

## TURKEY UPDATE

*May 15, 2013***Erdogan Back at the White House**

On May 16 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan meets President Barack Obama on his first visit to the White House since December 2009. Obama has reserved much of his schedule for the day to his visitor, who has won three successive elections, recently celebrated a decade as prime minister and is brimming with self-confidence. The Turkish leader will receive a very warm welcome from his host that will serve to confirm Erdogan's view of his country's enhanced stature in the international community. At the same time, the encounter will provide an opportunity for the two leaders to once again display their much-publicized mutual affinity. However, there are divergences, particularly on the Syrian crisis, that they will attempt to resolve or minimize behind the scenes.

**The Model Partnership**

The past four years have witnessed the development of a remarkable closeness between the two men, comparable to that of George H.W. Bush and Turgut Ozal when they were leading their countries two decades earlier. Surmounting linguistic obstacles, Obama and Erdogan have maintained frequent telephone communication and Obama has gone so far as to describe Erdogan as one of his favorite fellow leaders.

By choosing to visit Turkey in April 2009, just three months after moving into the White House, Obama signaled the priority he would assign to US-Turkish relations in his foreign policy. While in Turkey, he underlined this by unveiling his vision of 'a model partnership' between the two countries. Even before his election Obama had argued that, in contrast to the strategy of his predecessor George W. Bush, he would stress multilateralism while relying on the consensual support of his allies. Obama made it clear that Turkey, a country which he noted belonged to the West as well as the Muslim world, would play a major role, especially in the Middle East. When he welcomed Erdogan to Washington a few months later, Obama praised Turkey's "growing influence around the world" and said that, as "a majority Muslim nation," Turkey was playing "a critical role in helping to shape mutual understanding and stability and peace not only in its neighborhood but around the world."

Obama demonstrated his commitment to a smooth relationship with Erdogan a few days after his visit to Ankara through his treatment of the politically difficult Armenian genocide issue. Having repeatedly claimed as senator and as presidential candidate that the events of 1915 constituted genocide and that he would acknowledge it as such as president, Obama backtracked by refraining from using the word in his April 24 2009 statement. Obama has since maintained his position in annual statements on the subject while opposing Congressional action like his predecessors.

Although there have been stumbles during the past four years, most notably in 2010 when Turkey voted against the US-sponsored sanctions resolution on Iran at the United Nations Security Council despite a last minute personal plea by Obama to Erdogan, there is little doubt that the long-standing US-Turkish alliance has been

enjoying a new honeymoon under the Obama-Erdogan stewardship. While there are issues in the relationship, those charged with managing it in Washington and Ankara invariably choose glowing terms in describing it.

The current atmosphere is clearly a product of the convergence of the Obama administration's desire to strengthen its cooperation with this strategically located country as part of its overall foreign policy goal of trying as much as possible to 'lead from behind' and the Erdogan government's own desire to expand Turkey's influence in regions beyond its borders, preferably in coordination with its superpower ally.

Although he has not articulated it openly, Obama was no doubt cognizant from the outset that the nature and outlook of the current Turkish government provided possible advantages for his policy of cooperation. The Justice and Development Party (AK Parti), led by Erdogan, which came to power in November 2002, has its roots in the Turkish Islamist movement and was eager to strengthen links with fellow Muslims in the neighboring Middle East and beyond, as part of its ambitious foreign policy.

Prior to his partnership with Obama, Erdogan had been able to overcome the considerable strains produced by the unexpected Turkish refusal to allow US troops to attack Iraq through Turkey in March 2003. Erdogan then cooperated with Bush for almost six years, despite the skepticism of the majority of Turks who shared the widespread misgivings throughout the Middle East and the wider Muslim world about Bush's policies. Consequently, Obama's new approach made cooperation with Washington much easier.

### **The Arab Spring Falters in Syria**

The unfolding of the Arab Spring in 2011 provided the ideal forum for the implementation of the 'model partnership' as upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt proceeded relatively quickly, without a great deal of bloodshed, to the overthrow of unpopular Washington-backed autocrats and their replacement by Islamists previously shut out of the system. Turkey, supported by the United States, emerged as an example or inspiration for both countries as they grappled with the complex task of blending Islam with democracy while sidelining radicals who rejected cooperation with the West and the international financial system.

