

Obama visit signals increased role for Turkey and greater tensions

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President Barack Obama's visit to Turkey confirmed that the US plans to build up Turkey as a regional outpost, to play the role of policeman to secure US interests in the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia. The US policy poses grave dangers to the masses in Turkey and the surrounding region.

There is virtually no opposition to this development from any establishment party or the press in Turkey. On the contrary, they prided themselves in achieving such an important goal in luring the US president to Turkey on his first overseas visit.

The visit had been carefully cultivated for a number of months in line with its importance for US foreign policy. Just after the US elections, the Bush administration signalled a shift in US policy, and since then top US officials began visiting Turkey.

Last month, Hillary Clinton paid a visit seemingly geared toward preparing Turkish public opinion for Obama's visit. Turkey has one of the lowest approval ratings for the US in the world, with Pew Center polls oscillating between 9 and 12 percent over the last years, far behind Russia, Iran and Syria. Clinton spent a significant part of her visit appearing on talk shows and granting interviews. The *Washington Post* had noted that "the president will need an ambitious public relations program in Turkey."

Turkey was then chosen for Obama's first overseas visit, making Turkey the second official state visit of his administration after Canada, an unprecedented move by any recent US administration.

Once in Ankara, Obama delivered his speech to the Turkish parliament in his usual soothing tones, declaring, "[We] must stand together—and work together—to overcome the challenges of our time." He then went on to explain what those challenges are. One such challenge and "common" goal was victory in Afghanistan. "Now we must achieve our goals together," Obama said.

This was enough to cause the Turkish press to strike chauvinist tones and celebrate the greatness of Turkey and its foreign policy. According to a headline in the Islamist *Zaman* newspaper, the visit reaffirmed "historical and warm messages." The paper wrote, "We are very pleased to see that [Obama] emphasised Turkey's importance." His visit was a world historical event, in that he "understood the merit of our country, its importance and the power of our democracy."

In fact, while Obama told everybody what they wanted to hear, it was he who left with more concrete results. The left liberal *Radikal* newspaper reported Turkey's President Abdullah Gül saying, "We want America to be successful, including in Afghanistan. Our high contribution for Iraq and Afghanistan is to be taken for granted." It is unclear, however, of what this "high contribution" will consist.

The population of Turkey is strongly opposed to the occupation of

both countries. Any sending of Turkish combat troops to Afghanistan would create serious problems for the moderate Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. It has already a non-combat role in Afghanistan as part of the NATO forces there, commanding a contingent of 1,200 soldiers.

In Iraq, Turkey's contribution is likely to serve as a transit country when a large number of US occupation troops are withdrawn to be used against other targets. The US also expects Turkey to use its good relations with Pakistan to stabilize the country.

Prior to the visit, the Kemalist *Cumhuriyet* newspaper hoped that Obama would abandon Bush's aggressive stance towards Islamism embodied in the latter's "moderate Islam" policy and acknowledge Turkey as the only secular and "democratic" Muslim republic in the world; the sole balancing factor between the Middle East and the Western world in a region dominated by chaos and uncertainty.

Obama certainly delivered in this regard, emphasising the "secular" character of the republic, with glowing references to its founder. The Kemalist newspaper was overall satisfied with the visit of the US president, apart from some criticism of Obama's call for the reopening of the Christian orthodox Halki Seminary and a passing reference to a "Kurdish minority" in his informal discussion with Turkish students.

Obama's comment are significant because they signal a shift in US policy towards the Turkish military, which had formerly used the theme of secularism in its anti-democratic campaign against the Islamist AKP government. The practice of the Bush administration also led to the US distancing itself from the Turkish military during the Iraq war.

This was expressed in the failed motion of March 1, 2003, when the Turkish parliament denied use of the country as a staging ground for a "northern front" for US invasion troops against Iraq. The US criticised the Turkish military for failing to exert sufficient pressure on elected MPs and consequently based its policy in Iraq on support for the Iraqi Kurdish nationalists. The US feared that the nationalist policies of Turkey against the Kurds could complicate the war in Iraq by antagonising the only reliable ally the US had managed to find.

It seems that the strategic market value of the Kurds has fallen steadily since last year, while US relations with the Turkish military have steadily improved. The US provided intelligence to the Turkish military about the activities of the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] in Northern Iraq, which Turkey then used to bomb PKK guerrillas. Even a limited cross-border operation by Turkish land forces found US approval.

