



The Turkish-American Crisis

An Analysis of 1 March 2003

Karen Kaya

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS FACED a serious crisis on 1 March 2003 when the Turkish Parliament voted down the Turkish government's motion to deploy American troops in Turkey and open a northern front into Iraq.¹ What went wrong? How did this decision affect bilateral relations? How can we prevent such incidents from happening again? Given the importance of the strategic partnership between Turkey and the United States, these are important questions worth exploring.

The decision itself arose from several Turkish miscalculations. The Turkish public and parliament were mostly against war. Although the administration, army, and foreign ministry were not crazy about the idea of war, they did not wish to disrupt relations with the United States, a strong ally. On the other hand, they were reluctant to appear to be part of an effort to remove a neighboring country's regime by force, regardless of how bad that regime was. The European Union, which Turkey was trying to join, was divided on the issue of Iraq.

Several factors came together to produce the outcome of 1 March 2003. The domestic political environment in Turkey prior to 1 March 2003 was fragmented. There was no clear single point of contact for negotiations with the United States. In addition, U.S. war plans matured around the time of Turkey's general elections. The soon-to-be-elected party had no idea what was happening. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which had only come to power in November of 2002 and was inexperienced in foreign policy, resented U.S. policies. It was difficult for a party with its Islamic beliefs to get Turkey involved with large-scale military operations against a neighboring Muslim country. Moreover, the Turkish public remembered that Turkey had to deal with a refugee crisis and a huge loss in tourism revenues after the previous Gulf War. Concerns about the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq led to fears about a Kurdish secessionist movement. Finally, the military, the president, the parliament, the prime minister,

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PHOTO: Iraqi Kurds hold a rally to protest against possible Turkish plans to deploy forces in northern Iraq, 4 March 2003. (AP Photo/Tomislav Skaro)

the foreign minister, and the National Security Council all disagreed with each other.

In this uncertain environment, the government decided to require two motions from parliament, instead of one. When the first motion passed with a comfortable margin, the United States naturally thought that the second one would pass as well. However, it did not. And the crisis ensued.²

What Were the Stakes?

Turkish-American relations expert Soli Özel remembers that to create a northern front, the United States requested the use of Turkish airbases near Istanbul and the Black Sea, permission to deploy 80,000 to 90,000 American troops on Turkish territory en route to Iraq, permission to station 250 planes at Turkish airports, and the use of 14 airports and five sea ports. In return, the United States would establish a 20-kilometer security zone in northern Iraq. Up to 50,000 Turkish troops would go into this zone, some 30,000 of whom would be under U.S. operational command. The United States also promised that it would not allow the Kurdish political parties in northern Iraq to send their forces to Kirkuk, a multicultural city with a

majority of Turcoman residents, and that fighters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and their bases in northern Iraq would be eliminated. Turkey would also receive \$6 billion in grants or \$24 billion in long-term loans. The Turkish government had already approved U.S. technical personnel upgrading several bases and sending men, vehicles, and materiel to the port city of Iskenderun. Even though these developments indicated a willingness on the part of the Turkish government to satisfy Washington's demands, the task itself turned out to be more complicated.³

The domestic political environment in Turkey during the period leading up to the infamous "motion" was one of uncertainty and dysfunction. Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit had held talks with U.S. officials, including President George W. Bush and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. However, Ecevit's health was deteriorating. There were calls for him to step down. Sixty deputies from his party, the Democratic Left Party, had already resigned, including the deputy prime minister and the foreign minister. There were calls for early general elections.⁴ When the Bush administration made its first official *demarche* with the Turkish



(Paul Morse/White House)

Former President George W. Bush and then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the Republic of Turkey talk with reporters in the Oval Office, 16 January 2002.



(DOD)

Former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

government, serious splits within the Turkish political landscape were surfacing.⁵ In fact, the very day that Wolfowitz made his requests, coalition leaders agreed to hold early elections. These splits eventually dragged Turkey toward a period of political uncertainty and the denial of U.S. requests to open a northern front.

Gap between Domestic and Foreign Policy Actors

Wolfowitz's visit led to an agreement between the United States and Turkey to begin preparations for war in Iraq, even though the Turkish side had not made any final decision.⁶ The idea was that both sides would not be caught off-guard when a final decision was made, and no time would be lost.⁷

As a follow-up to Wolfowitz's visit, several government officials—including the undersecretary of the Turkish foreign ministry, the foreign minister, and the minister of state in charge of treasury—visited Washington in the fall of 2002 to discuss war plans in further detail. Turkey conveyed its expectations regarding its economic needs in case hostilities

broke out. In mid-October, Turkish military authorities officially started discussing contingency plans for Iraq with their American counterparts, and the Turkish government allowed the use of Turkish air space for U-2 flights over Iraq. While Turkish and American military officials were busy working on plans for military operations, Turkish politicians were busy with election campaigns.

A New Party comes to Power

On 3 November 2002, the recently formed Justice and Development Party won a landslide victory.⁸ Founded only a little over a year before the elections, the AKP was a brand new player on the political scene. The party had strong Islamic roots, and most of its members resented U.S. policies. The AKP had no experience in national government, foreign policy, or decision making. Involving the AKP in large-scale military operations against a neighboring Muslim country like Iraq was therefore problematic. The military and secular establishments were uncomfortable with the party's rise to power, and it was unclear whether the AKP would be able to work with the Turkish military.

War Memories

The public and government were also uncomfortable with the idea of involving Turkey in another war. Turkey had suffered an estimated \$40 to \$50 billion in economic losses during the 1991 Gulf War, some of which were due to unkept American pledges. Many thought Turkey's president had not bargained hard enough with the Bush Administration and expected tough negotiations to protect Turkey's interests this time.

