

Turkey Needs a Bear Hug from Obama

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Articles & Testimony

President Barack Obama will visit Turkey today and tomorrow, flying there from NATO and European Union meetings. Mr. Obama should be applauded for his vision. America can address the challenges it faces in Turkey only by emphasizing that country's place in the West. Turkish public opinion is growing increasingly anti-Western and Turkey needs a reassuring embrace from the U.S. Yet with policy differences emerging between Washington and Ankara on issues such as Iran, the Obama visit is also a useful opportunity to call on Turkey to strengthen its Western traditions.

I grew up on the Bosphorus, and have come to think of Turkey as a Muslim ship tied to a Western dock. But the Turkish ship is now slipping away. 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.

Policy differences caused by Ankara's religious point of view continue to emerge between Turkey and the U.S. The latest example involves Turkey's veto of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's appointment as NATO secretary-general, asserting that Mr. Rasmussen's position during the cartoon crisis was "offensive to the Muslim world." The day has come that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara wears religion on its sleeve even in NATO.

Turkish protestors shout slogans and hold banners reading 'Obama go home' during a demonstration against upcoming visit of U.S. President Barack Obama in Turkey on Sunday.

Angry at behavior like this, some analysts suggest that Washington should simply ignore Turkey. Yet Turkey has NATO's second-largest army and is Europe's sixth-largest economy. Turkey borders Iran, Iraq and Syria, and is a base for U.S. operations in Afghanistan and beyond. Ankara's nuisance value -- its ability to mess things up for the U.S. as an alienated former ally -- should be a serious concern for Washington.

EU accession and NATO membership -- Turkey has been a staunch member of this alliance since 1952 -- are the antidotes to Turkey's slide away from the West, and President Obama should make them pillars of his Turkey policy.

Turkey cannot be a Western country or a U.S. ally if its EU prospects collapse. Ankara's EU membership talks are stalled due to French objections, as well as the slow pace of Turkish reforms toward adopting the Union's legislation. As President Obama renews trans-Atlantic ties, he might try to convince Paris to adopt a more flexible position on Turkey's EU accession -- a tall order -- although the great benefit for Paris is that Turkey would lift its veto on France's return to NATO's military wing. In addition, setting the EU's political and social standards as a goal for would strengthen the country's enfeebled liberal democratic values.

NATO should be Mr. Obama's other anchor. Turkey has participated in every NATO operation. Once the U.S. president builds a consensus in NATO, such as a common stance on Iran, he can and should expect to find Turkey on board.

Although Washington and Ankara have been good military and political allies for six decades, they have not built comparable economic ties. Because of this, each time U.S.-Turkish relations have faced political problems, as they

did during the Iraq war, official cooperation and amity have nearly collapsed. In 2008, combined U.S./European share of Turkish trade dropped to 50% for the first time, and Russia replaced Germany as Turkey's top trading partner. If the West and Turkey are not tightly linked economically, their political and military ties will be susceptible to the influence of Russia and Iran, where Turkish investments have grown substantially in recent years.

Mr. Obama also should promote partnership with Turkey in reaching the energy fields of the Caspian Sea basin and in building pipelines, such as the long-projected Nabucco line, to connect Central Asia and Europe via Turkey. This strategy would decrease the West's dependence on Middle East oil and Europe's dependence on Russian energy, providing a sweetener for Turkish-EU talks.

The new U.S. president has strong public appeal in Turkey, and this will help him rebuild U.S.-Turkish ties. First, though, he has to cross a minefield: The Turkish people will closely monitor his statements on the deaths of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. According to polls, 90% of Turks do not think these events constituted genocide. While U.S. presidents issue a proclamation each spring, recognizing the suffering that took place during World War I, they have never used the word "genocide" to describe the Empire's activities. News reports suggest that Mr. Obama might describe 1915 as genocide in his first proclamation. This would hit a raw nerve in Turkey, hurting U.S. interests at a time when Mr. Obama is hoping to win Turkish hearts and minds and secure Ankara's cooperation. A Turkish backlash to the proclamation would also destroy current chances for Turkish-Armenian rapprochement: Seasoned diplomats say Turkey is about to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia.

For its own part, the Turkish government needs to tackle anti-Americanism. For the U.S. image in Turkey to improve, the government in Ankara first has to stop pursuing anti-Western foreign policy and issuing anti-Western statements. Then it must highlight for the Turkish public the common interests of Turkey and the U.S., 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 members of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) based in Iraq.

President Obama will succeed if he treats Turkey as a European country that happens to be Muslim and is in the West, rather than as a Muslim country that belongs to the Muslim world. Political stars in Turkey are aligned against Washington, and U.S. disengagement from Ankara would only deepen the Turks' sense of alienation from the West. Turkey's most important natural resource is its location. The U.S., Europe and Turkey itself will lose dearly if the Turkish ship slips its moorings and sails off to Russia, Iran, and other foreign ports.

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