

# Heads Up on Turkey

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [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



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It is not yet clear that the United States will use force to remove Saddam Hussein from power. But in discussion of that possibility to date one proposition has never been challenged: You can't do it without Turkey.

The conventional wisdom here in America is that, much as the Turks dread the prospect of a war next door, their interest in helping to shape post-Saddam Iraq ultimately leaves them no choice but to be cooperative. That is probably true as far as it goes. But there is no room for complacency. Turkey will have a lot on its plate during the period ahead. If we are not paying attention, there could be some unpleasant surprises.

For starters, national elections Nov. 3 will bring a new government to power in Ankara. Polls suggest that the AK Party, formed last year by elements of previously-banned Islamist parties, will either form that government or be the top party in a new coalition. The AK's skillful efforts to re-badge itself as a center-right, non-religious party have reduced the risk that Turkey's powerful secular establishment will block its participation in government. But it will probably take until the end of November, and quite possibly longer, before it is clear who will be in charge. (The fact that the AK's leader, R.T. Erdogan, has been legally disqualified from running for office, further complicates that question.)

During this period, Bulent Ecevit's badly divided coalition government of three parties, none of which is likely to be represented in parliament after Nov. 3, will remain in a caretaker capacity. That may be significant. Mr. Ecevit was never comfortable even with the Clinton administration's more nuanced approach toward Iraq; in recent weeks he has grown increasingly outspoken in his criticism of U.S. Iraq policy.

Leaving Iraq aside, Turkey's new government, if in place by early December, will face as its first order of business an event Turks view as a defining moment: the Dec. 12 Copenhagen EU summit. Having pushed through EU-mandated reforms on hot-button issues like the death penalty and Kurdish language rights, Turks want the Europeans to give them a date for starting negotiations on EU membership. It is not clear the EU will comply.

What is clear is that the summit will start the process of bringing Cyprus into the EU, even in the absence of a settlement among the island's Greek and Turkish communities. The Ecevit government has in the past threatened annexation of north Cyprus should this occur. Its successor would not necessarily be bound by such statements. But the double-whammy of being denied a date and seeing Cyprus's own membership cinched would put the new prime minister under enormous popular pressure to respond in ways that could poison relations between Turkey and

Europe for years to come and fuel nationalist sentiment at home.

That will, in turn, make it more difficult to handle the third urgent task facing Turkey's new government -- sustaining a fragile economic recovery. IMF-backed reforms (and an injection of tens of billions of new loans) have stabilized Turkey's economy since a February 2001 financial meltdown, and growth and inflation rates are now moving in the right directions. But unemployment, poverty and consequent popular resentment remain widespread. The IMF and "foreign influence" have during the current election campaign become lightning rods for such resentment, and the AK Party, while pledging to continue the reform program, has raised the possibility of "adjustments." If the new government yields to popular pressures to relax program requirements, the recovery could be put at risk, along with the IMF's (and, indirectly, our) \$30 billion investment in Turkey.

Add to this daunting agenda an American request to participate in an unpopular war with Iraq, and a legitimate question arises as to whether a new, untried leadership can take the strain. The answer is that it probably can -- if the Bush administration has its eye on the ball and is giving that leadership timely, relevant support.

The ground for that can be laid even before we know for sure who will be governing Turkey next. There are indications this is happening. Bush administration efforts to avoid a Turkish-EU train wreck in Copenhagen appear properly to have intensified in recent weeks. Settling the Cyprus dispute by Dec. 12 will be a challenge. But, if the Europeans are prepared to be at all sensible, it should be possible to avoid a situation where the new Turkish government has to respond to being left out in the cold before it has even had a chance to engage on Cyprus and other issues relevant to Turkey's EU candidacy.

The administration has also made a good start at consulting on Iraq. But only a start. Turks continue to fear the economic consequences of a war and want reassurance we will do more to alleviate those consequences than we did in 1991. And while most Turks believe we are sincere in our commitment to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity, they do not yet have an adequate understanding of what that means for the area they care most about -- predominantly Kurdish northern Iraq. Turkish popular opinion thus remains solidly opposed to U.S. military intervention. ❖

Washington Times

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