

# Winning Turkey's Heart

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Articles & Testimony

**T**urkish-US relations are at a low point. In Turkey, literally every Turk feels resentful of America's Middle East policies, and Ankara is reaching out to US foes Syria and Iran. An outgoing US ambassador to Ankara may not be replaced immediately when the time comes in the summer, a sure sign of strained relations. Some US officials have, in a rather ungrounded manner, blamed Turkey's lack of cooperation in the initial phases of the Iraq war for the lasting Iraq insurgency. Turkey is no longer considered a real partner when the US makes its plans for the Middle East.

How did it get to this and what needs to be done to repair relations whose positive tone has been unique in the region? There are three main reasons, but one underlying cause that feeds them all, and that is the ramifications for Turkey of America's war in Iraq. The impact of the war in Iraq on the Turkish public has affected opinion across the board, but is not a matter of simple "anti-Americanism". To understand this, one needs to understand some of the history.

When the Iraq war started, Turkey had just come out of a traumatic decade-and-a-half struggle against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) terrorist group. That conflict resulted in 30,000 casualties, which in Turkey means almost every individual was personally affected.

The PKK entered into a unilateral ceasefire in 1999 and remained largely dormant for several years. It pulled most of its operatives out of Turkey and into northern Iraq. The issue was not over, but it was about to become perhaps a closed chapter when the Iraq war started.

Some US officials, notably Donald Rumsfeld in March of this year, have argued that the lack of a northern front--as a result of the vote in Turkey's parliament prior to the onset of war in March 2003 against cooperating with US forces--is one of the main causes of the lasting Iraqi insurgency. But most military analysts disagree. The lack of a northern front did not affect an insurgency that would have happened with or without it.

But what the Iraq war has done is concentrate an unprecedented amount of political power in the hands of Iraq's Kurds. It is partly because Turkey did not offer the US an alternative that the US has come to rely so heavily on its Kurdish allies. Regardless, with the PKK enjoying a safe haven in northern Iraq under the control of Iraq's two Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the PKK renounced its ceasefire in June 2004 and restarted its attacks into Turkey.

This is where Turkey has become so wary of US policies. The struggle against the PKK is a fresh wound in Turkish society and has been reopened again too soon. Had Kurds in Iraq gained an equivalent amount of political power ten years down the line, Turkey would have reacted differently. But it happened now, and since Iraq is controlled by the US, that's where Turks lay the blame.

It is in this context that we should read the current rapprochement between Turkey and Syria and Iran, countries that have provided safe haven for the PKK in the past. Both countries have Kurdish populations and have concerns similar to Turkey's over the rising political profile of the Iraqi Kurds. This is why Syria and Iran are now starting to

cooperate with Turkey against the PKK. It is also a short-term strategic move. Syria and Iran see that by showing commitment against the PKK, they can win Turkey's heart.

The Kurdish issue, however, while shaping the majority nationalist constituency in Turkey, is only one factor. Also fiercely opposed to the Iraq war are the conservative and Islamist trend in Turkey as well as the liberal intellectual elite. The Islamists abhor the war because it is a war on a Muslim country. That rhetoric, while normally marginal in Turkey, has gained new credence in the country since the rise to power of the AKP (the Justice and Development Party). Although the AKP has an Islamist pedigree, since its rise to power in November 2002 the party has presented itself as a conservative democratic movement. Nevertheless, the AKP's ascent to power has broadened what is politically acceptable discourse in the country, and enabled Islamist and conservative views of the war to be well reflected in the mainstream press.

This is aided by the liberal media and academic elite, which, in European fashion, opposes the war because it judges it as illegal, as about US hegemony, and a neo-colonialist attempt at dominating the Middle East.

Nevertheless, it is the nationalist constituency and the Kurdish issue that have the greatest resonance, and it is here that the US needs to make inroads if it wants to repair relations with Turkey.

The US has two options, both predicated on the assumption that Turkey is too important an ally to let go by the wayside. One is direct, quick and sure-fire, but carries political costs. The other is slower but also less costly.

The US needs to reach out to the nationalist majority in Turkey. The quickest way of doing so is by addressing the issue that most excites this majority, namely the PKK. If the US did what Syria and Iran are doing so smartly, i.e., show commitment against the PKK, a Turkish majority would quickly be swayed back in favor of America. That would entail taking action against the PKK in northern Iraq. The PKK is a small organization of some 5,000 members. It is very hierarchical, and if the US acts against its leaders, the PKK will be paralyzed as it was after Turkey captured erstwhile leader Abdullah Ocalan. (It was immediately after Turkey captured Ocalan, with US help in 1998, that the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire.)

But such action carries a political risk for the US, dependant as it is on the Kurds of Iraq. While it is the most effective way of swaying Turkish public opinion, it demands a relatively stable Iraq, which appears to be still some way down the line. In the meantime, the US, however, has another, politically risk-free option.

The fate of Turkish Cyprus is very important to Turkey, as it appears to hold the key to membership of the EU. Turkish Cypriots showed a spirit of compromise during the April 2004 UN vote on the future of the island that Turks feel has gone unrewarded. In this referendum, which offered both sides the minimum of their political demands, Turkish Cypriots voted to accept the plan, while Greek Cypriots rejected it. If the US stepped in, by offering trade links, cultural contacts, and tourism, and acted to ease the economic and humanitarian sanctions Northern Cyprus has endured, it would play well in mainland Turkey and go some way to improve the image of American policy in the eyes of Turks.

What Washington does depends on how strongly the US values its relations with Turkey. Dangerously shorn as it is of allies in the Middle East, it would seem foolish not to make an attempt at restoring relations with a country that has historically been one of the western world's greatest allies in this region. - Published 14/4/2005 (c) bitterlemons-international.org

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