

Turning against US

Jun 3, 2010



Articles & Testimony

Visiting the White House six months ago, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Ankara aspires to build a "model partnership" with Washington.

Really?

Erodgan has been leading the chorus to condemn Israel in the wake of Monday's botched interdiction of the flotilla bound for Gaza described the killings of nine activists as a "bloody massacre."

This is superficially understandable: The flotilla was organized and set sail from Turkey; the ships flew Turkish flags -- and four of the passengers killed were Turks.

But Turkey played a key role in the runup to the incident, refusing Israeli and Egyptian requests to prevent the ships from sailing. And by helping to orchestrate the crisis, Turkey is not just damaging Israel, but interfering with a top foreign-policy goal of the United States, its ostensible ally.

Last month, the Obama administration defined "comprehensive peace between Israel and its neighbors" as a "top national-security priority." The Obama team has put months of effort into restarting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations -- which resumed just a few weeks ago, for the first time in nearly 18 months, in the form of the nascent, US-brokered "proximity talks."

In that context, the Gaza flotilla -- which Israel was bound to stop, as it has previous efforts to break the blockade -- seemed timed to intentionally provoke an incident and scuttle those talks. At a minimum, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas felt obliged to call the incident a "premeditated [Israeli] ... determination to kill" the alleged peacemakers on the ship -- hardly an auspicious start for peace talks.

And the flotilla was only the latest Turkish initiative at odds with President Obama's goals. Ankara has also recently frustrated US policies on Iran and Iraq.

In May, Turkey and Brazil brokered a nuclear-enrichment agreement with Iran that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said makes the world "more dangerous, not less." The deal vastly complicates the administration's already-herculean task of building an international coalition to sanction Tehran for trying to build a nuclear bomb.

In fact, Erdogan openly opposes US-backed sanctions against Iran. As a result, the Obama administration is trying to force a vote on its proposed sanctions in the UN Security Council before Turkey rotates into the council chair later this summer.

Just last week, Turkey hosted a conference of Iraqi insurgent groups seeking to reconstitute as the US prepares to withdraw. The Istanbul conference was one of two meetings (the other in Damascus) that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki condemned as "destabilizing." "The only ones benefiting," he said, "are al Qaeda and the terrorist organizations."

Ankara's break with Jerusalem is more blatant, of course -- disinviting Israel from a NATO military exercise last year and canceling other joint exercises in the wake of the flotilla incident. But Washington must also worry that Turkey last year conducted its first-ever military exercises with Syria, designated by the US government as a state sponsor of terrorism. Ankara has likewise signed several security cooperation agreements with Tehran.

So why has Ankara chosen to change the nature of its long-standing strategic alliance with Washington to one of strategic competition?

Turkey under the Islamist AKP is no longer a government committed to secular nationalism. Having been rejected for membership in the European Union, it once again sees the Middle East as its natural sphere of influence.

The AKP's Islamist agenda is being aided and abetted by the Obama administration's seeming determination to flee the area as rapidly as possible. The US troop surge in Afghanistan is tied to the start of a rapid military withdrawal in the summer of 2011. And in Iraq, the timetable is even shorter, with most combat forces to be withdrawn by the end of this summer.

Power vacuums of this nature never last for long. As long as the Obama administration is seen as diminishing ties to long-standing US allies -- Israel and Egypt in particular -- and shrinking its military footprint, many if not most of the region's players will conclude that America is opting out of the struggle for the future of the Middle East.

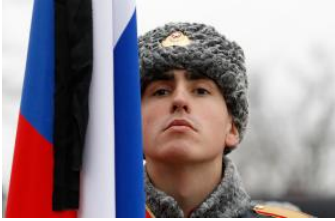
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