

Fixing Anti-Americanism in Turkey

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Articles & Testimony

President Barack Obama's visit to Turkey could not have gone better in terms of winning Turkish hearts and minds. Obama did all the right things, visiting Ataturk's mausoleum, the Blue Mosque and the Turkish parliament, capturing the complexity of a country that is Turkish by birth, Muslim in culture and western in its political identity.

Yet Washington still faces a challenge among the Turks: after a debilitating downturn in recent years, America's favorability rating is at rock bottom. Obama should be concerned about this phenomenon that, if ignored, will eat into the foundations of the new US-Turkish relationship he wants to promote on key issues, including Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. As serious as the problem is, though, Turkish anti-Americanism can be fixed.

Obama cannot and should not ignore anti-Americanism in Turkey, because as a democracy, Turkish politics are ultimately accountable to public opinion. Washington can sustain cooperation with all sorts of authoritarian Muslim states, such as Egypt, despite pervasive anti-Americanism in those countries, because these authoritarian regimes do not care for public opinion. In Turkey, though, these sentiments will sooner or later erode, reshape and then cripple governmental cooperation with the United States. Anti-Americanism in Turkey presents a larger, more immediate challenge to Obama than it does in other Muslim majority societies.

Obamania will help face this challenge. According to a recent poll by Infacto, whereas only 9 percent of Turks thought favorably of the US president four years ago, today 39 percent have a positive view of Obama. However, this jolt has not lifted America's standing in Turkey to match political ambitions for long-term and grand cooperation with Ankara as laid out by Obama's speech to the Turkish parliament on April 6. The Infacto poll also shows that 44 percent of the Turks view the United States as the biggest threat to Turkey.

Lately, the United States has done the right things to win Turkish hearts and minds. First, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during her March visit to Turkey, and then President Obama gave the Turks a needed bear hug, emphasizing that the United States likes the Turks, respects their faith and supports their western vocation. Washington is assisting Turkey in its struggle against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terror attacks, a key security concern for many Turks. Obama has even shied away from his campaign promise to support the "Armenian Genocide" bill in the US Congress, which many Turks find extremely offensive.

At this stage, there is little more Washington can do to charm the Turks. As I learned during a recent sabbatical in Turkey, the Turks form their views of the world based upon what they hear from their leadership. Turkey is a rare fence-sitting country between East and West, in which pro-American and western statements have the same weight in shaping public views as do views that oppose the United States and the West.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed power in 2002, the Turks have not heard anything positive about the West from their leadership. In fact, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has often lambasted the West, suggesting, for instance, that "the West uses terrorism to sell Turkey weapons" or that "Turkey has borrowed only immoral stuff from the West." Anti-Americanism has become pervasive in Turkey as not just the AKP but even

secular and nationalist leaders now vehemently voice such views.

The United States cannot stop entrenched anti-Americanism altogether; only the Turkish leadership can do that. Hence, the first step toward combating anti-Americanism would be zero anti-American and anti-western rhetoric from opinion makers in Turkey, government and opposition alike. By avoiding anti-American rhetoric, the Turkish leadership could demonstrate that it is ready to receive Obama's extended olive branch.

The next step is targeting existing anti-Americanism, which can be alleviated precisely because the Turks are a fence-sitting people. What the Turks hear about the United States and the West shapes their views. In battling anti-Americanism, the Turkish leadership needs to highlight for the Turks the common interests of Turkey and the US, such as a stable Iraq; shared institutions, such as NATO; and shared values, such as democracy. Ankara should also give Washington major credit for intelligence assistance to Turkey in its attempt to stop terror attacks launched by the PKK. Many Turks are not only unaware of this fact, but also think that the United States supports the PKK, as many news reports and government allegations insinuate. The situation on the PKK shows best how Turkish views of the United States can be distorted.

President Obama should not despair when faced with evidence of anti-Americanism in Turkey. This is indeed an immediate and big problem, but it can be fixed, for there is a Turkish solution to anti-Americanism in Turkey.

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