

Turkish-American Tensions Over the Iraqi Conflict

Soli Özel

Mehmet Ali Tuğtan

Bilgi University, Istanbul

Turkish-American Relations

The year 2003 has turned out, perhaps unexpectedly, to be a threshold year for Turkish-American relations. The issue that has defined these relations was the American led war against Iraq, and the position that Turkey would and ultimately did take with regard to cooperation with the US.

The new and inexperienced government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Abdullah Gül held tough negotiations with Washington on the nature, scope and extent of Turkish cooperation with the war. The American demand entailed the use of airbases in Turkey, including those near Istanbul and the Black Sea Shore; permission to deploy up to sixty thousand American troops en route to Iraq in Turkish territory, which also meant the opening of a northern front. In return, the United States offered their consent to the establishment of a twenty-kilometre security zone in northern Iraq. As many as fifty thousand Turkish troops would then move into this zone, some thirty thousand of which would be under US operational command. The United States also promised that the Kurdish parties in northern Iraq would not be allowed to send their forces to the major multicultural city of Kirkuk where the majority of inhabitants are Turcoman, that the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) fighters located in Iraq would be eliminated, and that Turkey would either receive a sum of six billion dollars in grants or

twenty billion in long term loans. A final matter of utmost importance for Turkey was the protection of the Turcoman minority living in northern Iraq.

While the negotiations for the final agreement were underway, the government, with the approval of the Parliament, allowed US technical personnel to upgrade several bases and send personnel, vehicles and material to the port city of Iskenderun. These developments indicated a willingness on the part of the government to satisfy Washington's demands, but the task itself proved harder to accomplish.

To begin with, there were almost no people or institutions in Turkey that wanted the war to be waged. In fact, the government went out of its way to bring regional powers together in order to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

On the issue of the actions Turkey should take in the case of war, the public was overwhelmingly opposed to cooperation. Of those institutions that would have a part in contributing to the decision, the presidency was unequivocally opposed to Turkish cooperation without a UN resolution that legitimated the war against Iraq, and this was also the position taken by the influential Parliament speaker. Moreover, the foreign ministry was in favour of cooperation; the military that had great reservations about the war and entertained grave concerns also appeared to be in favor. The government itself was divided on the matter, and as later reports suggested, the prime minister was, at best, uncomfortable with the idea of allowing the opening of a northern front if war proved inevitable.

Such divisions were also reflected by the highest body responsible for secu-

rity-related decisions in Turkey, the National Security Council. The prominent institution declined to endorse a «Yes» vote in the meeting held one day before the critical vote taken in Parliament.

The opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP), was against the deployment of American troops, but supported the unilateral sending of Turkish troops to Northern Iraq, a move that the United States explicitly stated would be unacceptable without its express consent.

The decision of the Turkish Parliament not to support the government's decree was a great shock to the Americans. Although the US administration expressed great disappointment over the refusal, the official position was respect for Turkey's democratic wish, and despite the fact that the decision would prevent the fourth infantry from entering the war, Washington did not choose to punish on Turkey. The next item for negotiation was whether Turkey should allow the US the use of its airspace, and before a final agreement was reached on the issue, the war started. This put a stop to the claim by many in Turkey, including some in the government and the military, that the Pentagon had no plan B prepared, and that without Turkey the war could not be waged. At a later date, an American official was to recapitulate this notion with the suggestion that Turkey had an exaggerated sense of its importance.

Once the war began, since the US had to rely exclusively on the cooperation of the Kurds in Northern Iraq, it was not long until Turkey's declared red lines were erased. The Kurdish forces entered the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, where they ransacked the city

records. Turkey wanted to maintain their right to enter Northern Iraq in case of either humanitarian need or PKK activity, but the US response was an unequivocal refusal. Although the tension between the parties was real, it also became clear later on that Turkey did allow the US Special Forces passage to northern Iraq, and the use of its airspace before the decision of Parliament, as well as the transportation of wounded US soldiers to the Incirlik base in Adana. As a sign of Turkey's continuing and future significance for the US, on 2nd April Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Ankara to offer Turkey one billion dollars in grants or 8.5 billion in loans.

The major casualty brought about by this episode was the collapse of the close relations that had prospered between the Pentagon and the Turkish Armed Forces, and a consequence of the ensuing dispute was a redefinition of the strategic partnership set up in the 1990's between the two countries. From a US perspective, the Turkish military had failed to assist when called upon in a moment of need. The message was presented in a most articulate fashion by the under-secretary of defence, Paul Wolfowitz, one of the most influential Turcophiles in Washington and a man committed to Turkey's democratisation. In an interview he gave to CNN-TURK TV station, Wolfowitz expressed his disappointment that the Turkish military had failed to take the lead in a security-related decision, and asked that Turkey acknowledge that it had committed an error in not supporting the ousting of a bloody tyrant. This interview gave rise to many controversial interpretations. Was Wolfowitz asking Turkey to apologise, or was he expressing regret that the Turkish democracy functioned and the civilians prevailed? If so what kind of democracy did he envisage for Turkey?

When most people in Turkey thought that the interview must have signified the low-point of Turkish-American relations, dealings were to deteriorate even further with an incident that took place on the 4th of July. As if to further erase Turkey's red lines, detachments from the 101st airborne forcefully entered the liaison office of Turkish Special Forces in Sulaymaniyah. It took

two full days to secure the release of the prisoners, and Turkish public opinion was in outrage. In the consequent investigation of the matter, a joint military committee issued a report from which an apology by the US military was blatantly absent. The US alleged that the Turkish Special Forces in the area were preparing for actions unwarranted by their mission mandate. The work needed to repair relations between the two militaries began immediately, and NATO Supreme Commander General Jones and CENTCOM Commander General Abizaid made a synchronised visit to Ankara.

