

## Obama's Turkey Policy: European Democracy and NATO Benchmarks

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### Brief Analysis

**P**resident-elect Barack Obama's administration faces difficult choices regarding its policy toward Turkey. Should Washington choose sides in Turkey's protracted struggle over secularism and democracy involving the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its opponents? Can the United States bring the reluctant AKP to support U.S. efforts against Iran's nuclear program? Finally, can Washington depend on Turkey, an irritated but strategically located ally, while withdrawing from Iraq, launching a new offensive in Afghanistan, and dealing with Russia? The challenges appear monumental, but the solution is not difficult: the Obama administration can use Turkey's European Union accession process and NATO membership as benchmarks to guide its policy toward Turkey. When formulating this policy, Washington should consider two important questions.

#### Should Turkey Be Judged as a European Democracy?

The answer is yes: Turkey is in accession talks with the European Union, and since Turkey is a member of the EU family of democratic nations, Washington should expect from Turkish democracy what it expects from any EU democracy and therefore employ the appropriate yardstick for measuring Turkey's political performance. Although Turkey's population is predominantly Muslim, like that of Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries, its political system is a secular democracy, like Europe's. Comparing Turkey politically to the Muslim yet undemocratic Egypt is as inappropriate as comparing the United States to the Christian yet undemocratic Belarus. As Turkey soul-searches for what it means to be a liberal, secular democracy, the Obama administration's political yardstick for Turkey should be Italy and France, not Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Washington's preference for a liberal European democracy in Turkey should not be a generic one. In recent years, Turkey has inched closer to the EU by negotiating accession chapters and adopting technical EU standards, such as the improvement of hygiene in grocery stores. In reality, however, the country has been slipping away from Europe and its values. Various indices reveal an alarming phenomenon: Turkey is less free and equal today than it was when the AKP assumed power in November 2002. According to the UN Development Programme's gender empowerment index, Turkey ranked 63 in the world in 2002. Today, it has slipped to 90. The World Economic Forum's gender gap report shows a similar slide, from 105 in 2002 to 123 in 2008. Freedom House's freedom-of-press index reports that the Turkish media is under more restrictions today than it was in 2002, falling from 100 in 2002 to 103 in 2008.

In part, these changes seem to have been engineered through bureaucratic appointments. A study by IRIS, an Ankara-based nongovernmental organization, points to the diminishing number of women in the upper echelons of bureaucracy: the percentage of women in governmental executive positions has declined from 15.1 percent in 1994 to 11.8 percent today. Gender inequality is driven also by legislation. The AKP passed a social security law in July 2008 that slashed benefits for working women, including cutting postnatal financial allowances to working mothers from six months to one month.

Government legislation and administrative acts also seem to be hampering media freedom in Turkey. At least a quarter of the 72 million Turks regularly use the internet to reach out to the world. In April 2007, a new AKP law made Turkey the only European country to ban access to some websites, among them YouTube. Turkey's slide away from European values of equality and freedom will impede the country's efforts to become an EU member.

The new U.S. administration has an interest in the AKP's consolidation of liberal European values in Turkey, including secular democracy, the rule of law, gender equality, and media freedom. In this regard, these principles provide the Obama administration with a useful benchmark: as Turkey strives to balance secularism and democracy, Washington's policy should provide for religious freedoms but also maintain Turkey's firewall between religion on the one hand, and government and education on the other.

The EU benchmark should be a two-way street. Just as the Obama administration should expect Turkey to be a European democracy, it should have an interest in breaking the impasse on Turkey's EU accession. Although Turkey started accession talks with the EU in 2005, since then Ankara has faced obstructions from a number of EU countries, most notably France. So far, Turkey has been able to negotiate and settle only one of the thirty-five "chapters" necessary for EU accession. The science and research chapter that Turkey concluded after three years of talks constitutes one and a half pages of EU legislation, while the remaining thirty-four chapters involve around 120,000. Using his appeal in Europe to jump-start Turkey's stalled accession talks, President-elect Obama can personally help turn the idea of a European Turkey into reality.

#### Is Turkey a NATO Member?

While the EU provides Washington with a gold standard for Turkey's domestic politics, NATO does the same for its foreign policy. This raises the second

question that the new U.S. administration should ask: Is Turkey a NATO member? Again, the answer is yes. In this case, the Obama administration can -- and should -- expect Turkey to behave like a NATO member on complicated foreign policy issues such as Iran and Russia. On the former, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently signaled his government's disinclination to follow the U.S. lead, stating, "Countries that oppose Iran's nuclear weapons should not have nuclear weapons themselves."

NATO should work as a successful point of reference because since Ankara joined the organization in 1952, Turkey has participated in every NATO operation. If the new U.S. administration can renew its transatlantic ties -- getting NATO to agree on a common Iran, Afghanistan, or Russia policy -- it should fully expect Turkey to fulfill its duties to this collective security organization.

Just like the EU benchmark, the NATO option requires reciprocity from the United States. Washington has repeatedly stated that Turkey is a Western country and a NATO ally, but it has not always treated Turkey as one. For instance, Washington has provided strong counterterrorism assistance to its Western allies, from the United Kingdom to Israel to Colombia, but not to Turkey. The litmus test of whether Washington considers Turkey Western should be its assistance to Ankara against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The Bush administration, however, has given Turkey only delayed and limited support against the PKK presence in northern Iraq. The Obama administration has an interest in signaling that it sees Turkey as a full member of the NATO alliance. One way of affirming this would be to increase cooperation among Turkey, the United States, the Iraqi government, and the Iraqi Kurds against the PKK. Washington might also benefit from prodding European countries, some of which host PKK fundraising and propaganda networks, to fully support Turkey against the organization.

#### Obama Can Get Turkey Right

Given Turkey's strategic location, it is important for President-elect Obama to get Turkey right in order to achieve success in places such as Iraq, Iran, Russia, and Afghanistan. More importantly, the president-elect needs to get Turkey right to bring this country into the European and Western fold as a pro-Western, liberal democracy.

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