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## SEEKING REDEFINITION: U.S.-TURKISH RELATIONS AFTER IRAQ

It has been three months since the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) failed to muster the appropriate number of votes to allow the United States to open a northern front through Turkey against Iraq. In retrospect it is clear that the March 1 vote reflected the public opposition to the imminent conflict, the perceptible ambivalence of the powerful military establishment and its reluctance to provide an unambiguous recommendation - in particular at the National Security Council (NSC) meeting one day before the vote - and the attitude of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. It also reflected the inability of the governing Justice and Development Party (JDP) to overcome its deep misgivings about the war to give a sufficiently clear lead.

However, despite the apparent consensus on the part of the unusual coalition of influential Turkish politicians, bureaucrats, soldiers and commentators that the denial of Turkish territory would constitute a major handicap to American war plans and might even force the Bush Administration to refrain from war, the United States proceeded to quickly defeat and overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman commented on the fundamental Turkish miscalculation after the war by saying that the "U.S. mistake was to let the Turks believe that somehow they were so important to this operation that we could not do it alone, ultimately."

Notwithstanding its current problems in post-Saddam Iraq, the United States is now firmly engaged on its massive project to undertake the transformation of the Middle East. The use of massive American military power has certainly focused the minds of the leaders of the remaining Baathist regime in Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as all other Middle Eastern autocrats and potentates, on their long-term prospects. Although Turkey, a U.S. ally and a democracy, has little reason to share their sense of foreboding, the persistent *frisson* in U.S.-Turkish relations since the vote provides legitimate grounds for concern over the future of its alliance with Washington.

For over fifty years since the Truman Doctrine and Turkish entry into NATO, successive U.S. administrations had unfailingly perceived Turkey as a strategically vital ally. Accordingly, Turkey received significant U.S. military and economic assistance, along with diplomatic support and understanding for periodic lapses in its democratic system and human rights record. Consequently, the unwillingness of Turkey to allow the United States to send ground troops to attack Iraq or to use bombers based at Incirlik air base came as an unwelcome surprise, particularly as the United States had proceeded to modernize Turkish airports and ports in accordance with an earlier TGNA vote in February to pre-position military equipment. "The big disappointment," as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz characterized the vote, was particularly galling to the Defense Department, Turkey's most ardent defender in Washington.

In the aftermath of the vote, it has become more apparent that the disappearance of the common Soviet foe had effectively removed the Cold War foundation of the strategic alliance between the two countries. Ironically, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the immediate Turkish response under President Turgut Ozal had then helped carry the relationship into the post Cold War era. Incirlik was made available to U.S. aircraft during the Gulf War in 1991 and for humanitarian assistance to beleaguered Iraqi Kurds as part of Operation Provide Comfort. During the following decade, the U.S. was allowed to use Incirlik through Operation Northern Watch in the enforcement of the no fly zone in northern Iraq. Consequently, Ankara was able to provide Washington a functioning cooperative arrangement, which encouraged the United States to argue that the alliance was in tact and to seek to embellish it with additional cooperation in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Caspian Sea energy and even Afghanistan.

## LOOKING AHEAD

To be sure, there has been no formal announcement from Washington during the past three months that the strategic partnership lauded by President Bill Clinton in Istanbul in 1999 is over or even that it is being seriously reviewed. Long-standing alliances do not wither rapidly and the hastily arranged visit to Ankara of Secretary of State Colin Powell in early April, as well as two subsequent telephone conversations between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President George Bush apparently reassured the Turks that the damage could soon be repaired. After all, Erdogan had argued in the Washington Post on March 23, just after taking over as prime minister, Turkey was “part of the coalition,” it had done its “utmost” to cooperate and wished to “prevent any watershed” in the relationship. The Turkish sense of optimism was further reinforced by the inclusion of \$1 billion for Turkey in the supplemental U.S. war budget, reportedly through the last-minute intervention of Secretary Powell.

