

# U.S. Must Address Turkey's War Fears

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**T**urkey, though partners with the United States in the war on terror, is worried about the negative impact that unseating Saddam Hussein could have in the volatile Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Washington must give a high priority to addressing this concern to ensure full Turkish participation in a coming conflict.

Turkey's chief worry about northern Iraq is the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Fighting in the mid-1990s between two rival Iraqi Kurdish groups, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led to chaos in northern Iraq. That unrest facilitated PKK operations. Northern Iraq became the launch pad for many PKK incursions into Turkey that killed thousands of innocent civilians.

Turkey also fears that Mr. Hussein's demise may lead to a political meltdown in which Iraqi Kurdish groups would take advantage of the chaos to pursue the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit has been warning for a year that such a Kurdish move would prompt Turkish intervention.

Turkey's suspicions were aroused in part by the constitution for a "federal Iraq," which the KDP and PUK proposed on Sept. 25. Turkey worries that this proposal could lead to de facto Kurdish independence, snubbing the region's Turkish-speaking Turkoman minority, the third-largest ethnic group in Iraq after the Kurds and the Arabs. Turkey traditionally has shown concern for Turkish minorities in its area and could rally to the Turkomans' cause if the Kurds infringe on their rights.

One problem: The proposed constitution calls for a Kurdish capital in Kirkuk, a major oil area and a Turkoman bastion. Over the last year, Turkish Defense Minister Sabahattin Cakmakoglu has repeatedly expressed Ankara's objection to this idea. Recent provocative remarks by Iraqi Kurdish leaders have only exposed more raw nerves.

The United States can address these concerns in several ways.

First, clearer communication among the three sides -- Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds and the United States -- would instill greater confidence in Washington's promise to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity after Mr. Hussein's removal. This includes presenting clear plans for rebuilding Iraq in a way that guarantees cooperation among Iraq's various constituencies while preventing the unilateral declaration of a Kurdish state.

Second, dispatching allied troops to ensure stability in the northern Iraqi cities of Mosul and Kirkuk at the outset of an invasion would diminish the chances of a confrontation between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. Any such

confrontation would mean disaster for U.S. war efforts.

Third, the United States could invite Turkey to help in the postwar rebuilding of Iraq. It would help ease Turkish worries about more economic losses if war should come.

Turkish sources say Turkey lost about \$44 billion because of the Persian Gulf war's impact on trade, tourism and other revenue. It fears another war in Iraq could cause financial losses of up to \$14 billion.

If handled properly, a war in Iraq could help strengthen U.S.-Turkish ties. It is not likely that today's Turkish elections will mean new challenges for U.S. war-making plans. Turkish foreign policy is nonpartisan, and a new government would follow Ankara's current line of "cautious and qualified" support for a U.S. military campaign.

Washington likely will go to great lengths to secure Turkish military cooperation, given the importance of Turkish bases (which U.S. forces have been using for decades) and Ankara's military familiarity with northern Iraq.

Moreover, because Turkey is a secular and democratic Muslim country, its consent to the war in Iraq may add legitimacy to a U.S. campaign aimed at establishing a democratic and secular regime in Baghdad. Emphasis on developing mutually agreeable policies and shared interests will pave the way for a deepening of Turkish-American relations at a time when sincere allies in the region are hard to find. ❖

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