

US-TURKISH RELATIONS AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: THE IMPACT ON GREECE AND CYPRUS*

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When I discuss Turkish-American relations, I am reminded of the stereotypes from the Truman Doctrine period about Turkey being a “proud and independent country” in an important strategic location, and Greece being a “loyal and traditional friend” who will support the US because of political, historic and cultural reasons. I am afraid nothing much has changed since then. The policy consequences of these stereotypes have resulted in Turkey’s arrogant behavior, a state with an over inflated ego, blaming everyone else but itself for many of its national and international problems. The recent recall of the Turkish Ambassador to the US over the approval by the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the Armenian Genocide resolution is a classic example. To Turkey’s credit, its leaders have displayed a consistent but also a foreign policy that has adapted to the changing international environment, a policy that has been assisted by effective lobbying in the US. Even though in recent months Turkey’s disputes with Israel and its pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian openings have harmed Turkey’s image in the US, Turkey’s supporters have tried to downplay these developments attributing them to the lack of support by the US and the EU.

Despite Turkey’s misconduct, we see a symbiotic relationship between Ankara and Washington based on alleged common interests on issues such as Islam, terrorism, energy and Afghanistan. Thus, our government had no difficulty supporting Turkey in securing a position in the UN Security Council despite its violation of the Council’s unanimous resolutions on Cyprus.

Starting in the fall of 2008 and into the spring of 2009, and earlier this February, we were flooded with think tank reports about the “neglected” Turkish-American alliance. These carefully choreographed reports blamed the US and the EU for Turkey’s alleged “turning away” from the West, while calling on the US and the EU to be sensitive and supportive of Turkey’s interests in order to revive the “failing partnership” between Turkey and the West, and rationalizing Turkey’s evolving relations with Iran, Syria, Russia and Israel. These reports included, among others, that by the Center for American Progress headed by John Podesta, a major study by Philip Gordon that was supported by Turkish funds, and most recently by a similar study by the RAND Corporation.

The Podesta report called on President Obama to make Turkey the first stop of his first European trip to highlight Turkey’s importance and position in Europe and promote its EU aspirations, even though we have no voice in the EU’s

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membership policies. Turkey was also used by the President as a platform to promote his vision of relations with the Islamic world.

The great irony is that there is nothing new in these reports. Those of us who devoted their academic lives following these issues remember similar reports and academic studies on Turkey during the 1970's and 80's. These studies had very similar titles to the ones of 2008/09, as they addressed issues like the impact of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the Congressional arms embargo on Turkey and Turkey's flirting with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Every time Turkey violated international law or was in trouble over its foreign policy, our country was blamed for being insensitive to Turkey's strategic needs and concerns in a volatile region.

This thinking was manifested in the President's low key meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch in an Istanbul hotel rather than at the Ecumenical Patriarchate; not a word about the threats against the Ecumenical Patriarchate or Turkey's misconduct in Cyprus; and only generic statements about religious freedom and the elusive reopening of the Halki School of Theology. In contrast, Turkey's arrogance was shown in the bullying of the US and NATO over the selection of the new Secretary-General of the alliance. In turn, the open ended support for Turkey's EU aspirations did not settle well with key EU members at a time when the President sought to rebuild US-EU relations in the aftermath of the Bush administration.

The American Hellenic Institute wrote to President Obama on March 26 2009 on issues of concern to the Greek-American community as relating to the rule of law, American and international law and US interests. However, in the absence of a crisis, Greek Turkish relations continue to be handled at the bureaucratic level where old assumptions still frame American policy. Greek-Turkish relations are not on the White House radar screen. The President's first European trip included Turkey but excluded Greece. At a time of economic weakness Greece is pressured to close various foreign policy issues in the Balkans, the Aegean and in Cyprus.

The Obama administration remains silent on the dangerous and destabilizing violations of the Aegean airspace by the Turkish air force. These violations continue to grow in numbers (from 1288 in 2008 to 1678 in 2009 including 51 over flights of Greek Aegean islands). The administration continues the policy of its predecessors about negotiating the Turkish claims of "grey zones" in the Aegean, regardless of their legal validity. This encourages Turkey's quest to revise the Aegean status quo established by international law since the early 1920's, by the threat of force if necessary as it happened with the 1996 Imia crisis. These policies undermine Greek sovereignty and territorial integrity, let alone regional stability. Even more disturbing are recent revelations of how Turkish policy in the Aegean may have been part of the domestic power play currently going on in Turkey. Thus the Turkish threat to regional stability may even be more serious than most observers believe.

Despite the President's commitment to human rights and to the rule of law we did not hear a single comment about the destruction of historic Greek communities in Asia Minor or in Cyprus, let alone the loss of the rights and the properties of these communities. The administration continues arming the Turkish armed forces with sophisticated US military equipment, permanently upsetting the balance of power in the Aegean, especially at a time of economic weakness in Greece. Washington has not reacted to Turkish efforts to acquire the advanced Russian S-300 anti-aircraft system which will nullify the balance of power in the Aegean and in Cyprus. Washington appears to have forgotten its harsh reaction in 1998 when Cyprus attempted to acquire a similar but lower grade S-300 system.

