

## Starting Over:

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

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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#### Brief Analysis

**A**s demonstrated by President George W. Bush's request to Congress yesterday to provide Turkey with \$1 billion in aid -- money that can be leveraged into \$8 billion in loan guarantees -- Turkey will remain a key country for Washington. But the Iraq war is a watershed in U.S.-Turkish relations, and the partnership will inevitably involve a new agenda based on postwar realities.

#### Strategic Partnership

In the 1990s, both the United States 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) growth, creating attractive opportunities for trade and investment. From a geopolitical perspective, Washington and Ankara repeatedly found themselves with similar or complementary perspectives on the former Yugoslavia, an East-West energy transportation corridor, the struggle against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Turkey's European Union candidacy, and the expansion of Turkish-Israeli ties. From a security perspective, Turkish participation in peacekeeping actions in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia demonstrated to Washington Ankara's capabilities and readiness to shoulder responsibility as a "security producing" nation. Despite differences of perspective, Turkey and the United States cooperated to create a mutually satisfactory status quo in northern Iraq.

Formal recognition that the relationship had reached a new level of maturity came with former president Bill Clinton's November 1999 visit to Turkey. To prolonged, repeated applause from Turkey's parliament, President Clinton declared the United States and Turkey to be "strategic partners," a term applied at the time to a very few close allies of the United States, 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 International Monetary Fund (IMF) program that kept Turkey afloat and set it on the path to structural reform and recovery. Later that year, Turkey was the first Muslim state to publicly support America's response to the September 11 attacks.

#### Shifting Foundations

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

partnership rested were changing. 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. In energy transportation, the signature Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline finally broke ground and did not need high-level attention. Meanwhile, negotiations for major new purchases of U.S. military equipment (notably AWACs and anti-armor helicopter systems) dragged on with no clear prospect of conclusion. By the time the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials AKP) swept to power in late 2002, attitudes and perceptions on both sides of the relationship had shifted in subtle but important ways.

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 United States was testing the outer limits of "strategic cooperation."

Parliament's decision had a profound impact. A U.S. administration which, from the president down, had been unusually pro-Turkish in its instincts and orientation, suffered a bitter defeat. Turkey's parliament had not, when the chips were down, trusted the intentions of assurances of its "strategic partner." To the extent it still meant anything at all, "strategic partnership" meant something different on the evening of March 1 than it had that morning. The subsequent decision to allow overflights has not materially changed that fact.

Washington has reacted with public restraint, but media accounts suggest deep personal anger over the reverse. At the popular level, the "no," and subsequent reports of efforts to sweeten the deal, reinforced negative 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. On the Turkish side, statements by then-prime minister Abdullah Gul and other leaders betrayed frustration that U.S. officials had not understood the difficulties AKP faced in seeking parliament's approval. Resentment over perceived U.S. strong-arm tactics and arrogance revived anti-U.S. stereotypes and images last seen during the Cold War.

#### Toward a New U.S.-Turkish Agenda

Size, location, and demographics alone will ensure Turkey a place among those key countries that Washington cannot afford to ignore. Turkey, for its part, has no incentive to let the relationship fester. The Iraq experience may create a greater 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 the needs of the other. That implies a post-Iraq war agenda different from that of classical "strategic partnership." It is too early to define that agenda with precision, 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. What will be the relative importance Washington attaches to Turkey and groups inside Iraq (i.e., the Kurds) when it comes to rebuilding Iraq? To what extent will Turkey's value as a unique "paradigm" (Muslim, democratic, and secular) 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?

Second, the outcome of the war in Iraq will inevitably affect defense relations. What will happen to Incirlik? With large numbers of U.S. military assets in Iraq itself, why keep significant U.S. forces in Turkey once Saddam Husayn is gone? Given current attitudes in parliament, it is also not clear what roles Turkey might undertake in connection with an ongoing war against terrorism (e.g., in Syria) or with regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (e.g., in Iran). And Turkey (and the United States) need to draw lessons from NATO's difficulty in responding to Turkey's request for deployment of defensive systems.

Third, the road to war in Iraq has opened up some fundamental diplomatic choices for both the United States and Turkey. 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 will U.S. Middle East policy post-Saddam mesh with the AKP government's own approach?

Finally, the economic impact of regime change in Iraq will determine the extent to which economic issues become an asset or liability. Assuming that Turkey can absorb the initial shock of war, will the AKP government's performance generate the market confidence needed for resumption of long-term growth? This will be a function of perceived fidelity to Turkey's IMF commitments. Should Turkey underperform in the year ahead, will the United States be prepared to support further multilateral financial aid to meet financing gaps caused in part by the war? Hard questions all. A prerequisite for handling them successfully will be to reestablish reservoirs of trust and mutual accommodation, and means of effective communication.

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