

Turkey:

Supporting United States but not Ready to Fight

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Nov 7, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

Secretary of State James Baker visited Turkey today, the last stop on his regional tour, to thank that country for its "steadfast" support and warn that the United States "cannot rule out the possible use of force." Turkish officials said there had been no talk about Turkey's opening a second front. Foreign Minister Husnu Dogan explained that Turkey would only "not rule out the possibility of giving permission to U.S. forces to use the bases if war starts."

Unquestionably, Turkey's support for sanctions was a turning point in creating a global united front against Iraqi aggression. If Ankara had not closed the oil pipeline traversing its territory, efforts to assemble a coalition and to stop Baghdad's petroleum exports would have been more difficult. The fact that this action was risky and costly to Turkey -- already suffering economic doldrums and for whom Iraq was one of its best customers -- only deepened Ankara's claim to compensation.

President Turgut Ozal's motives in taking a strong stand against Saddam Hussein are clear. Strategically, the Cold War's end eliminates Turkey's four-decade-long role as a frontline state opposing Soviet expansionism and undermines its status as a major recipient of U.S. aid. Psychologically, Turkey's long-held ambition to become part of Europe is threatened by rejection from the Common Market, which is busy with its own further integration and the absorption of ex-Communist states. Turkey is searching for a new identity and for renewed sources of strategic and political backing.

Shake-Ups and Weaknesses

Ozal decided to take a strong anti-Iraq stand by himself, without consulting his own party or parliament. Both his method and his policy have come under criticism. Reacting against this high-handed approach, Foreign Minister Ali Bozer resigned on October 12; Defense Minister Safa Giray quit six days later. Ozal chose as Giray's successor his own nephew, Husmu Docan, despite earlier reproaches over nepotism.

Fortunately for Ozal, the main opposition, the Social Democratic Populist Party, is fractionalized. There are also significant splits in Ozal's Motherland Party. Although Turkey is relatively stable, there is some increase in Islamic fundamentalism and recent terrorist assassinations of secularists. Ozal's own brother has been a top official in a fundamentalist party and the President's party pushed through the Turkish Parliament last month a controversial

measure to allow women to wear "Islamic" head-scarves in the school.

While Ozal is in no danger of falling from power, he hardly represents a national consensus which would accept going to war.

Last week, the Turkish republic celebrated its 67th birthday. Its national political culture was established by Kamal Ataturk whose famous statement, "Peace at home, peace abroad," has set the pattern for Turkish foreign policy. Having lost 20 percent of their population and much of their territory in World War I, the Turks stayed out of World War II until the final days. And while they sent a small contingent to the Korean War, there is a very strong predisposition against foreign military entanglements.

Moreover, while Turkey has a large military force and a great warrior tradition, its armed forces look better on paper than in the field. The 525,000-man army is largely a massive job corps program, with 475,000 of its men being conscripts. Equipment is old; most combat units are under strength. Although the air force includes three squadrons of F-16s, many of its planes are also antiquated.

Furthermore, despite talk among American commentators, Turkey has never made any claim to areas of northern Iraq, which were ruled by its predecessor before World War I. Given its politics and political culture, the chances of Turkey opening a second front against Iraq are extremely slim. Ozal has specifically denied this possibility.

Contributing to a War Effort

Nonetheless, the Turks could be useful in a war between a U.S.-led coalition and Iraq in two ways: by allowing the United States to use NATO air bases there and by forcing Iraq to worry about an assault on its rear, even if one never happens.

Turkey is the only NATO member bordering the Middle East and the site of several NATO air bases, the most important being at Incirlik. Turkey has permitted the United States to base 40 F-16 attack aircraft and 14 F-111 bombers there, but Turkish consent is needed to use these installations for non-NATO purposes. If U.S. planes could take off and land from these fields during war, it would expand the number of missions they could fly and targets they could hit while making the task of Iraq's air defense far more difficult. It would not be an easy step for Turkey to allow the United States to operate out of its bases but Ozal could decide to do so.

Making Iraq nervous about a Turkish front is an easier task. Reportedly, Turkey has beefed up its forces on the border to about 100,000 troops and Iraq has also increased its units there. Obviously, any forces that Iraq has to deploy on that front are unavailable in the south.

In exchange, Ozal hopes to gain significant U.S. assistance to modernize his military as a result of his participation in the anti-Iraq coalition. Some of this would come in the form of free equipment provided from U.S. stocks in Europe. Among the weapons systems under discussion are tanks (presumably M-60s), helicopters, and war planes (presumably more F-16s). Economic aid, totalling well over \$1 billion, is coming from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The Turkish President is also playing a helpful diplomatic role. In particular, he has served as an intermediary between the United States and Iran. Ozal plans to visit Tehran shortly and will meet again with President Bush during the November 19-21 session of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Turkey is playing a useful, even courageous, part in the anti-Iraq effort. While Turkey could find itself dragged into a war, any exaggeration of its willingness to become engaged in a war against Iraq would be a dangerous misperception.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notables, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of*

the PLO.

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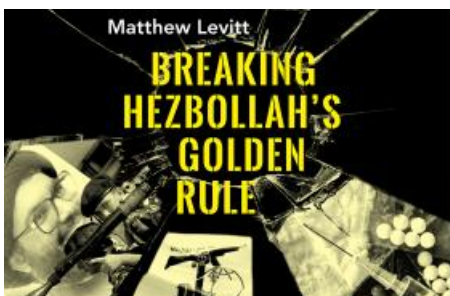
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