

The United States and Turkey: Mending Fences?

Nov 10, 2003



Brief Analysis

On November 3, 2003, Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. ambassador to the UN, delivered The Washington Institute's Sixth Annual Turgut Ozal Memorial Lecture. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=40\)](#)

Turkey is the new frontline state for the United States and the European Union (EU). This was true before both Operation Iraqi Freedom and the events of September 11, 2001, and it is even truer today.

Turkey and the EU

Turkey is an integral part of Europe, and its accession to the EU is essential for the security, stability, and prosperity of both Europe and the United States. Hence, when the EU holds its summit in the Netherlands in December 2004, it should set a clear date for the beginning of accession talks with Turkey. The EU may have numerous reasons to worry about the implications of Turkish membership for the rest of the union, particularly the potential economic consequences. Yet, to exclude Turkey would be far worse because such a decision would be perceived as being driven by ethnic and religious factors.

Turkey, the United States, and the War in Iraq

The diplomatic effort to secure Turkish support for the war in Iraq was a mess, particularly during the period leading up to March 1, 2003, when the Turkish parliament rejected a motion that would have allowed the United States to stage an invasion force on Turkish soil. For one thing, France, Germany, and Belgium prevented NATO from developing a contingency plan to defend Turkey, a fellow NATO country, even though it was clear that war was imminent. This was an absolutely reprehensible decision. Moreover, the Turkish parliamentary vote would have come out differently had the United States engaged in more effective, higher-level diplomacy. If senior U.S. officials had involved themselves directly, the extremely close vote would have turned in their favor (e.g., if as few as four absent ministers of parliament had attended the session and voted in favor of the motion, it would have passed). In the aftermath of the vote, many Americans reacted furiously, as though the Turkish position represented a betrayal of the United States or the beginning of a basic reorientation of Turkey into an anti-American nation. Yet, this notion of betrayal was wrongheaded—Turkey reached its decision via democratic processes.

On October 7, Turkey agreed to send its own troops to Iraq, reaffirming its ties to the United States. Unfortunately, Washington ignored a problem that was entirely foreseeable before the vote: the overwhelming opposition of the Iraqi Governing Council. This opposition, along with statements by Coalition Provisional Authority administrator Paul Bremer discouraging a Turkish deployment, left the Turkish leadership both annoyed and embarrassed. Washington should not have asked Ankara for troops until it was certain that the Iraqi Governing Council would accept them. [Editor's note: On November 7, Washington officially told Ankara that it does not want Turkey to send troops to Iraq.] Even though the intentions of the United States and Turkey were good, the proposed Turkish deployment has put both countries in a very awkward position. Iraq is the most serious military problem that the

United States has faced since Vietnam, and it is unacceptable for Washington to embroil an ally like Turkey in the conflict in such a manner.

Several different scenarios could emerge if Turkish troops were in fact deployed in Iraq. The risks involved in such a deployment would be significant. First, the Iraqi Governing Council does not want Turkish forces in Iraq, and the only reason it has not formalized this sentiment is because Bremer has prevented it from doing so. If the council did vote on this matter, it would almost certainly bar a Turkish deployment. Second, the Iraqi populace might respond quite negatively to a Turkish military presence. The animosity between U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians is bad enough; if history is any indicator, Turkish troops could be greeted with even greater hostility. Thus, the question becomes how necessary Turkish troops are and what the risks of such a deployment would be. Given the negative reactions of Bremer, the Iraqi Governing Council, and the Iraqi populace, Ankara should reexamine the premise of its October 7 decision, particularly in light of the fact that Turkey's efforts in Afghanistan and the offer to deploy in Iraq have already garnered significant appreciation from Washington.

Will Iraq disintegrate? Although some have compared the current situation in Iraq to that of Yugoslavia, the two countries are in fact very different. The former Yugoslavia has split into five separate countries, but such disintegration is not as likely in Iraq. The United States and Europe have a longstanding commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq, in part because of Turkish concerns. Hence, short of a civil war, Iraq will not break apart. This fact is of great strategic importance for Turkey, and the Kurds in northern Iraq understand it as well, whatever their stated aspirations.

Cyprus

The internationally recognized government of Cyprus that holds sway in the southern part of the island (as opposed to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is recognized only by Turkey) will join the EU in May 2004, regardless of whether or not Greek and Turkish Cypriots are able to resolve their dispute by that time. The extraordinary indisposition of Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktas to pursue UN-brokered negotiations has denied the people of Northern Cyprus the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they wish to be part of the EU. Although the UN plan provides a basis for discussion, it has many problems, including an unacceptable starting point. The Greek government has stated its willingness to begin negotiations based on this plan, but Denktas has refused. Despite the breakdown of talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, the two sides have opened their border, demonstrating that there is still a basis for communication and reconciliation. Now is the time for them to begin a dialogue based on the UN plan.

Over the last two years, the United States has failed to play its proper role in this dispute. It is puzzling to see how the current U.S. administration, which is generally rather skeptical of the UN, has left the Cyprus issue in the hands of that body. The significant efforts of Secretary-General Kofi Annan and UN emissary Alvaro de Soto would have been enhanced had all parties been shown that Washington backed the UN plan. In order to maintain its influence in the region and its close relationship with both Turkey and Greece, the administration should make a political commitment to this issue at the presidential or secretary of state level. Although this would not necessarily require the appointment of a special presidential emissary, Washington should no longer leave the matter to mid-level State Department officials, no matter how well-qualified they may be. This is a simple question of political standing, one that will have an impact on Turkey's future as well as on relations between Turkey, Greece, and the EU.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Pemra Hazbay, a Dr. Marcia Robbins Wilf young scholar and research assistant for The Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program.

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