

Tuesday, April 07, 2009

Obama: The US is not, and Never will be, at War with Islam

President Barack Obama conducted a state visit of the Turkish capital of Ankara on Monday, visiting the mausoleum of the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Attaturk and addressing parliament. The Turkish officer corps, which had been declining to attend parliament sessions because of the presence of a pro-Kurdish party, put aside its reservations and attended to hear Obama.

The Washington Post has a run-down of the mostly positive Turkish newspaper editorials about Obama's Prague and Ankara speeches.

Veteran correspondent Steven Kinzer, who has reported extensively from Turkey, remarks on the state of US and Turkish relations.

The text of Obama's address to the Turkish parliament is here

Video of Obama's speech:

VIDEO: [Part 1 of Obama's speech to Turkish Parliament](http://videogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/Video.aspx?s=5&vid=3261)  
<http://videogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/Video.aspx?s=5&vid=3261>

VIDEO: [Part 2 of Obama's speech to Turkish Parliament](http://videogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/Video.aspx?s=5&vid=3262)  
<http://videogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/Video.aspx?s=5&vid=3262>

VIDEO: [Part 3 of Obama's speech to Turkish Parliament](http://videogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/Video.aspx?s=5&vid=3264)  
<http://videogaleri.hurriyet.com.tr/Video.aspx?s=5&vid=3264>

Here are my thoughts on some key passages:

*This future was not easily assured, it was not guaranteed. At the end of World War I, Turkey could have succumbed to the foreign powers that were trying to claim its territory, or sought to restore an ancient empire. But Turkey chose a different future. You freed yourself from foreign control, and you founded a republic that commands the respect of the United States and the wider world.*

The powers that attempted to rule parts of what is now Turkey after WW I included Greece, Italy, France and Britain. Turkish irregulars lead by Mustafa Kemal fought them off. It was a bloody struggle, and Obama's account stresses the Turkish point of view on it.

*And there is a simple truth to this story: Turkey's democracy is your own achievement. It was not forced upon you by any outside power, nor did it come without struggle and sacrifice.*

I read this passage as a slam at Bush and the Neoconservatives, who attempted to democratize Iraq forcibly. Obama is saying that Muslims and Middle Easterners have agency and can and should make their own fates without US intervention.

*It is a friendship that flourished in the years after World War II, when President Truman committed our nation to the defense of Turkey's freedom and sovereignty, and Turkey committed itself into the NATO Alliance. Turkish troops have served by our side from Korea to Kosovo to Kabul. Together, we withstood the great test of the Cold War. Trade between our nations has steadily advanced. So has cooperation in science and research.*

Turks are proud of their nation's service in the Korean War and membership in NATO, and Obama was wise to praise those two. Many Americans seem unaware that the US has a Muslim-majority NATO ally, pledged to defend America from her enemies by article 5 of the NATO treaty (which was invoked with regard to Afghanistan).

*The ties among our people have deepened, as well, and more and more Americans of Turkish origin live and work and succeed within our borders. And as a basketball fan, I've even noticed that Hedo Turkoglu and Mehmet Okur have got some pretty good basketball games.*

For Tom Tancredo and Mike Huckabee, immigration into the United States is a scandal and a source of danger. For Obama it is a source of strength and soft power extending back to all the mother countries.

*This much is certain: No one nation can confront these challenges alone, and all nations have a stake in overcoming them. That is why we must listen to one another, and seek common ground. That is why we must build on our mutual interests, and rise above our differences. We are stronger when we act together.*

When France advised against an Iraq War and declined to join in, then Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is said to have vowed that France would be punished. Obama is criticizing those unilateral moments and policies of the Bush administration.

*Already, America and Turkey are working with the G20 on an unprecedented response to an unprecedented economic crisis.*

Obama really begins the substance of his speech here, and it is remarkable that he starts not with security but with the economic crisis. Turkey has been an economic success story in recent years, though it is suffering at the moment.

*There's enormous opportunity when it comes to energy to create jobs. And we can increase new sources to not only free ourselves from dependence of other energies, other countries' energy sources, but also to combat climate change. We should build on our Clean Technology Fund to leverage efficiency and renewable energy investments in Turkey. And to power markets in Turkey and Europe, the United States will continue to support your central role as an East-West corridor for oil and natural gas.*

Obama is offering Turkey participation in his push for green energy, a talking point that will be popular in that country because Turkey has few fossil fuels of its own and so suffers from high petroleum prices. (Not all Middle Eastern states are oil states.) Obama also recognizes Turkey's major role as a transit territory for the gas and oil of neighboring states.

*So let me be clear: The United States strongly supports Turkey's bid to become a member of the European Union.*

Popular in many quarters in Turkey, rejected by France and Germany. Apparently these European publics are afraid that if Turks can move freely within Europe without papers, that half of Turkey will be living in Paris or Frankfurt if it is given European Union membership. That scenario, however, is not how labor immigration has worked in Europe. People emigrate for jobs and come back when there aren't any.

*Europe gains by the diversity of ethnicity, tradition and faith, it is not diminished by it. And Turkish membership would broaden and strengthen Europe's foundation once more.*

Well, let us just say that that is not how the European Right sees this issue.

*In the last several years, you've abolished state security courts, you've expanded the right to counsel. You've reformed the penal code and strengthened laws that govern the freedom of the press and assembly. You've lifted bans on teaching and broadcasting Kurdish, and the world noted with respect the important signal sent through a new state Kurdish television station.*

Obama knows that much work needs to be done in Turkey to bring civil rights there up to a level acceptable in Europe.

