

Obama, Erdogan Find Shared Interests

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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After a decade of discord with the United States, Turkey has come in from the cold, due largely to shared concerns over Iran.

Only last year, U.S.-Turkish relations were in tumult, with disagreements on a number of issues -- such as Turkey's relations with Israel and how to deal with Iran's nuclearization -- undermining Washington's historical bond with Ankara.

Today, however, the United States and Turkey are on a honeymoon, with President Obama and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan having formed what is probably the best relationship between a U.S. president and a Turkish prime minister in decades. The shifting political winds across the Middle East are also bringing Turkey and the United States closer than they have been since their falling-out in 2003 over the Iraq war.

Obama and Erdogan seem to have really hit it off: Turkish media outlets reported that after Erdogan's mother died last month, Obama was among the world leaders who called him and that the two "spoke for 45 minutes about their feelings." This personal rapport is the foundation of the new U.S.-Turkish relationship.

It took time and hard work to get to this point. Until last year, Turkey's relationship with Washington was wavering: Ankara's Iran policy was oscillating, which often challenged Washington's efforts to impose internationally backed sanctions on Tehran.

In June 2010, for example, Turkey voted at the U.N. Security Council against a proposal for U.S.-sponsored sanctions. For about two months, it looked as though this vote would sever U.S.-Turkish ties. But the straightforward conversation Obama had with Erdogan on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in Toronto in July 2010 changed everything.

Obama told Erdogan how upsetting Turkey's U.N. vote had been to him, and his candor helped clear the air between the two, as Turkish and U.S. officials and friends have told me. And Turkey's policy soon changed: Ankara stopped defending Tehran and began working with Washington.

Since the summer, the relationship has been on the upswing. The two leaders speak often -- at least a dozen times this year alone -- and frequently agree on policy. Consider their consensus on the Arab Spring. Turkey's statements on the uprisings in Middle Eastern and North African nations pushed Obama to appreciate Turkey -- a large, Muslim NATO member that uniquely satisfies Obama's quest to find powerful allies that have a majority-Muslim population and are happy to work with the United States.

After Ankara concluded that dictators such as Libya's Moammar Gaddafi will fall -- sooner or later -- once they are challenged by the masses, the two countries began coordinating their policies on the Arab Spring.

Cooperation has been especially deep toward Syria. Turkey has emerged as the region's key opponent of the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on demonstrators, which is just fine for Obama, who is focusing on domestic issues ahead of the 2012 elections. Washington and Ankara both hope for a "soft landing" in Syria -- an end to Bashar al-Assad's rule without the country descending into chaos. Obama appreciates that Ankara is willing to bear the burden of policy toward Syria, from imposing sanctions against Assad to supporting the opposition, following a strategy grandfathered by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

The upswing in U.S.-Turkish ties is likely to last. In 2002, when Erdogan took office, Ankara launched a policy of rapprochement toward Tehran. Turkey's return as a major player in the Middle East, however, stirred competition with the region's other country seeking hegemony, Iran. A "soft" rivalry started between the two when they supported opposing factions in Iraq's 2010 elections. This struggle has given way to outright competition over Syria, with Tehran supporting and funding the Assad regime and Ankara supporting and hosting members of the opposition.

Tension still exists between Washington and Ankara, including over the future of Turkish-Israeli relations. But when a flotilla sailed from Turkey to Gaza in early November, the White House asked Ankara to allow no Turks on board the ships, in order to avoid a repeat of the May 2010 incident in which nine Turks on Gaza-bound ships were killed by the Israelis. Ankara obliged, and a crisis was averted.

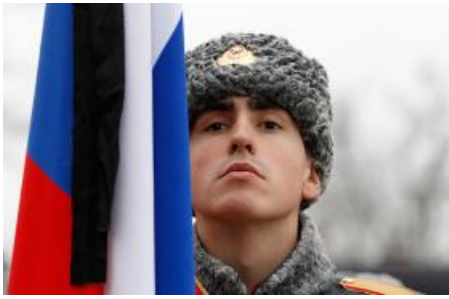
In the long term, the Turkish-Iranian rivalry will bring Ankara closer to Washington, and perhaps even to Israel. For instance, when the United States completes the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, Turkey and Iran will be competing economically and politically to gain influence in Iraq.

After a decade of discord with the United States, Turkey has come in from the cold. While the Obama-Erdogan relationship has established a new foundation for U.S.-Turkish ties, the two countries will be bound by common interests in the Middle East even after these leaders leave office.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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