

Obama pursues US strategic interests in Turkey

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In his two-day visit to Turkey, President Barack Obama sought to distance himself from the disastrous foreign policy legacy of George W. Bush in the Middle East while pursuing the same strategic interests of US imperialism that motivated the wars launched by his predecessor.

Media coverage of Obama's speech to the Turkish parliament Monday has focused largely on his affirmation that "the United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam," as well as his shying away from statements made in his 2008 presidential campaign defining the massacres of Turkish Armenians beginning in 1915 as "genocide."

Asked at a press conference in Ankara about his earlier statements—clearly aimed at winning Armenian-American support in key Democratic primaries—Obama refused to utter the word "genocide" and insisted that the matter was one for Turkey and Armenia to resolve.

The statement on Islam was meant to underscore the Obama administration's shift in tone from the Bush White House, whose aggression in Iraq and simultaneous "war on terrorism" and crusade for Christian fundamentalism generated popular outrage towards Washington throughout the region. In Turkey itself, polls taken at the end of Bush's term showed just 9 percent with a positive view of the US.

Whether this attempt to refurbish the image of US imperialism will succeed in salvaging Washington's interests in Turkey remains to be seen. The visit to Ankara and Istanbul follows Obama's participation in the G20 Summit in London, the NATO summit in Strasbourg and Kehl and the European Union summit in Prague. All of these gatherings served largely to paper over deep-seated differences between Europe and America, while failing to produce the key objectives sought by Obama: European fiscal stimulus to boost the US economy and more troops for the escalating war in Afghanistan.

In addressing the parliament in Ankara, Obama underscored the history of US-Turkish relations and particularly Washington's close ties to the Turkish military, which has carried out four coups since 1960.

"It is a friendship that flourished in the years after World War II, when President Truman committed our nation to the defense of Turkey's freedom and sovereignty, and Turkey committed itself to the NATO alliance," he said. "Turkish troops have served by our side from Korea to Kosovo to Kabul. Together, we withstood the great test of the Cold War."

Maintaining this military collaboration is clearly a key aim motivating the visit to Turkey. With 1,200 soldiers participating in the US-led occupation in Afghanistan, Turkey has the

second largest army of the NATO member states. Moreover, the Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey serves as a key logistics hub for supplying US troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a base for US warplanes carrying out strikes in Iraq.

The end of the Cold War and the aggressive US policy in the Middle East have placed increasing strains on the ties binding Turkey to NATO and Washington.

Tensions mounted after 2003, when the Turkish government was unable to get legislation through parliament granting Washington's request to use its territory for launching the US invasion of Iraq. Ankara's fears about the war were fueled in large measure by concern that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would stoke Kurdish separatism not only in northern Iraq, but across the border in Turkey itself.

Fissures also emerged in August 2008 over the conflict between Russia and Georgia. While the rest of NATO was condemning Russia and declaring its support for Georgia's "territorial integrity," Turkey adopted a stance of neutrality.

As Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared at the time: "Some are trying to push us toward the US and some toward Russia... One of the sides is our closest ally, the United States. The other side is Russia, with which we have an important trade volume ... I will not allow Turkey to be pushed to one side or the other. We will act in accordance with Turkey's national interests."

Moreover, under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has its roots in Turkey's Islamist movement, Ankara has forged closer ties with Iran and Syria—treated as pariahs by Washington—as well as with the Palestinian Hamas movement, which is on the US "foreign terrorist" list. At the same time, Ankara has maintained close military and economic ties with Israel.

Nonetheless, Erdogan sharply criticized Israel's three-week siege against Gaza last December and January, storming off the stage during a panel discussion with Israeli President Shimon Peres at the Davos World Economic Forum, a performance that boosted his popularity in Turkey.

In his speech, Obama addressed some of these relations, attempting to cast US policy as more moderate under his administration. On the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he declared, "Let me be clear: the United States strongly supports the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. ... That is a goal that the parties agreed to in the Roadmap and at Annapolis. And that is a goal that I will actively pursue as president."

The remark was widely seen as a shot across the bow for the new Israeli government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, which has indicated it has no interest in pursuing negotiations aimed at creating a Palestinian state.

Obama's remark in Ankara drew a quick retort from Israeli Environmental Protection Minister Gilad Erdan, who is in charge of relations between the Netanyahu cabinet and the Israeli Knesset. He declared, "Israel does not take orders from Obama... In voting for Netanyahu the citizens of Israel have decided that they will not become the 51st US state."

