

U.S.-Turkish Military Cooperation in Iraq:

The Next Step

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

A surprising summit meeting yesterday in Ankara involving members of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, the Turkish General Staff, the Turkish Foreign Ministry, and the Turkish National Intelligence Organization produced an agreement "in principle" to send Turkish "peacekeeping soldiers" to Iraq. From one perspective, if Turkish troops were deployed to Iraq, it could end the period of "strategic pause" between Washington and Ankara in place since March 1, when the Turkish parliament refused to open up a northern front for U.S. troops invading Iraq. There are still political obstacles to Turkish troop deployment -- such as a divided AKP and a fairly reluctant parliament. Moreover, Turkish law requires that parliament authorize sending troops abroad except in the case of international legislation (such as a UN resolution), or a call for help justifying such a deployment, and the Turkish parliament is in recess until October 1.

But even before the AKP government determines its position on this issue, a major hurdle will have to be overcome: if American and Turkish troops are to work together in Iraq, they will first have to build mutual confidence, which -- once formidable -- seems to have quickly eroded over the past months. How can this be accomplished?

Restoring the Bedrock of U.S.-Turkish Relations

For many decades, military relations formed the bedrock of the U.S.-Turkish alliance. While social, economic, and cultural links between the United States and Turkey hovered at a minimum (for instance, in 2002, Turkey ranked twenty-nine among America's trading partners), military relations flourished. Such rapport was not limited to ever-important defense cooperation. Rather, a strong human element lay at the core of the U.S.-Turkish military partnership, with American and Turkish officers working as colleagues, studying at the same academies, and participating in joint military operations. As a result of such first-hand contact, U.S. military officers developed perhaps the most accurate, and therefore the most sympathetic, view of Turkey and the Turks, becoming Ankara's best -- and at difficult times only -- ally in Washington.

Yet, as indicated by the July 4 events in Sulaymaniya (when American troops detained Turkish special operations forces on the grounds that they were conspiring to assassinate elected Kurdish officials in northern Iraq), things have changed. The complex chess game played out over the past year between Washington and Ankara over

northern Iraq has poisoned U.S.-Turkish military relations to a previously inconceivable level. Many in the Turkish military believe that the United States is trying to set up a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, and many in the American military are convinced that Turkey is aiming to complicate things there for the United States. Accordingly, little trust can be found today between American and Turkish troops, especially those stationed in Iraq. Thus, as America and Turkey negotiate the deployment of Turkish peacekeeping troops to Iraq, a precondition for effective cooperation would be confidence-building measures between the two armed forces.

The First Step: Clearing the Air

In the short run, two linchpins, if publicized well, may help the American and Turkish militaries to begin viewing each other more positively.

- Turkey. It would be helpful for the Turkish army to affirm that despite the fallout of the past months, the United States has adhered to Turkey's chief concern in northern Iraq, namely the demilitarization and shutting down of the rump Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is on the State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. (Ultraskeptics who doubt America's sincerity may well remind themselves that without significant U.S. support, Turkey might not have been able to apprehend PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in February 1999).
- The United States. Although the AKP government did not open up a northern front in the Iraq war, Turkey did contribute to the campaign, perhaps more so than any other NATO ally with the exception of the United Kingdom. For instance, American airplanes flew more than 4,000 sorties over Turkey into Iraq, and Ankara granted permission for U.S. airplanes in distress to use Turkish bases such as Batman, Diyarbakir, and Incirlik. There was also much unreported assistance. For example, at the onset of the Iraq campaign on March 27, Turkey allowed the transit of 204 vehicles into northern Iraq to support U.S. forces as they launched the northern front. In sum, although Turkish support for the Iraq operation was clearly not what Washington had originally requested, Turkey did provide the United States with certain vital logistical assistance.

The Second Step: Establishing Mutual Transparency

Sharing intelligence about respective activities in Iraq would be the second step in establishing mutual confidence. Then, Washington and Ankara could assure each other that they do not have agendas for undermining one another in northern Iraq. In this regard, Turkey might consider communicating its long-term vision and plans for northern Iraq to Washington, while Washington may find it helpful to relay its own vision and plans to Ankara vis-à-vis Iraq's political restructuring. Some other transparency measures could include:

- Direct data links for real-time monitoring. During Operation Provide Comfort in the 1990s, Turkey and the United States shared real-time data, mutually assuring one another's sincerity. Establishing mutual real-time data-feed channels for planning and operations, as well as pre-notification mechanisms for troop movements, might help jumpstart confidence building, especially at the command level.
- Better use of liaison officers. As of now, Turkey has stationed liaison officers with various American units in northern Iraq, but not in the rest of the country. It would be helpful for Washington to invite Turkish observers to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) offices in Baghdad and elsewhere, while Ankara could create liaison positions for Americans with the Turkish troops in northern Iraq.

The Third Step: Team Spirit

The following steps might help further increase trust between the U.S. and Turkish militaries by providing members of both armies with the opportunity to become colleagues again:

- Joint work in the field. In an effort to increase camaraderie in Iraq, the two militaries might consider conducting joint operations in northern Iraq, whether to demilitarize the PKK or to build schools and hospitals. In the latter case,

Turkish soldiers could be attached to U.S. Civil-Military Operations Centers in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, as well as to Civil Affairs Units in the field, which face the momentous task of rebuilding Iraqi civilian infrastructure.

- Military diplomacy at home. High-level visits, as well as military exchanges among policy planners, academies, and think tanks could help the U.S. and Turkish armies reengage in collaborative policy development. Such steps might also reestablish rapport among ranking military personnel, the basis of good ties in the past.

Make Turkey a Partner in Iraq

For the United States and Turkey to move ahead together in Iraq, the two countries will eventually have to cooperate on nonmilitary matters as well. In that case, it would be helpful for Turkey to be able to participate in planning at the CPA headquarters in Baghdad. (Turkey, which has been involved in northern Iraq for almost two decades due to its struggle against the PKK, probably knows the area better than any other country. In this regard, Turkish input on northern Iraq, including Iranian penetration there, would be a valuable asset.)

Washington has already responded positively to parts of Turkey's June 17 offer to help rebuild Iraq. As the reconstruction becomes an urgent matter, it might help if Washington increased Turkey's role in that process. Turkey is the largest economy in the Middle East and can act as a direct supplier of urgently needed goods and services to Iraq.

Besides, the improviso business skills of Turkish capitalists (which would facilitate short-term makeshift solutions to Iraq's burgeoning infrastructure problems as grand projects are being developed) could assist in jumpstarting economic normalcy in Iraq. Such assets could help make Turkey a partner in rebuilding Iraqi infrastructure, while paving the way for military and perhaps even political U.S.-Turkish cooperation toward a successful new Iraq. ❖

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