

U.S.-Turkish Relations and Iraq

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Remarks made on the CNN program Insight.

JONATHAN MANN, CNN ANCHOR: Talking Turkey. Washington tries to get a new and nervous government to take a big role against Iraq. What's a war going to be worth? Hello and welcome.

Prominent Turks and Americans have been traveling this week in essentially opposite directions. A team from the United States is in Turkey looking at military bases, preparing for war. Senior Turkish cabinet members have been out of the country, visiting Iraq and other Middle Eastern nations, trying to avert a war.

The Pentagon wants permission to deploy an estimated 80,000 soldiers in Turkey for an attack on Iraq, and Washington has been trying to use the prestige of the White House, the power of American diplomacy and the unmistakable wallop of Uncle Sam's wallop to close the deal.

On our program today, seducing the Turks.

(NEWSBREAK)

There is a particular ritual to bargaining in Turkish bazaars, but buyers and sellers do go to them to do business, after all, and for the most part some kind of deal does eventually get done.

Going to war, though, is a very different thing. Turkey is demanding a high price, and even then it may face disaster if it agrees. It's a difficult decision for any government, but especially for the one Turkey elected only two months ago.

CNN's Jane Arraf begins our coverage.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JANE ARRAF, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): It's an unlikely courtship between the United States and Turkey's new governing party.

GEORGE W. BUSH, U.S. PRESIDENT: Welcome to the home of one of your country's best friends and allies.

ARRAF: And like most courtships, prone to ups and downs.

On his previous visit to Washington, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the head of the AKP, Turkey's Justice and Development Party, had been snubbed by U.S. officials. But that was before the party swept Turkish elections in November. A group with its roots in a banned Islamic party became Turkey's first majority government in years.

Now that government is in a bind over how to handle U.S. requests that could determine when and how the United States goes to war against Iraq.

YALIM ERALP, POLITICAL ANALYST: The United States is an ally, there is no doubt about that, and people accept that the United States will use airfields and ports. But the stationing of 80,000 armed troops on the southern border of Turkey is a dilemma, because it may cause a chaos in northern Iraq in a post-Saddam period. That is where the dilemma is.

ARRAF: To see why the United States wants Turkey in any war plan, you just have to look at a map: a 400-kilometer long border with northern Iraq, 250 miles. Although the main attack would likely be in the south, from Kuwait, if the U.S. can attack from the north as well, it could make any war quicker and less dangerous for the United States.

What you won't find on a map is Turkey's political clout. The huge country is the only Muslim member of NATO and an important bridge between the West and the Muslim world.

A succession of U.S. military officials have gone to Ankara to try to persuade the Turkish government and military leaders to allow it to base up to 80,000 troops in the country.

PAUL WOLFOWITZ, U.S. DEP. SECY. OF DEFENSE: We reached agreement on the next steps on military planning and preparations, and I believe we have charted a course for the way forward, working together. So now it should be clearer than ever that Saddam Hussein is surrounded by the international community.

ARRAF: During the Gulf War, the United States launched air strikes on Iraq from Turkey. Ankara since then has let the United States and Britain use its NATO base at Incirlik in southeastern Turkey to launch air attacks as part of the controversial no-fly zones, which keep Iraq's aircraft out of its own air space.

But tens of thousands of American soldiers on Turkish soil for an unpopular war would be a totally different matter, one that will have to be approved by a reluctant Turkish parliament.

A recent Turkish public opinion poll indicated that more than 80 percent of Turks oppose war with Iraq. A majority in the polls, and here in the streets, say that even if war happened anyway, Turkey still shouldn't let its bases be used.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE (through translator): It's harmful to the country, and from the point of economics, the United States is using us.

ARRAF: With rampant unemployment and a devalued currency, Turkey is still recovering from the last war with Iraq, and the loss of one of its main markets.

Oil-rich Iraq is still one of Turkey's biggest trading partners. Just last week, the Turkish foreign trade minister led a huge business delegation to Baghdad. Just as worrying to Ankara, the possibility that any war could leave the Kurds in northern Iraq with even more autonomy and revive Turkey's internal battle with Kurdish separatists.

ABDULLAH GUL, TURKISH PRIME MIN.: In the first Gulf War, we suffered a lot economically, politically, and also there was a (UNINTELLIGIBLE) in northern Iraq. There was terrorist activities and they found a safe haven there. That's why the people of Turkey, they are very much concerned about the war.

ARRAF: To ease those worries, the United States has offered Turkey military and political support and money -- \$3 billion in grants and \$10 billion more in loans if it cooperates, officials say.

