

Why Are the Turks Hesitating on Iraq?

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Brief Analysis

On January 25, Secretary of State Colin Powell met Turkish prime minister Abdullah Gul and the chair of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), Tayyip Erdogan, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Powell's meeting -- which followed a January 19 visit to Turkey by General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and a December 6 visit by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz -- was aimed at persuading Ankara to allow American troops entry into Turkey in order to prepare a northern front against Iraq. After nearly two months of negotiations, the Turkish government still appears undecided on this issue. Why are the Turks hesitant to cooperate with U.S. military plans, and how can Washington overcome Ankara's indecision? Recent developments in Turkey may help answer both of these questions.

Why Is Turkey Undecided?

The Turks are cautious about a war in Iraq for several reasons:

The overloaded Turkish political agenda has left little room for the Iraq issue. Over the past year, much of Turkey's energy has been devoted to European Union accession, national elections, and an economic crisis. Accordingly, 2002 saw little public discussion in Turkey regarding war in Iraq, despite the vigorous debate being waged on the subject in the United States. In fact, the Iraq issue first appeared on the front pages of Turkish newspapers and on primetime television news programs only six weeks ago, during Wolfowitz's visit. Because the debate is so new to them, most Turks do not see why a war against Iraq is necessary or why Turkey should take part in it.

Most Turks harbor suspicions toward any foreign military presence, taking pride in the fact that they have never been subjugated by outsiders. Accordingly, much of Turkey -- particularly the army -- is uncomfortable with the idea of allowing even allied troops on Turkish soil. Turkey's history of confrontation with Europe, including a post-World War I conflict with England over northern Iraq, has made Ankara especially uncomfortable with the prospect of permitting European forces to use Turkey as a staging ground against Iraq. The Turks are better disposed toward U.S. forces. Turkey and the United States have never fought each other, and Turkey has hosted an American military presence -- a few thousand troops on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bases -- since the beginning of the Cold War. Yet, a new campaign in Iraq would require a far larger deployment of U.S. soldiers to Turkey, many of whom would have to be stationed outside NATO bases.

Many Turks do not feel that Saddam Husayn is a menace to their country. Saddam is seen as a crazy neighbor with whom Ankara has managed to live for more than three decades, and who -- despite his tyrannical bent -- would not dare bother Turkey. Even the potential threat from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction has gone largely unnoticed in Turkey.

The Turks are concerned about the potential negative economic impact of war. Since 2001, Turkey has suffered through a serious depression that has left 2 million people unemployed and shrunk the economy by 9.5 percent. In the event of a campaign against Saddam, the Turks could suffer significant financial damage in the loss of tourism and trade revenues, endangering Turkey's fragile economic recovery.

U.S. reassurances have yet to dispel Ankara's concern about the potential emergence of an official Kurdish statelet in postwar Iraq.

Political Obstacles

Ankara's hesitance has been exacerbated by the fact that Turkey is the only democracy among the regional countries from which America has requested help. That is, in determining Turkey's stance toward war in Iraq, the governing AKP must take into account many actors including the opposition, the media, and the president. Moreover, by law, the parliament must approve any deployment of foreign troops on Turkish soil. Although AKP holds two-thirds of the seats in the parliament, the party does not have a unanimous opinion on the Iraq issue. Two distinct factions seem to have emerged within AKP regarding cooperation with U.S. war plans:

Approximately 30 percent of the party's parliamentary deputies constitute a hardline faction, most with roots in the now-defunct Welfare Party. These deputies are guided by distaste for the United States rather than sympathy for Saddam. Accordingly, they could be a significant stumbling block to the government's efforts to authorize the deployment of U.S. troops in Turkey.

AKP's remaining deputies constitute a pragmatic faction led by current prime minister Gul and AKP chair Erdogan, who is expected to take over as prime minister in mid-March. So far, this faction has guided the Turkish government through a two-pronged policy on Iraq. On the one hand, Ankara has negotiated with Washington, asking for guarantees regarding the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity and attempting to secure financial benefits in return for Turkey's participation in a war. On the other hand, Ankara has advanced a so-far unproductive peace track with Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Gul visited all of these countries between January 4 and 12, and representatives from each met in Istanbul on January 23, later issuing a communique warning Saddam to comply with UN arms inspectors.

Traditionally, Turkey's key national security decisions have been made by the country's National Security Council, which was long controlled by the Turkish General Staff. Due to recent political reforms, however, the army no longer holds the majority of the council's seats. Moreover, the Turkish military seems as diffident as the government about the Iraq issue.

Overcoming Turkey's Indecision

Several measures that would help Turkey reach a decision sooner rather than later would include:

A reduction in the size of U.S. forces. On December 6, Washington proposed to deploy as many as 80,000 troops to Turkey, a majority of them army units. After General Myers's trip -- in response to Turkish sensitivities -- it seems that the proposed size and composition of forces scheduled for deployment to Turkey could decrease to around 15,000 troops, a majority of which would belong to special forces and air force units.

Economic aid. Washington has promised Ankara financial aid -- as much as \$18 billion -- in order to address a portion of Turkish losses in the case of war; \$14 billion of that amount would consist of low-interest loans to be paid

over the long term, and \$4 billion would take the form of donations. Washington could also consider reintroducing the Turkish Qualified Industrial Zone (QIZ) bill that was stalled on the House floor last year -- this time, free of the restrictions that limited the bill's scope. The QIZs currently implemented in Jordan and Israel enable these countries to export goods manufactured in special industrial zones free of tariffs to the United States. A QIZ could help the ailing Turkish economy and boost Turkish-American economic relations (currently, Turkey ranks low at 29 among America's trading partners).

Assurances of support in the event of attack. On January 19, NATO secretary-general George Robertson declared that if Turkey were attacked during a war in Iraq, Article 5 of NATO's charter would be invoked granting Ankara the full support of NATO countries.

Concrete discussions about the future of the Kurdish region, post-Saddam. These discussions should go beyond the repeated assurances given to date that a war will not result in the creation of a Kurdish state in Iraq.

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