Obama and Erdogan clearly hoped that this process would be repeated throughout the Middle East and usher in a new era of responsible government and regional stability. However, the protracted conflict through which the dictatorship in Libya was overthrown with Western military support produced lingering disorder which ultimately led to the murder of American Ambassador Christopher Stevens. This raised serious questions in Washington about the direction of the Arab Spring which have been underlined by the virtual disappearance of optimistic comments about the region by the Obama administration. The even more protracted and bloodier conflict in Syria has inevitably deepened the skepticism in the White House about the trend of events in the Middle East.

While Obama and Erdogan agree on their joint stated goal of an end to the ruthless authoritarian regime of Bashar Assad, they have disagreed on the means. Having fully committed himself and his country to the achievement of this aim, Erdogan has become increasingly frustrated by the unwillingness of Obama to utilize the enormous diplomatic and military capabilities of the US to help ensure Assad's departure. Turkey has been confronting increasing financial and social costs in hosting over 400,000 refugees from its troubled southern neighbor while facing the very real danger of the spread of the conflict into its border provinces, as evidenced by the recent bombings in Reyhanli which killed over 50 people for which Erdogan blamed the Assad regime. Without a viable option of using its own military assets to end the conflict in Syria unilaterally, Turkey is also incurring the incalculable costs of the exposure of the limits of its ability to determine the course of events immediately beyond its border, raising serious questions about its influence in the entire region.

Erdogan made it clear before his departure for Washington that he will endeavor to persuade Obama to abandon his reticence about greater US involvement. To that end, Erdogan confirmed that he will present evidence that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons and thus crossed his host's self-proclaimed red

line. However, it seems highly unlikely that Obama will provide the kind of support to the Syrian opposition forces which could allow them to turn the tide against Assad or to back the establishment of a safe zone in Syria protected by the US and its allies, similar to the arrangement in northern Iraq in 1991 after the First Gulf War which allowed over 500,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees in Turkey to return.

The kind of American engagement in the Syrian crisis which will be requested by Erdogan appears to be unpalatable to Obama partly because of his grave reservations about the strength of the Islamist radicals within the opposition and their future possible role in a post-Assad Syria. At the same time, having withdrawn US troops from Iraq and announced his intention to withdraw from Afghanistan, Obama is determined to avoid what could become open-ended new foreign military adventures and is instead intent on giving priority to 'nation-building at home.' Accordingly, after the recent meeting between the US and Russian foreign ministers in Moscow, Obama will in turn urge Erdogan to see the advantages of a negotiated settlement with the help of Russia, which has been backing Assad while blocking action by the United Nations Security Council. It remains to be seen how Erdogan will react to an idea which he specifically opposed before his departure and which, contrary to his strident calls during the past two years, could leave the Baath regime, if not Assad himself, in power as part of a Washington-Moscow brokered arrangement.

### **Iraq and Kurdish Energy**

The course of events in Iraq also constitutes another serious source of divergence between the two leaders. To be sure, since the US-led decapitation of the Saddam regime a decade ago, both countries have agreed on the need to achieve stability in Iraq. However, Erdogan regards the current Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Maliki's authoritarian and increasingly sectarian policies as the source of growing tensions with Sunnis and Kurds and as a threat to the very unity of Iraq and his distrust of Maliki has been aggravated by suspicions that Maliki has been quietly supporting Assad. In contrast, Obama remains committed to working with the Iraqi leader, especially after the withdrawal of US troops in December 2011. To Maliki's annoyance, Erdogan has chosen to maintain links with Sunni leaders disaffected with his leadership while cultivating closer relations, particularly in the energy sector, with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which controls Iraqi territory immediately beyond the Turkish border. Bolstered by the hope that the influence of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership would help to resolve the Kurdish problem within Turkey and also help to control the activities of Syrian Kurds who have gained de facto autonomy in northern Syria as the civil war unfolded, Turkey has finalized a bilateral deal with the KRG, confirmed by Erdogan on his way to Washington, to facilitate the transportation of northern Iraqi oil and gas through Turkish territory without the approval of the central government in Baghdad.

