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Middle East Brief

Turkish-American Relations Since the 2003 Iraqi War: A Troubled Partnership

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The United States was Turkey's closest ally during the Cold War, and close relations continued in the aftermath of the Cold War. Yet, relations between the two countries have been strained since the Iraqi war began in 2003—primarily because of a change in U.S. policy toward the Kurdish issue. The Turkish state establishment is concerned about potential Iraqi territorial disintegration in the future, which might produce a Kurdish state in the North. That might in turn lead to irredentist claims on the Kurdish-populated sectors of Turkey, which would threaten Turkish territorial integrity.¹ Since the beginning of the Iraqi war, the Kurdish separatist terrorist organization, the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party, also known as Kongra-Gel), has resumed its attacks on Turkish citizens and security forces. At the same time, anti-Americanism has been on the rise in Turkey. This paper analyzes tensions between the Turkish state and the United States since March 2003 from a Turkish perspective.

Turkish-American Relations: Highs and Lows

Traditionally, the Turkish state establishment—mainly the military—has defined two issues as constituting major threats to the Turkish state's existence: Islamic reactionism (fundamentalism) and separatist Kurdish terrorism, namely the PKK. For the purposes of this paper, I focus only on the threat posed by PKK terrorism.

Turkey has been struggling against PKK terrorism since the mid-1980s. The loss in human life was quite high. Between 1984 and 1999, nearly 37,000 people, including civilians and members of Turkish security forces, died. The economic cost was also high: Since the mid-1980s, Turkey has spent \$100 billion in the war against PKK terrorism.² In the 1990s, Turkey's efforts to fight PKK terrorism received harsh criticisms from the European Union as constituting "violations of human rights." Yet, unlike the EU, the U.S. clearly characterized the PKK as a terrorist organization—and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya with American assistance in 1999, after which

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PKK attacks in Turkey subsided. This support was very well received, in the 1990s, by the Turkish state and the public, and it led to the perception that the U.S. was Turkey's most trustworthy and dependable ally in the West.

This perception changed in March 2003, however, when the United States invaded Iraq. Turkey was, of course, not the only country that criticized the American invasion, which inaugurated a war whose legitimacy is highly debatable. Furthermore, the ways in which the U.S. conducted the war—as exemplified in the mistreatment of Iraqis, particularly at Abu Gharib prison and in Fallujah—created a fear in the Muslim world that the U.S. was targeting the faith of Islam itself rather than Islamist terrorism in particular.

In addition, the treatment of Turkish Special Forces by American marines in Suleymaniya in northern Iraq in the summer of 2003 hurt both the Turkish military and Turkish citizens. On July 4, 2003, United States marines arrested members of the Turkish Special Forces, alleging that they were planning to assassinate the newly appointed Kurdish governor of Kirkuk.³ Turkish soldiers were roughed up and sacks placed over their heads, as if they were Iraqi insurgents. One of the detained members of the Turkish Special Forces complained that “the marines treated us as if we were war detainees (*savaş esiri*).”⁴ The Turkish Chief of General Staff, Hilmi Özkök, commented that the Suleymaniya incident represented “the greatest crisis between Turkey and the United States.”⁵ The Turkish foreign minister, Abdullah Gül, argued that the American allegations were “unconvincing.”⁶

The incident was widely covered in the Turkish media.⁷ According to a public opinion poll conducted in Turkey in 2003, nine out of ten respondents (88.3 percent) did not accept American explanations for the incident, while seven out of ten (70.2 percent) argued that the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government, which was acting cautiously so as not to further damage bilateral relations with the U.S., did not take a tough enough stand on the incident.⁸

The continued presence of the PKK in northern Iraq, an American-controlled region, and the mistreatment of Turkmens in Telafer and Kirkuk, strengthened the belief that the PKK was being backed by the U.S.⁹ Semih Idiz, a columnist for the *Turkish Daily News*, reported in February 2005 that “most Turks, whether civilian or military, seriously believe today that the PKK is actually being harbored by the American military in northern Iraq.”¹⁰ Seventy-five percent of respondents in a poll conducted around the same time identified the American attitude toward the PKK terror organization in northern Iraq as the biggest impediment to Turkish–American relations.¹¹ Turkish citizens accordingly started to regard the United States not as a trustworthy ally, but as a state that was pursuing a double-standard policy on the issue of terrorism by targeting those it considered terrorists while ignoring the PKK. A poll conducted by the International Strategic Research Organization in March 2006 indicated that 83 percent of respondents did not believe that the U.S. would close down the PKK camps in northern Iraq.¹²

