

An Accident on the Road to U.S.-Turkish Cooperation in Iraq: Implications for Turkey

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.



Brief Analysis

In a dramatic session yesterday, the Turkish parliament convened to consider a motion sent by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which had requested that a large U.S. force be permitted to use Turkish soil as a staging ground for a possible campaign in Iraq. The legislature refused to authorize the motion, however, blocking the creation of a northern front in the looming war. Of the 533 deputies in session, 264 voted for the motion, 250 voted against it, and 19 abstained, bringing the motion only three votes shy of the majority required by the constitution. AKP assurances that only 30 to 40 of its delegates would object to the motion crashed to a halt over the course of the session, with 99 of the party's deputies voting nay. Although the democratic will of the Turkish parliament should be respected, the fact remains that the AKP government failed to pass its agenda through the legislature. Some analysts argue that this spells trouble for both Turkey and AKP, with others speculating that U.S.-Turkish relations are now at a historical threshold.

The Markets React: Gloomy Days for the Turkish Economy?

Turkish markets have already interpreted the government's failure to pass the motion through parliament as a no-confidence vote. At closing time today, the stock market in Istanbul had tumbled by more than 12 percent, with interest rates increasing by 5 percent and the Lira devaluing around 3 percent. Only after the government declared that it would implement a measures package did the markets stabilize.

Even with such measures, the motion's failure is bad news. An Iraq war would likely result in significant damage to the Turkish economy, causing losses of \$8 to 12 billion according to low estimates and perhaps as much as \$50 billion according to high estimates. Moreover, without an agreement on U.S. troop deployment, Turkey will not receive financial compensation from Washington to cover its losses during a war -- losses that will occur whether or not Ankara supports the U.S. campaign. Thus, today's downturn in the Turkish markets could be a precursor to a severe economic crisis once war breaks out. The Turkish economy is hardly in good health, having just recovered from its worst slump since World War II. Indeed, hours before a March 1 parliamentary meeting, AKP chair Tayyip Erdogan told the party's deputies: "Today, Turkey is able to pay its debts only through further borrowing. . . . [P]eople who are against the war will forget this if their paychecks are delayed by three days."

Divisions in AKP Crystallize

As forecast in previous PolicyWatch articles (Soner Cagaptay, "Why Are the Turks Hesitating on Iraq?" PolicyWatch no. 704, January 27, 2003; and Soner Cagaptay and Mark Parris, "Special Policy Forum Report: Turkey's Stakes in Iraq," PolicyWatch no. 716, February 28, 2003), two camps seem to be emerging within AKP: the idealists and the realists. The party is undergoing a transformation process whereby the responsibilities of government are undermining its pre-election idealism.

In this regard, the Iraq issue has been a real litmus test for AKP, with the idealists opposing war even as the realist block, led by Erdogan and Prime Minister Abdullah Gul, advocate cooperation with Washington. Over the past few weeks, Bulent Arinc, the Speaker of the parliament and a vocal opponent to war, has emerged as a leading figure in the idealist camp, which rallied ninety-nine AKP deputies to block the government's motion. Some analysts argue that the idealist camp may have even more deputies in its ranks. For example, during the vote to choose the parliament's speaker on November 20, 2002, Arinc mustered overwhelming support among AKP deputies despite the fact that Erdogan had supported the candidacy of Vecdi Gonul, the current minister of defense and a figure with apparently stronger secularist credentials. Hence, yesterday's vote may have been a showdown of sorts between Arinc, on the one hand, and Gul and Erdogan, on the other, demonstrating that the idealist camp is now willing to oppose the pragmatic policies of the party leaders.

A Test for Erdogan

The government has already indicated that it might send a second motion to the parliament regarding the deployment of American troops. At this stage, it is likely that Erdogan and Gul would do so only if they firmly believed that the motion would pass, since they would prefer to spare themselves and AKP a great embarrassment. Some analysts expect that Erdogan will work hard during the coming days to convince those deputies who voted against the first motion to come out in favor of a second motion.

Indeed, this situation will pose a serious test to Erdogan's leadership. He was unable to take office as prime minister immediately after the November 3, 2002, elections because he had been temporarily barred from serving in the parliament. On March 9, however, he will run in by-elections in order to join the legislature, after which he is expected to become prime minister. Hence, the Iraq crisis has become the test case for Erdogan's hold on his party even as he stands at the brink of becoming Turkey's chief executive.

Relations with the United States: What Next?

One could argue that, one way or another, U.S.-Turkish military cooperation against Iraq will continue. Each day, for example, U.S. warplanes fly regular missions out of the Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey into northern Iraq. The question, then, is whether Ankara will agree to further cooperation with Washington, deepening its commitment to the effort to re-create Iraq.

Whatever the country's internal dynamics, if Turkey refused to offer full support to a U.S.-led campaign in Iraq, it could get sidelined in Iraq's postwar political reconstruction, in addition to suffering the previously mentioned economic blows. For instance, Ankara would not be in a position to influence policy on issues related to northern Iraq, including the disposition of the region's autonomous Kurdish zones, the welfare of the Turcoman minority, and the fate of oil-rich cities such as Kirkuk. Hence, if the United States decided to open a northern front in Iraq without Turkey (however cumbersome and costly such an operation might be) by, for example, heavily arming the Iraqi Kurds, Ankara and Washington could find themselves at loggerheads regarding postwar developments in northern Iraq.

Ankara's unwillingness to support a northern front could even chip away at the very foundations of the U.S.-Turkish partnership. Indeed, what happens in Ankara during the coming weeks might prove as significant as three other

watersheds in U.S.-Turkish relations: 1948-49, when Turkish president Ismet Inonu and President Harry Truman agreed that Turkey should take its place among Western nations; 1974, when Washington imposed a debilitating embargo on Turkey following the latter's deployment of forces into Cyprus; and 1991-92, when U.S.-Turkish relations soared with the prospects of Ankara's full support for Operation Desert Storm. Alternatively, if both Washington and Ankara take the appropriate steps, yesterday's mishap could become just a bump on the road toward U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Iraq.

◆ Soner Cagaptay is a Soref fellow and coordinator of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

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