

Whither U.S.-Turkish Relations?

A Turkish Perspective

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Brief Analysis

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Turkish-American relations have experienced many crises in the past. Relations were tense during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 (when the United States withdrew missiles from Turkey) and when Washington imposed an embargo on arms supplies to Turkey in 1974 after Ankara's military intervention in Cyprus. Nevertheless, U.S. and Turkish policymakers were quick to overcome these crises.

Several factors explain the current crisis. First, the Turkish public opposed war in Iraq. Second, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which holds an almost two-thirds majority in the Turkish parliament, is primarily composed of people who have not previously held elected office. The new government was not able to come up with a policy that disagreed with what it saw as a U.S. preemptive strike against Iraq while at the same time maintaining good relations with Washington. By initiating a peace track with Arab countries and aiming to resolve the Iraq crisis diplomatically, AKP overestimated Turkey's role, mistakenly thinking that it could change U.S. policy regarding Iraq. Moreover, the fact that the United States was serious about going to war did not become fully apparent in Ankara until the last minute because Washington kept extending the deadlines for reaching an agreement, contributing to the impression that Turkey had leverage and further bargaining space.

The 1991 Gulf War provides a good comparison to the present situation. During that crisis, Prime Minister Turgut Ozal sent a motion to parliament, which the legislature amended, barring Ankara from sending troops abroad or letting foreign troops into the country unless Turkey was attacked. When Ozal called for Turkish troops to be sent into Iraq along with the U.S.-led coalition, Chief of Staff Gen. Necip Torumtay resigned, and no Turkish forces were deployed to Iraq during the war.

Past legacies might help explain Turkish hesitancy to play a strategic role in Iraq. Turkey has historically subscribed to the motto of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic: "Peace at home, peace abroad." But it will be difficult for Ankara to insist on a policy of goodwill to all; the risk is that Turkey could end up having little influence and becoming more inward looking.

EMRE GONENSAY

Over the past few months, Ankara may have missed an opportunity to emerge as a leading country on the international stage. On the surface, U.S. and Turkish interests and objectives regarding Iraq seem to converge: the disarmament of Saddam Husayn, the demilitarization of Iraq, and regime change in Baghdad. As Iraq's neighbor, however, Turkey has many abiding interests that may not be shared by the United States, which can disengage from the region whenever it wishes.

Several factors, both deep-seated and transient, can help explain the Turkish parliament's failure to authorize the deployment of U.S. troops. Religion is one of the deep-seated factors. Many of the former Islamists in AKP oppose war against Muslim countries. The irony is that the Ottoman Empire, a Muslim state, fought several wars against

other Muslim states. Another longstanding factor is political opportunism. Opposition parties are always in disagreement with the ruling government, no matter what is at stake. The present Turkish opposition, the Republican Peoples' Party (CHP), has been no different in that sense, opposing the AKP's calls for joint action with the United States.

The temporary factors behind the parliamentary motion's failure include the fact that the outgoing prime minister, Abdullah Gul, never spelled out the common interests that Turkey and the United States had in going to war with Iraq. On the contrary, Gul always spoke of peace, and the AKP government failed to shape public opinion. Hence, most Turks were not informed about Turkey's interests in pursuing an alliance with the United States in Iraq, creating a widely shared belief that an invasion was not in Turkey's interests and that Ankara could even prevent war if it put forth sufficient opposition. Moreover, Article 92 of the Turkish constitution states that Turkey can declare war only if it has the backing of international law. Therefore, sending Turkish troops abroad or deploying foreign troops in Turkey is possible only if authorized by international bodies such as the UN or NATO. This portion of the constitution needs to be revisited, because it significantly detracts from the power of the Turkish parliament.

There are further challenges ahead for Turkey. First of all, the government has seen the price of not cooperating with Washington: Turkish financial markets have reacted negatively to parliament's decision. For example, after the failure of the first motion regarding U.S. troop deployment, the Turkish lira and stock market fell significantly. If Saddam's regime does not collapse within the next week or two, the United States might once again pressure Turkey for a northern front. Another Turkish refusal could have further negative economic effects, whereas cooperation -- and subsequent U.S. aid measures -- could have a positive impact.

Turkey's vision of Iraq needs to be revisited as well. Ankara has been suggesting a unitary parliamentary democracy for post-Saddam Iraq. This is not a viable solution, however, and it could lead to a political meltdown in Iraq over the long term, which would be harmful to Turkey's interests. A more viable solution would be a federation based on geographical rather than ethnic divisions, with limited autonomy for each area.

The U.S.-Turkish friendship will survive the events of the past few weeks. Despite all the current bad feeling, Ankara and Washington must still work together militarily and politically. The Middle East is already in a very fragile state because of the longstanding conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. In order to prevent further degradation in the region's political conditions, U.S.-Turkish cooperation is essential, particularly for the post-Saddam task of building secular, democratic, and peaceful governments in the Middle East and promoting societies with Western values.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ayca Ariyoruk.

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