
New Tensions Test Old Allies

By Lamis Andoni

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The US has longed viewed Turkey as a buffer between the East and the West [EPA]

On the eve of the recent meeting between Barack Obama, the US president, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, in Toronto, the two sides exchanged soft - but poignant - warnings.

Philip Gordon, the US assistant secretary of European and Eurasian affairs, challenged Turkey to prove that it remains "committed to the National Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), Europe and the United States," while Erdogan questioned whether the US was "supporting Turkey adequately in its battle against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)".

The statements were the strongest public indication of an emerging mutual mistrust between the two allies since the crisis over an Israeli attack on a Turkish Gaza-bound aid flotilla and Turkey's vote against imposing further sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council.

'Turning its back on the West'

Washington has so far refrained from criticising Ankara, despite a growing campaign among lobbyists and the US congress targeting Turkey's governing Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP). Led mainly, but not exclusively, by the pro-Israel lobby and neo-conservatives, this campaign has called for measures ranging from withholding support for the Turkish government to US backing of the opposition in the country's next parliamentary elections.

Barry Rubin, a leading neo-conservative, has even called for Turkey to be "permanently" written off as an ally. Writing in the Jewish Commentary Magazine, Rubin declared: "The fact is that Turkey has changed. Gone, and gone permanently, is secular Turkey, a unique Muslim country that straddled East and West and that even maintained a cooperative relationship with Israel."

But even 'liberal' writers have been accusing Turkey of turning its back on the West and attempting to lead a pro-Islamic Arab axis. So far, however, there has been no sign that Obama is ready to downgrade ties with Ankara, let alone treat it as "an international pariah".

But Gordon's statements suggest that Washington is questioning some aspects of its support for Ankara: "There are people asking questions about it in a way that is new, and that in itself is a bad thing that makes it harder for the United States to support some of the things that Turkey would like to see us support," Gordon said in an apparent reference to Turkey's actions against the PKK.

A buffer between East and West

Israel's attack on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla strained US-Turkish ties [EPA]

But Turkey is too important to the US to be easily sacrificed.

The relationship dates back to 1947, when the US, under the Truman Doctrine

of then president Harry Truman, designated Turkey as a recipient of special economic and military aid with the intention of combating Soviet influence in Europe and Asia.

Turkey became a crucial partner in the post-9 /11 'war on terror' and a key component of the post-Cold War neo-conservative agenda that guided the two administrations of George W Bush, the former US president.

The US has relied on Ankara to curb Russian expansion towards the former Soviet, mostly Muslim, republics and to check China's influence in that region.

As a non-Arab Muslim state, neo-conservatives viewed Turkey as an important part of a security belt to protect Israel - a buffer between the Muslim world on one side and Israel and the West on the other - and those who sought to fully integrate Israeli security goals into US national security policy, saw Turkey as a more reliable ally than Arab states like Egypt and Jordan.

Turkish and pro-Israeli lobbies regularly worked together to promote the interests of both countries on Capitol Hill. The pro-Israeli lobby supported Turkish efforts to prevent a US bill calling the 1915 massacre of Armenians "genocide" and to secure US financial and logistical assistance in Ankara's fight against the PKK. In 1999 the US, with Israeli assistance, even helped to kidnap the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, from Kenya.

The AKP's ascension to power in 2002 did not affect the country's strategic pacts with the US or Israel. Nor did the Turkish parliament's decision not to allow Turkish territories to be used in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In fact, many American strategists and writers - liberals and conservatives alike - viewed the AKP's modern ruling style as "a model for other Muslim and Arab countries" and hoped that the "moderate AKP" would placate anti-Western and Israeli sentiments in the Arab world. Washington did, however, rely heavily on the strength of Turkey's military council and Turkish yearning to join the European Union to check the Islamic leanings of its government.

At the same time, the AKP's role was boosted by its sponsorship of indirect talks between Syria and Israel.

A shifting focus

But Turkey was changing.

Firstly, the government began placing a greater emphasis on Turkey's Islamic identity and affinity with the causes of the Muslim world.

Secondly, in its effort to implement the reforms demanded by the European Union, the Turkish government managed to marginalise the country's military council, stripping it of its power to shape policies.

Thirdly, the AKP no longer saw itself as a junior partner in its alliances and sought to assert Turkey's role as a strong regional power rather than a follower in a pro-Western axis.

Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, put forward a new paradigm in international relations where Turkey's political weight is derived from expanding and developing its ties with its neighbours to the East - including the Arab world, the former Soviet Republics and Iran.

When Obama became US president, Turkey was the first Muslim country he visited in his bid to open a new page with the Muslim world away from the hostile terminology of the 'war on terror'. His visit was viewed as a triumph for Turkey's new strategy and a boost to its perceived role as a power broker between East and West.

But the new developments in Turkey alarmed its traditional allies in Washington, particularly neo-conservatives and the pro-Israel lobby - who claimed that Ankara was distancing itself from the West. The Israeli war on Gaza galvanised the AKP's opponents in Washington, while Turkey saw it as a blow to its efforts to mediate between Israel and Syria at a time when it was expecting a breakthrough.

'Payback'

Erdogan accused the US of employing double standards in the Middle East [AFP]

Ankara's improving ties with Tehran were also arousing mistrust in Washington, and the Turkish and Brazilian brokered uranium swap deal seemed to confirm the suspicions of those who felt the Turkish government was moving in a direction contrary to US interests. While Turkey may have been asserting its new role and trying to avoid a scenario it saw as destabilising to the entire region, it was not necessarily misunderstood. The Iranian-Brazilian initiative did run counter to US Republican and neo-conservative pressure to support a war or at least an Israeli military strike against Iran.

But two events became the catalyst for an all out campaign against the Turkish government in Washington: Turkey's suspension of military maneuvers with Israel, the recalling of its ambassador and demand for an international investigation in the wake of Israel's military interception of the Turkish aid ship; and Turkey's vote against a new round of sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council.

The response was swift: A number of prominent Republican and Democrat congressmen slammed Turkey's "disgraceful conduct," warning that there would be "payback" if Ankara continued to pursue its close relations with Iran and hostility towards Israel.

In conclusion, when Obama visited Turkey in 2009 he declared: "We are not solely strategic partners, we are also model partners." No similar statement followed the Toronto meeting, but little has changed in terms of the two countries' mutual needs.

The US needs Turkish support troops in Afghanistan and to benefit from Turkey's influence the Black Sea region, the Caucasus and the Middle East. It also needs secure transport from Turkish ports during the eventual withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Likewise, Turkey needs sustained US support in its battle against the PKK and its apparent splinter groups, which Ankara suspects are backed by Israel.

But the US needs to patch up the Turkish-Israeli rapture - partly to placate right wing pressures at home, but also because it is vital to US interests in the Middle East.

It is likely that Ankara will collaborate with Washington to stop any further deterioration in its relations with Israel, but may wait until a new government takes over to mend the rift.

And while the US cannot afford to bow to right wing pressure to drop its support for Turkey, it may still choose to support the AKP's rivals in the next elections - something US ambassador James Jeffrey's recent visit to Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of Turkey's opposition Republican People's Party, may hint at.

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