

Turkey's Stakes in Iraq

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay), [Mark Parris \(/experts/mark-parris\)](/experts/mark-parris)

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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.

[Mark Parris \(/experts/mark-parris\)](/experts/mark-parris)

Mark Parris was United States ambassador to Turkey from 1997 to 2000. He has also served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Israel and political counselor at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. During the Clinton administration, he was special assistant to the president and senior director



Brief Analysis

Turkey's parliament will soon vote on whether to allow U.S. forces to use Turkish soil as a staging ground for a possible war with Iraq. Since Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz's trip to Ankara in early December 2002, Turkey and the United States have engaged in a protracted dialogue about Ankara's stance toward potential U.S. military action. Why has Turkey been hesitant to support Washington's plans, and how might such vacillation affect the U.S.-Turkish strategic alliance in the future?

SONER CAGAPTAY

Despite what has been reported in the press, money is not the only divisive issue in U.S.-Turkish discussions regarding Iraq. Ankara is also concerned about what will happen in northern Iraq after a war. The coalition-protected Kurdish area created there after the Gulf War bifurcated into two feuding cantons in the early 1990s. This resulted in a political vacuum that the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) took advantage of in order to launch many brutal attacks in Turkey. Thus, northern Iraq has been the source of much headache for Turkey. In some ways, the area represents for the Turks what southern Lebanon does for the Israelis. Ankara is concerned that the current situation will continue after a war in Iraq or, worse yet, that a Kurdish state will be created in northern Iraq, which Turkey would consider a *casus belli*.

Further complicating the issue is the Turkoman community in northern Iraq, a Turkish-speaking group related to the Turks of Anatolia. The Turkomans constitute 5 to 10 percent of Iraq's population of 23 million, and most of them live in the cities of northern Iraq, especially Kirkuk. Because Kirkuk is near northern Iraq's largest oil fields, Ankara fears that various Kurdish factions covet the city as part of their aspirations toward statehood and may attempt to capture it in the event of a U.S.-led war in Iraq. Turkey is concerned that such a scenario could result in persecution of the Turkomans, for whose welfare the Turks feel deeply responsible. Hence, Ankara has sought reassurance from Washington regarding these issues.

Indeed, Turkey and the United States seem to have moved closer to each other's positions on northern Iraq. Still,

why have the negotiations on Iraq in general lasted so long? One reason is the relative inexperience of the Turkish government; most of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) cadres have little or no experience in governance. There may also be trouble within AKP itself. The party has had a difficult time getting the parliament to vote on the matter of U.S. troop deployments, as required by the constitution. When an idealist party comes to power in a democracy, it risks splitting into realist and idealist camps, as happened to the German Greens during the 1990s. AKP's handling of the Iraq issue demonstrates that such a fault line may be forming within the party. The realist faction, represented by many officials throughout the government, wishes to devise policies that serve Turkey's interests. In contrast, the idealist faction, which is especially strong in the parliament, holds to the principle that Turkey should not cooperate in an attack on a Muslim country.

MARK PARRIS

If the United States proceeds with its plans for regime change in Iraq, Turkey would be well served by providing full support to these efforts. After all, such efforts would bring an end to an Iraqi regime that: has cost Turkey tens of billions of dollars; supported the PKK; sought weapons of mass destruction that can threaten much of Turkey; and caused numerous regional crises that have profoundly hurt Turkey's tourist industry.

Washington hopes to shorten the military phase of its campaign for regime change, which would minimize civilian casualties and disruption to Iraq's civil and petrochemical infrastructure. Turkey's agreement to a northern front is essential to this outcome.

Given the short-term threat that a war next door would pose to Turkey's economy, the United States must ensure the stability of financial markets during hostilities so as to minimize Turkey's need for additional financing during the crisis. Following a war, Turkey would stand to benefit from the economic recovery of Iraq, which was once Turkey's principal trading partner.

Inside a liberated Iraq, Turkey and the United States would work toward a common agenda: preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity; full respect for the rights of all ethnic groups, including the Turkomans; and development of Iraq's oil resources for the benefit of all Iraqis. To achieve these goals, U.S. and Turkish forces should collaborate in northern Iraq. Together, they could manage refugee movements and create an effective liaison with the Iraqi Kurdish factions, so as to avoid Turkish-Kurdish clashes. Toward these ends, U.S. forces should establish firm control over Kirkuk and Mosul.

By cooperating on Iraq, Turkey would also affirm its status as a close ally of the United States. Precisely because Turkey is seen as an important friend, Washington has listened closely to Ankara's concerns, and the Turks have been very effective in influencing Washington's approach to the issues of Kirkuk and the Turkomans. Nevertheless, the U.S. vision of regime change in Iraq is deeply mistrusted in Turkey. Indeed, as a result of several factors, the debate over Iraq has produced a breathtaking degeneration in the tone and substance of dialogue between the two countries since early December 2002. First and foremost, Washington was late in initiating discussion on Iraq. Second, Washington surprised Ankara by asking that an unexpectedly large number of ground forces be permitted in Turkey, which led to a misperception that the United States was seeking the long-term stationing of numerous forces on Turkish soil. Third, Washington wrongly presumed that Turkey would support any U.S. plan, since such support had been unwavering in the past. By relying on such an assumption, Washington underestimated the uniqueness of the Iraq issue in Turkey's political consciousness and the challenges that the new government would face in handling it. Finally, Washington has not been sufficiently transparent during discussions of the Kurdish issue.

The Islamic background of the AKP government has also affected negotiations with Washington. The Turkish public's stand against U.S. war plans is based in part on a desire to avoid joining a grand coalition that is Christian-

led and supported by Israel. Nevertheless, pragmatism will eventually dictate how the United States and Turkey view each other, and they will not jeopardize their long-term strategic alliance. The Turkish parliament will probably approve a northern front in Iraq, if only because the consequences of being excluded from U.S. efforts to reshape Iraq would be enormous.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ayca Ariyoruk.

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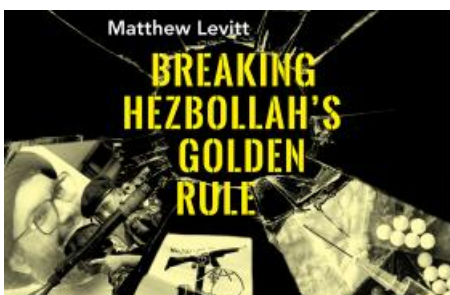
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