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Turkey at the Crossroads on Iraq: A Test Case for US-Turkey Relations

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Summary

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While the Iraqi crisis has served to help define America's position on the world's stage, especially pertaining to trans-Atlantic relations and the West-Islam axis, Turkey's position on Iraq will similarly have a lasting effect on that country's relations both with the West and with the Islamic world. The Turkish government's ambivalent stance towards the Iraqi crisis (first siding with the US position, then deciding to remain on the sidelines in accordance with a legislative decision based mainly on domestic concerns) seriously strained Turkish-American relations. This strain must be addressed, as it is now clear that neither side can take the decades-old, deep-seated ties for granted. As the Iraqi crisis proved, Turkey should not overestimate its strategic geographical location as a guarantee that will ensure America's continuing interest in Turkish concerns. On its part, the US should avoid the patronizing position that was evident in the run-up to the Iraq war. Especially, as the leading supporter of Turkey's fight against the PKK, America should be more attentive to its ally's special concerns and engage in consistent consultation with the Turkish government on Iraq while avoiding any "knee-jerk" reactions or unilateral acts. It is also important that Turkey's economic recovery program should continue to be backed by Washington. As a Middle Eastern country and a long time ally of the US, Turkey's views on the rebuilding of Iraq should be taken into account, especially while anti-Americanism in the area remains strong.

Recommendations

- The sooner the governing elite creates a shared common perspective among its own citizens, the more pressure free any government can feel about Kurdish developments in the neighbouring space. Recent Turkish reforms that permit the use of the Kurdish language in education and on television were encouraging, but have not wholly resolved the deep-seated problem for good.
- Turkey's officials and Iraq's Kurds must improve their channels of communication without a mediator or outside pressure. Turkey and the US could narrow the rift over Iraq by making their long time experience with the Kurdish groups available to one another.
- All political parties should have a shadow cabinet to ensure a seamless adjustment to the challenges of being in office. Despite being a one party government, the AKP government displayed a serious degree of ambiguity and indecisiveness in the recent negotiations with the US, degrading mutual trust. The AKP leadership failed to share its policy details pertaining to the Iraqi crisis with the public and more surprisingly with the AKP deputies, causing a wave of speculation and uncertainty about the government's Iraq policy, especially in the days preceding the war.
- As well as curing the acute economic and social ills of the country, another great challenge to the AKP government and to the Turkish political system in general is to prove that the democratic system of government in the country can continue to function and improve without any serious tension arising between the military and the government, under an administration which is closely tied to Islamic values. The Iraqi crisis did not cause a serious crisis in military-government relations since both sides seemed to favour the motion but did not dispute the Assembly's verdict. Nonetheless, as long as the Kurdish question and the possible rise of Islamic radicalism remain major concerns, the involvement of the military in the decision-making process will likely continue. Turkey should work to relieve the military of their foreign-policy making duties, and organize military-civil relations in accordance with contemporary practice.
- With anti-Americanism on the rise around the world, the Middle East-Turkey partnership, ineffectual as it was in the first Gulf War, should be safeguarded by both the US and Turkey for the sake of future coordinated efforts in the region. As a country that has relations with Israel as well as with Syria and Iran, Turkey could be a relevant partner to Washington in the years to come.
- Turkey faces a foreign policy challenge in effectively balancing EU and US relations. However, the EU's ability to initiate alternate (vis-a-vis the US) Middle Eastern policies as a unified bloc, coupled with Turkey's potential membership and alignment with this position, would not necessarily mean confrontation with the US, but could give rise to constructive competition.
- Although a clear-cut path to EU membership could improve Ankara's posture in the international arena, the EU cannot be a substitute for the US - at least not for the foreseeable future. The recent US-Turkish divergence over Iraq has placed Turkey closer to the anti-Iraqi stance propounded by Germany and France, but this has not changed France or Germany's attitude towards Turkey's possible EU membership. Currently, the US is the only country that possesses adequate means to resolve any Middle Eastern crisis -including the rebuilding of Iraq. Thus, to meet the challenges stemming from the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular, the AKP government must deal with the Americans. One crisis, regardless of how influential and dramatic its outcome might be, should not destroy the longstanding relations between the two countries. Powell's recent visit to Ankara coupled with the US decision to give Turkey a grant of 1 billion USD might be regarded as early signs of rapprochement, but it is too early to assess the long term impact of the Iraqi debacle on Turkey-US relations.

