

Obama in Turkey: Enticing Ankara Westward

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Brief Analysis

On April 6 and 7, after attending the NATO and European Union summits, President Obama will visit Ankara and Istanbul as part of his European tour. The visit seeks to build on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's March 7 trip to Ankara, where she underscored Washington's commitment to a European and Western Turkey. The president's sojourn is an important step in rebuilding troubled U.S.-Turkish relations, which have cooled in the past several years as Ankara has turned away from the West. Bringing Turkey back into the Western fold will require an ongoing concerted effort by the Obama administration and, given Turkey's importance to the United States, should be a priority for Washington.

Turkey's Importance to the United States

In past years, Turkish public opinion toward the West and the United States hit an all-time low. When Obama took office, those in Turkey with a favorable view of the United States were a minuscule 9 percent. This trend coincides with a shift in Turkish foreign policy away from the United States on important issues such as Russia, Sudan, Hamas, and Iran, ever since the 2003 Iraq War. Policy differences caused by Ankara's religious point of view continue to emerge between Turkey and the United States. The latest example involves Turkey's veto of Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's appointment as NATO secretary general because he failed to apologize for cartoons published in a Danish newspaper in 2005 that were deemed offensive by some Muslims. Many Western governments defended the publication of the cartoons in the name of freedom of speech.

While some have questioned whether the new administration should devote much effort to improving U.S.-Turkish ties, President Obama's visit early in his tenure indicates that the administration understands that it cannot afford to lose Turkey. 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 possible nuisance value as a problematic, alienated former ally should be a serious concern for Washington.

Challenges for Obama

Building a strong relationship, however, will not be an easy task. Presidential efforts at strong public diplomacy, such as Bill Clinton's 1999 trip to Turkey, have positively affected Turkish attitudes toward the United States. Although the Obama visit has plenty of public diplomacy appeal, including a proposed town-hall-style meeting, the president will encounter one particularly sensitive subject, the Armenian question, during the visit.

Any statement Obama issues on Armenia will be closely monitored. According to polls, 90 percent of Turks do not think that the deaths of many Armenians during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire constituted genocide. While U.S. presidents traditionally issue a proclamation every spring commemorating the events of 1915 and recognizing the suffering that took place during World War I, they have never used the word "genocide" to describe the Empire's activities. This year's presidential proclamation will be Obama's first, and its wording will be important in setting the public tone of U.S.-Turkish relations. If Obama describes the 1915 events as genocide, as some news reports suggest could happen, it will hit a raw nerve in Turkey, hurting U.S. interests at a time when Obama is hoping to win Turkish hearts and minds and secure Ankara's cooperation. What is more, such a proclamation would create a backlash in Turkey, blocking the anticipated breakthrough in Turkish-Armenian relations; analysts are suggesting that Turkey will soon establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and open its border to trade with that country. It will be impossible for the Turkish government to push for these steps if Obama were to describe the events of 1915 as genocide.

Obama will also face a challenge in winning over younger Turks, including midlevel Turkish military officers. Although U.S.-Turkish military ties have been getting stronger among the top brass as a result of cooperation against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorists, this does not appear to be the case among midlevel officers. If the United States cannot win the confidence of Turkish captains, it cannot sustain military ties with Turkey in the long term. NATO remains the key to success in this area, since it is the international institution respected most by the Turkish military. Using NATO as a platform to rebuild ties with the Turkish officer corps through special initiatives, including large-scale exchanges and training programs, will be critical to success in this area.

Rebuilding Strong Ties

Once Obama's visit is over, the administration can take a number of longer-term steps to strengthen U.S.-Turkish ties and influence Turkish policy in key areas.

Make EU accession the leitmotif of U.S. policy. The president should be applauded for going to Turkey after attending NATO and EU summits, thereby treating

Turkey as part of Europe and emphasizing its NATO role. 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. As the president renews transatlantic ties, he might consider using his dialogue with the French president to convince Paris to adopt a more flexible position on Turkey's EU accession -- a tall order even for Obama -- though the benefit for Paris is that Turkey would lift its veto on France's return to NATO's military command structure. In addition, setting the EU as a benchmark for Turkey would strengthen the country's enfeebled liberal democratic values and forces.

Treat Turkey as more than a Muslim country. Since the Iraq War, U.S.-Turkish relations have been focused on the Muslim Middle East, particularly Iraq. This development has come at the expense of previous U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the Caucasus, Black Sea, Central Asia, and within Europe and NATO. Turkey is more than just a Muslim partner for the United States. Washington's singular focus on Middle East issues has empowered a Muslim vector in Turkish foreign policy, stimulating an exclusively Muslim identity among Turks at the expense of European and pro-Western identities. Obama has a grasp of this issue; news reports suggest the president is not going to deliver his "address to the Muslim world" from Turkey. According to the White House, Obama's Turkey stop is not linked to his campaign promise to visit a Muslim country during the first 100 days of his presidency. Washington needs to cooperate with Turkey on non-Muslim issues if it wants to keep Turkey's non-Muslim foreign policy vectors alive and various Turkish identities thriving.

Emphasize NATO as the benchmark for Turkish foreign policy. Turkey has participated in every NATO operation since it joined the alliance in 1952. When Obama builds consensus in NATO, such as a common stance on Iran, he can and should expect to find Turkey on board.

Build an economic component to bilateral ties. Although the United States and Turkey have been 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, the U.S./European share of Turkish trade dropped to less than 50 percent, and Russia became Turkey's top trading partner for the first time. 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.

Partner with Turkey on energy security. One way to diversify U.S.-Turkish relations and shift the focus from the Middle East would be to join forces with Turkey to reach the energy fields of the Caspian Sea basin and to build 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.

Conclusion

Turkey is at a crossroads in terms of its international political identity. The Obama visit will be a success if the president endorses Turkey as a European country that is seen as part of the West rather than part of the "Muslim world." With political stars in Turkey aligned against the United States, a passive U.S. policy toward Ankara would only deepen the Turks' growing sense of alienation from the West. Rather, the Obama administration should take an active interest in Turkey and formulate a broad-based policy coordinated across various government agencies.

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