

Obama's Leverage: How to Improve U.S.-Turkish Relations

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Brief Analysis

A foreign policy rift is emerging between the United States and Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government on a range of Middle East issues, including Iran's nuclear program, support for Hamas, and the deteriorating relations between Ankara and Israel. Some U.S. officials are concerned that Washington has little or no leverage to prevent further erosion, and the AKP's leadership seems to agree, apparently believing the United States needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the United States.

Both assumptions are wrong. The United States has leverage; Washington need only make a concerted effort to use it. And although Turkey, as a sovereign democracy, can pursue whatever foreign policy it wishes, Ankara must realize that working against U.S. national security priorities has costs. What, then, can the Obama administration do?

In the short term, the United States should use its most considerable bilateral asset -- Ankara's regard for President Obama -- to remind Turkey's leaders that access in Washington should not be taken for granted. In the mid term, it should find ways to express ambivalence about the relationship in order to reinforce the notion that partnership is a two-way street. And for the long term, it should launch a massively funded, Turkey-specific public diplomacy initiative, bolstering its leverage by educating the insular Turkish public about U.S. policies and broadening its reach beyond the AKP's constituencies.

Obama's Role

The AKP's leaders appear convinced that President Obama is sympathetic toward their policy goals. His historic April 2009 trip to Turkey reinforced this notion; many AKP officials considered it an acknowledgement of the party's various successes, rather than recognition of modern Turkey and the country's status as an ally. Today, Ankara seems to believe that Obama supports the party against those in the United States who seek to create tension in the relationship, whether in Congress, the State Department, or elsewhere. This perception has created leverage for the president, and he should use it.

Two incidents highlight the potential utility of this approach. In spring 2010, the AKP's opposition to sanctioning Iran's nuclear program emerged in stark contrast to the international consensus Washington was building. In June, continued official and backchannel diplomacy failed to prevent a Turkish "no" vote in the UN Security Council. Furthermore, the AKP ratcheted up its rhetoric to defend Tehran's program after the vote, suggesting that it did not see Iranian nuclearization as a problem and instead pointing at Israel's nuclear arsenal as a regional threat.

Yet the party seemed to take notice in late June, after President Obama met with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu at the G-20 summit in Canada. There, he relayed his personal ire to the two leaders; in subsequent weeks, their antisansctions rhetoric subsided, and signs emerged that the AKP was acting more deferentially to Washington on the Iran issue. For example, Ankara ended its insistence that the United States recognize the stillborn May 17 nuclear fuel swap deal that Turkey had brokered with Tehran and Brazil.

A similar instance of the "Obama effect" came after AKP officials recently objected to the NATO missile defense project. At first, U.S. diplomatic efforts failed to budge an obstinate Ankara. But after the president relayed to senior AKP officials that the matter was "of personal importance to him," the party reportedly backed down, agreeing at NATO's recent Lisbon summit to participate in the initiative.

In both cases, presidential intervention came late in the diplomatic process and, in the case of the Iran vote at the UN, failed to prevent a debacle. To be truly effective, the president should speak out earlier and more clearly to ensure that his priorities regarding Turkey are properly understood in Ankara. He should also correct the AKP's perception that he supports the party against those in the U.S. government who focus on the Turkey portfolio. Publicly meeting with his Turkey team in the Oval Office, for instance, would amplify their voices and make it clear that his representatives truly speak for him.

Midterm Steps

Although direct presidential communication can be a useful way for the United States to exercise leverage, it is a limited resource that is likely to yield diminishing returns over time. Therefore, the administration should take its campaign public, making clear its concern over the drift in Turkey's Middle East policies. For example, the president could deliver a speech on a symbolic Turkey-related issue of importance to the administration. The United States should also sit on its hands when asked to support Turkey in various international forums, including NATO. If such indirect action fails to get Ankara's attention, Washington should employ more direct ways of demonstrating that U.S. strategic considerations are shifting.

With Turkish parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2011, the AKP will likely seek to avoid trouble with Washington in order to show the Turkish public its mastery of the bilateral relationship -- a position that tends to help incumbents in Turkish polls. Washington can use this situation as further leverage; introducing a degree of uncertainty about the relationship would help sharpen the choice for Turks as they head to the polls. Some argue that such a tactic risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet most analysts expect bilateral foreign policy rifts to widen should the AKP win a super-majority in the 2011 elections, as is currently predicted. Therefore, expressing clarity now risks little and may spur Ankara to recalculate its interests.

Smart Public Diplomacy

Any long-term prospects for restoring a true U.S.-Turkish partnership require leaders in Ankara who value the relationship and can speak on its behalf. If the emergence of such leaders proves unlikely in the short term, then Washington should do whatever it can to speak directly to the Turkish people.

This would not be easy. Anti-Americanism is increasingly widespread in Turkey, and Washington lacks a counterpart in the Turkish government to address this trend. Accordingly, a unique, country-specific solution is required: a massive, Turkey-only public diplomacy initiative with devoted funding that would enable the United States to connect with and win over the

individual Turk.

Like many countries, Turkey is an "open society with closed minds": despite its technological connection to the global community, its views of the outside world can be provincial. So every effort should be made to puncture this insularity by taking advantage of Turkey's open, internationalized nature. This requires a massive increase in exchange and training programs targeting Turkey's opinionmakers, journalists, editors, scholars, and young politicians, as well as new programs that take advantage of Turkish-language social networks. The United States should also look to promote civil society initiatives that broaden the foundation of U.S.-Turkish relations while doing more to expand bilateral trade. Washington might also consider launching initiatives to bolster media independence in Turkey -- an especially pressing task given the erosion of such freedom under the AKP. If Turkish media cease to be independent, the United States will find it nearly impossible to communicate with the individual Turk.

None of these initiatives is a silver bullet, but over time such measures could foster a constituency in Turkey sympathetic to true strategic partnership with the United States. Many Turkish elites are already sending their children to the United States for higher education, and more should be done to build relations with these Turkish leaders of tomorrow.

Conclusion

The AKP's rise has coincided with an expansion of Turkish economic power, bolstering the party's confidence in regional and international affairs to the extent that Ankara now acts as if it no longer needs its U.S. partner. This is a shortsighted approach on Turkey's part given how rapidly the world can change. For example, the global economy could take another turn for the worse; Russia, Ankara's friend today, may not always be so; an Iran with nuclear weapons could pose quite different challenges to Turkey than an Iran without such capabilities; and instability in Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq could pose challenges that make Ankara reach out for American hard and soft power. The United States should use the leverage it has in the short and mid term to remind Ankara of these realities while building bridges directly to the Turkish people in the long term. There are no guarantees that this multifaceted approach will halt Turkey's eastward drift. But not trying at all will only accelerate it.

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