The Policy context

Especially in the wake of September 11th, Turkey and the US have shared the view of promoting Turkey as a role model for the Islamic world. However, despite Ankara's increasing efforts towards democratization and its commitment to secularism, the schism created by the Iraq war has meant that Turkey's relations with the West, particularly with the US, have moved into an ambiguous phase. The Turkish Grand National Assembly's decision not to permit US deployment on its territory reflected a certain level of democratic maturity, reflecting as it did the overwhelming public opposition to the war. This decision was taken despite the opposing views of the leadership in the Justice and Development Party-AKP, namely, of then Party Chairman, Tayyip Erdogan and of then Prime Minister Abdullah Gul as well as that of the military. Unlike the majority of deputies, the high level political and military figures favoured passing the motion for the sake of the deeply-rooted US-Turkish strategic partnership. Whilst Parliament's verdict was meant to show that Turkey has a maturing democratic system, the motion's rejection hampered efforts Turkey had made to overcome the misgivings and wrongdoings between the US and the Islamic world. However, Turkey and America could still turn their disagreement over Iraq into an advantage by proving that democratically governed allies can have differences in response to the wishes of their constituents, but these disagreements should not crush a multifaceted partnership that has been nurtured by both sides for many years.

Turkey was consistently against the US' intervention in Iraq by military means throughout the run-up to the war. Nonetheless, prior to the war, the AKP leadership signalled that it would be a reluctant partner of the US, in a US-led operation against Iraq due to its desire to have a say in the reconstruction of Iraq, especially concerning the Kurdish question and its ongoing economic difficulties.

In fact, Turkey's domestic difficulties governed its foreign policy on Iraq vis-a-vis the US. The government's indication that it was taking a clear pro-American line during AKP leader Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Washington D.C. in late December 2002 was short-lived. The pro-American stance was reversed on March 1, 2003, when the National Assembly, where the AKP holds an overall majority, rejected the motion that American troops be deployed on Turkish soil. This was a serious setback both to the AKP government and the Bush administration as the Americans had already begun to make military preparations for opening a northern front to Iraq through Turkey. This rejection of the motion was generally described as a U-turn on the Turkish side. It stressed Turkish-American relations and brought weeks of US-Turkish political, economic and military talks on Iraq to a standstill. Before the motion, the different interests and approaches of the two parties were on display and served to drive a wedge between the two allies. On the Turkish side, the AKP government wanted to be assured that a Kurdish independent state would not arise, that Turkey would receive economic compensation in return for its prospective assistance to the US on Iraq, and also wished to have a say in the future of Iraq. The US side was characterized by the US' patronizing style and "race against time" approach. The Turkish government was able to disguise its uneasiness, to some extent, as to the progress of the Turkish-US talks, but the lack of accord was broadcast world-wide when the Parliament refused the motion on March 1st, 2003.

Regardless of the Turkish decision, the US launched the war without using Turkish territory to open a front in Northern Iraq. In so doing, Turkish-US cooperation in the war was confined to nothing further than the Turks granting fly-over rights to the Americans. However, growing Turkish-American cooperation is likely, perhaps not in the battlefield but at least in the area of humanitarian assistance and in the process of reconstructing Iraq.

Turkey's deep-rooted political and economic problems shaped Turkey's policy toward Iraq; these problems were more important than the dangers created by its proximity to Iraq, and more important than its 50-year alliance with the US. As long as Turkey fails to be a true democracy and continues to have a poorly-managed market economy, the country's foreign policy will continue to be vulnerable to outside pressure.

Having suffered from the separatist PKK (the Kurdistan Workers Party) military campaign from 1984 to 1999, Turkey's apprehension with regard to the developments in Northern Iraq is understandable. Turkey has its particular reasons to feel uneasy about the possibility of the autonomous [Kurdish] zone in Northern Iraq becoming a Kurdish state and inciting separatist tendencies and actions among its own Kurds. Therefore, Iraq's territorial integrity has consistently been the leading priority of Ankara. The two rival Kurdish groups, namely, the KDP (the Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), have administered Northern Iraq since they obtained control of the Kurdish enclave from Baghdad in the wake of the 1991 Gulf war. Although successive Turkish governments have been involved in a dialogue with both the KDP and PUK since the Gulf war, cooperated closely with the KDP in its fight against the PKK and allowed the use of the Incirlik base to enforce the Kurdish autonomous region, the US' recent intensification of support to the Iraqi Kurds after dismissing them for years as divided and ineffective has increasingly alarmed the political and military establishment in Ankara. Especially given the close cooperation between the Peshmergas and the US military in the North, Turkey has become progressively uneasy about the possibility of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq.