PKK terrorism had resumed in Turkey after the launching of the Iraqi war. In June 2004, the PKK broke its five-year unilateral cease-fire; since then, 1,007 Turkish citizens were killed or wounded as a result of terrorist attacks.¹³ Meanwhile, anti-Americanism has been on the rise in Turkey. According to a poll conducted in 2004, when Turkish citizens were asked to choose between the EU and the United States as a desirable ally, 51 percent chose the EU and only 6 percent opted for the U.S. A third of Turkish respondents identified the United States as the greatest threat to world peace.¹⁴

Another poll, conducted in 2005, revealed that while only 28 percent of respondents were totally anti-American, 50 percent had, on balance, a negative view of the United States. Seventy-one percent of the respondents disapproved of President George W. Bush and his policies. Nearly half of the respondents (47 percent) believed that relations with the U.S. were in a bad state and blamed President Bush and his administration for the deterioration of the decades-old Turkish–United States alliance.¹⁵ Hasan Ünal, a prominent Turkish political science professor, remarked in September 2005 that the Turkish public had never been so anti-American.¹⁶

The Iraqi war, then, has deeply divided Turkey and the United States—and the primary source of the rift is the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq. The 2003 public poll cited earlier shows that “the majority of the Turkish people (60.5 percent) believed that the U.S. favored the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq.”¹⁷ And the March 2006 poll showed that 82 percent of respondents believed that the establishment of a separate Kurdish state in northern Iraq was not compatible with Turkey’s interests.¹⁸

Diverging Interests: The March 1st Crisis

On March 1, 2003, the Turkish parliament rejected a bill under which tens of thousands of United States troops would have used Turkish territory to attack Iraq from the north.¹⁹ The rejection clearly did damage to the traditionally close Turkish-U.S. relationship. Top United States officials commented that had the Turkish front been used, the Sunni Iraqi insurgency in Iraq would not have been as strong, and hence a smaller number of American lives would have been lost. Some Turkish analysts regard the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq as a by-product of Turkey’s refusal to help the U.S.-led coalition forces. According to this view, the rejection of the bill “forced the U.S. to become dependent on Iraqi Kurdish militias,”²⁰ resulting in the U.S. turning a blind eye to the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq.²¹ Yet, other analysts argue that even if the Turkish parliament had passed the bill, according to American military planning Turkish troops would have been sent to the Sunni triangle near Baghdad, rather than to northern Iraq. Furthermore, Turkey would have been put in the position of a country invading its neighbor, and would be participating in a war whose legitimacy was highly questionable.²²

In the 1990s, Turkey had been occasionally carrying out anti-PKK cross-border operations in northern Iraq. At that time, the U.S. was not criticizing Turkey for these operations; on the contrary, the U.S. supported Turkey’s anti-PKK struggle.²³ Some analysts argue that after the rejection of the bill, the U.S. was forced to ally with the

Kurds in northern Iraq, as a result of which Turkey seems to have lost some leverage with respect to carrying out cross-border operations.²⁴

Diverging Interests: Telafer and Kirkuk

One of the major concerns of Turkey has been the forced demographic change in the Turkmen-populated cities of Kirkuk and Telafer in northern Iraq, whereby Turkmens are being replaced with Kurds. In September 2004, the U.S. conducted an air bombardment in Telafer to hunt for Iraqi insurgents. But this operation increased Turkish concern regarding the future of Turkmens in Telafer. Prominent Turkmen leaders in Telafer called for an active Turkish policy toward the Turkmens in northern Iraq. “Lots of people abandoned their homes,” declared Iraqi Turkmen Tribes chair Abdülhamit Beyatlı. “We sought help mainly from the Iraqi government. We do not want Turkey to be silent about what is going on.”²⁵ In the aftermath of the American military operation, *Şakir Hacıoğlu*, the Iraqi Turkmen Front chair and Independent Turkmen Movement chair, reported that “the people of the region are in a very difficult situation; women, children, and old people are dying.”²⁶

