

Enhancing the Turkish-American Alliance: The Campaign for Iraq and Other Possibilities

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Brief Analysis

Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Jones was in Ankara Monday to discuss foreign policy issues including Iraq with her Turkish counterparts. Interestingly, Iraq's vice premier Tariq Aziz visited Ankara yesterday for the same purpose. These trips come at a crucial time as Washington prepares for a confrontation with Saddam Husayn. While prepared to stand with its close NATO ally the United States, Turkey remains uneasy about several issues.

What Could Turkey Contribute?

War in Iraq is likely to require heavy air activity. Bases in Turkey's southern Anatolia could support American air operations into northern and central Iraq. Besides the base at Incirlik, which the United States has used for decades for operations such as the vital AWACS flights, other bases including Diyarbakir, Batman, Mus, and Malatya supported activity during the Gulf War. Furthermore, the recent experience of the Turkish armed forces in northern Iraq could provide useful information for the Americans.

Turkey knows northern Iraq very well. Over the last two decades, the Turkish army -- especially its elite Special Forces unit -- have conducted dozens of operations in northern Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) terrorists. In some especially large operations such as one in 1995 involving up to 30,000 soldiers, Turkish troops proceeded more than fifty miles into Iraqi territory. In fact, Turks have covered almost the entire mountainous strip of terrain in northernmost Iraq, behind which are the flat lands leading to Baghdad. According to various sources, Turkey in fact maintains a force of nearly 5,000 soldiers in northern Iraq. Some of these forces keep a security fence along the Iraqi border. Yet others may be further inland, even at the strategic Serseng (Bamerni) airport, one of the three landing strips in this rugged region that would be especially useful for helicopter flights. So far, Turkish experience in northern Iraq has involved the use of elite troops supported by surgical bombing sorties and tactical helicopter flights. U.S. forces could benefit from Turkish operational experiences it gained in this terrain. Finally, while Turkey is a secular and democratic Muslim country, Ankara's consent for a U.S. attack against Iraq may add legitimacy to the American campaign of pursuing a democratic and secular Baghdad regime after Saddam.

Turkey's Concerns

Ankara's concerns about an American campaign center on several key issues: PKK Haven. For many Turks, northern Iraq has come to embody PKK terrorism. Following the Gulf War, the allied-enforced no-fly zone in northern Iraq allowed the creation of a semi-independent Kurdish entity in this area. Nevertheless, fighting in the mid-1990s between the two rival Iraqi Kurdish groups, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led to the bifurcation of the northern Iraqi para-state into feuding cantons. The unsettled political circumstances in an area that has a longstanding tradition of Kurdish nationalism meant that both parties were reluctant to act against the PKK unless pushed. Until its recent demise, the PKK successfully used these circumstances to establish bases in northern Iraq from which it launched many extremely bloody operations into Turkey.

The nature of Iraqi federalism. Ankara is concerned about the fallout effects of a campaign against Iraq. It fears the end of Saddam's regime may lead to a political meltdown in which Kurdish groups would take advantage of the chaos to pursue what Turks suspect Kurds truly desire: namely, independence. Since October 2001, Turkish prime minister Bulent Ecevit has continuously warned this scenario would be a casus belli, leading to Turkish armed intervention. Furthermore, Ankara is suspicious about what kinds of federalism might arise in a post-Saddam Iraq. On September 25, the two Kurdish factions in northern Iraq proposed a constitution for a "federal Iraq" on terms that Turkey fears could lead to de facto Kurdish independence while ignoring the rights of the region's Turkish-speaking Turkomen minority.

Kirkuk. Among the parts of the KDP-PUK proposed constitution that Ankara objects to is the provision that Kurdistan's capital would be the city of Kirkuk, a major oil area and a bastion of the Turkomens. Over the last year, Turkish defense minister Sabahattin Cakmakoglu has repeatedly voiced Ankara's objection to this proposed move. Yet, recent provocative remarks by Iraqi Kurdish leaders have only fueled Turkish apprehensions. For example, on August 21, the KDP representative in Ankara argued, "Kirkuk is a Kurdish city." KDP leader Massoud Barzani was quoted in a German newspaper saying that he would "never allow Turks to take over even a millimeter of our soil," and that if Turkey invaded northern Iraq, his fighters would turn the territory into a "graveyard for Turkish soldiers." In a response on September 25, Turkey declared that it would "react" to an attempt by Iraqi Kurds to take possession of the oil-rich area of northern Iraq.

Allaying Turkish Concerns

These Turkish trepidations, however, do not point at an irreconcilable divergence of Turkish-American interests. There are several ways Washington could encourage more enthusiastic Turkish participation in an Iraq operation:

Communicating to Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds a clear plan on Iraq's future. Clearer communication among the three sides -- Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds, and the United States -- would create greater confidence in Washington's often-stated commitment to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity after Saddam. It would also help to present clear plans for rebuilding Iraq in a way that guarantees cooperation among its peoples. Meanwhile, on the humanitarian front, the United States might consider collaborating with Ankara to prepare for potential relief efforts in the event of a refugee crisis into Turkey, similar to that in the aftermath of the Gulf War.

Commit to ensuring stability in Mosul and Kirkuk from the very early stages of conflict. Inserting troops into and reserving these cities for a future Iraq would diminish the chances of a Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish confrontation, a possibility that could undermine American war efforts.

On the economic front, Washington might invite Turkish companies to rebuild Iraq. With proven expertise in construction, retail, telecommunications, and automotive industries, Turkish businesses could play a vital role in post-bellum Iraq. Turkish sources are convinced that the Gulf War cost the country approximately \$44 billion in the last decade in losses of trade, tourism, and revenue. Now, Turkey fears substantial financial damage exceeding \$14

billion during a possible campaign in Iraq. By inviting Turkish businesses to rebuild Iraq, America might address these worries.

EU Membership. Ankara expects help from Washington toward its European Union (EU) membership, which Turks see as their pressing issue during the next few months. Although it is not directly related to the Iraq issue, Turkish-American cooperation on EU matters could deepen the strategic partnership between the two countries, while providing Turkey with further growth and stability that is likely to accompany the country's EU accession schedule. With the recent reform package, Turks may feel that they have satisfied the criteria for becoming a candidate for EU accession, while the EU may not be willing to set a target date for that accession. America could consider lobbying Brussels to offer Ankara a target accession date in its December expansion summit in Copenhagen. On a related matter, America may also offer help towards the resolution of the Cyprus issue, which could become a destabilizing factor in the region if it is not settled while the EU proceeds with its plan to admit Cyprus to the EU.

Handled well, developments of the coming months vis--vis Iraq might bring Ankara and Washington even closer. Mutually agreeable policies implemented at a time when the two countries will have many shared interests should pave the way for a deepening of Turkish-American relations.

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