

by Ariel Cohen, Ph.D. and Owen Graham

After attending the three summits--G-20, NATO, and the EU--President Obama arrived in Ankara, Turkey, Sunday for the final stop on his inaugural European tour. Obama's visit to Turkey highlights the importance Washington attaches to this country as a key regional player, a veteran NATO ally, and an influential Muslim state.

During the NATO summit on Saturday, the alliance unanimously chose Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Denmark's prime minister, as the next secretary general. Turkey was initially against the nomination, however, alleging that Rasmussen was insensitive to

Muslims during the scandal over the Prophet Muhammad cartoons and due to his pessimistic views about Turkey's EU membership. Turkey claimed to speak on behalf of the Muslim world, raising the larger question of Turkey's direction and its trajectory toward the West in general and NATO in particular.

Deterioration of U.S.-Turkish Ties

Until the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rise to power in 2002, Turkey was considered a reliable U.S. partner. During the Cold War, Turkey's modernizing secular elites championed unpopular causes: the Korean War, support of U.S. operations during the 1991 Gulf War, and Operation Northern Watch in Iraqi Kurdistan (1991-2003).

Turkey also played a vital role in peacekeeping missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Likewise, the U.S. supported Turkey against the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK and the 1999 capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. These relations contributed to major mutually beneficial projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main oil export pipeline.

Today, the AKP appears to be moving Turkey away from its pro-Western and pro-American orientation to a more Islamist one. This drift has left many in Washington uncertain over the country's direction. The growing anti-Americanism within Turkey poses a major challenge to bilateral relations.

In 2007, for instance, according to public opinion polls, only 9 percent of the population held favorable views of the United States. The Turkish public was overwhelmingly against the Iraq war and also protested perceived U.S. inaction on Kurdish PKK terrorist attacks launched from northern Iraq. Anti-Semitism and vitriolic anti-Israel sentiment is also rising--often fanned by the AKP-controlled media and politicians--and threatening to destroy a close security relationship between the two countries.

Growing Illiberalism

Turkey's secular elites are increasingly concerned by the country's direction. They argue that the AKP is promoting a creeping Islamic agenda--one that is closer to Muslim Brotherhood fundamentalism than to the traditional Ottoman tolerant religious outlook.

In July 2008, the Constitutional Court, in a split decision, rejected an attempt by Turkey's chief prosecutor to ban the AKP. The prosecution accused the AKP of violating separation of mosque and state in public life, with the intention of leading secular Turkey down a path toward Shari'a law.

While the AKP has enjoyed popular support since it came to power, for the first time since 2002, it lost support, dropping from 47 percent to 39 percent in the March 29 local elections. While the global economic crisis is in part responsible for this decrease in support, the outcome of these elections is also explained by discontent with AKP policies and recognition that the party has strayed from its promises of a more liberal Turkey in the European Union. Prominent supporters of democracy are concerned that the right of dissent and the principle of government accountability are being eroded: The AKP is viewed as increasingly intolerant of opposing views.

Turkey's Foreign Policy Drift

Regarding foreign policy, there are important signs that Turkey is drifting away from the West. In 2006, Turkey became the first NATO member to host the leader of Hamas, Khaled Mashaal. Turkey also enthusiastically hosted Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, whose government has been accused of genocide. Turkey's geography explains its association with Iran but not with Hamas or Sudan; only Islamist solidarity and anti-Western sentiment can explain these ties.

Although Turkey has been trying to facilitate an Arab-Israeli rapprochement, it is losing its impartiality and, therefore, credibility. It is attempting to sponsor an Israeli-Palestinian industrial border zone and an Israeli-Palestinian hospital. It also sponsored an Israeli-Syrian proximity talks in Istanbul.

However, at the recent Davos World Economic Forum, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Israel's operation in Gaza "inhumane." The prime minister has verbally attacked the elderly, Nobel-prize-winning, dovish Israeli President Shimon Peres as a killer of children, thus positioning himself as a Hamas protector. He then stormed out of the Davos panel, only to receive a hero's welcome at home.

