

# Obama's Two Dollars and Turkey

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Articles & Testimony

It is a tough economy, but if President Barack Obama has \$2 to invest in Turkey, I would suggest that he put one buck into consolidating Turkey's liberal democracy, and the other into moving forward the country's European Union accession, for a non-European Turkey would be a big loss for Washington.

No one in Washington doubts that Turkey should consolidate as a liberal democracy. But what does this process entail? Which tangibles of liberal democracy should President Obama promote? Turkey is already a democratic polity: the country became a multiparty democracy in 1946 with all the trappings of a functioning democracy, from a parliament to a democratically elected government, to a constitutional judiciary. The three pillars of democracy are in place in Turkey, and in this regard, there is not much Mr. Obama can do to promote Turkish democracy. Mr. Obama can, however, help consolidate liberal democracy in Turkey by bolstering the fourth pillar: media and the accompanying freedoms.

Whenever Turkey goes through a political spasm, with tensions mounting over Islamism or nationalism, analysts start warning about the collapse of Turkish democracy. One need not be alarmed about Turkish democracy so long as Turkey has a vigorous media and its accompanying freedoms, such as the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. Turkey has democratically pulled through numerous crises in the past, thanks to the balancing power of its fourth pillar and the checks and balances exerted by its growing civil society. Turkey will weather future storms and the current tensions between the government and its opponents if Mr. Obama helps maintain Turkey's fourth pillar.

In the absence of a free media, Turkish democracy would likely turn into a sham. A case in point in this regard is Turkey's northern neighbor, Russia. Like Turkey, Russia has the three pillars of democracy in place, from a democratically elected parliament to courts. However, unlike Turkey, Russia lacks the fourth estate, a free media, which makes all the difference between the two countries.

Since the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power in Turkey in 2002, Turkey's media has been transformed for the worse. The government has used legal loopholes to confiscate ownership of independent media and sell it to its supporters. In 2002, pro-AKP businesses owned less than 20 percent of the Turkish media; today pro-government people own around 50 percent.

Not only has Turkey's media ownership been transformed with a pro-government bent, but media freedoms have been eroded as well: according to Freedom House's freedom of press index reports, Turkish media is less free today than it was in 2002, slipping from 100 in 2002 to 103 in 2008. As Turkey ought to be moving toward the EU, its record on media freedoms should have improved significantly since 2002, not stagnated. Something is not right in Turkey today. Mr. Obama ought to put his money into Turkey's free media since, without a free and independent media, as well as the accompanying freedoms, Turkey risks looking more like Russia, and nobody, neither the EU nor Mr. Obama, wants two Russias on Europe's eastern frontier. This is why Mr. Obama should invest his second buck in Turkey's EU membership it would serve the Europeans well to back him in this endeavor. For decades, the Turkish military, courts and secular businesses have acted as the arbiters of democracy, providing a moderating

force, if occasionally an unappealing one. Today, these actors have only some of their power, and EU membership has become the strongest safety valve of liberal democracy in Turkey.

However, Turkey's EU accession has hit a stalemate since membership negotiations started in 2005. Talks have slowed to such a grinding halt that the proverbial train of Turkish accession into the EU reminds one of a joke about the trains in Brezhnev's Soviet Union: With the Soviet Union stagnating under Brezhnev, the trains did not move, the scenery did not change, but the people said "chu chu" to make believe. This is how Turkey's EU accession looks, with everyone acting as if there is momentum where there is none or little.

It is not too late before the Turks realize that their train is not moving toward the EU, and subsequently decide to de-board.

That would be a disaster for the United States. If Turkey's accession to the EU had been stalled in the pre-Sept. 11 world, I would have said "that is a real shame"; back then, there was room for Turkey to be outside of the EU but part of Europe and the West. Now, with the EU pushing its boundaries into the Balkans up to Turkey and with al-Qaeda clamoring that there is a war between the "Muslim world" and the West, there is no longer a grey area in which Turkey can position itself. Turkey will either become an EU member and part of the West, or fold into the "Muslim world," as per al-Qaeda's vision. This is already a risk, with the number of Turks who identify as Western decreasing, especially among the youth. Mr. Obama ought to invest in Turkey's EU accession in order to keep Turkey Western and to consolidate its liberal democracy. All it takes is two bucks from Obama's wallet. Hard as times might be, this is not the time for Washington to lose Turkey, or let go an important ally.

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