

Op-Ed

Obama is the key problem regarding Turkey

By Gene Rossides
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President Barack Obama's e-mail interview with the Turkish daily newspaper *Hürriyet*, published Sunday December 19, 2010, demonstrates that Obama is the key problem regarding Turkey and the rule of law issues of Cyprus, religious freedom in Turkey and the Aegean.

The *Hürriyet* article by their Washington reporter Tolga Tanis quoted Obama following his conversation with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that the two leaders had "reaffirmed the strong state of U.S.-Turkish relations" despite some difference "from time to time."

Obama's call to Erdogan was prompted by leaked United States diplomatic cables from Turkey critical of some officials in Ankara. Obama said "Our partnership is resilient, and we agreed that the irresponsible acts of Wiki Leaks do not threaten it...Given the increasingly complex challenges the world faces, I believe that the U.S. -Turkish cooperation is more important now than ever."

In the interview Obama covered many of the key issues facing Turkey. These issues included Turkey's European Union accession bid; its relations with Israel; its relations with the West and with Iran; and internally its handling of its 20 percent Kurdish minority and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

On all these matters Obama used language which the Turks and other could interpret as soft and without any real sense of pressure.

Religious Freedom

On issues of direct concern to Greek Americans, Obama was less than adequate. Regarding religious freedom Obama simply repeated a request he made to the Turkish Parliament in April 2009 to reopen Halki Seminary "as a symbol of [its] commitment to religious freedom." He made no criticism of Turkey for failing to reopen Halki since they illegally closed it in 1971 and since his April 2009 request.

Obama should have stated that if Turkey did not take prompt action to reopen Halki he would take action against Turkey under the United States international religious freedom law. He also failed to call for the return of 7,000 church properties illegally seized by the Turkish government, and to ensure the protection of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to recognize its ecumenical nature.

Cyprus

How could a president of the United State conduct an interview on relations with Turkey and not bring up Turkey's invasion, occupation and colonization of 37 percent of Cyprus, now in its thirty sixth year?

How could Obama not refer to Cyprus on his own, even though the *Hürriyet* reporter did not bring it up?

Why didn't Obama call for the prompt removal of the 43,000 illegal Turkish occupation troops from Cyprus?

Why didn't Obama call for the return to Turkey of the 180,000 illegal Turkish colonists/settlers from Anatolia?

Why didn't Obama call for the prompt return of Famagusta for the resettlement of refugees, as the United States and Turkey stated would happen in the 1978 debate on lifting the congressional rule of law arms embargo?

Aegean

Regarding the Aegean, Obama said nothing. Turkey has made outrageous claims devoid of any legal basis to one-half of the Aegean Sea. Although the reporter did not raise the Aegean issue, Obama should have stated that the maritime boundary in the Aegean between Greece and Turkey is set by treaties and that the U.S. is a signatory to one of the treaties, the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty.

Regarding relations between Turkey and Israel Obama urged the two U.S. allies to "find an acceptable way forward" and to do everything they can to repair their relations." He failed to challenge Turkey's verbal attacks on Israel.

Regarding Turkey's vote in the UN Security Council against the U.S. sponsored sanctions against Iran as evidence of Turkey's shift in foreign policy toward the Muslim world and away from the U.S. and the West, Obama stated: "Turkey has pursued an active foreign policy that has seen it interacting more intensively than ever with countries all across its neighborhood and beyond. I recognize this important emerging role for Turkey." That's not what the United States said at the time of the vote.

Regarding Turkey accession to the EU, Obama called on Turkey "to continue the reforms necessary to complete the membership process." He did not refer to the German and French proposal for Turkey to consider associate membership in the EU.

Regarding Turkey's 20 percent Kurdish minority, Obama repeated the usual attacks on the PKK and praised Turkey for some minimal steps instead of calling for full political and human rights for the Kurds now.

Action called for

The Greek American community should respond in respectful language to these views and omissions by Obama. By e-mail, letter and telephone, Greek Americans should call on President Obama to support the rule of law on our issues as in the best interests of the United States. They should call on him to pressure Turkey, diplomatically politically and economically, including sanctions, if Turkey continues to refuse to take proper action on our issues.

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