In the case of Cyprus the Obama administration continues to view the problem not as one of invasion, continuing occupation and continuing violations of internationally protected human rights, but as an inter-communal problem to be resolved in UN sponsored talks. Like the issue of Greek-Turkish relations, the Cyprus issue remains a bureaucratic problem, a problem that is not in the White House radar screen. There has been total disregard of significant decisions by the European Court of Justice and by the European Court of Human Rights, while emphasis is given to the political solution of the Cyprus problem. In these talks, the only noticeable change is in the tactics of the Obama administration but not on the substance of the policy of its predecessors. The administration has learned something from the failure of the high handed tactics of the Bush administration during the Annan negotiations (2002-2004) which included direct US participation in the talks, intimidation tactics and propaganda activities, if not also bribes, funded via the UN Development Program. For the time, the low key US approach expresses support for the alleged "Cypriot solution" with Secretary Clinton calling on the leadership of the two Cypriot communities to speed up the talks and reach a successful conclusion. More direct US participation has been promised only if the parties request it. The administration is also counting on the mythology of the ideological and personal friendship between the President of Cyprus and Turkish Cypriot leader Talat, forgetting that years earlier we used to hear about the friendship between Mr. Clerides and Mr. Denktash and how this friendship would bring the Cyprus talks to a successful conclusion. The personal friendship aphorisms overlook the reality that Turkish Cypriot policy is determined in Ankara and not in occupied Nicosia.

Even though the administration continues the non-recognition of the so-called "TRNC" in occupied Cyprus, it has not discouraged the quiet upgrading of the status of this illegal entity as shown by the meeting between Secretary Clinton and Mr. Talat on April 15 2009 in Washington, and other unofficial visits by members of Congress and other agencies to occupied Cyprus via the illegal Tymbou airport. What are some characteristic dimensions of current US policy on Cyprus?

- Despite the overwhelming rejection of the Annan Plan in 2004 by the Greek Cypriots, the administration maintains that this document provides the basis for the current negotiations.

- The operation "Save Talat" promoting his "moderate" image compared to his main opponent Mr. Eroglu, as if this matters in Ankara's Cyprus policy decisions.
- The continued support of a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation which in reality amounts to a confederation of two largely autonomous states on Cyprus. The origins of that policy can be traced to Henry Kissinger (1975) and to Clark Clifford (1977) culminating in the ideas of Richard Holbrooke (1998) and David Hannay, the parents of the so-called "virgin birth" of a new Cypriot Republic with a new denomination. Washington continues to support the Turkish claims of guarantees over Cyprus, even though such a guarantee is incompatible with conditions in today's Europe.
- Washington, since 1974, opposes any sanctions on Turkey for its documented violations of international law in Cyprus. Washington continues the policy that the remedy to Turkey's documented violations of human rights can only come through a political solution and not through sanctions or judicial actions.
- Washington continues its calls for the lifting of the so-called Turkish Cypriot "isolation", ignoring the fact that this "isolation" was largely imposed through the acts of the Turkish occupation army.
- Washington continues to count on Athens and Ankara, much like the International Crisis Group has recommended, to bring the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leadership to an agreement.
- During his visit to Turkey, President Obama was careful not to raise the subject of the Turkish invasion and continuing occupation of Cyprus despite his statement on Cyprus of October 8 2008 during his presidential campaign. Nor did the President address, publicly at least, the issue of the Turkish settlers in occupied Cyprus, the presence of Turkish occupation troops on the soil of a European Union country, or Turkey's documented violations of human rights. Nor did the President address Turkey's actual threats against Cyprus in case Cyprus proceeded to explore for gas and oil in its own continental shelf and exclusive economic zone. Nor did the President comment on the destruction of the island's cultural heritage following the very significant April 2009 report by the Law Library of the US Congress.

Instead, the US ambassador to Ankara James Jeffrey, a career Foreign Service officer, on February 3 2010, not only defended Turkey's policies in the region but proceeded to state that Turkey's role in Cyprus is positive, that Turkey is a peaceful country that does not invade its neighbors, that Turkey reflects European values and is physically closer to Europe than Cyprus. Despite the disclaimers of the Department of State over the comments of its Ambassador to Ankara, the harsh reality of Turkey's appeasement is a fact. That fact was reiterated in Philip Gordon's March 17 lecture at the Brookings Institution. The toleration and encouragement of Turkey's actions have contributed to Ankara's arrogance of power. The latest manifestation of this policy was during the March visit to Ankara by the EU Enlargement Commissioner Stephan Fule. When the Commissioner urged Turkey to normalize its relations with the

Republic of Cyprus the Turkish government's blunt response was that the Cyprus issue is not connected to Turkey's EU accession.

Sometimes we wonder about the rhetoric and the reality of US policy and the issue of the rule of law. Let me give you an example that will answer your questions. Richard Sale, in his recent investigative book Clinton's Secret Wars-The Evolution of a Commander in Chief (St. Martin's 2009) outlines how US government agencies cooperated with the Iranian secret services in arming and training the Bosnian Muslims in the early 90's. The arms acquired via Iran were transferred to Turkey and from Turkey to occupied Cyprus where they were flown to Zagreb by unmarked US air force cargo planes from airports in occupied Cyprus. I do not have to tell you anymore about legality or the morality of our Cyprus policy. The bottom line is that these cynical policies have contributed to the consolidation of the partition of Cyprus rather than its reunification under a viable and functional system that conforms to the standards of 21st century Europe.

Let me conclude by saying that the Obama administration by promoting Turkey as a resolute ally in the Middle East and as a responsible partner in transatlantic and European matters has failed to fulfill its rule of law and transparency pledges promoted during the 2008 campaign. Americans of Greek, Greek Cypriot and Armenian origin are aware of the President's failure to fulfill his electoral promises. By pampering Turkey for years our government has contributed to Turkey's arrogance. Turkey today blames everyone else except her self for her problems, while blackmailing our government and the EU that it will pursue other foreign policy options in relation to Iran, Russia and other Middle Eastern states if her demands are not met. Turkey thinks of itself as a superpower, forgetting that it may only be a giant with clay feet. No one calls for abandoning Turkey but, after more than six decades, we need to look beyond Turkey's threats and blackmail. Time has come to see the reality of what the Turkish-US partnership really is.