

TURKEY UPDATE

President Obama's Trip to Turkey: Building a "Model Partnership"

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By choosing Turkey as his second destination for a bilateral visit after neighboring Canada so early in his administration, President Barack Hussein Obama has sent a very important signal to his Turkish hosts, as well as the wider Islamic world.

The visit took place before the new administration has completed its foreign policy reviews and determined how exactly Turkey might fit into its overall objectives. Consequently, Obama's talks with Turkish leaders were long on "atmospherics" and short on specifics. While extremely successful by any measure, the trip will not ensure a smooth ride in the important but complicated alliance between Washington and Ankara during the remainder of Obama's presidency. Nevertheless, his recognition of Turkey's geopolitical significance has helped immeasurably in eradicating the negative legacy of the previous administration and in opening a new chapter in relations.

There was a logical thread linking Obama's trip to Turkey to the previous stops on his European tour in London for the G-20 summit, Strasbourg for the NATO summit, and Prague for the EU summit. Turkey is a member of the G-20 and, like many emerging markets, is grappling with the effects of the global economic crisis. As a member of NATO for more than 50 years, it has the second-largest armed forces after the United States and remains an indispensable component in transatlantic defense cooperation. Turkey is also an applicant for EU membership, although its accession process has been slow and difficult.

Obama declared in his speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) on April 6 that he had followed up his participation in the summit meetings by going on to Turkey specifically to "send a message" that Turkey was "a critical ally and an important part of Europe." He added that Turkey and the United States had to "stand and work together to overcome the challenges of our time." Obama argued that Turkey and the United States could "build a model partnership in which a majority Christian and a majority Muslim nation, a Western nation ... can create a modern international community that is respectful, secure and prosperous." He reinforced his message by calling on the European Union to "gain by diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith" through the admission of Turkey, which would "broaden and strengthen Europe's foundation."

While helping to bolster bilateral U.S.-Turkish relations, Obama's trip was primarily designed to take advantage of Turkey's unique role as a member of the Western community of nations as well as of the Muslim world. Throughout his visit, Obama underlined the positive message he has been sending to Muslims since his inauguration relating to a new relationship based on "mutual respect." By reaffirming that the United States "is not and will never be at war with Islam" while emphasizing his own personal links to the Muslim world, Obama sought to enlist the support of the governments and peoples in what he called "majority Muslim countries" to isolate and defeat extremists resorting to terrorist violence in the name of Islam. Although administration sources had been saying before the trip that the Obama address to the TGNA was not the "big speech" he had promised to make to the Muslim world within his first 100 days, the entire Muslim world was listening.

Obama's message was a breath of fresh air to the Recep Tayyip Erdogan-led Justice and Development Party (JDP) government, which had found itself in an awkward position as the Bush administration pursued its global war on terror, a term abandoned by the Obama administration. It had endeavored to maintain a good relationship with the United States even after the crisis caused by the failure of the TGNA to sanction the passage of U.S. troops to attack Iraq from the north in March 2003. However, the JDP government was clearly uncomfortable as it tried to balance its desire to be on good

terms with a superpower ally with its discomfort over the conduct of a war that was alienating the Muslim world. Consequently, Obama's outreach to Muslims, coupled with his effort to redefine and narrow the scope of the response to the terrorist threat, will surely ease some of the pressure on the Turkish government.

Ankara also welcomed Obama's reconfirmation of his desire to proceed to "engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect" with Iran. Having maintained a relationship with Iran as part of its own policy of closer engagement with all of its neighbors, the Erdogan government had advocated the initiation of contacts with Tehran as well as the resumption of the dialogue with Damascus to the previous administration without much success. To be sure, an eventual U.S.-Iranian dialogue, which Turkey will now encourage with even more vigor, will be dominated by the thorny issue of Iran's nuclear program, which is of immense concern to Obama. Moreover, if talks with Iran fail and the United States moves to seek stronger sanctions against Iran, Turkey will find itself in a difficult position as a member of the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, Turkey now has reason to be less concerned about an escalation of tensions to the point of a military confrontation that would create the kind of strains in U.S.-Turkish relations that had followed the U.S. attack on Iraq.

