

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3937 | MAY 15, 2013

U.S.–Turkish Relations: Greater Cooperation Should Be Goal of Obama–Erdogan Meeting

James Phillips

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits Washington this week amid escalating and intertwined Middle East crises. Turkey is a key NATO ally that borders Syria, Iran, and Iraq: three major focal points of U.S. Middle East policy. President Obama should consult with Prime Minister Erdogan to coordinate policies on these three fronts and to encourage Turkey to repair its strained relationship with Israel.

Syria First. The deepening crisis in Syria will dominate Erdogan’s meeting with Obama on May 16. Erdogan has played a leading role in orchestrating support for the Syrian opposition. Turkey has offered sanctuary to more than 400,000 Syrian refugees and has cooperated with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in funneling arms to the opposition. Rising tensions with Syria have triggered cross-border artillery attacks, the downing of a Turkish warplane by Syrian missiles, and the deployment of NATO Patriot air defense systems along the border with Syria last year.

Turkey has blamed Syria for the May 11 car bomb attacks that killed 50 people in Reyhanli, a border town that serves as a hub for Syrian refugees in Turkey. This terrorist outrage is likely to spur

Erdogan to step up his appeals for stronger international action against Syria’s rogue regime. He has pressed Washington to impose a no-fly zone over Syria, contribute arms to Syria’s opposition, and help create safe zones inside Syria to stem the flow of refugees into Turkey. At the White House, Erdogan will undoubtedly make a renewed pitch for a more assertive U.S. policy in ousting Bashar al-Assad.

Assad’s predatory regime has exploded Turkey’s “zero problem with neighbors” foreign policy just as it has exposed the wishful thinking behind Obama’s feckless Syria policy. Both countries should now cooperate closely to mitigate the destabilizing spillover effects of Syria’s civil war and promote a rapid transition to an inclusive government that is accountable to its own people. The Obama Administration has called for Assad to step down from power but still clings to the illusion that he will agree to negotiate the demise of his own regime. Secretary of State John Kerry last week announced that Washington will work with Russia to sponsor a regional conference aimed at ending the fighting in Syria.

Diplomatic efforts will be stillborn as long as Assad believes he can defeat the opposition through brute force. Assad’s regime has launched offensives that have driven rebels back away from Damascus in recent days, propped up by substantial arms supplies from Russia and Iran. Moscow also recently announced that it will provide Syria with sophisticated S-300 air defense missiles. Given strong backing from Moscow and Tehran, Assad has little incentive to genuinely cooperate with international efforts to reach a diplomatic solution.

But a no-fly zone would do little to stop the killing on the ground, most of which is done by the regime’s

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib3937>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

artillery, tanks, and rockets. Saddam Hussein's regime survived for more than 10 years despite the creation of two no-fly zones in Iraq. What is needed is stepped-up support for non-Islamist groups in the opposition facilitated by the U.S., Turkey, and Jordan.

President Obama should press Erdogan to redirect Turkish aid from the Syrian National Council, a coalition of exiled leaders dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, to the Free Syrian Army, which is led primarily by secular and nationalist military officers who defected from Assad's army. Such a switch would help accelerate the fall of Assad by encouraging an upsurge in defections from Christian, Druze, and Alawite supporters of the regime who fear sectarian vengeance attacks from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists.

Turkish Cooperation Needed on Iraq, Iran, and Israel. Syria's civil war between the Alawite-dominated regime and the predominantly Sunni opposition increasingly has aggravated sectarian violence in neighboring Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated regime has marginalized leaders of Iraq's Sunni Arab minority, which has fueled political unrest that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has exploited.

Washington and Ankara should jointly press Maliki to rule in a less authoritarian and sectarian manner, reach out to moderate Sunni leaders, and include them in the ruling coalition. This would help drain away Sunni support for AQI, which has made a major comeback in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 and Maliki's harsh treatment of Sunnis since then.

If Maliki continues his heavy-handed treatment of Iraq's Sunni Arab and Kurdish minorities, then the U.S. and Turkey should downgrade relations with Baghdad and seek enhanced relations with

the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which Ankara has already courted as a source of oil imports. This would not only reduce Turkey's need for Iranian energy supplies but could encourage the KRG to broker a closer alliance between Syria's Kurdish minority and the opposition.

Iran's nuclear program should be another focus of enhanced bilateral cooperation. Obama should push for greater Turkish pressure on Tehran to halt its accelerating uranium enrichment efforts. Ankara has implemented U.N. sanctions on Iran but has failed to comply with some U.S. sanctions against trade with Iran. Obama should demand Turkish enforcement of banking sanctions against Iran as well as a reduction of Turkish gold sales to Iran, which Tehran has used to evade sanctions.

Obama should also encourage Erdogan to continue improving relations with Israel. During his visit to Israel two months ago, the President helped broker an Israeli apology for the deaths of nine Turks in a 2010 Israeli military raid on a flotilla of ships chartered by Turkish Islamists that aggressively challenged Israel's arms embargo on Gaza. Turkey and Israel face similar threats from Syria and Iran. Obama should urge Erdogan to pragmatically revive strategic cooperation with Israel to advance Turkey's national interests.

Cooperation Needed on Common Threats. The U.S. and Turkey face growing threats from Syria's civil war, Iran's nuclear program, and Iraq's renewed sectarian violence. All three issues require greater bilateral cooperation as well as multilateral cooperation from NATO allies, Israel, and Jordan.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*