

Turkey and Regime Change in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's attitude will be critical in the event the United States seeks to remove Saddam Husayn through use of force. Simple geography demands that any military option include Turkey. What do Turks think about the prospect of direct U.S. military action to topple Saddam? The short answer is: they hate the idea. But sitting it out is not an option.

Turkey's Misgivings

The Turks dread a new war against Iraq due to their negative experiences with the Gulf War.

From a security standpoint, Saddam's suppression of the Iraqi Kurds' short-lived uprising in early 1991, and the coalition's subsequent expulsion of Iraqi central authorities from the north, had a profoundly negative impact across the border in southeastern Turkey. PKK terrorists exploited the situation to expand their operations dramatically. The Turkish military eventually brought this situation back under control, but only after several years of frequent interventions into northern Iraq, at the cost of thousands of lives and a great deal of money.

From an economic standpoint, UN sanctions against Iraq cut off Turkey's access to what had been its principal trading partner. The impact of these sanctions was on the order of what Americans would experience if the U.S.-Canadian border were sealed indefinitely. Turkey estimates that a decade of sanctions has cost the country between \$40 and 80 billion, and even that may be a conservative figure.

From a strategic standpoint, Ankara saw the emergence of Kurdish administrative organs in northern Iraq (created to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of Iraqi central authorities) as a step toward the establishment of a de facto Kurdish state. Preventing such a development has long been a cornerstone of Turkish regional policy. Ankara is concerned about the impact that Kurdish statehood would have on Turkey's own Kurdish population, as well as on the nearly two million Turkomans of northern Iraq -- a people with close ethnic and cultural ties to the Turks.

Certainly, Turkey would be better off if Saddam were removed from power. Turks are not insensitive to the potential advantages -- especially from an economic standpoint -- of Iraq becoming a normal neighbor. But for most Turks, the appeal of such gains is outweighed by misgivings over what could go wrong. Based on their experiences since 1990, Turks have several reservations about potential U.S. action:

They lack confidence that Washington understands Iraq's internal dynamics well enough to give credence to repeated U.S. commitments to maintain Iraqi territorial integrity.

Even if Washington does understand the situation better than Turks suspect, they worry that the process of replacing Saddam could at some point lead the United States to make tradeoffs at Turkey's expense.

They remain concerned that the United States will not see things through if its plans go awry, leaving Turkey to once again face a neighbor that is either hostile or in chaos.

Given this perspective, it is no surprise that Turkey's highest leaders -- including its president, prime minister, defense minister, and senior military officers -- have repeatedly and publicly expressed deep reservations about the wisdom of attempting to topple Saddam.

Turkey's Bottom Line

If the United States does decide to remove Saddam, however, Ankara would have too much at stake to simply sit out the campaign. Turkey would need to participate in the planning and execution of any such operation in order to ensure that Turkish interests are factored in and that the United States does not deviate from the agreed plan once the operation is underway. The price of such access and transparency would be some degree of cooperation on Turkey's part.

Clearly, if the United States moves against Saddam militarily, it would be best served by maximizing Turkish cooperation and minimizing the possibility of surprises once its operation begins. The key to making Ankara part of the solution, rather than a potential problem, is early, honest, detailed consultations.

Incentives and Red Lines

What would the Turks be looking for in such consultations? At the most general level, they would want to see evidence that U.S. intentions are serious. Given the Gulf War and its aftermath, they would need to be convinced that the United States will finish the job this time around, and quickly. Moreover, they would want assurances that Washington will do what it takes to help Iraq get back to its feet in one piece, as a member in good standing of the family of nations.

In addition, the Turks will want to ensure that they do not again pay an economic price for being on the right side of the conflict. Before hostilities start, Turkey may seek to secure concrete, specific commitments from the Bush administration regarding debt forgiveness or additional economic or military assistance. Ankara may also seek assurances of continued U.S. support with the International Monetary Fund and other international financial agencies, to the extent action against Iraq adversely affects Turkey's economic recovery program.

U.S.-Turkish consultations will be most important on issues relating to northern Iraq. What happens in the north will in large measure define Turkey's role in the broader conflict. Turkey's objective will be to deny the Iraqi Kurds any gains that might enhance their ability to press for independence or its functional equivalent in a post-Saddam environment. This objective will have practical implications for U.S. military planners:

The notion of improving the military capability of Kurdish guerrillas as part of an effort to topple Saddam is not likely to find support in Ankara.

The Turks have spent a decade developing an impressive ability to monitor and, to a large extent, control developments in northern Iraq. They will be suspicious of, and may resist, any U.S. efforts that dilute this ability (e.g., attempts to establish direct links with local Kurdish leaders).

Turkey has traditionally been skeptical of Iraqi exile organizations, and Ankara has long had a rocky relationship with the Iraqi National Congress. Ankara may resist U.S. efforts to employ such groups, particularly in the north.

Credible reports in the Turkish press suggest that if Iraqi Kurds attempted to occupy Mosul and Kirkuk during an American campaign against Iraq, Turkey would itself seize those cities. Ankara fears that possession of these

politically important cities and their oil wealth would put the Kurds in a powerful negotiating position once Saddam is removed. Are U.S. and Turkish views on such matters so irreconcilable as to preclude cooperation to remove Saddam? Probably not. But the differences are sufficiently serious to underscore the importance of honest, detailed discussions before any action is taken. Judging from press reports, that process seems to have started in earnest during Deputy Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz's visit to Turkey last month.

Mark Parris is counselor at The Washington Institute.

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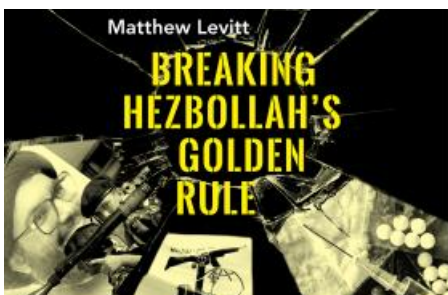
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