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Mr. President, Please Don't Let Erdogan Play America, Too

By Stanley A. Weiss

WASHINGTON--For a man who has spent ten of the past 14 years as the only inmate of a Turkish island prison on the Sea of Marmara, Abdullah Öcalan knows how to make his voice heard. Last month, the longtime leader of Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had a message read to a million Kurds gathered in southeastern Turkey, announcing that the moment had come to end his Party's 29-year war against Turkey. It was time, he said of the conflict that has claimed 40,000 lives, for "the guns to fall silent and for ideas to speak;" for Turks and Kurds to "unite under the banner of Islam;" to work together toward "a new Turkey."

But imagine for a moment if Öcalan had issued a different statement: that the time had come for Kurds in Iraq and Syria to join the PKK in launching an all-out war on Turkey. Imagine if he cited Ankara's leaders for "crimes against humanity," while proclaiming that Turkey had "no right to exist." Imagine if the Kurds launched unprovoked missile attacks into Turkish cities. And imagine if Turkey's ally of 65 years, Israel, then tried to sneak supplies to the Kurdish forces--only to see eight Israelis and one Israeli-born American killed in the process by Turkish troops.

Would the world insist that Turkey owed Israel an apology? Would Israel be justified in demanding compensation from Turkey for its fallen citizens? Or is it more likely that world opinion would conclude that Israel had no business betraying its long-time ally to help people sworn to Turkey's destruction?

We know the answer: Israel would be condemned. So, why is it any less absurd that Israel would reportedly agree to compensate the relatives of nine Turks killed by Israeli troops on a 2010 Turkish flotilla bound for Gaza, when it sought to aid the same Hamas government that disavows Israel's right to exist? Why would it be incumbent on Israel to apologize to Turkey for Ankara's decision to help those working for Israel's destruction? And why would the President of the United States be the one to coax Israel into admitting wrongdoing--with President Barack Obama going so far during his recent trip to Israel to hand his own telephone to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan waiting on the line?

For a decade now, Erdogan has brilliantly played Israel and Europe to advance an Islamic agenda unseen in Turkey for nearly a century. And now, with Erdogan scheduled to make an official state visit to Washington, he's trying to play America, too. Last week, his government had the temerity to rebuke U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who gently suggested that Erdogan delay a scheduled mid-May visit to Gaza for fear of upsetting nascent new peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis--a suggestion that Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc called "objectionable."

Maybe it's time for America to start objecting to some of the things Erdogan has done to Turkey, America's long-time ally, during his decade in office. Maybe it's time to object to the fact that under Erdogan, "democratic" Turkey has imprisoned more

journalists than any nation on earth; jailed half of its admirals and 400 of its active and retired army officers; and incarcerated more than 2,800 students, most for the crime of exercising free speech.

Maybe, when Erdogan stands with Obama in the East Room far from Ankara's censors, it's time for journalists to ask why there have been more than 20,000 complaints filed against Turkey's government in the European Court of Human Rights; why he's built more mosques than any Turkish government in the history of traditionally secular nation; why he recently forced female flight attendants on Turkish Airlines to replace skirts with ankle-length caftans; and why he's working to change the role of women in Turkish society, as journalist Cinar Kiper put it, "headscarf by headscarf."

Maybe, when the two leaders are in the Oval Office, Obama can ask why the Prime Minister, in a February speech at a United Nations event, equated Zionism with "crimes against humanity," such as "anti-Semitism, fascism and Islamophobia." Maybe he could even ask Erdogan to explain how he came to write, direct and star in an anti-Semitic play called *Maskomya* back in 1974.

There is a good chance that when he's in Washington, Erdogan will manufacture a moment of indignation against the West--similar to his 2009 tirade at the World Economic Forum in Davos, when he engaged in a heated exchange with Israeli President Shimon Peres before storming off stage, returning home the hero. As Israeli journalist Smadar Peri recently wrote, "Every time he attacks us, his stock as the king of the Arab street soars."

Inexplicably, Israel allows him to get away with it. Putting aside the fact that Israel's Jewish-only dreams are quickly being overwhelmed by demographics, why would Netanyahu not remind the world, every day, that Hamas still calls for Israel's destruction? Find a creative way to do it - maybe a Hamas version of America's debt clock, ticking higher each day Hamas refuses to acknowledge Israel's existence.

If Erdogan pulls an Erdogan while in Washington, I hope Obama calls him on it.

If the Turkish PM is intent on traveling to Gaza, maybe Obama should publicly appeal to America's friend that it's time for Hamas to recognize Israel. With reports that Hamas is considering recognition, maybe Obama can ask Erdogan to deliver the message: if Hamas publicly recognizes Israel and renounces violence, the U.S. will remove Hamas from its list of terrorist organizations, making reconciliation with Fatah possible while advancing the peace process. In the macho mind of Ankara's Muslim leader, it might play just enough into his God complex to work.

Such a move would put Erdogan in an unfamiliar position: receiving global attention for something he achieved, rather than something he said. That kind of leadership might play well on any street, Arab or otherwise. It might just help make Erdogan the transcendent figure he so desperately wants to be.

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