The next important topic in Turkish-US relations was whether Turkey would be ready to send troops into Iraq. The US called for the deployment of Turkish troops when Ankara expressed its readiness to offer its help in that particular situation. The Turkish government considered the controversial idea, which was very unpopular with the public, for two principal reasons: the first and most obvious being the government's desire to make amends with the US for letting them down at the last moment earlier that year in March; and equally important was the wish of the Turkish military to be physically present in Iraq. As Chief of Staff General Hilmi Özkök remarked on 30th August, «You cannot expect to win the lottery unless you buy a ticket». The military believed that it could thereby provide a deterrent to the Kurds should they decide to try to take advantage of the disarray in Iraq and make attempts either to cleanse the region of non-Kurds or to declare their independence. The Turkish military was also apprehensive about the presence of five thousand militia from the separatist PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in northern Iraq, against whom the US was taking no action, even though they considered the PKK a terrorist organisation, and had in effect promised Turkey that action would be taken. Their failure to do so thus aggravated the existing climate of mistrust between the parties.

This concern with northern Iraq was the primary reason as to why an agreement could not be reached easily about where the Turkish troops should be deployed. It is safe to say however, that although Turkish-American relations have still not been fully recuperat-

ed, they are not set to fall apart completely. Relations will continue to be safeguarded, but on different grounds than those that prevailed during the Cold War.

NATO and Turkey

The year 2003 began with a crisis over the issue of NATO's delayed response to Turkey's routine request for assistance against a possible Iraqi missile attack, as the war in Iraq loomed closer. The alliance, to the frustration of both the US and Turkey, failed to give a prompt and affirmative response. Belgium, France and Germany felt that such an affirmation would give a stamp of approval to initial US preparations for war against Iraq, however Turkey interpreted this reluctance as an underestimation of Turkey's importance.

The Turkish political establishment shared the belief stated by many Western politicians and the outgoing NATO Secretary Lord Robertson that, in light of new threats the Alliance was facing, Turkey was no longer a southern flank country but had become a country in the front line. Particularly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Turkey's position as a secular and democratic Muslim country, with its historical and cultural credentials in Central Asia, the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East combined with its participation in the main western security and political organisations, made it a unique asset for the West.

The reluctance on the part of some of the European allies in the Trans-Atlantic Alliance to provide Turkey with the assistance it had requested against Iraq led many to question the future and viability of NATO as an entity. France, Germany and Belgium in particular objected to the American demand to mobilise NATO assets, on the grounds that this would give the world a message that the war was inevitable. In the end, the assistance was granted on NATO's Defence Review Committee, where France is not represented. Turkey had been an adamant supporter of international cooperation against terrorism, and the endorsement of the Partnership Action Plan Against Terrorism by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) represented a rising

awareness in this regard. Another positive sign of this endorsement was the country's willingness, especially on the part of new and aspiring members, to integrate its security agendas with that of the US. Turkey, as demonstrated by the crisis over NATO assistance in the Spring, had been suffering from the wid-

ening gap between the security agendas of European powers and the US. Its double position as a strategic partner of the US in the Middle East, on one hand, and as a candidate for membership in the EU on the other, created a dilemma in the planning of Ankara's security and threat priorities.

The dilemma was intensified by the fact that although its long term interests lay with the EU, the immediate security problems of Turkey desperately needed cooperation with the US. It was therefore crucial for Turkey that the Trans-Atlantic Alliance remained both relevant and viable.

THE ACCESS OF TURKEY INTO THE EU

- The Copenhagen European Council of December 2002 welcomed very positively the measures adopted by Turkey with reference to the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria, and recognised the determination of the new Turkish government to continue their advancement along the path of reform. It also declared that the strategy for accession would be reinforced, and the Commission was urged to submit a revised proposal of Accession Partnership.
- 19th May 2003. Council's decision on the principles, priorities, intermediate objectives and conditions for the accession of Turkey.
- The Thessaloniki European Council of June 2003 warmly welcomed the commitment of the Turkish government to undertake the reform process. The European Council affirmed that, bearing in mind the progress already made, it remains necessary to encourage further efforts. To this end, the Council has adopted a revised Accession Partnership that constitutes the cornerstone of the EU-Turkey relations, with a view to the adoption of the decision by the European Council in December 2004.

- At the meeting of the European Council planned for December 2004, the Council will decide (based on the report and the recommendation of the Commission) if Turkey fulfils the political criteria of Copenhagen. If the decision is positive the European Union will then start accession negotiations with Turkey without further delay.
- The Report on the preparation of Turkey for the accession of September 2003 emphasises that Turkey has made a legislative effort that constitutes a significant progress toward the country's adaptation to the political criteria of Copenhagen. Despite this progress, Turkey must continue its work for the improvement of certain aspects such as judicial independence, the exercising of fundamental rights, cultural rights and the situation in the southeast. Apart from legislative reforms, it must also ensure their effective implementation to guarantee Turkish citizens their fundamental rights and liberties in accordance with the European standards. At the same time, the advances in the relations with Greece with reference to the «Cyprus problem» are also signalled for importance.
- In the economic field, Turkey has significantly improved the functioning of its market eco-

nomy, although macroeconomic imbalances still prevail. The current process of reform must be maintained in several areas, such as fiscal discipline, the economic policies directed at stability, the restructuring of the financial sector, privatisation of public companies, promotion of investment, etc. The alignment of Turkey with the EU has progressed in many areas, particularly in those that contain international obligations similar to the community *acquis*, where it remains at an initial stage in many chapters. A legislative development in all the areas is still necessary, focusing on a more consistent implementation of the National Programme for the Adoption of the *Acquis*, in accordance with the priorities of accession established in May 2003.

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