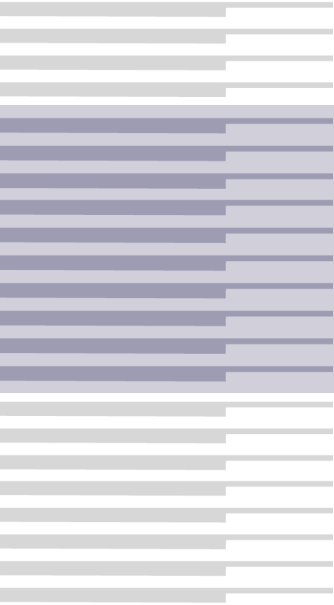
After the capture of Abdullah Ocalan, the head of the PKK in early 1999, and the close of the long-lasting conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army, Ankara's threat perception regarding the Kurdish issue has significantly improved. Moreover, the passage of new legislation in August 2002 that allows the Kurds to have Kurdish language education and television whilst abolishing martial law in the Southeast, has contributed positively to mending some of the political wounds that have divided the country. However, serious issues that remain undecided could hold back Turkey's relations with the outside world. Turkey's position in the Middle East, especially its bargaining position as regards Iraq, is hindered by these question marks. Due to its Kurdish concerns, Turkey has been most anxious to be well informed on every aspect of the negotiations between the US and the main Kurdish groups as well as the Iraqi National Congress pertaining to the process of rebuilding Iraq. Developments in war-torn Iraq have the AKP government, as its predecessors, apprehensive about the revival of separatist activities among its own Kurds. It is very much against Iraq developing a weak central government with an ethnically based federal solution. Turkey also firmly defends the rights of the Iraq Turcomans; a founding nation of Iraq (along with the Kurds and Arabs) Turkey looks to involve them in reshaping Iraq.

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However, these Turkish concerns frequently fall on deaf ears in the West, and, as was the case when the Turkish government voiced its intention to place troops in Northern Iraq to prevent possible refugee inflow and spill-over effects from Northern Iraq (especially the PKK), it faced a disproportionate reaction from its Western allies. Not only the US, but also most EU countries raised firm opposition to any Turkish involvement in Northern Iraq. With Ankara being portrayed both as the Kurds' archenemy and as a potential troublemaker in the North, this reaction caused a good deal of resentment in Turkey. Turkey has not deployed any Turkish troops in the area, but, as became clear during Colin Powell's recent visit to Ankara in early April 2003, no consensus has been reached with the Americans. This incident proved that, after years of negotiations, Turkey is far from reaching a common perspective about the Kurdish issue with the West, even with its closest allies.

In addition to Turkey's Kurdish problem, economic considerations have also driven a certain portion of Turkey's policy towards Iraq for years, and these economic concerns have caused differences of opinion between the US and Turkey since the early 1990s. Turkey was not alone (France and Russia concurred) in supporting the immediate lifting of the sanctions against Iraq in the pre-war years. Since the Gulf War, and the subsequent blockage of trade with Iraq - one of Turkey's leading trading partners- Turkey has consistently complained about the significant economic losses it has incurred as well as the humanitarian impact of this loss on its backward Southeastern region where large numbers of Kurds live. Since the early 1990s, successive governments have criticized the lack of economic compensation in return for Turkey's backing of the US led war on Iraq in 1991 and its compliance with the economic embargo. Officials and business people in Turkey have argued that a war next door would frighten away foreign investors, cause trade losses from neighbouring states and adversely influence Turkey's tourism sector. Therefore, during the US-Turkish talks in the months prior to the war, Turkey asked for compensation in return for its support of America's war effort.

