

President-Elect Obama, Is Turkey Western and European?

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Articles & Testimony

Dear President-elect Obama, Obamania in Turkey will help you change America's image, but I fear it will be insufficient to change Turkey's behavior. After spending three months in Turkey, I have some suggestions for your Turkey policy. Today, Turkey faces tough choices between Iran and the West and between European Union membership and the abysmal alternative. As a liberal, you are no doubt committed to Turkey's western and European inclinations. You can help prod the Turks in the right direction by confirming these identities. Washington has repeatedly said that it considers Turkey a western and European country, but it has not treated Turkey as one. Washington has not given Turkey western-level assistance against terrorism, nor has it assessed Turkey's domestic environment by European benchmarks.

The litmus test of whether Washington considers Turkey western is US assistance to Ankara against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terror attacks. Washington has provided strong counter-terrorism assistance to its western allies, from the United Kingdom to Colombia. Vis-a-vis the PKK presence in northern Iraq, however, the Bush administration has given Turkey delayed and limited support. Dear President-elect Obama, signal to Turkey that you see it as a full member of the western alliance by providing full support against the PKK.

Despite close cooperation with the United States on Iraq, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has been bashing America at home in an attempt to boost its own popularity. Do not dismiss the AKP's rhetoric as benign domestic politicking. While an anti-western statement by a Danish politician could be dismissed as "crazy" and the same statement by an Egyptian might be considered "normal", Turkey is neither Denmark nor Egypt. This is the rare country in which anti-western statements actually matter because they help shape people's identity.

For Turkey to commit itself to the West, the AKP has to make an effort. Since the AKP assumed power in 2002, the Turks have heard nothing positive about the West or the United States from their leadership. Today Turkey is the most anti-American nation in the world; a recent Pew Center poll shows that only 12 percent of the Turks have a favorable view of the United States. Anti-Americanism places Turkey's cooperation on foreign policy issues at risk. Turkey is not Saudi Arabia. Turkey being a democracy, when the Turks turn anti-American eventually Turkish foreign policy, too, will turn anti-American.

The lesson for you, President-elect Obama, is clear: given this anti-western rhetoric and the tenuous Turkish attachment to the West, your strategy must be to constantly remind Turks that they belong to the West. Hence, my next suggestion: you must recognize that while the United States cannot stop this entrenched anti-Americanism altogether, the AKP government can. You should make this issue a part of your conversation with Ankara, demanding zero tolerance toward official anti-American and anti-western rhetoric in Turkey.

My final suggestion concerns Turkey's European vocation. After coming to power in 2002, the AKP initially pushed for EU accession. However, just as Turkey began membership talks with the EU in 2005, the party's appetite for a

European Turkey waned. As Turkey moved closer to the EU, it slipped 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 2002. According to the UNDP's gender empowerment index, in 2002 Turkey ranked 63 in the world. Today, it has slipped dramatically to 90. The World Economic Forum's gender gap report shows a similar startling slip, from 105 in 2002 to 123 in 2008. Freedom House's freedom of press index reports that Turkish media is less free today than it was in 2002, slipping from 100 in 2002 to 103 in 2008.

You should expect from the AKP's Turkey what you expect from any liberal European democracy. A diplomat friend once said, "Turkey is in good shape, because its Islamists would be democrats in Egypt." True, but while Turkey's population is predominantly Muslim like Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries, its political system is a secular democracy like Europe's and Turkey is an aspiring EU member. Comparing Turkey politically to Muslim yet undemocratic Egypt is as anachronistic as comparing the United States to Christian yet undemocratic Belarus. As Turkey goes soul-searching for what it means to be a liberal, secular democracy, your political yardstick for Turkey should be Italy and France--not Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Dear President-elect Obama, given Turkey's location it is important for you to get Turkey right to achieve success in Iraq, Iran, Georgia and Afghanistan. But you also need to get Turkey right to bring this country as a pro-western, liberal democracy into Europe and the western fold.

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