Obama made clear this policy would continue. In his speech to the Turkish parliament he equated the Kurdish nationalist PKK with Al

Qaeda terrorists, while vaguely calling for “continued efforts to promote education and opportunity and democracy” for Turkey’s Kurds. Significantly, in his meeting with parliamentarians from the Kurdish nationalist DTP (Democratic Society Party), which is about to be banned for “separatism,” Obama lectured them about the necessity of distancing themselves from violence, but avoided any criticism of the possible party ban.

In a significant change of heart, the Turkish military brass turned out en masse to hear Obama’s speech. This was the first time they attended a parliament sitting since DTP deputies entered the Turkish assembly two years ago, which the general staff saw as reason for a boycott.

The left liberal *Milliyet* newspaper also drew attention to this fact by noting that “a new beginning” has emerged from Obama’s speech and that Bush’s “moderate Islam” references had been replaced with references to a secular-democratic country. Off the official record, however, Obama did not forget the AKP’s constituency and made sympathetic references to prayer times during his informal meetings with university students.

Prime Minister Erdogan, the leader of the AKP, correctly noted that “a new era has begun between Turkey and the US.” He no doubt assumed that the US is now more amenable to Turkey’s demands.

Deniz Baykal, the leader of the largest opposition party—the Republican Peoples Party (CHP)—acknowledged that Obama’s visit was a success as a public relations exercise, but criticised the government for not exploiting the visit more. He said that the visit was “a missed opportunity” and that “some of Turkey’s theses should have been communicated more effectively.”

The only high-profile criticism of Obama’s speech came from Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which increased its vote significantly in the recent local elections to emerge as third strongest party. He complained that Obama was “impolite” in asking Turkey to face its history. This was a response to Obama’s reference to the Armenian genocide of 1915, in which Obama avoided any direct reference, but instead spoke nebulously of “a process, that works through the past in a way that is honest, open and constructive.” This is close to the official Turkish position, that historians of both countries should discuss the “1915 incidents”—as if the genocide were an open question.

The US president selected his words regarding Armenia with the utmost care, in order not to offend the Turkish establishment, on the one hand, and to press for a reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia, and Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, on the other. This is seen as vital for a greater Turkish role in the southern Caucasus. Nagorno-Karabakh is inhabited predominantly by Armenians, and broke away from Azerbaijan after a bitter war, supported by Armenia. Since then, Turkey has severed its diplomatic relations and closed its borders to Armenia, which has turned to Russia as an ally.

In Turkey and Azerbaijan, nationalists talk of the two states as being “one nation,” and any concession to Armenia is met with their bitter opposition. In addition, the cultivation of hatred and resentment against Armenians has been the stock in trade of right-wing nationalists, fascists and Islamists in Turkey for decades. Amongst Armenian nationalists, anti-Turkish resentment is also deeply rooted.

Similarly, Obama’s appeal for a “lasting settlement” in Cyprus on the basis of a “bi-zonal and bi-communal federation” will inevitably evoke Turkish and Greek nationalists, which firmly oppose any concessions to the other side.

Obama further indicated his satisfaction with Turkish mediation between Israel and Syria and called for “engagement” with the “leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” implicitly dropping the aim of regime change while trying to enlist Turkey’s support in pressuring Iran over alleged “nuclear weapons ambitions.” In reference to Israel and Palestine, no mention was made of Hamas. In contrast to the Kemalist establishment and the Turkish army, Erdogan’s AKP government has good relations with the Islamist group and has unsuccessfully sought to mediate between Hamas and Israel.

Overall, the main conclusion drawn by the Turkish media and political establishment is that Obama’s new approach will help immensely in promoting Turkish national interests and assist Turkey in reclaiming its strategic importance in the world. Such “national interests” have nothing to do with the interest of the Turkish masses. Rather they represent the interests of the Turkish ruling elite, which is continuously seeking to make an accommodation with the imperialist powers. It now seems that the US indeed has plans for Turkey to play a greater, more active role in the neighbouring regions.

A foretaste of the tensions arising from this policy was expressed in Obama’s insistence on Turkey’s claim for membership in the European Union—a recommendation that was immediately opposed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Tensions also arose over the election of Anders Rasmussen as new NATO secretary-general. Erdogan’s government initially opposed Rasmussen, who is seen as an anti-Islamic hardliner, defending the infamous Mohammed cartoons in a right-wing Danish newspaper in 2005. Turkey also takes issue with Danish-based Kurdish satellite TV channel Roj TV, allegedly linked to the PKK. Merkel and other European leaders rejected any compromise over Rasmussen, however, and only a last-minute intervention by Obama secured Turkey’s agreement, bought mainly at the price of some NATO posts for the country.



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