Although Turkey had not supported the United States when it invaded Iraq, Obama made a point of asking for Turkish help to ensure stability in Iraq as U.S. troops begin to withdraw. As part of that process, Obama called for closer Turkish cooperation not only with the Iraqi central government but also with the Iraqi Kurds, with whom Turkey has had problems because of the presence in northern Iraq of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Obama once again characterized to Turkish satisfaction as "a terrorist organization." Although Ankara has intensified its contacts with the Iraqi Kurds recently, it remains to be seen whether the relationship will develop as Obama clearly wishes.

Having committed more U.S. troops to Afghanistan as he withdraws from Iraq, Obama called for continued Turkish assistance for the campaign to defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although there may have been hopes on the part of some members of the Obama administration prior to the trip that Turkey would be more willing than other members of NATO to provide combat troops to Afghanistan, there has been no indication so far that Turkey would be willing to reverse its stand against sending additional troops to serve in combat capacity. On the other hand, Turkey is prepared to intensify its diplomatic efforts with Pakistan as well as Afghanistan to deal with what is now being called "the AFPAK problem" in Washington, as it has diplomatic leverage in Kabul and Islamabad.

Praising Turkey's links with both Israel and the Palestinians, Obama asked for Turkish support in helping to achieve "the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security." However, his deliberate omission of any reference to Hamas, which Erdogan has been insisting needs to be included in the search for a settlement, indicates a serious disagreement between the two sides. Moreover, Erdogan's advocacy of Hamas and his vigorous denunciations of the recent Israeli attack on Gaza have caused tensions in the relationship between Ankara and Tel Aviv. Consequently, it seems unlikely that the new harder-line Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu will look favorably on a prominent role for Turkey in the near future in attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or even in reviving the Turkish-sponsored indirect Israeli-Syrian talks.

During his TGNA speech and his other public events in Turkey, Obama carefully avoided direct intrusion into the turbulent world of Turkish politics. While understandably devoting a great deal of his time to discussions with President Abdullah Gul and Erdogan and thus giving a boost to the JDP—which suffered an unexpected reversal of fortune in recent local elections—he also made a point of meeting the leaders of the opposition parties. Even as he praised both secularism and democracy as indispensable elements of modern Turkey, Obama refrained from entering the ongoing debate in the country about the nature of the secular system and its uneasy coexistence with growing religiosity. This was prudent, as every comment by U.S. leaders and officials on this sensitive subject—especially references to "moderate Islam"—has caused endless controversy in Turkey. However, Obama chose to enter into other neuralgic areas by underlining the importance of respecting "robust minority rights," praising the lifting of bans on teaching and broadcasting in Kurdish, advocating the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary, and calling on Turkey "to deal with the past" with respect to the Armenian issue.

In fact, as we look to the immediate future of U.S.-Turkish relations, there is little doubt that the Armenian question will be the main determinant. Prior to the trip, the Turks were justifiably concerned that, having committed himself strongly during his campaign to supporting "the recognition of the Armenian genocide," Obama might not follow the example of his two immediate predecessors in opposing the resolution that was recently introduced in the U.S. Congress or choose to

use the word genocide himself. In response to a question by an U.S. reporter covering the trip, Obama stated that he had not “changed his view.” However, he then referred immediately to the negotiations between Turkey and Armenia, which he said would “resolve a whole host of long-standing issues including this one,” and thus effectively tied the determination of his eventual position to the fate of the talks between Ankara and Yerevan. In other words, if the two countries can normalize relations, then Obama will be able to justify going back on his word. If not, he may still disappoint the Turks in one way or another in coming weeks or at some future stage. Needless to say, this would force Ankara to respond negatively and put into jeopardy the cooperative future that Obama outlined in Turkey.

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