Turkish opposition parties of various political orientations (center-right, center-left, nationalist, and Islamist) criticized the Justice and Development Party government for pursuing a passive policy regarding what was going on in Telafer. Onur Öymen, for example, vice-chair of the main opposition party in Parliament, the center-left Republican People’s Party, argued that the government did not even have the courage to criticize the American military operation in Telafer, let alone pursue an active policy to protect Turkish interests.²⁷

In March 2005, the chair of the Ankara branch office of the Iraqi Turkmen Culture and Cooperation Association, Mahmut Kasapoğlu, claimed that as a result of the military operation in Telafer, over 30,000 Turkmens were forcefully transferred. Kasapoğlu argued that the American military operation, with the collaboration of local Kurds, sought to erase the Turkmen-populated region located between the Barzani region in northern Iraq and the Syrian Kurds.²⁸ Ümit Özdağ, a prominent Turkish scholar, commented that the U.S. military operation was aimed at forcing the Turkmen population in Telafer to emigrate, and to ensure their replacement by a flow of Kurdish migrants.²⁹

Kirkuk, a multiethnic city of Turkmens, Arabs, and Kurds, which has 12 percent of Iraq’s oil reserves, has become another source of tension between Turkey and the United States. Large numbers of Kurdish migrants returned to the city to reclaim property that had been forcefully taken from

them during Saddam Hussein's Arabization campaign.³⁰ The Kurdish Democracy Party leader, Massoud Barzani, declared that "Kirkuk is a Kurdish city with a Kurdish identity. Neither Turkey nor any other country has the right to speak about Kirkuk or any other Iraqi city."³¹ Patriotic Union of Kurdistan chair Jalal Talabani likewise described Kirkuk as "a city of Iraqi Kurdistan."³²

Before the January 2005 elections for the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly, both Kurdish leaders encouraged and financed Kurdish migration from other parts of Iraq and neighboring countries to Kirkuk.³³ The Turkish military—for example, Deputy Chief of General Staff İlker Başbuğ—warned that Kurdish migration could spark clashes in Iraq, posing a security problem for Turkey and possibly drawing Turkey into the conflict. Massoud Barzani replied, "We are not interested in what Turkey or any other countries say. Their words are not binding on us. Threats will not work. The elections will reveal what the people of Kirkuk want for the city's future."³⁴ The JDP government, unlike previous Turkish governments of various political orientations, pursued a wait-and-see policy. Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül commented, "The elections are a step, but of course we will see what it is like. Let's see what happens. Will there be manipulation or not? What will the participation be like?"³⁵

During the January 2005 elections, Iraqi Turkmens appealed to the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI), alleging irregularities at the polling stations of Kirkuk, Musul, Selahaddin, and Erbil. Turkmens reported that "Eight polling stations were illegally set up to allow Kurds to vote." The IECI acknowledged the allegations and advised that a committee of lawyers would investigate the issue.³⁶ Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, criticized the "disturbing elements" in the Iraqi election process, noting that "we are concerned that some segments did not participate in the elections at the level that we had hoped for and that the results may display an imbalanced picture in ethnic terms."³⁷

Meanwhile, the JDP government pursued a two-track policy toward the United States regarding northern Iraq. It frequently criticized U.S. policy toward Turkmens in northern Iraq, while at the same time trying to mend U.S.-Turkish relations. As Foreign Minister Gül declared, "The Turkish-American relationship is above everything."³⁸

Turkey's Unmet Demands

Turkey continued to urge the United States to take active steps against the presence of PKK terrorists in northern Iraq, but no satisfactory measures were undertaken by the U.S. An American official estimated that there were

between 4,000 and 6,000 PKK militants located in Kandil Mountain in northern Iraq, and that a military force ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 was needed to destroy the PKK camp; but U.S. forces in Iraq had a higher priority fighting a Sunni Arab insurgency in the country's central areas.³⁹ Turkish Security General Management (*Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü*) reported that because of weak authority in Iraq in the aftermath of the war, the PKK could obtain C-4- and C-3-type explosives in northern Iraq. Between 2004 and 2005, Turkish security forces intercepted 190 kilograms of explosives intended to be used by PKK terrorists. Commander of the Land Forces, General Yaşar Büyükanıt, noting that both types of explosives were "entering into Turkey from northern Iraq," observed that C-4 has become an indispensable component of terrorists' backpacks.⁴⁰

