

An Obama Policy toward Turkey: Continuity or Change?

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Brief Analysis

On February 18, 2009, Soner Cagaptay, Mark Parris, and Ian Lesser addressed a Policy Forum luncheon hosted by The Washington Institute's [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

to review Dr. Cagaptay's recent four-month sabbatical in Turkey and to discuss the Obama administration's policy toward Turkey. Dr. Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. Ambassador Mark Parris is the former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, and currently is counselor to the Turkey Project at the Brookings Institution. Ian Lesser is a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund, focusing on Turkey and the U.S.-Turkey-EU triangle. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Soner Cagaptay

Turkey is an elite project; historically, large elite groups have led Turkey toward their own societal values and foreign policies. This was the case during the Ottoman Empire, the Republican era, and, today, with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP represents the new elite; it is supported by a large business community, directs domestic intelligence, and controls the executive and legislative branches. Former AKP member Abdullah Gul is now the Turkish president with the power to appoint judges to the high courts. In addition, around 50 percent of the media is now owned by pro-AKP businesses.

As the new elite, the AKP is shaping Turkish society in its own image, promoting social conservatism through administrative acts. It is this author's observation that it is not religiosity that is on the rise in Turkey -- i.e., the number of people attending mosque services or praying -- but rather government-infused social conservatism. Indications of social conservatism, such as women wearing Islamic-style headscarves (turbans), are used as benchmarks to obtain government appointments, promotions, and contracts. Social conservatism, however, is not in itself the problem, and a conservative Turkey can certainly be European. The problem is that a government-led project of this type is incompatible with the idea of a liberal democracy. And given Turkey's nature as an elite project, AKP-led social conservatism is reshaping Turkish society.

The new AKP elite is also reshaping Turkish foreign policy. In the past, Turkey's foreign policy paradigm centered around the promotion of national interests vested in the West. Today, the paradigm is based on a civilizational view of the world, manifested by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's recent treatment of events in the Gaza Strip and Sudan. The government's sympathy for Hamas and harsh remarks for Israel's attack on civilians coincided with an Ankara visit by the Sudanese vice-president as his government faced charges on genocide at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The AKP cares if Muslims are killed by non-Muslims, but not if Muslims kill Muslims. For the AKP, the problem in the Middle East is not violence or human suffering, but rather Muslim suffering at the hands of non-Muslims. The subsequent anti-Western, anti-U.S., and anti-Israeli view is the new paradigm promoted by pundits, think tanks, and newspapers close to the AKP. This paradigm drives public opinion, which is becoming increasingly anti-Western and anti-American. And because Turkey is a democracy, public opinion matters. Sooner or later, the anti-Western views will cripple Turkey's foreign policy partnership with the West.

Given these developments, the Obama administration should engage Turkey in a multipronged initiative, though one with strong gauges, to prevent the country's slide away from the West and liberal democratic values. Washington should treat Turkey as a Western country and take six concrete steps to rebuild bilateral ties. First, Obama should maintain strong cooperation against the Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK), including ongoing discussions with Turkey, Baghdad, and the Iraqi Kurds to this end. Since 2007, U.S. assistance to Turkey against the PKK has helped improve Washington's standing in Turkey and built mutual confidence.

Second, the U.S. administration should rebuild bilateral military cooperation and emphasize NATO's role in U.S.-Turkish ties. If the Obama administration cannot win the hearts and minds of midlevel Turkish officers, Washington cannot sustain military ties with Turkey in the long term. NATO also provides a gauge with which to check Turkish foreign policy's slip away from the United States. Once Obama builds a consensus in NATO, such as a common stance on Iran, he should expect to find Turkey onboard.

The third step is to counter the new anti-Western paradigm of Turkish foreign policy. This is where the Turkish leadership has to step up to the plate. Turkey sits a fence between the Middle East and the West; pro-Western and anti-Western statements carry equal weight in shaping public opinion toward the West. Accordingly, to improve the U.S. image in Turkey, the Turkish government needs to highlight for the their public the two countries' commonalities, including institutions such as NATO, values such as democracy and free markets, and regional interests such as a stable Iraq.

Fourth, President Obama, while renewing transatlantic ties, must convince the French president to move ahead with Turkey's EU candidacy. EU accession is an important measure of support to the enfeebled liberal democratic values, such as media freedom, in Turkey. Fifth, economic ties and energy cooperation should be promoted to provide a "shock absorber" to the U.S.-Turkey relationship. The last step is to avoid an inactive U.S. policy; 2009 is the wrong year to make it appear as if Washington rejects Turkey.

Mark Parris

Many know the concept of Occam's Razor: if a problem has two explanations, go with the simpler one. For example, one can view Erdogan as anxious to pack the Turkish bureaucracy with people who share his worldview, who displays paranoia toward the press, whose vision is limited to the next elections, and whose enthusiasm for the United States and Europe is tied to a calculation of "what can you do for me." From this, you can conclude either of two things: that Erdogan has a secret agenda and wants to impose an Islamic paradigm on Turkey, or that he shares the same political culture as his predecessors, is acting much the same way they did, and is not retreating from the democratic ideal.

In terms of foreign policy, the AKP's record is marked by Turkey's its closeness to Sudan, Russia, and Iran, and paints an alarming picture. But it is not only Turkey that is getting closer to Sudan -- Russia is as well. One can look at these changes and see a shift toward an anti-U.S., or even anti-Semitic, picture. Or the changes could be seen as a reaction shared by many countries that simply had difficulties with certain aspects of the previous administration's policies.

The Obama administration should help build liberal democracy in Turkey. Threats to this progress come in different forms, such as in 2007 when the Turkish military warned the AKP not to change the country's secular orientation. Europe is the key to keeping Turkey on the right track.

Ian Lesser

The global economic crisis will eventually have an effect on Turkish foreign policy. The implications of getting Turkey into the EU have become more costly with the current international market instability, and Turkey will be seen as a greater potential burden by European countries during accession talks.

At this point, it will be difficult for Turkey to get the Obama administration's attention. During this period of domestic troubles, the United States might be looking for low-maintenance partnerships, and Turkey has not necessarily been an easy partner to work with. Continued convergence between Turkey and its Western partners is desirable, but Turkey should not expect miracles from the Obama administration regarding its ability to change the EU's stance on Turkey. Still, the president should make a visit to Turkey as part of his European trip to underline Turkey's European identity.

Finally, the AKP's changes to Turkish foreign policy are not merely the party's project anymore. All Turks embrace them. What is dangerous about this shift in orientation is not necessarily its direction, but the fact that it is neither focused nor well prioritized.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Melis Evcimik. ❖

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