Turkey views the involvement in the KRG by leading US oil companies such as Exxon-Mobil, with which the Turkish Petroleum Company has signed a preliminary agreement to cooperate in the production of oil in the KRG, and Chevron as a significant indicator of a trend towards US acceptance of such a deal. However, the Obama administration has so far proved unwilling to give its support. The primary concern in Washington is that this deal would further erode the authority of Maliki, ultimately leaving him with little choice but to move even closer to Iran. Limiting Iranian influence as much possible in post-Saddam Iraq and preventing Iraqi-Iranian cooperation in the Gulf, which would threaten Saudi Arabia and other US allies, remains a major policy imperative in Washington. To that end, Deputy National Security Adviser Anthony Blinken and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns recently organized a meeting in London with Turkish Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioglu and Iraqi National Security Advisor Falah Fayyed to stress the importance of cooperation between Turkey, Iraq and the KRG on this issue.

It seems safe to predict that Obama will reinforce this message. However, what is not clear is whether Erdogan will be inclined to back away from a bilateral deal to which he is personally committed. Moreover, even if he were willing to do so, it would be very difficult for him to explain such a major reversal which would contradict his often stated commitment to trying to ensure that Turkey becomes a country which "determines its own agenda rather than following others' agendas."

## **Israel, Gaza and Hamas**

Turkey's relations with Israel and the Palestinians, in particular with Hamas, are certain to be a significant item in the Obama-Erdogan agenda. This was made clear even before the visit was finalized by the strong US reaction to Erdogan's characterization of Zionism as "a crime against humanity" during a UN speech in February and even more by the recent major US diplomatic effort to foster renewed Turkish-Israeli cooperation in the wake of the Mavi Marmara attack in 2010.

Although tense relations between Turkey and Israel predated Mavi Marmara, the incident seriously aggravated tensions and forced Obama into implementing the difficult option of effectively compartmentalizing US relations with these two important allies. Consequently, at the very end of his first trip to Israel in March, Obama arranged a phone conversation between Erdogan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during which the latter apologized for "any error that may have led to the loss of life." The Obama-brokered apology opened the door to the possibility of coordinated trilateral cooperation between Turkey, Israel and the US to deal with the ferment in the Middle East.

However, while Netanyahu's apology met the first of Turkey's three conditions for normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations and the subsequent technical-level talks appear to have cleared the way to the resolution of the compensation issue, the focus has now shifted to the Turkish demand for the lifting of the Gaza blockade imposed by Israel. Although the blockade has been eased and some Turkish aid is getting to Gaza, Erdogan recently stated that full diplomatic relations would not be restored until the blockade was "completely lifted." The issue is further complicated by Ankara's close relations with Hamas leader Khalid Meshaal, and Erdogan's stated conviction that Hamas has to be involved in any solution of the Palestinian problem as well as his intention to travel to Gaza.

Cognizant of Israel's strong opposition to the Turkish engagement with Meshaal and the Palestinian Authority's own discreet reservations, the US has been unwilling to change its perception of Hamas as a terrorist organization which cannot be a part of the equation. In any case, even if the Obama administration were to somehow prove amenable to the Turkish argument that Hamas could be persuaded to soften its current position on talks with Israel, it is very unlikely that Congress would accept such a change of policy. As the strong Turkish reaction to the public suggestion by Secretary of State John Kerry in April that Erdogan should review and delay his planned visit to Gaza makes clear, a meeting of minds on this issue is not in the cards. At a broader level, it is also clear that, despite the recent progress towards an improvement in Turkish-Israeli relations, the kind of cooperation between the two countries desired by Obama seems unattainable in the near future, not least because Erdogan's strong advocacy of the Palestinian cause brings popular dividends for him in Turkey as well as in the Arab world.

## **Iran and Sanctions**

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and even more so after Iran's nuclear program became the focus of US-Iranian tensions, Ankara has been forced to balance the requirements of its alliance with Washington and its ties to Teheran. Until 2010, when the US rejected Turkish efforts for a deal with Iran and Turkey voted against UN sanctions on Iran, Washington essentially tolerated Ankara's engagement with Teheran and its nuanced policies. However, since then, Turkey has been more cautious diplomatically although it has continued to be protective of its energy-dominated trade relationship with Iran despite growing tensions over Syria.

As their talks are certain to confirm, Obama and Erdogan agree that an Iran with nuclear weapons capability is unacceptable. Both leaders also agree that the use of the military option by Israel or the US itself is undesirable. However, they differ on the use and efficacy of sanctions, which Obama sees as the best way to avoid resorting to the military option. Accordingly, the US has been leading an international effort to impose increasingly strict sanctions on Iran to try to force a change in Iran's nuclear program and Obama expects Erdogan to support them to help ensure their effectiveness.

