OBAMA... A TWO-FACED MILQUETOAST

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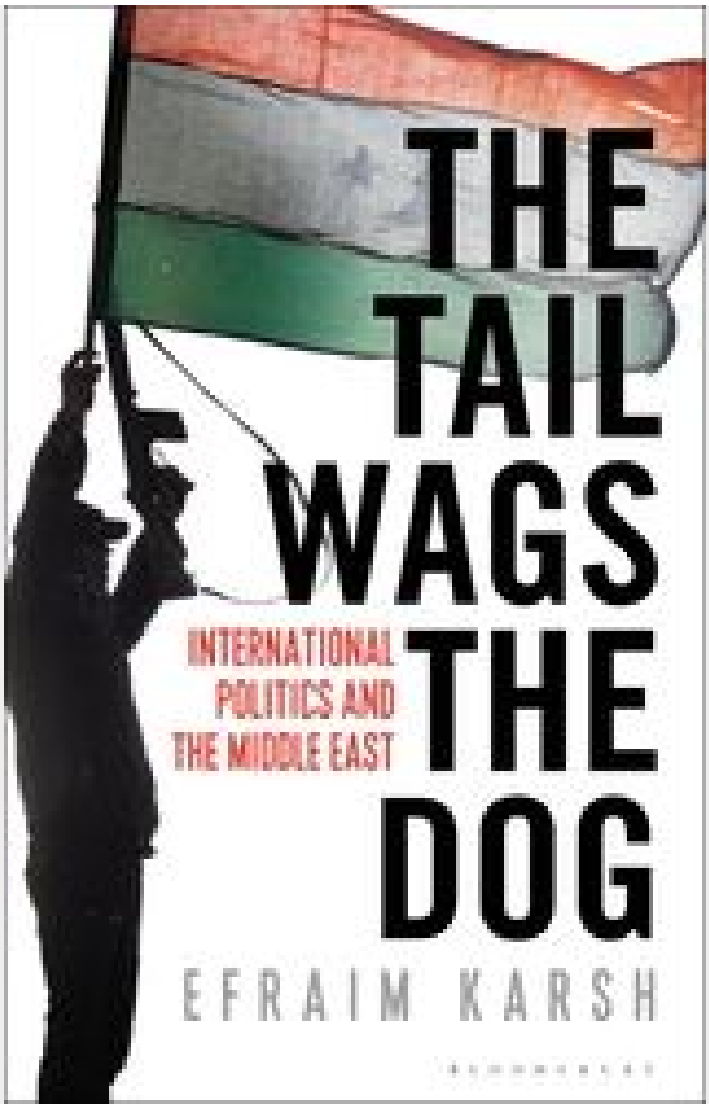

Category: Opinions

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Having praised Turkey's "strong, vibrant, secular democracy' , Obama voiced unequivocal support for the country's incorporation into the European Union--a highly contentious issue among the organization's member states.

"Let me be clear," he said: "The United States strongly supports Turkey's bid to become a member of the European Union. We speak not as members of the EU, but as close friends of both Turkey and Europe. Turkey has been a resolute ally and a responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions. Turkey is bound to Europe by more than bridges over the Bosporus. Centuries in shared history, culture, and commerce bring you together. 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...

"I know there are those who like to debate Turkey's future. They see a country at the crossroads of continents and touched by the currents of history...They wonder whether you will be pulled in one direction or another. But I believe here is what they don't understand: Turkey's greatness lies in your

ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide--this is where they come together."

As with his Cairo speech, Obama's reading of the historic Turkish-Western interaction and its attendant implications was disastrously flawed. Far from being a bridge between the East and West, the Ottoman Empire was an implacable foe that had steadily encroached on Europe and its way of life. It is true that the nineteenth century saw numerous instances of Ottoman-European collaborations; but this was merely pragmatic manoeuvring aimed at arresting the imperial decline and holding on to colonial possession that did not prevent the Muslim empire from unleashing a prolonged orgy of bloodletting and mayhem on its rebellious European subjects--from the Greek civil war of the 1820s to the Crimean War, to the Balkan crisis of the 1870s to the Armenian genocide of World War I.

As the twentieth century's first comprehensive ethnic cleansing and a source of inspiration for future mass murders ('Who speaks today of the extermination of the Armenians?' Hitler famously asked his general days before beginning World War II), the Armenian genocide has become a major obstacle to Ankara's accession to the EU, as the Turkish government not only failed to acknowledge its very occurrence as demanded by the European organization but misrepresented it as a natural act of self-defense against a disloyal subject population. In the worlds of Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, doyen of Turkish historians: "It's one thing to say that the Turks killed the Armenians spontaneously, and another to say that, when the Armenians revolted, the Turks, who were locked in a life or death struggle, used excessive force and killed a good many people."

In his 2008 election campaign, Obama stated that "America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian Genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that President. The Armenian Genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence," he further argued. "As a senator, I strongly support passage of the Armenian Resolution (H. Res. 106 and S. Res. 106). And as President I will recognize the Armenian Genocide."

No sooner had the presidential hopeful take his oath of office than this pledge was all but forgotten. In his above address to the Turkish parliament Obama made no mention of genocide. Instead, putting victim and perpetrator on a par, he urged both Turks and Armenians to work "through the past in a way that is honest, open and constructive." A year later the administration made a spirited effort to block a (nonbinding) congressional resolution branding the Armenian massacres as 'genocide'. Only to watch it pass by the slimmest of margins. In the coming years the president continued to flaunt his election pledge. He paid the customary lip service to Armenian suffering and vowed to ensure that "such dark chapters of human history are never again repeated". Yet he refrained from urging the Turkish government to own up to its tragic past, let alone from fulfilling his own pledge to "recognize the Armenian genocide".

Obama was of course not the first US president to betray the Armenians: he was actually following in the precise footsteps of his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, whose legacy he constantly besmirched. Yet his carefully contrived image as a shining human rights champion (his close confidante-made-UN-representative Samantha Power earned her stripes through a Pulitzer Prize-winning indictment of America's failure to confront genocide) and the messianic euphoria attending his election (which made him the first and only person to have won the Nobel Prize on the basis of future promise rather than actual achievement) helped underscore his betrayal and dent his initial aura. Most importantly, if past presidents had shunned the Armenian issue as a quid pro quo to Turkish contribution to Western interests, Obama pandered to a regime that was openly and defiantly positioning itself in opposition to American values and interests, which in turn made his exercise in appeasement not only futile but counterproductive.

Indeed, by the time Obama addressed the Turkish parliament, the country's "strong and secular democracy" which he lauded as the foremost and most enduring legacy of the republic's founding father Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), was well and truly under siege. In the seven eventful years since it won the November 2002 general elections, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP) and its hugely ambitious leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has transformed Turkey's legal system, suppressed the independent media, sterilized the political and military systems, and incarcerated hundreds of opponents and critics on the flimsiest and most dubious charges. When in June 2013 thousands of Turks took to the streets to protest their dissatisfaction with the regime, the authorities heavy-handedly suppressed the unrest, with demonstrators prosecuted for attempting to overthrow the government. Several months later the exposure of massive AKP corruption, reaching as high as cabinet ministers and Erdogan's son, led to the purge of thousands of police officers for an attempted 'judicial coup' alongside scores of opponents in the media, parliament and the justice system.