But that's still a long way from what Turkey says it would need to avoid being left bankrupt by a war. Washington even went to bat for Turkey with the European Union, asking the European Union to set an early date for Turkey's talks to join the club. That bid failed.

Despite urgent U.S. requests for a decision, Turkey just last week agreed to allow an American survey of some of its

airbases, airports, and seaports to see what would need to be done to them. But still no guarantee we'll allow U.S. troops there.

Some Turkish military leaders war of a rift with the U.S. if the government doesn't make a decision soon. Officials say the United States itself has warned that unless Ankara climbs onboard, it can't guarantee that it can protect Turkish interests in any war.

But parliament likely won't even begin to debate the issue until after the U.N. weapons inspections chief reports to the Security Council on January 27.

With serious potential problems no matter which way parliament votes, it seems in no rush to make the decision.

Jane Arraf, CNN.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

MANN: So what will Washington do? How badly does it need Turkey's involvement?

Joining us now from the Pentagon is CNN Sr. Military Affairs Correspondent Jamie McIntyre.

Jamie, how crucial is Turkey?

JAMIE MCINTYRE, CNN SR. MILITARY AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT: Very, very crucial. U.S. military officials say privately that it's the biggest problem they're working on right now.

They still remain convinced that in the end they'll get some measure of cooperation from Turkey, in terms of permission to base U.S. ground troops there, but perhaps not the entire measure of cooperation that they're hoping for.

But right now the three big question marks are Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, the United States is pretty convinced will work itself out. Jordan is really involving only a small number of troops, and Turkey is the big question mark, because they do need to have a lot of bases in Turkey, or they're going to have to do it the hard way, which means bringing troops up from other locations, either from the sea or from the south or all the way from other places such as Saudi Arabia.

MANN: How long can this decision wait?

MCINTYRE: Well, it's gone past the point where the United States would have liked to have seen the decision made already. In fact, one exasperated official said today they'd almost rather hear absolutely not and at least they could plan around that, rather than continue to be sort of pushed into the future.

Meanwhile, the United States is planning for alternatives -- they won't discuss exactly what they are -- in case they don't get permission to base ground troops in Turkey, and they're pushing very hard to try to bring Turkey around -- as you heard Jane Arraf say, even holding out the sort of veiled threat that the United States might not be able to guarantee that they won't prevent an independent Kurdistan from forming in the north if Turkey doesn't sign on.

Now, U.S. Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Richard Myers is scheduled to arrive in Ankara later this week for more consultations, and again he'll press the U.S. case.

MANN: Jamie McIntyre, at the Pentagon, thanks very much.

We take a break now. When we come back should Turkey trust what it's told?

Stay with us for that.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MANN: When the United States last went to war against Iraq, President George Bush, Sr. encouraged opposition

groups in the country to rebel. They did, and they were crushed. About 1/2-million Kurdish refugees fled to the border with Turkey. Hundreds, maybe thousands, died of exposure in the mountains before a huge multinational rescue mission was mounted to feed and help them.

Welcome back.

The first United States war against Iraq ended abruptly. The victory itself was clear, but just about everything else was confused. Turkey was still facing the same belligerent government in Baghdad and it got an enormous humanitarian disaster on its border to boot.

The Kurds, the economic cost, the uncertainty, only some of the reasons for Turkish reticence this time around.

Joining us now to talk more about what Washington has been doing to address Ankara's fears is Soner Cagaptay, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Thanks so much for being with us.

It has seemed, from this side of the world, to be an extraordinary kind of diplomacy, something unusual. What do you make of the talks, the negotiations, the visits back and forth between Turkey and the United States on this issue?

SONER CAGAPTAY, WASHINGTON INST. FOR NEAR EAST POLICY: Well, it's a good question. I think one way of looking at the ongoing debate and the diplomatic effort between America and Turkey is to realize that this is really a young debate, meaning much of it has taken place, at least publicly, over the last month, and I think in comparison to the situation in America, where the debate in Iraq has been going on for more than a year now, we should realize that this is only now in the makings in Turkey.

The reason for that is over the last year, much of the energy in Turkey, the energy of the public as well as the energy of the policymakers, was taken up by certain issues. The first of these was Turkey's EU accession. The second, the country's elections. And the third, the ongoing economic crisis in the country, as a result of which the Iraq issue was never on the frontlines in the papers, and it actually got there only last month in December.

And as a result of that, the public has been debating the Iraq issue in Turkey only over the last five weeks. And this, I think, explains part of the hesitation that everybody's been talking about in town, as to why Turkey is not fully prepared to commit itself to America's Iraq campaign.