Turkey supports the development of a peaceful nuclear power program by Iran but wants transparency and dialog on the subject. However, Erdogan's judgment has been called into question after he stated last year that "those who ask Iran not to produce nuclear weapons should themselves give up their nuclear weapons first."

The Bear Hug

There have also been worrisome developments in Turkey's Black Sea and Caucasus policies.

During the Russian-Georgia war, the Turkish prime minister proposed the "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform." The platform proposed a condominium of Russia and Turkey, together with the three South Caucasus countries, but it initially omitted the U.S. and EU, as well as Iran. Moreover, the United States and the European Union were not consulted on these proposals beforehand.

Turkey also temporarily blocked the transit of U.S. warships delivering humanitarian aid to Georgia. And it prioritized rapprochement with the Russian ally Armenia over the ties with the secular, pro-Western Azerbaijan. These developments underscore Turkey's cozying up to Russia as Moscow is providing nearly two-thirds of its gas supplies. Indeed, Russia may have used multi-billion-dollar construction and gas supply contracts as leverage over Ankara.

Turkey is critical to Europe's efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, including the proposed Nabucco gas pipeline that would bring Central Asian gas to Europe via Turkey, bypassing Russia. However, Turkey demanded to fill Nabucco with Iranian gas while it is currently stalling on signing an intergovernmental agreement on Nabucco. Thus, Turkey is throwing the "bypass Russia" gas transit strategy in limbo.

If Turkey's terms do not improve soon, Azerbaijan may be forced to embrace Gazprom. If that occurs, Ankara's actions will threaten to derail a decade of Western progress on East-West energy and transportation.

Afghanistan and Iraq

According to Prime Minister Erdogan, Turkey is open to discussing the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq through Turkey. Considering that Turkey refused to allow U.S. troops to enter Iraq from its territory, this is a questionable statement. Yet Turkey is a major logistical hub of efforts in Afghanistan. The planned withdrawal of troops from Iraq raises the importance of the Incirlik base.

Beyond this, Turkey has played a positive role in Afghanistan. Finally, President Obama is well aware that his statements on the Armenian genocide issue are being watched carefully. He avoided alienating a key ally not by using the "G" word (genocide) in his speeches. However, it is not clear whether the White House can prevent a congressional resolution on genocide from passing, primarily with Democratic votes, for domestic political reasons.

What Should the U.S. Do?

Despite Turkey's movement away from the West, the country continues to play a key role in NATO. Strong bilateral security relations are particularly important for cooperation on the Iraq withdrawal, Afghanistan, dealing with Iran, and addressing a resurgent Russia.

Washington should devote more attention to U.S.-Turkish relations. The Administration should stress that it is in Turkey's long-term interests to remain politically oriented toward the West. However, the timing of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's and President Obama's visits have provided political support to the ruling anti-American political party at the time of crucial

elections and increased criticism on behalf of pro-American secularists, who feel abandoned.

The United States should expand energy cooperation with Turkey. Yet it should also warn that excessive dependence on either Russian or Iranian gas will jeopardize Turkey's sovereignty and security. While U.S. support of the Turkish-Armenian normalization is justified, so is American reinforcement of the Turkish-Azeri ties.

When speaking before the Turkish Parliament, President Obama voiced support for Turkey's membership in the European Union, saying that it would "broaden and strengthen" Europe's foundation. This may not endear Obama to many Europeans. Many in Europe and the United States, however, grew even more skeptical when President Obama delivered a speech at the Alliance of Civilizations Conference--which many have deemed an anti-American forum.

Instead of these mixed messages, the Obama Administration should specify clear terms under which Turkish cooperation with the U.S. is welcome. After all, it is up to the Turkish elites to decide whether they want to continue on the path of development with the trusted and powerful ally or seek new friends in Iran, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.

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