Just days before, the US Senate voted for a foreign aid package that will provide Israel with

the nearly \$3 billion in annual US aid which sustains the country's economy and government.

On Iran, Obama demanded that Tehran forego "nuclear weapons ambitions," while stressing that Washington "seeks engagement based upon mutual interests and mutual respect."

On Sunday, however, Obama's national security adviser Susan Rice was asked in a television interview whether she was concerned about Israeli threats to carry out air strikes against Iran. She replied that the US shares "Israel's very grave concern about the [Iranian] threat," while refusing "to speculate about what may transpire." She added that while the Obama administration was open to "direct diplomacy" with Tehran, "if that path is not chosen, we have not ruled out any options."

Also straining Turkey's ties with both the US and NATO is the stalled bid for Turkish membership in the European Union.

Speaking at the US-EU summit in Prague, Obama urged the 27-state union to admit Turkey as a member, saying that it would foster closer relations between the West and the Muslim world. "Moving forward towards Turkish membership in the EU would be an important signal of your commitment to this agenda and ensure we continue to anchor Turkey firmly in Europe," he said.

He reiterated this point in his speech to the Turkish parliament, saying, "Let me be clear: the United States strongly supports Turkey's bid to become a member of the European Union. We speak not as members of the EU, but as close friends of Turkey and Europe."

This pronouncement drew a quick rebuff from French President Nicolas Sarkozy. "I have been working hand in hand with President Obama, but when it comes to the European Union it is up to member states of the European Union to decide," he said in a French television interview. "I have always been opposed to this entry and I remain opposed."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel essentially concurred, noting that there were obviously "differences of opinion" with the US president.

The tensions involving Turkey, the EU and NATO erupted at the NATO meeting in Strasburg when the Turkish delegation initially blocked the naming of Denmark's prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, as the alliance's secretary general. The Turkish objections stemmed from what was perceived as Rasmussen's indifference to the outrage provoked in 2005 by anti-Islamic cartoons published in a Danish newspaper, as well as Denmark's tolerance of Roj TV, a station that Ankara has accused of acting as a propaganda arm of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), an armed Kurdish separatist group.

Turkey was persuaded to drop its veto, which threatened to derail the summit, only after Obama brokered a deal that included giving a top NATO post to Turkey and a pledge by Denmark to begin proceedings to close down the offending Kurdish station.

The incident reflects the increasing willingness of Turkey to use NATO as a means of pressuring Europe over EU membership. Earlier, Ankara had rejected NATO deployment orders for Kosovo and Afghanistan because they called for cooperation with the EU.

As part of Obama's bid to repair relations with Turkey, he invoked the "common threat from terrorism," lumping together Al Qaeda and the PKK. "There is no excuse for terror against

any nation,” he said. “As president and as a NATO ally, I pledge that you will have our support against the terrorist activities of the PKK.” This policy represents a direct continuation of that of the Bush administration, which sanctioned cross-border attacks against PKK positions in northern Iraq in 2007.

Another issue touched on in Obama’s speech was Turkey’s role in providing routes for pipelines linking the West to the vast energy resources of the Caspian Basin, bypassing Russia. “The United States will continue to support your central role as an East-West corridor for oil and natural gas,” he said.

This key strategic aim was covered in far greater detail in a report issued in advance of the Obama visit by the Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies [PDF]. Among those supervising the preparation of this document were former US national security advisors Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft.

“The United States should bolster its support for Turkey’s development as an energy transit corridor to the global market,” the document states. It adds, “Quiet diplomacy is needed to align various state and commercial interests and to not provoke potential competitors into early action in opposition.”

The CSIS calls on the Obama administration to “appoint a senior official for Eurostan energy to enhance interagency coordination and orchestrate US engagement with foreign governments and the energy industry.”

The authors of this report represent the sections of the US foreign policy establishment that backed Obama’s candidacy, seeing it as a means of improving Washington’s abysmal image on the world stage and effecting certain tactical changes in US policy, while adopting a less confrontational tone than the one adopted by the Bush administration.

Underneath these changes in style, however, the Obama administration, no less than that of Bush, is pursuing the geopolitical and economic interests of America’s financial oligarchy. In the trip to Turkey, what predominated was the continuing quest for American hegemony over markets and strategic resources—above all energy—that motivated the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Under conditions of deepening economic crisis, this drive carries with it the threat of even bloodier conflicts.

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