MANN: How big a footprint are 80,000 U.S. troops going to put down in Turkey? How big a deal is it going to be, if the government agrees?

CAGAPTAY: I think that I would suggest it would be a big deal, especially given that Turkey is the country it is.

What I mean by that is, this is a country where people are very highly nationalistic. This is a country that was never ruled by outsiders. It's a country in which the people are the descendents of a long-lived empire, the Ottoman Empire, and it's a country which is just not used to the idea of having foreign troops on its soil.

Now, when we're talking about 80,000 American troops deployed on Turkish soil, I think the question there is, to what extent are the Turks able to digest this information? And to what extent are they able to accommodate this? And here, what makes the situation more complicated is that of all the countries of which America asked for help in the region, and all the countries in the region, Turkey is the only democracy, which means that here the government simply cannot make a decision and ignore the response of the people in figuring the popular reaction to the idea of so many American troops deployed in Turkey and.

MANN: Let me jump in on that very point and ask you a question. It is a democracy, and if I understand correctly it would need the approval of the parliament to get the troops permission to land in Turkey. It's a majority government, but could the government get this through parliament?

CAGAPTAY: The government could get this through the parliament, but I think it also would need strong public support in favor of this action before it takes it to the parliament. And here the government would have to convince Turkey's vigorous press, it would have to convince other political parties, and it would have to conduct a long public debate, which is going on only briefly, in order for the resolution to go through Turkey's parliament.

I think when the resolution or the Turkish decision, the discussions do start in the parliament, even then I think the government is likely to face at least some opposition from among its own members. The members of the governing party even may oppose the government's agenda of providing support to deployment of American troops on Turkish soil.

MANN: Much will depend on what the United States offers. What do you think the United States has to offer? And do you think whatever the United States offers will be trusted by the people in the government of Turkey?

CAGAPTAY: Let's turn the question around and say what are the sensitivities of the Turks? What are the issues that the Turks would like Americans to address so that the Americans are -- then the question becomes, will America be able to satisfy these concerns.

There, I think, are two main Turkish concerns. One is the Turks are fearful of the fact that war and the resultant loss of revenues of tourism and trade may cause the country to go back into the economic slump out of which it's only barely coming, and this is a huge slump that's hurt the Turks, because it's the country's biggest depression since World War II.

So there is hesitation that war may re-ignite the slump. That's one concern.

Another concern that many Turks have, and many policymakers in Ankara have, from what I have heard, is that a lot of people are concerned about whether or not Iraq's territorial integrity is going to be maintained after the war, and whether or not there's going to be an independent Kurdish state, and to what extent Iraq is going to be democratic.

So I think what America can offer is to make sure that, economically, war is not going to have a negative impact on Turkey, that the country's losses in revenues, trade and tourism, are going to be met through some other means, financial assistance, and so on and so forth, and also give guarantees that international markets will not perceive Turkey as a risk country. That I think is very important.

Secondly, of course, there is the issue that Iraq's territorial integrity should be maintained -- that should be the message that Washington is giving to Ankara, in order to make sure that some of the Turkish concerns in that regard are also met and allayed.

MANN: So let me ask you one last question, we have just a moment -- is this going to happen?

CAGAPTAY: I think this is happening right now as we speak. I think that the process we are seeing is definitely a long, arduous process where the two sides are negotiating. I think it's also very important to emphasize here that when we look at Turkey and America, we're looking at two countries that are long time allies.

Turkey has been an ally to America since the end of World War II. It's been in NATO and it's supported America in many conflicts since the end of the Cold War, including the Cold War, the Gulf War, as well as the wars in the Balkans.

And therefore, when Turkey looks at its relationship with America, it sees a long term relationship in which the country, not for political expediency but for long term, strategic, ideologic, political, economic gains.

And therefore, I would say that what we are seeing is not necessarily a conflict -- perhaps a crisis, but a crisis that can definitely be addressed once these talks go through successfully.

MANN: Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, thanks so much for talking with us.

CAGAPTAY: It was a pleasure being here.

MANN: We take another break. When we come back, as we've been hearing, even without a war, Turkey's new government has its hands full. We'll have more on that when we come back.

Stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MANN: Tayyip Erdogan is the most popular politician in Turkey. He led his party to victory in November's elections and it now forms the government. All Erdogan has to do is find a way to get himself a job.

Welcome back.

A conviction for sedition kept Erdogan from running in the last election. Now a constitutional amendment may allow it, if the Turkish election board will agree. That, the war with Iraq and a lot of nervous Turks are only some of the hurdles facing Erdogan's Justice and Development Party now that it's in the government, the first majority government ever formed by an essentially Islamist party in the history of modern secular Turkey.