In July 2005, the PKK bombed a number of holiday resorts in Turkey. In response, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that Turkey might consider cross-border military operations against the PKK camps in northern Iraq; whereupon U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Daniel Fried warned Turkey against such steps and advised that such moves could lead to "unintended consequences." Instead, the U.S. urged Turkey to improve its relations with Iraqi Kurds. This represented a major shift in United States policy regarding Turkey. As General Richard Myers, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed, "I think the difference now is that they [Turkey] are dealing with a sovereign Iraqi government, and a lot of these discussions will have to occur between Turkey and Iraq, not between Turkey and the U.S."⁴¹

Deputy Chief of General Staff Başbuğ sharply criticized the shift in U.S. policy toward Turkey during his visit to Washington, remarking that "the fact that the U.S. does not do anything to eliminate the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq shows that we are not on the same page. Such a situation is impossible to explain to anybody. . . . Regarding the PKK problem, Turkey expects more from its American friends. . . . We have been waiting for more than two years with patience. The Turkish public wants the U.S. to take action against the PKK."⁴² Yet, the United States took no military action against the PKK—and in August 2005 the PKK actually opened up an office in U.S.-controlled Kirkuk.⁴³

While it encouraged Turkey to negotiate with the Iraqi government regarding a resolution of the PKK problem in northern Iraq, the U.S. continued to condemn the PKK as a terrorist organization. U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley emphasized, for example, that "the PKK is a terrorist organization. We condemn its activities. We understand its activities in northern Iraq affect Turkey and

cost Turkish lives.”⁴⁴ Along the same lines, U.S. Chargé d’Affaires Nancy McElDowney maintained that “there can be no division between us, and no double standard in our words or our deeds. It makes no difference whether the bomb explodes in Istanbul or in New York. . . . And it makes no difference whether the name is Osama bin Laden, or Abdullah Öcalan, or Al-Zarkawi.”⁴⁵ Prime Minister Erdoğan, meanwhile, reiterated what Turkey expected from the U.S. and complained that “no concrete steps have been taken so far.”⁴⁶

In September 2005, the Turkish military briefed the press and reported that nearly 4,000 PKK militants were located in the mountains of northern Iraq and were carrying out terrorist attacks against Turkish security forces and civilians; since the summer of 2004, more than 100 Turkish security force members had died as a result of PKK terrorism. In the summer 2005, the PKK had also attacked holiday resorts in western Turkey, resulting in civilian deaths as well.⁴⁷ While Minister of Trade Kürşat Tüzmen emphasized the necessity for action rather than merely words from the United States, and Chargé d’Affaires McElDowney commented that Turkey was “impatient” regarding what it demanded from the U.S.,⁴⁸ Adullah Öcalan’s brother, Osman Öcalan, predicted that the U.S. would not take any military action against the PKK in northern Iraq. “The U.S. does not want to antagonize any Kurdish factions,” Öcalan argued. “The U.S. policy is to ally with all Kurdish factions.”⁴⁹ Similarly, PKK chair Zübeyir Aydar contended that they were not expecting any U.S. military operation, as “the U.S. allies with the Kurds. The Kurds will be a part of the 21st century.”⁵⁰

In October 2005, the Turkish military briefed military attachés of various embassies in Ankara—a rare occasion highlighting the military’s increased concern regarding PKK terrorism. According to the military’s findings, there were 1,850 PKK militants in Turkey and 3,500 PKK militants abroad, mainly in northern Iraq.⁵¹ Again it was stressed that the U.S. had not taken any measures against the PKK presence in northern Iraq.

