# MR. OBAMA AND TURKEY

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**Category:** Opinions

New York Times Editorial, 4 April 2009, **and Prof. Dennis R. Papazian's Response**

President Obama has wisely decided to visit Turkey during his first official trip to Europe. The United States needs Turkey's cooperation — in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as with Iran and efforts to broker Middle East peace. But there are also very worrying trends in Turkey's relationship with Europe and its internal politics.

Mr. Obama must do all he can to help reverse those trends and anchor Turkey more firmly in the West.

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Mr. Obama must do all he can to help reverse those trends and anchor Turkey more firmly in the West.

The Justice and Development Party scored an impressive re-election in 2007 after pursuing market-oriented policies that brought economic growth and more trade ties with the European Union. That conservative Muslim party also expanded human rights and brought Turkish law closer to European standards.

Those reforms have since stalled — partly because of opposition from civilian nationalists and generals who still wield too much clout. (The trial of 86 people accused of plotting a military coup is a reminder of the dark side of Turkish politics.) But Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan also seems to have lost enthusiasm for the European Union bid and the reforms that are the price of admission. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France has been especially unhelpful, making clear that he will do all he can to keep Turkey out of the European Union. Mr. Obama must persuade Mr. Sarkozy and others that admitting Turkey — a Muslim democracy — is in everyone's interest. And he must persuade Ankara that the required reforms will strengthen Turkey's democracy and provide more stability and growth.

We are concerned about Mr. Erdogan's increasingly autocratic tendencies. His government's decision to slap the media mogul Aydin Dogan with a $500 million tax bill smacks of retaliation against an independent press that has successfully exposed government corruption. Ankara's willingness to help rebuild schools in Afghanistan is welcome. But the situation there is dire, and NATO also needs more troops and needs access to Turkish military bases to facilitate the transport of American soldiers and equipment into Afghanistan and out of Iraq.

Ankara has played a positive role, mediating indirect talks between Israel and Syria. With Washington's encouragement, Mr. Erdogan could also use his relationships with Iran, Sudan and Hamas to encourage improved behavior.

Turkey's cooperation with Iraqi Kurds has vastly improved. There are also reports that Turkey and Armenia may soon normalize relations.

We have long criticized Turkey for its self-destructive denial of the World War I era mass killing of Armenians. But while Congress is again contemplating a resolution denouncing the genocide, it would do a lot more good for both Armenia and Turkey if it held back. Mr. Obama, who vowed in the presidential campaign to recognize the event as genocide, should also forbear.

The Bush administration's disastrous war in Iraq fanned a destructive anti-Americanism in Turkey. Mr. Obama's visit is likely to soothe hostile feelings. But he must go beyond that to secure a relationship with an important ally and an important democracy in danger of backsliding.

***Prof. Dennis R. Papazian's Response*:**

> *Dear Editor,*
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> *Your newspaper should keep up with the times, press the reset button on your moral compass, engage in new thinking, and relearn the old truth that you don't solve the problem of the playground bully by appeasement. Asking Pres. Obama to hold off his recognition of the Armenian genocide, is to invite him to join you in your moral cowardice and old thinking.*
>
> *It is also to give him bad advice on how to carry out international relations under his new administration. Your craven advice also lets down hundreds of thousands of decent Turkish citizens who are fed up with the old, discredited policies of the "deep state," and want a breath of fresh air in Turkey, the freedom to speak out on all aspects of Turkish history and contemporary Turkish affairs without fear of being dragged into court and convicted under article 301 of the Turkish criminal code of being "anti-Turkish.". They want more democracy, not less. More truthfulness, less deception. How can you in good conscience ask the American president to set a bad example?*
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> *Pres. Obama rightly understands that America is held in contempt by most people in most countries of the world. That contempt is based on America's moral cowardice and America's record of thinly veiled deception in international affairs. Pres. Obama wants to push the reset button and get us out of the moral and political quagmire which a decade of bad leadership and bad advice has ensnarled the United States.*
>
> *I follow Turkish affairs closely. I have traveled in Turkey. I have many Turkish friends who keep me apprised of what is going on in their country. I firmly believe that Prime Minister Erdogan wants to recognize the Armenian genocide and get a an ugly monkey off Turkey's*

> *back. He really wants to take Turkey into the European Union. I also believe that he understands that he must first break the hammerlock of the unrepentant holdouts of the old order before he can do so. Having the United States tell the truth will only be of benefit to Turkish democracy and Prime Minister Erdogan. Get with the new times, push your reset button. Engage in some new thinking but remember old truths.*
>
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