*I say this as the president of a country that not very long ago made it hard for somebody who looks like me to vote, much less be president of the United States. But it is precisely that capacity to change that enriches our countries. Every challenge that we face is more easily met if we tend to our own democratic foundation. This work is never over. That's why, in the United States, we recently ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed. That's why we prohibited, without exception or equivocation, the use of torture. All of us have to change. And sometimes change is hard.*

Obama cleverly compares Turkey's ongoing anti-terrorism measures to those of Bush and Cheney, insisting that there are other options.

*Another issue that confronts all democracies as they move to the future is how we deal with the past . . . The United States is still working through some of our own darker periods . . . Our country still struggles with the legacies of slavery and segregation, the past treatment of Native Americans. . . I know there's strong views in this chamber about the terrible events of 1915. And while there's been a good deal of commentary about my views, it's really about how the Turkish and Armenian people deal with the past. And the best way forward for the Turkish and Armenian people is a process that works through the past in a way that is honest, open and constructive.*

Obama is not nagging Turkey, but rather admitting imperfections in US history with regard to treatment of minorities, a problem the Turks have in facing up to what was done by the late Ottoman government to the Armenians. Obama the candidate had been eager to sign into law a bill worked up on Capitol Hill. Obama as president says he is content for now for Turkish-Armenian negotiations to succeed in their own right.

*In the Middle East, we share the goal of a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors. Let me be clear: The United States strongly supports the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. That is a goal shared by Palestinians, Israelis and people of goodwill around the world. That is a goal that the parties agreed to in the road map and at Annapolis. That is a goal that I will actively pursue as president of the United States.*

The problem is that the two-state solution is probably over with given the massive Israeli colonization of the West Bank (which is pursued by Israel precisely in order to forestall a two-state solution). And as a pro-Palestinian activist wrote at my facebook wall: " How can he talk with a straight face about nukes in the region, and mentions Iran and completely ignores Israel's 500 or more nuclear warheads He said that Turkey must recognize that Israel has 'legitimate' security interests, but could not condemn Israel's recent illegal assault against Gaza, or suggest that US will work to lift the illegal siege against Gaza. Unfortunately, he came off sounding like [he was] trying to intellectually disarm Muslims with platitudes."

*The peace of the region will also be advanced if Iran forgoes any nuclear weapons ambitions. Now, as I made clear in Prague yesterday, no one is served by the spread of nuclear weapons, least of all Turkey.*

Turkey is from all accounts afraid of an Iranian nuke. But Obama keeps speaking as though Iran has a nuclear weapons program, which our intelligence agencies say it does not.

*So both Turkey and the United States support a secure and united Iraq that does not serve as a safe haven for terrorists. I know there were differences about whether to go to war. There were differences within my own country, as well. But now we must come together as we end this war responsibly, because the future of Iraq is inseparable from the future of the broader region. As I've already announced, and many of you are aware, the United States will remove our combat brigades by the end of next August, while working with the Iraqi government as they take responsibility for security. And we will work with Iraq, Turkey, and all Iraq's neighbors, to forge a new dialogue that reconciles differences and advances our common security.*

According to opinion polls, Turks are upset about the US military presence in Iraq and they were deeply opposed to the Iraq War. If Obama pulls off a successful withdrawal, that in itself should be a basis for an improved relationship with Ankara.

*Make no mistake, though: Iraq, Turkey and the United States face a common threat from terrorism. That includes the al-Qaida terrorists who have sought to drive Iraqis apart and destroy their country. That includes the PKK. There is no excuse for terror against any nation.*

I've never thought it was useful or judicious to dismiss the Sunni Arab resistance in Iraq as "al-Qaeda," and I doubt the Turks bought that part of it. But they will certainly be pleased to hear Obama denounce

in no uncertain terms the Kurdis Workers Party (PKK), which is responsible for a great deal of violence in eastern Anatolia and has killed Turkish, which is to say, NATO troops.

*Finally, we share the common goal of denying al-Qaida a safe haven in Pakistan or Afghanistan. The world has come too far to let this region backslide, and to let al-Qaida terrorists plot further attacks.*

How many Americans know that Turkey has troops in Afghanistan?

*I know there have been difficulties these last few years. I know that the trust that binds the United States and Turkey has been strained, and I know that strain is shared in many places where the Muslim faith is practiced. So let me say this as clearly as I can: The United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam.*

After Georg W. Bush's unfortunate crack about a "crusade," and after all those US politicians who have spoken incessantly of "Islamofascism" and used other bigoted and inaccurate terms, much of the Muslim world says in polls that it fears that the US intends to undermine the Muslim faith and to divide and rule the Muslims. Obama's unequivocal denial of any US hostility toward the religion itself is being very warmly received.

*I also want to be clear that America's relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect.*

Since most Muslim countries are not in fact beset by al-Qaeda, Obama's recognition that there are other grounds for US relations with them than counter-terrorism is welcome.

*We will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith, which has done so much over the centuries to shape the world, including in my own country. The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans. Many other Americans have Muslims in their families or have lived in a Muslim-majority country, I know, because I am one of them.*

Obama hit a grace note here with his indirect reference to his Muslim relatives. He could have made more of the Muslim contribution to the building of the US. Some historians estimate that 10% of the African slaves who did so much of America's labor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were Muslims or of Muslim heritage. A significant percentage of Hispanics in the Southwest were Muslim converts whose families had been forced into Catholicism by the Inquisition after the Reconquista in Spain.

*Above all, above all we will demonstrate through actions our commitment to a better future. I want to help more children get the education that they need to succeed. We want to promote health care in places where people are vulnerable. We want to expand the trade and investment that can bring prosperity for all people.*

That's the sort of thing the peoples of the world, including Muslims, want from the United States, not guns and bombs and F-18s, not arrogance and cowboy swagger, not ponzi schemes and "deregulation."

Despite some occasional awkward or false notes, I call Obama's speech a home run. It is precisely the sort of thing I have been calling for: