

Starting Over:

U.S.-Turkish Relations in the Post-Iraq War Era

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Articles & Testimony

During the nineties, Turks and Americans found they had become more, not less important to one another than during the Cold War, and declared themselves "strategic partners." The meaning of that phrase was changing even before George Bush decided to go to war with Iraq. But the President's decision accelerated the process and raised the stakes.

The Iraq war is a watershed in U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey will remain a key country for Washington. But the partnership will inevitably involve a new agenda based on post-war realities. Sets of issues likely to figure prominently on that agenda include: the shape of post-Saddam Iraq; the future of an American military presence in Turkey; likely future missions for Turkey's armed forces; U.S. reliability as a supplier of military equipment; the interrelationship among Turkey, the EU, NATO and the U.S.; and Turkey's economy.

The war to remove Saddam Hussein has brought to an end what might be termed the "post-Cold War phase" of U.S.-Turkish relations. Now is the time to think about what the "post-Iraq War" phase will look like.

Post-Cold War Dynamics

The end of the Cold War and subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union led in the early nineties to a debate in both the U.S. and Turkey as to whether each country would be as important to the other in the future as during the forty years when Turkey anchored NATO's southern flank. In the absence of a "Soviet threat," problematic issues relating to human rights, Cyprus and the Caucasus became more prominent on Washington's agenda (particularly in Congress), America's traditionally strong military relationship to Turkey was called into question, economic and military assistance programs were reduced and eventually zeroed out, and even cash purchases of arms and equipment became subject to congressional holds. Turks, still absorbing security and economic aftershocks of the first Gulf War, and smarting from the failure of America and Gulf Arab Coalition partners to make good on promises of post-conflict assistance, were disillusioned with their senior NATO ally.

But by the second half of the decade, both Turkey and the United States had reached the conclusion that each would, in fact, be more important to the other than in the past. As they surveyed the messier world of the nineties, the U.S. and Turkey found more common ground than many in either country had anticipated.

From an economic perspective, Turgut Ozal's reforms had set the Turkish economy on a path of rapid (if erratic) economic growth, creating attractive opportunities for trade and investment. The U.S. Department of Commerce declared Turkey one of ten "Big Emerging Markets" and U.S. firms flocked to Turkey to get a piece of the action in rapidly growing sectors like energy production, telecommunications and infrastructure projects. U.S.-Turkish trade volume swelled. The result was to expose a whole new generation of U.S. firms to the Turkish market, expanding Turkey's "commercial constituency" in Washington beyond its traditional core of defense firms.

From a geopolitical perspective, Washington and Ankara repeatedly found themselves with similar or complementary perspectives on emerging challenges and opportunities. In former Yugoslavia, Turkey shared Washington's growing frustration with Europe's inability to end anti-Muslim violence and applauded the Clinton Administration's decision to throw its weight behind solutions. Turkey played a key role in convincing Washington to press for an East-West energy transportation corridor to guarantee the independence of the newly-independent states of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and was later instrumental in lining up local governments behind the concept. Ankara provided constructive support to American diplomatic efforts to broker settlements in conflicts from Nagorno-Karabakh to Hebron.

Washington, for its part, came increasingly to realize the importance of Turkey in grappling with rising trans-national threats: drug trafficking, money laundering, trafficking in human beings ... and terrorism. Washington's unapologetic condemnation of the PKK as a terrorist organization and support for Turkish efforts to bring its leadership to justice contrasted sharply with more "nuanced" views of other major capitals. Vocal U.S. support for Turkey's EU candidacy was appreciated in Ankara, especially after the EU's 1997 Luxembourg summit set back Turkish prospects. And the expansion of Turkish-Israeli ties by the late nineties helped bring American Jewish groups better to appreciate Turkey's strategic importance, neutralizing to some degree the influence of interest groups traditionally hostile to Turkey.

From a security perspective, the military dimension of the relationship proved as important as during the Cold War. Turkish participation in peacekeeping actions in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia demonstrated to Pentagon and White House planners Ankara's capabilities and readiness to shoulder responsibility as a "security producing" nation. In keeping with that role, Turkey sought to modernize its armed forces, consistently showing a strong preference for U.S. weaponry. And in the long-running debate over the European Security and Defense Initiative, Washington and Ankara were more often than not on the same page.

But Iraq presents perhaps the most significant example of U.S.-Turkish strategic convergence during the nineties -- in part because the two sides' views on the subject started out so far apart.

As the (GHW) Bush and, later, Clinton administrations sought to contain Saddam Hussein, keeping him from regaining control of northern Iraq became imperative. Access to Incirlik airbase, whence U.S. aircraft had patrolled the northern "no-fly" zone since 1991, thus became equally imperative. Turkey, on the other hand, viewed the perpetuation of a closed border with Iraq and of de facto Kurdish self-rule as serious liabilities in economic and security terms.

The importance Washington attached to Incirlik is reflected in the extent to which the U.S. was ultimately prepared to give Turkey a free hand in the north to address these concerns. After the mid-nineties, the border was essentially open to trade in non-strategic goods (which Turkey does appear to have monitored closely), and Turkish forces made repeated incursions into, and later established contingents permanently, inside northern Iraq to deal with PKK terrorists. The result by the late nineties was a stable modus vivendi in which the basic requirements of America, the Turks, and even the Iraqi Kurds were being met.

Strategic Partnership

The broad-gauged multiplication and convergence of interests described above had by the late nineties qualitatively transformed U.S.- Turkish relations. A relationship that had for decades been one-dimensional and based on NATO security commitments had become multifaceted and dynamic. A relationship that had been the whipping boy of single-interest groups enjoyed the support of a diverse, growing and influential constituency in Washington. Perennially problematic issues like human rights, Cyprus and Turkey's relations with Greece and Armenia remained on the agenda. But the new breadth and depth of the relationship allowed them to be discussed in non-zero sum terms, and strengthened advocates in Ankara of innovative approaches.

Formal recognition that the relationship had reached a new level of maturity came with Bill Clinton's November 1999 visit to Turkey. To prolonged, repeated applause from Turkey's Parliament, President Clinton declared the U.S. and Turkey to be "strategic partners," a term applied at the time to a very few close allies of the U.S., notably Israel.

"Strategic partnership" soon proved to be more than just empty rhetoric.

- In February, 2001, following a catastrophic financial meltdown, the new Bush administration supported an IMF program that kept Turkey afloat and set it on the path to structural reform and recovery. Turkey's strategic importance was widely viewed as the key factor in overcoming the administration's initial bias against such "bail-outs."

- In September, 2001, just hours after Al Qaeda attacks on New York and the Pentagon, Bulent Ecevit made Turkey the first Muslim nation to express its unqualified support for America's response. He would later offer to send Turkish combat troops to Afghanistan, if needed (despite polls showing significant public opposition to such a move). A year later, Turkey assumed command of the International Security and Assistance Force.

Both Turkey and the U.S. in 2001 experienced nightmare events that would mark each forever. In both cases, their strategic partner provided welcome support when the need was greatest.

Shifting Foundations

Below the surface, however, some key assumptions on which the notion of broad-gauged U.S.-Turkish strategic partnership rested were already changing.

This was most dramatically the case in the economic sphere. Even before Turkey's financial meltdown, U.S. interest in the Turkish market ebbed as growth in both countries slowed, the global economy contracted, privatization lagged, and high-profile commercial disputes gave investors pause. Attempts to revive trade and investment, notably the January 2002 announcement that duty-free Qualified Industrial Zones would be established in Turkey, generated little enthusiasm on either side. Despite the impressive progress Turkey was making in carrying out structural reforms, American businessmen and investors were either moving to the sidelines, or remaining there.

A different dynamic was at work with respect to energy transportation, a sector which had been a major focus of U.S.-Turkish cooperation and interaction throughout the nineties. Signature projects like the Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan pipeline finally broke ground and simply did not need the kind of official prodding that had been necessary at an earlier stage. Turkey's energy requirements were revised steadily downward as its economy contracted, and newly opened pipelines from Russian and Iran promised to meet its gas demand for years to come. At the official level, issues that had routinely been handled at the head-of-state and government level devolved to lower echelons of the bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, negotiations for major new purchases of American military equipment (notably AWACS and anti-armor helicopter systems) that had begun in 2000 dragged on with no clear prospect of conclusion. By the fall of 2002, these delays had tempered the enthusiasm even of American defense contractors, traditionally Turkey's most ardent advocates outside of government.

On the Turkish side, concerns arose over the new Bush administration's perceived unilateralist tendencies and (apparently inadvertent) snubs such as leaving Turkey off Secretary of State Powell's first official trip abroad ... to discuss Iraq. Frustration over American inflexibility on market access issues meanwhile fueled criticism that the partnership lacked an economic dimension responsive to Turkey's needs.

Thus, by the time the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials "AK") swept to power in late 2002, attitudes and perceptions on both sides of the relationship had shifted in subtle but important ways. Some, including this author, were already pointing to the need for a redefinition of the concept of "strategic partnership" to ensure it would continue to be meaningful to constituencies on both sides.

Iraq

The Bush Administration's decision to go to war with Iraq accelerated the shift in perceptions of "strategic partnership," and dramatically raised the stakes involved. Even before the Turkish Parliament's March 1 "no" vote on a resolution authorizing U.S. forces to stage in Turkey, strong and mounting opposition to war there suggested the U.S. was testing the outer limits of "strategic cooperation."

Those limits were breached when Parliament on March 1 failed to approve a government-backed "motion" to permit deployment. While the significance of the vote and the factors responsible for it will be debated for decades, the facts at the end of the day were as stark as they were clear:

- On an issue of paramount importance to the President of the United States, Turkey had said, "no."
- On a set of issues affecting Turkey's paramount national interests, the Turkish Parliament had not trusted the intentions or assurances of its "strategic partner."

This is not the place to analyze whether such a result was avoidable, nor to assign blame. Mistakes were made, and opportunities lost, on both sides. What is indisputable is that U.S.-Turkish "strategic partnership," to the extent it still meant anything at all, meant something quite different on the evening of March 1 than it had that morning.

Parliament's decision had a profound impact on a number of levels:

- At the personal level, an American administration which, from the President down, had been unusually pro-Turkish in its instincts and orientation, suffered a bitter defeat. Washington reacted with public restraint, but media accounts suggested deep personal anger and resentment over the reverse. On the Turkish side, statements by Prime Minister Gul and other leaders betrayed frustration that U.S. officials had not understood the difficulties AK faced in seeking Parliament's approval.
- At the diplomatic level, coming just as the American-British-Spanish diplomatic end-game was getting underway at the UN Security Council, the "no" vote gave encouragement to Council members lobbying against a new authorizing resolution and made more difficult the Bush Administration's task of winning over undecided members. This reinforced perceptions in America that Turkey had left its strategic partner in the lurch. Delays in scheduling a second vote deepened those perceptions.
- At the operational level, the need to plan alternatives to a northern front in Turkey forced U.S. military planners to go back to the drawing board at a time when they had hoped to be putting finishing touches on war planning. Experts speculated the result could be additional U.S. and civilian casualties. Parliament's "no" meanwhile left Turkey's armed forces without an agreed framework for dealing with developments in northern Iraq (no doubt an important factor in Gen. Hilmi Ozkok's subsequent public call for a review of the March 1 decision).
- At the economic level, the March 1 decision left Turkey with no safety net for coping with the economic consequences of war, and hardened Congressional attitudes toward doing anything positive for Turkey. This, in turn, reinforced Turkish concerns that Congress would not come through on Administration aid promises, even if

Parliament turned its decision around.

- Finally, at the popular level, the "no," and subsequent reports of efforts to "sweeten" the deal, reinforced negative media images of Turks and Turkish diplomacy that had been fueled in preceding weeks by leaked suggestions that Turkey was holding out for unreasonable levels of aid in return for its support. In Turkey, meanwhile, resentment over perceived American strong-arm tactics and arrogance revived anti-U.S. stereotypes and images last seen during the Cold War.

These factors will be significant burdens to overcome as the U.S. and Turkey now turn to the question of building a relationship that will serve their separate and common interests in the months and years ahead.

Toward a New U.S.-Turkish Agenda

There is no question that such an effort must and will be made.

Once the emotions of the current moment are behind us, the United States will find that Turkey remains important for many of the same reasons that it has been important to America for 60 years and more. Size, location and demographics alone will ensure Turkey a place among that restricted club of "key countries" to which Washington will always have to pay attention. Turkey's Muslim character, and the important experiment its new government represents in the post-September 11 world, will only reinforce its significance. It is hard, by the same token, to imagine any advantage that would accrue to Turkey by allowing to fester relationships with Washington that have been strained by the debate over Iraq.

The Iraq experience, in short, may have as a silver lining a clearer awareness in both Ankara and Washington that neither side can take the other for granted, and that each needs to make a more systematic effort to understand and be responsive to the needs of the other. That implies a post-Iraq U.S.-Turkish agenda that is different in important ways from the one on which classical "strategic partnership" was based. It is too early to define that agenda with precision at this juncture, much less prescribe how it should be pursued. But it is possible to identify issues that will shape it.

Iraq is the place to start, since both countries' most vital interests are so deeply engaged there, and can be profoundly affected by how the story ends. Some "now" issues:

- What will be the relative importance Washington attaches to Turkey and groups inside Iraq (i.e., the Kurds) when the objective is not going to war, but rebuilding Iraq? One can speculate that the picture will look different once the U.S. is inside Iraq, trying to make it work, than it does today. Iraq's federal structure and the status of the Turkomen are clearly bellwether issues.
- To what extent will Turkey's value as a unique "paradigm" (Muslim, democratic, secular, etc.) be affected by the appearance in Iraq of an Arab state with (if some Bush Administration spokesmen are to be credited) many of the same attributes?
- What measures will be taken to maximize the opportunities for the Turkish private sector to redress its decade-long losses by participating fully in the rebuilding of Iraq? When will sanctions be lifted? Will liberal tendering procedures (e.g., as in Afghanistan) enable Turkish firms to take best advantage of their contiguity and familiarity with Iraqi markets?

Second, the outcome of the war in Iraq will inevitably affect what has been the traditional core of U.S.-Turkish relations, the defense partnership. Some salient questions:

- Will U.S. forces remain in Turkey? Turks have not fully appreciated the leverage they have enjoyed in Washington since 1990 as a function of Incirlik's importance to U.S. Iraq policy. Given other challenges facing the Bush Administration post-Saddam, and with large numbers of U.S. military assets in Iraq itself, it is hard to imagine a

justification for keeping significant U.S. forces in Turkey for very long once Saddam is gone.

- Given current attitudes in Parliament, what roles might Turkey undertake in connection with an ongoing war against terrorism (e.g., in Syria) or with regional proliferation of weapons of mass destructions (e.g., in Iran)? Will Turkey remain prepared even to shoulder the kinds of peacekeeping or outright military burdens previous Turkish governments have in places like Afghanistan, Georgia, Somalia or Hebron?
- What role will the U.S. play in promoting the capabilities of Turkey's military? If resources can be found for potentially controversial weapons sales (e.g., the Bell KingCobra), will negative fallout from the March 2 vote produce Congressional holds of the sort experienced in the mid-nineties?
- What lessons has Turkey (and America) drawn from NATO's difficulty in responding to Turkey's request for the deployment of defensive systems in advance of possible war with Iraq? What are the implications for both countries' approach to future debate on European Security architecture?

Third, the road to war in Iraq has opened up some fundamental diplomatic choices for both the U.S. and Turkey. They include:

- How has Turkey's European vocation been affected by France and Germany's dismissive attitude toward new and candidate countries during the Iraq debate, to say nothing of the collapse of the UN-led Cyprus talks? To what extent can and should the U.S. in the future seek to promote Turkey's candidacy, given strains that have opened up between "old Europe" and the Bush Administration?
- To what extent will American Middle East policy post-Saddam (whatever it may be!) mesh with the AK government's own approach? While one can expect basic continuity in terms of Ankara's assessment of its interests, AK's roots and its opening moves in the region suggest differences of emphasis that could be significant over time, and possibly lead to daylight between Ankara and both Washington and Jerusalem.

Finally, the impact on Turkey's economy of regime change in Iraq will determine the extent to which economic and trade issues become an asset or liability in the next phase of U.S.-Turkish relations.

- Assuming that Turkey can absorb the initial shock of war, will the performance of Erdogan's government generate the market confidence that will be critical to resumption of long-term growth? This, of course, will in the first instance be a function of perceived fidelity to Turkey's IMF commitments.
- In a best case scenario that sees Turkey growing again next fall and on track to meet inflation and other targets, will foreign investors finally overcome their skittishness and open the spigots of direct foreign investment?
- What steps will or should the U.S. take to attenuate the negative impact on Turkish textile imports to the United States of the WTO phase-out of quotas in 2005? Is there any scope for providing Turkey market access that could help grow its economy out of its current fragile state?
- Should Turkey under-perform in the year ahead, will the U.S. be prepared to support further multilateral financial aid to meet financing gaps caused in part by the war?

Hard questions all. But questions that can't be avoided if a sound foundation is to be laid for the next phase of U.S.-Turkish relations. The prerequisite for handling them successfully will be to reestablish the reservoirs of trust and mutual accommodation, and the means of effective communication, that have enabled Turks and Americans to meet so successfully the challenges we have faced together over more than sixty years of friendship and alliance. As a starting point, leaders on both sides can have no higher priority than that. ❖

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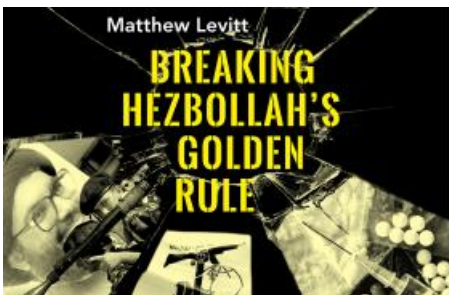
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