

## Obama's Middle East Debut

Apr 8, 2009



Articles & Testimony

President Obama's April 6 speech to the Turkish parliament in Ankara has addressed Washington's concerns over Turkey's turn from the West. In his speech, Obama tackled the erosion of Turkey's liberal democratic values. He also took up Turkey's recent foreign policy differences with the United States. Lately, a civilizational view of world politics has formed in Ankara, relativizing good and bad according to religion and splitting the Turks from the West. In the latest incident, at the Davos meeting in January, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan chided Israel's president for "killing people" -- and then returned to Ankara to host the vice president of Sudan. Since September 11, Turkey is fact becoming a "Muslim" nation, and a member of the "Muslim World." The only way to counter this conception -- as well as Turkey's turn towards illiberal politics at home and a civilizational view in foreign policy -- is to emphasize Turkey's Western vocation. By speaking strongly in favor of a Western and European Turkey, Obama did exactly that, putting Turkey back in the West.

Recently, there has been much confusion in the United States and Europe about Turkey's identity. Until September 11, Turkey was considered a NATO ally, a secular democracy and a member of the West. Suddenly, following September 11, this changed. Turkey became a Muslim ally, considered a model of Islamic democracy and a member of the Muslim world. The punditocracy began to describe Turkey as a "moderate Muslim state," and regional experts viewed Turkey as part of the Greater Middle East. A German Turk born and raised in Berlin told me that prior September 11, his friends referred to him as "the Turk." On September 12, he became "the Muslim." He added: "I had not changed in one night, but the world had."

In due course, U.S.-Turkish relations focused exclusively on the Muslim Middle East, particularly Iraq. This development came at the expense of previous U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the Caucasus, Black Sea, Central Asia, and within Europe and NATO. Thrown into a closed-circuit, Muslim lot, Turkey started to empathize with Muslim world on matters, moving away from the United States on key foreign policy issues, such as Iran, Sudan, and Hamas. Coupled with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, Washington's singular focus on Middle East issues empowered a religion-based civilizational vector in Turkish foreign policy. This stimulated an exclusively Muslim identity among Turks at the expense of European and pro-Western identities.

An exclusive focus on the Muslim world in U.S.-Turkish ties is short-sighted since Turkey is more than just a Muslim partner for the United States. Branding Turkey as a Muslim country only runs against the grain of the country's identity fabric: the Turks are at ease with multiple identities, including Muslim, Turk and Western. President Obama has a grasp of this issue, and that is why he opted to not deliver his "address to the Muslim world" from Turkey. Enforcing the view of Turkey as a Western nation, he de-linked his Turkey sojourn from his campaign promise to visit a Muslim country during the first 100 days of his presidency.

With his Ankara address, Obama put the post-September 11 confusion about Turkey's identity to rest. The President started his speech with a rhetorical question: "I have been to . . . the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and Kehl, and the European Union Summit in Prague. Some people have asked me if I chose to continue my travels to Ankara and Istanbul to send a message. My answer is simple: Evet ["Yes" in Turkish]." The president added that Turkey belongs in Europe and the West and that "Europe gains by the diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith." For Obama, Turkey is a country in the West that happens to be Muslim, rather than a Muslim country in the Muslim world.

This is good news for Turkey's democracy, and even better news for the Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. In his address, Obama made strong references to Turkey's secular democracy and the need for the country to move towards European Union (EU) accession. Importantly, Obama set Europe and its liberal democratic traditions as Washington's benchmark for evaluating domestic Turkish developments. On foreign policy, the President referred to Turkey as a "resolute ally and a responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions." Obama understands Turkey's strategic importance -- Turkey borders Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Russia, and is a staging ground for operations in Afghanistan and beyond. With his speech, Obama set NATO as a Western gauge for cooperation with Turkey on key foreign policy issues.

Turkey is a nation that is Turkish by its birth, Muslim by its culture, and Western by its political identity and institutions. By placing Turkey back into the Western polity, Obama has hailed all three characteristics, allowing Turkey to thrive as a country with multiple identities. During his visit, the President chose to visit Ataturk's mausoleum, the Blue Mosque and the Turkish parliament, symbolically demonstrating that he grasps the non-exclusive nature of Turkish nationalism, Islam and Western political identity in Turkey. With his speech, Obama has also made a successful case against the argument that Islam and the West are exclusive of one another. This is one reason why Obama was received with open arms in Turkey. As the President of the United States, a country full of diverse ethnicities, religions and races, Obama has a grasp of Turkey's complexity, and understands the importance of maintaining its multiple identities.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at The Washington Institute. ❖

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