

Turkey's Crisis, Iraq's Future, and the Wolfowitz Visit

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Brief Analysis

The speech delivered by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz at the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in Istanbul on July 14 was a detailed, comprehensive statement of U.S. policy on Turkey. In the clearest expression of U.S. policy on Turkish-Iraqi relations to date, Wolfowitz observed that "it is vital to Turkey for the people of Iraq to govern themselves democratically, with full respect for the rights of minorities, including the Turcomans, and to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq." Yet, how will current Turkish crises affect the prospects for U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Iraq?

The Turkish Financial Crisis

Hit by its worst financial crisis since World War II, Turkey is struggling to meet the International Monetary Fund's reform requirements. Although work continues on the plan to create Qualified Industrial Zones that would open up greater trade opportunities between the United States, Turkey, and Israel, this effort is not moving quickly enough, despite a positive reaction from the Israelis. As an indication of the importance that the United States attaches to Turkey's economic recovery, Wolfowitz stated that "President Bush has raised our economic relations with Turkey to a strategic level; we are pursuing every effort to increase our trade and investment from a base that is currently too low."

Turkey's European Union Candidacy

December 2002 is the deadline for Turkey to meet the European Union's (EU's) Copenhagen criteria for membership in that community. In order to do so, the Turkish parliament must pass key legislation in the area of human rights, including the elimination of the death penalty and the enhancement of cultural and linguistic rights for Turkish Kurds. Other than sheer inertia, there is little to prevent Turkey from meeting these goals. Membership in the EU would represent the culmination of a long journey toward Westernization begun nearly a century ago by the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who wanted his country to take its "rightful place in contemporary civilization." Conversely, isolation from Europe would have negative ramifications on Turkey's future political and economic stability. Approximately 85 percent of Turks across a broad political spectrum support EU membership. As a reinforcement of the United States' staunch, consistent support for Turkey's EU candidacy, Department of State Undersecretary for Political Affairs Marc Grossman met with EU Expansion Commissioner Gunther Verheugen in Brussels shortly after Wolfowitz's visit to Turkey.

The Turkish Political Crisis

Unfortunately, the recent illness of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit prompted a period of governmental paralysis at this crucial juncture, resulting in a spate of high-level resignations earlier this month. Minister of State for Economic Affairs Kemal Dervis, the financial wizard responsible for the reform package, was one of those who tendered his resignation, but he was asked to stay on by President Ahmet Sezer. The highly respected foreign minister -- Ismail Cem, an extremely progressive advocate of EU accession and reconciliation with Greece -- left the government to establish a new party. Ecevit and his coalition partners -- Devlet Bahceli, leader of the conservative MHP, and Mesut

Yilmaz, leader of the center-right ANAP -- have agreed to stay on until the November 3 elections.

This unsettled atmosphere will no doubt affect the Turkish people's perception of a potential U.S. campaign against Iraq. Wolfowitz's speech and visit to Ankara have focused Turkey's attention on Iraq. When he made it clear that the United States plans to take action regardless of whether Turkey cooperates or not, Turks began to realize that the Iraq question cannot be put on the back burner; rather, by working closely with the United States, Turkey can have a hand in shaping the outcome of this venture.

What Turkey Wants

Directly after Wolfowitz's visit, Hurriyet newspaper published a succinct list of Turkey's conditions for participation in a campaign against Iraq. The most pervasive fear among Turks is that an invasion would create chaos in the region and lead to Iraq's disintegration into nonviable ministates, including an Iraqi Kurdish state that could reignite the past conflict over Turkey's own Kurds. Turks want concrete assurances that no Kurdish state will be created in northern Iraq. Although this has been a U.S. mantra for some time, many in Turkey are skeptical, particularly when they read plans announced by Iraqi Kurdish groups for a federal configuration that would provide Kurds with what Turks view as an unacceptable level of autonomy. Wolfowitz assuaged this fear with the assurance that "a separate Kurdish state in the North would be destabilizing to Turkey, and would be unacceptable to the United States."

In addition, Turkey wants assurances that it will be compensated for losses suffered in the operation. During the Gulf War, then-President Turgut Ozal provided immediate and unreserved cooperation to the coalition. Turkey closed its oil pipeline, losing billions of dollars in revenue; despite promises, Turkey was never compensated for those losses. During the current financial crisis, the issue of compensation will loom even larger. Turkey wants to see a new regime in Baghdad that has the full support of the Iraqi people; Turks will not make sacrifices and take risks for the sake of another dictatorship, even one less hostile than the current regime. Wolfowitz addressed this important issue with statements about democracy in Iraq.

Finally, it is essential to Turkey that Kirkuk and Mosul -- two large Iraqi cities not far from the current Kurdish autonomous region -- not be given to the Kurds. When the Turkish republic was created by Ataturk in 1923, these cities were the only ones among all that applied to join that were not included within the republic. Ataturk wanted to include them, but he did not command the military strength necessary to battle the British for these oil-rich territories. In current discussions of Kirkuk and Mosul, Turks emphasize the role of the Turcomans who have lived in these territories for over a thousand years. It is interesting to note that both Bahceli and Turkish Chief of General Staff Gen. Huseyin Kivrikoglu are Turcomans.

Timing

Recently, many U.S. press sources have speculated that the United States may take action against Iraq sooner rather than later. While in Turkey, Wolfowitz stated repeatedly that no final decisions had been made about either the timing or the specific mode of intervention. That said, if the Iraq question were to come to a head while elections loomed in Turkey (or soon after elections, while a new coalition government was being formed), Turkey would be unable to ignore the issue. No matter who is in power, many of the same concerns will arise; moreover, the Turkish military will have a strong voice in whatever policy is adopted on such an important security question. Therefore, the Turkish stance on U.S. action against Iraq may not depend much on whether this action takes place before or after Turkish elections.

How Important Is Turkish Cooperation?

Although Wolfowitz emphasized that the United States would implement its plans regardless of Turkey's stance, it would obviously be better for both countries if Turkey cooperated. Turkey has a serious interest in the long-term stability of the region and the creation of a new, democratic Iraq, one in which all elements of the population are

represented. Without Turkish involvement, any number of scenarios are possible, including the one Turkey fears most: a state that is torn apart by internal strife. Turks are justly proud of their country's superb performance as the leader of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. If they are able to escape the malaise created by Turkey's domestic woes, they may well decide that the forthcoming American action can be an opportunity for them to shape the future of yet another nation, one right on their border.

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