

Can the U.S. Win Turkey Over in 2005?

Understanding EU Dynamics and Confidence Building in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

On January 3, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Ankara to discuss with Turkish officials Iraq-related issues straining U.S.-Turkish relations, including unforthcoming Turkish support for U.S. operations in Iraq and the fight against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a terrorist group with 5,500- 5,800 members in northern Iraq. Armitage's timely visit comes on the heels of the December 17 European Union (EU) decision on Turkey's membership. Ankara, which has focused its energy on gaining EU status for the past two years, is now in a position to revisit its relationship with Washington, which has been badly damaged as a result of failure to cooperate in Iraq. In the aftermath of the EU decision, the United States might gain an opportunity to rebuild its relationship with Turkey by offering Ankara a vision of closer cooperation in Iraq. Otherwise, the rift in U.S.-Turkish relations could only widen dangerously in 2005.

An Opportunity for Washington

Although the EU has decided to open accession talks with Ankara on October 3, 2005, Brussels has also suggested Turkey's membership is not a done deal. Ankara's EU path is full of difficult political hurdles. First, in order to begin accession talks, Turkey has to recognize the Cyprus government in the Greek-dominated part of that island, an EU member country. Second, throughout 2005 Brussels will be establishing benchmarks with which to evaluate Turkey's progress during likely accession negotiations. Given these hurdles, especially the EU's record of raising the bar for Turkey (see PolicyWatch no. 906 and PolicyWatch no. 905), it is possible that the political honeymoon between Turkey and the EU -- in effect since December 2002 when Brussels said Ankara only had to satisfy the Union's membership rules, the Copenhagen Criteria, in order to qualify for accession talks -- might more than likely come to an end in 2005.

This year, Ankara and Brussels will enter a new phase in their relationship. Both sides will aim to maximize their gains prior to beginning accession talks, with the EU making a number of tough political and economic demands from Turkey in the run-up. Such demands are likely to create anti-EU resentment in Turkey. And even if accession talks were to start in October 2005, the EU will press the Turks to make many sacrifices even though they will reap very few economic gains thanks to membership until the next decade, when talks with the EU should come to an

end. (In previous cases, accession countries have typically not reaped the economic benefits of membership until the very advanced stages of negotiations.)

As Turkey begins a tough bargaining period with Brussels, the anticlimactic aftermath of the EU's December decision and a new era in Turkish-EU relations provide Washington with a window of opportunity. U.S.-Turkish relations have gone through an increasingly stressful period since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government took office in November 2002. While Turkey's EU ambitions diverted the country's attention toward Brussels -- resulting in a near realignment of Turkish foreign policy with that of the EU -- events in Iraq have hurt the U.S.-Turkish relationship by unleashing potent anti-American forces in many Turkish constituencies, ranging from secular nationalists in the press to the Islamists in the AKP. As the pro-EU euphoria subsides in Turkey, the United States has a chance to initiate a process to gradually win Ankara over. By taking the right steps, Washington could dampen the effects of the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. This reorientation has brought Turkey closer than ever not only to the EU but also to Iran and Syria, especially since Ankara, Damascus, and Tehran share similar concerns vis-à-vis the prospects of Kurdish independence in Iraq, an opportunity the AKP government followed to pursue rapprochement with Tehran and Damascus (See [PolicyWatch no. 825 \(templateC05.php?CID=1703\)](#)). The place where Washington can win Turkey over is Iraq, where the relationship failed in the first place.

Rebuilding Mutual Confidence: Need to Clear the Air in Iraq

One of the most unexpected repercussions of the Iraq war for the United States and Turkey has been an erosion of confidence in bilateral relations. While on the surface, as has been apparent during high-level visits, the Iraq war epoch seems to be over, at the middle levels, among bureaucrats as well as military officers, mutual confidence seems to have weakened. On the American side, the thinking is that the Turks did not help Washington in the Iraq war and that they have been less than forthcoming in recent cases, such as when the United States requests flyover rights. On the Turkish side, the view is that staunch U.S.-Kurdish cooperation since before the Iraq war is a sign the United States has long chosen the cause of Kurdish nationalism over Turkey.

High-level trilateral talks: In order to rebuild mutual confidence, Washington and Ankara would need to establish common grounds vis-à-vis the prospects of Kurdish nationalism. In this regard, trilateral talks between the Turks, Americans, and Iraqis, brought up during Armitage's visit to Ankara and now scheduled to be held next week, should provide a useful tool. Parties to such talks could include ministers and secretaries of defense, foreign policy, and state, as well as chiefs of staff from the three countries. The United States would want from Turkey committed support for the continuation of its operations in Iraq. Objections from the AKP government that such a policy goes against the EU line or that public opinion would be against it should not be difficult to overcome. After all, there is the example of Germany, an EU member that, despite its powerful antiwar movement and official stance against the Iraq campaign, has allowed the United States full access to American military assets in that country. In the talks, Turkey would want the United States to develop a plan with which to combat the PKK, for example, by eliminating this Stalinist organization's leadership, a step that would effectively cripple the PKK's hierarchical structure. Washington might convince the Iraqi Kurdish parties to join this plan with the logic that terror is bad even when it is Kurdish terror. Turkey would also want the United States to commit itself to maintaining Kirkuk's status as a city shared by all its inhabitants, Turkmen, Kurds, and Arabs alike.

A second benefit of trilateral talks would be the waves of confidence that would emanate from the secretary/minister/chief of staff level, where few problems seem to exist, down to the operational level of middle and lower cadres, where mutual confidence is most lacking. In this regard, it would also help if Washington included in the talks commanders of both U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which runs the operations in Iraq, has little tradition of working with Turkey, and nurtures much resentment toward Ankara due to Turkey's stance on the Iraq war, and U.S. European Command (EUCOM), which has been working with Ankara for decades, knows Turkey very

well, and has often proven itself as Turkey's best advocate in the U.S. military. Under the guidance of the secretary of defense and chief of staff, EUCOM and CENTCOM, which tend not to see mending ties with Ankara as a priority, could move to a common Turkey policy.

A trilateral memorandum of understanding followed by concrete action by the United States on the PKK issue, by Turkey in giving Washington unhindered help for Iraq, and by the AKP government in using restraint when criticizing U.S. actions in Iraq would be the best way to untangle U.S-Turkish relations. If not, 2005 might only bring more unpleasant surprises, such as even fiercer Turkish criticism of the U.S. operations in Iraq in line with the AKP government's tone during 2004, increased Turkish stringency in allowing U.S. military operations through Turkey, and last but not least further PKK attacks from northern Iraq into Turkey. Neither Turkey nor the United States can afford to lose one another in Iraq.

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