

# Sealing the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership through Cooperation in Iraq?

## A View from Ankara

Aug 22, 2002



Brief Analysis

**E**ver since talk of American intervention in Iraq began heating up, Turkish policy on cooperation has generally been as follows: keep a close eye on the situation and clearly express reluctance, but if Washington begins to display greater decisiveness, take part in the action. The primary reasons for such a policy are Turkey's immediate proximity to Iraq and its unpleasant memories from the Gulf War.

### Turkish Concerns

From Ankara's perspective, the prospect of intervention in Iraq presents tremendous complexities. Such a campaign could easily spin out of control with unforeseeable -- and therefore frightening -- consequences. Ankara's concerns have both an economic and a security dimension. A war in the region could very well deepen the existing economic crisis in Turkey, inflicting long-term losses in sectors such as border trade and tourism. Despite Minister of Economic Affairs Kemal Dervis's attempts to assure Turks that the government has money in reserve in case of a new war, lingering fear and bitterness from the Gulf War remain intense. Most Turks are convinced that a new war would spell further negative consequences for their country. For example, hostilities in the region could lead to a repeat of the mass migration that followed the Gulf War. This is a disturbing prospect from many perspectives, including the possible manipulation of such an event by Turkey's separatist Kurdish elements. The potential emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq is perceived as a direct challenge to Turkey's territorial integrity, largely because of what it might mean for Turkey's own Kurdish population.

### Shifting Winds in Turkey

Ankara believes that Washington has more or less decided to intervene in Iraq at some point in the future, a position made particularly clear after Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz's visit to Turkey last month. Consequently, although Turkey remains extremely reluctant, it is now forced to consider joining such an operation as a way of maintaining a sense of control over developments.

Evidence of this strategic shift could be seen at a National Security Council meeting in late July that reportedly focused on the possibility of Turkish cooperation, including the use of Turkish troops as far south as Iraq's thirty-sixth parallel. Turkey's shift is not surprising, since mere logistical assistance in a campaign against Iraq (e.g., allowing the United States to use Turkish bases) may not serve either country's interests: Turkey's interest in preventing the emergence of a Kurdish state, and America's interest in building a multifront engagement against Saddam Husayn in order to limit his maneuverability. These two needs will likely extend the parameters of Turkish-U.S. cooperation. Ankara and Washington may feel compelled to work together in a more strategic manner for several reasons.

For the Turks, the only way to forestall Kurdish statehood may be to place their own armed forces on the scene so that they are directly involved in the post-war transition period. Turkish forces could also prevent Kurdistan Workers

Party (PKK) militants in northern Iraq from taking advantage of wartime conditions in order to jumpstart their separatist activities. Moreover, Turkish troops could help to contain the possible mass migration of Iraqi refugees into Turkey, in addition to securing the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline, which is crucial to the Turkish economy.

Strategic cooperation would also help both Turkey and the United States meet their goal of protecting Iraqi minorities from potential ethnic cleansing at the hands of the outgoing regime. For the Turks, playing a greater role in the intervention would help them protect the Turkoman minority. As for the United States, any steps that it takes to prevent attacks on Iraqi minorities would be perceived as a sign of Washington's desire to atone for its past failures along this line, particularly with regard to the Kurds.

From the U.S. perspective, Turkish intervention would also divert Baghdad's attention to some extent, lightening the load on U.S. military forces and increasing their maneuverability and tactical options. Specifically, Turkish forces could reduce U.S. deployment in Iraq by an estimated 40,000-60,000 soldiers, easing the task of preparing and transporting troops and reducing financial costs and combat losses. Moreover, the United States could draw on the experience of the Turkish military. As part of their struggle with PKK militants over the last decade, the Turkish armed forces have conducted three large-scale military operations in northern Iraq, developing a familiarity with the territory and close relations with local Kurdish groups. Turkish soldiers have built up combat experience in all kinds of conditions, and their special operations forces have significant hands-on training for the type of combat that U.S. troops would face in Iraq.

#### Implications for U.S. Policy

What would Turkey expect from the United States in return for comprehensive cooperation? First, Washington needs to state clearly that it is willing to compensate the Turks. This entails providing detailed plans covering both military expenditures and the potential costs of any post-war economic crisis. Second, the United States must assure Turkey that its cooperation on Iraq will be regarded as a landmark in Turkish-U.S. strategic cooperation, and that, in return for Turkey's attaching her destiny to that of the United States, Washington will acknowledge its own responsibilities in this long-term relationship. This would entail that U.S. policy toward Turkey remain consistent, and that Washington fully and actively support Turkey's policies in the Caucasus (e.g., regarding the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline), its bid for accession to the European Union, and perhaps even its stance on Cyprus. Third, since Iraqi weapons of mass destruction pose a huge threat to the Turkish military and general public, Washington must assure Ankara that it could immediately supply Turkey with weapons systems to counter this capability.

Turkey needs to feel a sense of control over developments in the region. It has that sense at the moment; after all, Turkey maintains a small presence in northern Iraq in order to watch over its interests and to ensure its ability to operate independently in that area. If the United States is determined to intervene in Iraq, Turkish decisionmakers may view cooperation as their best means of maintaining control. Moreover, if Washington can meet Ankara's needs, Turkey's willingness to participate in action against Iraq may prove even greater than American optimists project.

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