Under pressure from the US, Turkey reduced the volume of oil it imports from Iran from 51 per cent in 2011 to 41 per cent last year. However, it still pays around \$8 billion a year for Iranian oil and \$4 billion for Iranian gas and is disinclined to downgrade its energy relationship with Iran further, not least because Teheran accepts payment in Turkish liras. The US Congress is particularly unhappy with the continuing Turkish-Iranian energy relationship which is seen as enabling Iran to withstand the effect of sanctions and, having recently moved to try to curb the so called 'gas for gold' arrangement between the two countries, is now focusing on the role of state-owned Halkbank where the Turkish payments to Iran are deposited. It will be interesting to see if Obama will be able to persuade his Turkish guest to change the scope and nature of the trade relationship with Iran.

### **The PKK, Trade and Cyprus**

Although the other issues on their agenda will take up much of their time, the two leaders will also take up other items. These are led by Erdogan's recent initiative to try to solve Turkey's perennial Kurdish problem through talks with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan. Although the US has not been directly involved in the current process, it has welcomed it and Erdogan will be asking Obama to provide support for the ultimate goal of the elimination of the PKK, which has been involved in a war with Turkey for almost 30 years, in the context of US-Turkish cooperation against terrorism. Tangible US support might be expected in dealing with complications which will be created by the continuing PKK presence in northern Iraq after the withdrawal of PKK members from Turkey to Iraq has been completed. At a broader level, Erdogan will expect backing from Obama for his stated vision of redefining relations with Kurds within Turkey as well as outside in a cooperative relationship with major regional implications.

The two leaders will also examine the likely effects on Turkey and US-Turkish trade of the US-European Union negotiations about a free trade agreement with massive global implications. Turkey is understandably worried about its impact on its own economy and recent recovery. Accordingly, Turkey will seek assurances from the US that it will help to ensure the protection of Turkish interests in the talks even though it has a customs union agreement with the European Union and expects support from an institution that it ultimately hopes to join. At the same time, Erdogan will ask Obama to help re-invigorate efforts to bolster US-Turkey trade which have not grown to the levels the two men hoped when they began to talk about it four years ago.

The long-running Cyprus problem, which previously did not get on the Obama-Erdogan agenda in any meaningful way, looks certain to be discussed this time. The election of a new Greek Cypriot president who supported earlier efforts for a settlement combined with the discovery of huge gas deposits around the island have helped encourage Turkish hopes for a revival of serious diplomatic efforts for a settlement. Accordingly, Erdogan will be asking Obama to provide US support for such efforts. Although the US has not been active in this issue for almost a decade, it seems likely that Obama will indicate a willingness to re-engage.

### **Looking Ahead**

The history of American-Turkish summit meetings in Washington shows that, almost irrespective of the substance of the private discussions between the leaders, the talks are invariably characterized as successful and Turkish leaders return home buoyed by having met their American counterparts in the White House. The unusual courtesies extended to Erdogan on this trip – the provision of Blair House and military honor guards, two separate meetings with Obama as well as a joint press conference – will help ensure that the trip will be characterized by the Turkish media as a triumph. However, only Erdogan will be able to determine whether it was indeed a success from Turkey's point of view and his judgment will, to a great extent, depend on what he was able to wrest out of Obama on Syria. After all, following his return to Turkey, Erdogan will be visiting Reyhanli which has been witness to rising tensions between the locals and Syrian refugees after the bombings coupled with increased questioning of the extent of Turkish involvement in the Syrian crisis.

The possible effects of the Syria crisis on the domestic political equation will be foremost in Erdogan's mind as he begins to focus after his return to Turkey on the local, presidential and parliamentary elections which are due

to take place in the next two years. In addition to the dealing with the Syrian problem, Erdogan will have to juggle the expectations of the Kurds after the PKK withdrawal and the likely negative reactions of Turkish nationalists; ensure the continuation of the perception that the economy is on the right track and intensify his efforts to engineer a constitutional switch to a presidential system which have inevitably reinforced accusations of growing authoritarianism even as he endeavors to ensure that his party's vote remains at or above the remarkable 50 per cent mark he achieved in the 2011 parliamentary elections. Having been on an unbroken trajectory of political achievements since his election as mayor of Istanbul in 1994, it will be interesting to see how Erdogan will perform as he tries to keep his winning streak going.

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