In December 2005, Kurdish Democracy Party leader Barzani proclaimed that “the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk will join the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in 2007;” otherwise, he warned, “there would be chaos and instability in Iraq.”⁵² Barzani had already been welcomed by both President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair as the president of Iraq’s autonomous Kurdish region. Turkish Foreign Minister Gül had responded that “Turkey has no objection to high-level reception for the Kurdish leaders, but insists on the need to protect the unity and integrity of Iraq.” Gül warned that the disintegration of Iraq would bring chaos, and criticized Iraqi Kurdish leaders

for not taking any steps toward eliminating the PKK camps in northern Iraq. “Today,” he declared, “PKK terrorism hurts Turkey. But tomorrow, it could hurt Iraqi Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq. Terrorism is a source of trouble not only for us but also for them, and they are aware of this fact.”⁵³

On the same day that the *Turkish Daily News* reported Massoud Barzani’s warning about Kirkuk, the Islamic daily *Milli Gazete*, citing the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* and the Italian daily *La Stampa* as its sources, reported that retired Israeli military officers were training Kurdish *peshmergas* (fighters) in northern Iraq.⁵⁴ News regarding Israel’s training of Kurdish *peshmergas* had first appeared in June 2004.⁵⁵ Although Israel denied the allegations, the Turkish state establishment and the Turkish public may not have found the denial convincing. These alleged activities raised Turkish concerns that Israel was encouraging and organizing Kurdish ambitions to establish an independent state and that it was also backing the PKK.⁵⁶ It should be noted that the general view in Turkey is that Israel, as a close United States ally, has been a primary source of tension in the region. The close relations between Turkey and Israel, which were mainly established by the Turkish military high-command in the mid-1990s, have seemingly been damaged as a result of the Iraqi war.

As the Turkish state establishment predicted, pro-PKK demonstrations started to take place in Turkey. For example, in November 2005, a political gathering was organized by “Democracy Platform,” which is composed of twenty-eight civil society associations, for the purpose of finding a “peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey.” The gathering, however, turned out to be a pro-PKK and pro-Öcalan show. Nearly 20,000 people gathered, shouting such slogans as: “We will go to the mountains, ask for an account;” “I am European, *Türkiyeliyim* [affiliated to Turkey], Kurdish;” and “I want a democratic and liberal constitution.” Diyarbakır great municipality mayor Osman Baydemir was welcomed by the crowd with the slogan, “The PKK is the public; the public is here.”⁵⁷

While the U.S. refrained from taking any measures against the PKK in northern Iraq, Iran and Syria proclaimed the PKK a terrorist organization and announced that they would take necessary measures against it.⁵⁸ In August 2005, Iran asked for cooperation from Turkey as it prepared to conduct a military operation against PKK efforts to organize Kurds against Iran.⁵⁹ Syria, which had supported the PKK in the 1990s, declared that the PKK problem was no longer an issue between Turkey and Syria. It also indicated its support of Turkey’s policy of protecting Iraq’s territorial integrity.⁶⁰ Thus, Iran and Syria, countries which were considered by Turkey enemies in the 1990s, now

became allies of Turkey in the face of the commonly perceived threat from the Kurds, while the U.S. and Israel came to be seen in the eyes of many Turkish policy-makers, security forces, and the public, as states supporting the PKK.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed Turkish–United States relations in the aftermath of the current Iraqi war from a Turkish perspective. The Turkish public deeply questioned the legitimacy of the American invasion of Iraq, as did citizens in many EU and Muslim countries. The unethical treatment of Turkish Special Forces by United States marines in Suleymaniya hurt both the Turkish military and Turkish citizens; and the treatment of Turkmens in Telafer and Kirkuk likewise increased tensions between Turkey and the U.S.

In June 2004 the PKK broke its five-year unilateral cease-fire. Since then, PKK terrorism has resumed in Turkey: Almost every day, there is a PKK attack, often directed against Turkish security forces. The JDP government has been heavily criticized by political parties of various ideological tendencies: center-right, center-left, Islamist, and nationalist. Turkish politicians of various ideological orientations are united against the commonly perceived threat posed by PKK terrorism—a scenario that could hardly have been imagined before the Iraqi war. They criticize the government for what they regard as its insufficient response to PKK terrorism and to the perceived new U.S. tolerance of the PKK.

Changes in United States policy on the issue of PKK terrorism, and the rift between the U.S. and Turkey over measures to be taken against the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq, deeply divided the former close allies. Turkish policy-makers, along with the Turkish military and the Turkish public, increasingly regard the U.S. as having selectively targeted certain terrorists while turning a blind eye to the rise of PKK terrorism in Turkey. As a result, anti-Americanism is on the rise in Turkey.

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