

# *TURKEY UPDATE*

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*February 14, 2003*

## **THE US-TURKISH ALLIANCE AT THE IRAQI JUNCTION**

On February 14, President George Bush received Turkish Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis and Economy Minister Ali Babacan to personally emphasize the urgent need for Turkey to clarify the extent of its support for the United States in the seemingly imminent conflict with Iraq. Bush's unusual gesture demonstrated an acknowledgement of Turkey's strategic importance in the Iraqi equation, while raising the stakes for Turkey in the negotiations relating to the opening up of a northern front against Saddam Hussein. It is clear that Turkish decisions in the next few days will determine the future course of the US-Turkish alliance.

On February 6, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) finally voted to allow the United States to modernize Turkish facilities in preparation for war. The vote was followed by the conclusion of a long-stalled memorandum permitting immediate work by American personnel on six air bases, including Incirlik, as well as the Mediterranean ports of Iskenderun and Mersin. If the TGNA approves a second resolution on the deployment of American troops on Turkish territory on February 18, as Washington expects, 40,000 soldiers and 200 aircraft will reportedly move into position to attack Iraq.

The request for Turkish logistical support had been conveyed to Ankara over three months ago and the lack of a response produced perceptible unease within the Washington policy elite planning for war. Consequently, parallel to the diplomatic efforts to obtain Turkey's backing, which included two letters by President George Bush, a long telephone call by Vice President Dick Cheney to the Turkish Prime Minister, Abdullah Gul, and a visit by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Richard Myers, the United States also brought public pressure to bear through expressions of displeasure by anonymous officials.

Despite the growing urgency of the messages, Ankara was slow to act for a number of reasons. To begin with, there is deep unease on the part of the Turkish government, the powerful military establishment and the Turkish public at large about the likely negative political and economic consequences of a war in Iraq. Just as in the rest of Europe and the Islamic world, a vast majority of Turks oppose both an attack on Iraq, as well as any kind of support for a military campaign. Moreover, while confronting the momentous decision on Iraq, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) was simultaneously endeavoring to establish full control over the government machinery. Despite its overwhelming parliamentary majority, the JDP faced broad resistance, particularly from President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and the entrenched civilian and military establishment suspicious of its Islamist origins, and major problems in appointing its bureaucrats. The JDP's task was made even more difficult by the fact that parallel to Prime Minister Gul's constitutionally mandated authority, Chairman Recep Tayyip Erdogan wielded ultimate political power.

Consequently, the Turkish Government withheld its response to Washington while hoping that this would somehow help dissuade President Bush from going to war. In the meanwhile, Gul mounted a regional peace effort by visiting Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran and organizing a conference with their foreign

ministers in Istanbul. When his diplomatic initiative failed to stem the drift to war, Gul followed up his earlier gesture of sending the Turkish Minister for Foreign Trade to Baghdad by dispatching a plane to bring Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan to Ankara for a fruitless last-ditch effort on February 3. However, the next day, Erdogan, bluntly declared that it was “not possible to prevent war,” prompting Gul to announce that “in line with our national interests” Turkey would “act with our strategic ally, the United States.”

The ability of the Turkish Government to resist superpower pressure is limited by certain realities. The weak Turkish economy is effectively on IMF life support sustained by discreet backing from Washington, and Turkey is hoping to receive a major financial package directly from the United States. Moreover, with Turkish hopes of early integration into the European Union dashed at Copenhagen last December and the value of NATO membership undermined by the policies of France, Germany and Belgium during the current crisis, a continued relationship with the United States has become even more imperative. Equally importantly, Ankara’s desire to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state with control over the oilfields of Mosul and Kirkuk after a possible break up of Iraq, dictates cooperation with Washington. Significantly, notwithstanding its own reservations relating to northern Iraq, the Turkish General Staff ultimately recommended a positive Turkish response to the United States.

However, the reluctance of the Turks to provide immediate support, as many in Washington clearly expected, has underlined the need to redefine the US-Turkish strategic relationship. The alliance had its origins in the Cold War and was buttressed for nearly four decades by their partnership against the Soviet Union. The redefinition needs to take into account the fundamental geostrategic changes, satisfy both sides on goals and means and fully clarify what each could expect from the other. At the same time, a new strategic accord following the Iraq crisis must include recognition that beyond its military value, Turkey’s support could be of incalculable importance in what will inevitably be a long drawn-out effort by the United States to convince a skeptical Islamic world that the war against Iraq is not part of a global campaign against Moslems.

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