Joining us now to talk about that is Bulent Aliriza. He is the senior associate and director of the Turkey project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Thanks so much for being with us.

When the Justice and Development Party was first elected, I can remember talking to people in Turkey who were terrified about what an Islamist majority government would bring, and there were people who, for their part, were terrified about what would have happened if they hadn't won.

What's happened since? Has it been essentially business as usual?

BULENT ALIRIZA, CSIS: Well, as you said, Mr. Erdogan won the elections, but he's not the prime minister. Mr. Abdullah Gul is the prime minister, but there are serious questions being raised as to the effectiveness of that party, perhaps because of the two-headed nature of the Justice and Development Party, with the leader out of government and the number two man in the job of prime minister, who wields real constitutional power.

They've been absolutely overwhelmed with events. There was the European Union summit, the related issue of Cyprus coming to the boil in December. There is the Iraq issue, as you mentioned. There is the ongoing economic crisis, with very serious, in fact crucial, talks coming up with the IMF over coming weeks.

Turkey is never an easy country to rule, and even though this is the first single-party government that Turkey has had for a decade, they're finding it difficult to make the transition from an opposition party to government.

MANN: Let me ask you about two intertwined issues. One of the reasons I guess that you could say Mr. Erdogan can't get into parliament, or couldn't, was because he was regarded by the Turkish establishment as a religious bigot, a frightening, fiery Islamist. There has been a constitutional amendment. This is moving through the legal process. But how hard a time is he having getting into parliament? And what happened to those fears about the scary Muslim fundamentalists who were about to take over Turkey?

ALIRIZA: Well, that's spoken less and less, although the most vigorous defenders of a secular system within the military establishment as well as outside -- the prosecutor general, for example, the head of the high educational council, to take another -- are still very wary of Mr. Erdogan, as well as the party.

The constitutional amendment went through the national assembly, which is dominated by the JDP. It was rejected, vetoed by the president. They adopted it yet again. The president has now accepted it. So constitutionally there is an impediment. The (UNINTELLIGIBLE) is likely to take place in the Province of Siirt, near the Iranian border on the 9th

of March, and if things work according to schedule, Mr. Erdogan will run in those elections and will presumably join the national assembly and become prime minister.

But I doubt whether the problems will have got any easier for him if and when he does become prime minister.

MANN: The biggest problem is the economy. What's going to happen there?

ALIRIZA: Difficult to say. Turkey owes upwards of \$200 billion for its -- as part of its foreign debt and domestic debt. It's ability to turn around particularly the domestic debt, which is growing alarmingly, is still in doubt.

There was a wave of optimism that swept the markets, as you know, immediately after the elections. That's dissipated quite a bit. The (UNINTELLIGIBLE) Party has not shown itself to be effective in government. There have been conflicting statements by the various ministers. The market is beginning to get really skittish about whether they're going to get a handle on things.

And their inability to deal with the foreign policy issues that have been on their plate -- above all, Iraq the Cyprus issue -- have exacerbated those doubts. And if they don't actually eradicate those doubts, and show that they can actually govern, this thing could quickly slip out of control with respect to the economy.

MANN: Let me ask you about another question that's of enormous concern outside of Turkey and to millions of Turks inside the country, of course, and that is the position of the Kurds, the rights that their political associations are according and their community's ability to live what it feels is a normal life. Has anything changed?

ALIRIZA: Well, you know, the Province of Siirt, where Mr. Erdogan is going to run, presumably, is part of the area where the Kurdish speaking Turkish citizens live.

Mr. Erdogan himself is married to a lady from that province, and that's a little symbolic signal that he's giving to that area, that things are going to be different under his leadership.

The new government is proceeding with the reforms that were undertaken with respect to the European Union, with their effort to adjust their laws for eventual entry into the European Union, which doesn't look likely for at least another decade the way things are going.

You know, the PKK has been defeated. There is no terrorism in the southeast part of the country, which is where the Kurds live, which is right next door to Iraq. The Turks fear the consequences of an Iraq war not least with respect to their Kurdish minority. But, you know, it is an issue that needs to be dealt with now at the level of adjustment, long term adjustment, and accommodation with respect to the Kurdish speakers, and Kurdish language education and broadcasting would ease the tension quite a bit, as would economic improvement, not just in that area, but in Turkey as a whole.

MANN: Economic improvement and peace, no doubt.

Bulent Aliriza, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, thanks so much for talking with us.

ALIRIZA: Thank you.

MANN: That's INSIGHT for this day. I'm Jonathan Mann. The news continues. ❖

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