Clearly, sustaining an admittedly difficult relationship with a predominantly Moslem country led by a government with Islamist origins is of value to Washington in its wider diplomatic efforts directed at a mostly skeptical Islamic world. However, at the practical bilateral level, there is an urgent need for repairs as well as redefinition. To begin with, as it won the war without the anticipated Turkish participation, the United States forged a tactical alliance with Iraqi Kurdish militias and then forced Turkey to back down from its stated intention to send troops into Iraq to counter Kurdish advances into Mosul and Kirkuk and to protect the Turkmens. It is worth noting that if the TGNA vote had gone the other way, Turkey would have established a sizeable and deterrent military presence in a buffer zone in northern Iraq as part of the military, political and economic agreements laboriously negotiated with the United States. Equally importantly, Operation Northern Watch was terminated and U.S. planes assigned to Incirlik were withdrawn, raising serious questions over the future role of Turkey in American forward deployment. Significantly, Chief of Staff Hilmi Ozkok acknowledged at the end of April that the United States might establish permanent bases in Bulgaria and Romania, although he chose to avoid comments on speculation that there might be permanent American bases in Iraq itself.

Washington and Ankara now confront the unavoidable and difficult task of determining exactly what each could expect from the other in the new geostrategic environment created by the Iraq war. For its part, the Bush Administration has made it clear that the immediate priority is for Turkey to prevent additional strains in the relationship by refraining from unilateral action in northern Iraq. The apparent medium-range U.S. goal is to ensure that Turkey will lend effective support to possible action against Syria and Iran. As Wolfowitz pointedly warned, “drawing closer” to those countries was “absolutely the wrong way to go” and Turkish policy towards “Syria or Iran should fit into an overall policy with us.” In the longer run, Wolfowitz reportedly told a visiting Turkish business delegation in May, “the ball was in the Turkish court” to define the nature of the relationship. After the recent Turkish rebuff, Washington clearly preferred Ankara to take the lead by saying what it was prepared to do in the future.

To be sure, there have been Turkish moves to repair the rift. A number of senior JDP officials were recently in Washington and Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Ugur Ziyal is due to arrive later this month. However, the Turkish task is not an easy one. While the Turkish government and the military are fully cognizant of the need to avoid misunderstandings with the United States in northern Iraq, serious Turkish misgivings over the enhanced position of the Kurds and the parallel weakening of that of the Turkmens could lead to future tensions. Moreover, while Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul condemned terrorism as a “scourge” that had to be “eradicated” at the recent Islamic conference in Teheran and frequently stresses his coordination with Powell relating to ongoing contacts with Syria and Iran, Turkey may find it difficult to maintain its delicate balancing act if Washington eventually moves towards outright confrontation with Damascus and Teheran. In fact, the Turkish government could once again find itself in a situation similar to its predicament during the prolonged build up to the Iraq war when it was involved in ultimately fruitless negotiations with Washington while maintaining a dialogue with the doomed regime in Baghdad. At the broader level, Turkey will also need to somehow dispel the widespread impression that has developed within the Bush Administration, Congress, media and the American public at large that it is no longer a totally reliable ally.

The redefinition of the U.S.-Turkish relationship will also require coordination and consensus in the Turkish system. For its part, in addition to the U.S.-Turkish relationship, the JDP government is also having to focus on the current recovery in the economy and the standby agreement with the IMF, as well as on its declared goal of beginning accession negotiations with the European Union (EU). However, as Erdogan and Gul have acknowledged, achieving the latter goal depends indirectly on a solution of the Cyprus problem. At the same time, there needs to be an adjustment of the Turkish civilian-military relationship to conform to European norms, in particular, of the composition and role of the NSC. Although the JDP has been moving very cautiously, the two issues have helped to bring to the surface strains between the JDP and powerful elements in the military establishment. The reported tensions recently prompted General Ozkok to publicly deny “growing discontent on the part of young officers” and Deputy Chief of Staff Yasar Buyukanit to reaffirm the military’s full support for EU membership. However, Ozkok also chose to stress that the entire military establishment had “deep concerns and sensitivities” and Buyukanit to warn the goal of EU membership could “not be used as a vehicle for the achievement of the aims of those opposed to the country’s unitary and secular system.” Consequently, it seems all too likely that the coming months will once again witness difficult negotiations and maneuvering within the Turkish system with their unavoidable effects on the repair of the relationship with Washington.

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