Although financial considerations, especially Turkey's need for economic assistance, was firmly tabled in the US-Turkish talks as a prerequisite for any viable partnership, the Western side saw Turkey's "dollars for support" approach to the US' position on Iraq as mere haggling. The foreign press, which portrayed Turkey as a beggar or as a country that would do anything for money, oversimplified the real situation and caused a good deal of resentment on the part of the Turkish public. This seems to have greatly contributed to the failure of the motion in the National Assembly. Given that Turkey is recovering from the Republic's worst economic crisis and is very much dependent on US support, the country's economic difficulties understandably played a significant part in Turkish-American talks on Iraq. In the process of these talks, millions of dollars worth of US assistance was reportedly discussed. Thus, when the motion was defeated in the Assembly, pro-American business, media and political circles in Turkey condemned the government for missing a real chance to help the struggling Turkish economy recover. Nonetheless, despite the importance of the economy, the political and military issues seem to have had the upper hand in the talks. In the final analysis, Turkey's position on the Iraqi problem was largely dictated by Turkey's internal difficulties, namely by the Kurdish problem, which, if resolved earlier, would have meant that little importance would have been attached to the Kurds in Northern Iraq.



American and Turkish policies appear to overlap considerably with regard to geo-strategic interests in the Balkans or in the Caucasus, but the current Iraqi question seems to offer a mixture of cooperating and conflicting views on the Middle East. Turkey is faced with a difficult foreign policy dilemma; it must balance its tense relations with the US and the European Union with its own national priorities. Its internal problems have led to a reactive and defensive attitude with regard to American policy on Iraq rather than viewing this as a new window of opportunity for improving the alliance.

The Iraqi crisis publicly demonstrated the depth of the disagreement between the two allies as to the use of force and the conditions for the legitimate use of military means as well as divergent priorities for post-Saddam Iraq. In view of this, Turkey's efforts to explore multifaceted and multilateral foreign policy opportunities for the sake of a better position on the world stage should gain momentum regardless of the state of American-Turkish relations.

At present, Turkey wants to coexist with a strong and democratically governed Iraq that represents the Iraqi Arabs as well as the Kurds, Turcomans and other ethnic and religious groups while keeping its territorial integrity intact. As long as the US rebuilding of Iraq corresponds to these Turkish priorities, US-Turkish relations will recover from their recent set back. By all accounts, Turkey is not the only US ally to have had a bad patch with Washington over Iraq, so Ankara-Washington differences should not call for harsh treatment.

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Key Recommendations

- Turkey must complete democratic and economic reforms that will minimize the effects of domestic difficulties on the country's ability to carry out an outward-looking foreign policy that would give the country more space to manoeuvre in its relations with the outside world. For example, the government should take all necessary steps to resolve the Kurdish question to ensure more trouble free relations with the West as well as with the Middle East.
- EU membership is more vital than ever before. However, Turkey should consistently explore ways to balance its relations with the US with those of the EU. As seen during the Iraqi crisis, should Turkey-US relations face difficulties in the future, the EU should be prepared to bring pressure to bear with the US on behalf of Turkey. Prospective EU membership could give Turkey more space for manoeuvring in its stated foreign policy, by eliminating certain domestic concerns including the Kurdish issue and human rights issues in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria. If Turkey makes progress towards EU membership, it will be better positioned in its relations with the whole world including the US. Turkey's possible EU membership would likely enrich its long-standing geo-strategic relations with the US in a value/principle-shared partnership in terms of democracy, human rights and economic partnership.
- As well as achieving fast-track relations with EU countries, Ankara should also improve its ties with other important international players such as Russia. This will help improve its standing as an international actor. Like Ankara, Moscow has had serious reservations concerning America's Iraq policy. Despite the strong relationship between Russia and the US that only strengthened after September 11th, Moscow, with economic interests at stake (the payment of Iraqi debts to Russia, and the validity of Russian contracts with the former Iraqi regime), questioned the US' decision to use force and the consequent side-lining of the UN. Turkey should further improve its economic ties with Russia; a move that would increase its standing on various international fronts, including that of the US.
- Located at the heart of conflict-ridden areas, Turkey should reform its foreign policy-making process, emphasising conflict resolution and crisis management with a view towards adapting itself quickly and decisively to foreign policy challenges.
- Turkey and the US should not let the complexities surrounding the Iraqi situation place any further strain on their bilateral relations.

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