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# Turkish Dilemma : Can The Frayed Relationship Between The United States And Turkey Be Repaired?

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As I traveled across Turkey in November, optimism over Barack Obama's electoral victory was in the air. Several Turks told me stories of villagers who had sacrificed 44 sheep in honor of the 44th president's election. They were not alone in their jubilation: Indeed, many people I met believed President-elect Obama could restore U.S. moral clarity and mend the troubled U.S.-Turkish alliance.

Such sanguinity does not surprise. Come inauguration day, the United States will enjoy, at least briefly, a spike of good will in global public opinion, if for no other reason than the fact that Obama is not George W. Bush.

Nowhere might this bounce be more needed than in Turkey. In recent years, relations between Washington and Ankara have frayed. From Turkey's March 2003 refusal to open up a second front in Operation Iraqi Freedom to Congress' October 2007 deliberation of an Armenian genocide resolution, events have fed mutual distrust and recrimination. Today, polls consistently rank Turks as the most anti-American nation on Earth.

Conventional wisdom in Turkey lays much of the blame for this crisis of confidence at the doorstep of the Bush White House. If only U.S. policymakers had appreciated Turkish concerns more in the run-up to the Iraq war and not stonewalled on providing Ankara assistance in its fight against PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) terrorists, Turks, the logic goes, would have far less reason to inveigh against the United States.

It is naive, however, to think the reversal of Bush administration policy alone will induce a sea change in Turkish public attitudes. The burden of improved U.S-Turkish relations does not lie squarely on Obama's shoulders. To believe otherwise would exculpate Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party--an Islamist-rooted party known by its Turkish acronym, the AKP--and its media organs of stoking rampant anti-Americanism.

Indeed, under the AKP's stewardship, U.S. bashing has become something of a national sport. One of the most egregious instances of such incitement came in October 2003 when Yeni A~afak, an Islamist daily close to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, published a lead story accusing U.S. soldiers of raping thousands of Iraqi women. The scurrilous allegations served as motivation for a suicide bombing the following month that devastated HSBC's Turkish headquarters, killing eleven.

Yet, Islamist media outlets affiliated with the AKP have since grown more unrestrained. Following the July 2008 attack on the U.S. consulate in Istanbul, the pro-AKP press again flew into high dudgeon. The daily Vakit accused U.S., British, and Israeli intelligence of orchestrating the attack, which killed six people, including three Turkish policemen, in order to push Ankara into Washington's lap. The AKP's subsequent silence did little to disabuse Turks of this notion.

I observed the cumulative effect of such slander when I met with college students in the city of Adana. The meeting, part of a State Department-funded exchange program to bridge the gap in U.S-Turkish relations, revealed distorted views of the United States in the Turkish press. For example, none of the students knew anything of U.S. relief efforts after

the 2004 tsunami, and several Turkish papers even blamed Washington for the natural disaster. Worse, all believed PKK terrorists received arms from U.S. forces in Iraq.

The fact that the media peddles this latter myth is telling. Since 2007, U.S. Kurdish policy has reversed course. Resentment may linger, but U.S. action against the PKK--whose presence in northern Iraq Washington once tolerated--is now resolute. Today, with both U.S. intelligence and acquiescence, Turkish warplanes regularly enter Iraqi airspace to strike PKK targets.

Still, Turkish media continue to prevaricate. Following an October 4, 2008, PKK attack that killed 15 Turkish soldiers, the mainstream daily Milliyet opined that the "heavy weaponry [used in the attack] cannot be moved, deployed, and implemented without [U.S.] authorities...receiving information about it." Milliyet may be secular, but its journalists find themselves under increased pressure to hew an AKP line.

The AKP's media apparatus has endorsed similar conspiracy theories, too. But incitement is not just a sin of commission. The AKP leadership has repeatedly failed to repudiate anti-American rhetoric elsewhere that, left unchallenged, is often taken as fact. Though the AKP cannot be called to account for every incendiary comment, the reality is that anti-American sentiments have proliferated on their watch. Alas, more Turks now appear willing to act on what they hear.

Washington can no longer countenance this situation. While Obama can help matters--enlisting Iraqi Kurdistan's support against the PKK would be a good start--he alone cannot solve them. The AKP must begin to tell it like it is and curb widespread anti-Americanism. Should it not, the answer to "Who lost Turkey?" will end up being far different from what the current narrative would have us believe.

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