The possibility of a military intervention in Iraq also brought up memories of PKK terrorism. Most Turks believed the power vacuum created in northern Iraq was a result of the first Gulf War—that it created a safe haven for the PKK and paved the way for terrorism and the resultant loss of 30,000 Turkish lives in 15 years. The Turks believed that one of the consequences of the Gulf War was the creation of a semi-autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq. The majority of Turks worried that a military campaign in Iraq might further consolidate this entity. They also feared that a U.S. operation relying on Iraqi Kurds might empower an independent Kurdish state and even ignite Kurdish secessionist

movements in Turkey. The fear was that Iraq's Kurds, with America's tacit blessing, would exploit the turmoil that would follow an Iraqi defeat by setting up their own independent state in the chunk of northern Iraq under their control.⁹

As the Americans discussed following the model they used to destroy the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, they became worried about the role Kurdish groups would play in the war and in post-Saddam Iraq. The Turks believed that if Kurdish groups aided by the American troops helped topple the Saddam regime, the Kurds would be the main beneficiaries of the operation.¹⁰

The war would be the first time the Turkish Republic hosted a large number of foreign troops on its territory, and it was unclear whether the Turkish public would be comfortable with some 80,000 to 90,000 troops stationed on its soil to invade a neighboring Muslim country.¹¹

The public also felt that Turkey would have to deal with the aftermath of the war, while the United States could leave the region whenever it decided. The public feared that the United States would withdraw prematurely and leave the region full of political demons. If the United States did not provide the necessary troops or resources to rebuild Iraq, it might fall into a prolonged ethnic conflict that could aggravate militant radical Islamic terrorist groups, who might use terror and other guerrilla tactics to weaken the U.S. position in the Middle East. The Turks felt that if Iraq fell into anarchy, it would likely spill over into the rest of the Gulf and create a catastrophe, leaving Turkey and other countries in the region to deal with it. Some Turks feared that a victory over Iraq, far from being a deathblow to terrorism, would end up producing a new generation of terrorists.

The Turks also believed that such a war would severely harm the economies in the region. Memories of losses after the Gulf War exacerbated the economic concerns. Turkey claimed that it lost up to \$100 billion in trade revenues because of the economic sanctions enforced on Iraq. With another invasion of Iraq, trade activities that had recovered in the past decade would halt again. More important, tourism, amounting to \$10 billion annually, would be severely hurt, along with desperately needed new foreign investment. An intervention in Iraq would destabilize the region at a time when stability was



Current Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

the key component to success in the global fight against terrorism.

Turkey was also concerned that countries like Iran and Syria might increase their support to terrorist groups in order to marginalize American influence and that Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah might increase their activities in the region. Turkey was concerned about having to deal with an influx of refugees, as had happened in the previous Gulf War crisis, worried that weapons of mass destruction might end up in the hands of terrorists, and that Iran might conclude that the only way to defend itself from the United States was to acquire nuclear weapons of its own and to increase and accelerate its efforts in this direction.

In view of all these things, therefore, Turkey decided to maintain the status quo rather than involve itself in an operation that might open the doors to military, political, and economic uncertainty.

Too Many Communication Channels

Normally, the leader of the victorious party in Turkey becomes prime minister, but due to a court verdict, the AKP's leader could not do so. Thus,

an interim prime minister assumed power to serve until the verdict was satisfied. After the November elections, communications between the United States and Turkey entailed negotiations between then-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and the Turkish Prime Minister-elect Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, aided by three of his advisers, but none of these people had any official capacity to represent the Turkish government. The details of the meetings that took place between these parties were never communicated to the Foreign Ministry or the Turkish General Staff. As a result, negotiations and promises made through back channels often went beyond the limits set in official channels. The president and the speaker of the parliament were opposed to cooperation without a UN resolution that legitimated the war against Iraq. The foreign ministry was in favor of cooperation. The military had major reservations about the war and the future of northern Iraq, but it was in favor of cooperation because it wanted to have a say in how Iraq's future would unfold after the war.¹² Since then, several generals have expressed that Turkey's refusal of the motion was a mistake, lamenting a lost historical opportunity to end the PKK presence in northern Iraq.

The government was thus divided. Prime Minister Abdullah Gül was uncomfortable with the idea of a northern front launching from Turkey. The Prime Minister-elect, the leader of the governing party, was in favor of cooperation. The National Security Council makes security-related decisions in Turkey, but it was also divided. The opposition party opposed the deployment of American troops into northern Iraq but supported the unilateral deployment of Turkish troops to the same area, a move the United States would not accept.¹³

The Turkish military had major concerns and suspicions.¹⁴ On 24 February 2003, the Kurdish parliament in northern Iraq declared it "would not let any foreign military in." Turkish military leaders

wondered if the United States was negotiating with Ankara on the one hand, while supporting Kurdish leaders on the other. When the United States insisted on distributing a large number of anti-aircraft missiles to Kurdish groups, Turkish military officials understandably wondered who these anti-aircraft missiles were going to be used against. The United States insisted an American commander command the Turkish troops in northern Iraq and tried to include a clause in the agreement preventing Turkish troops from opening fire on anyone, including PKK members, unless were fired upon first. (Eventually, the United States had to drop this clause due to a public uproar about it.)

The United States had requested the use of a large number of airports and ports, which would have had the effect of turning the whole country into a U.S. logistical base and creating suspicions that the United States might also invade Iran and Syria via Turkey.

Turkey believed that after a certain period, Turkish troops would be told, "We don't need you, you can leave now." Some worried that the United States would not allow Turkish troops more than 15 to 20 kilometers inside Iraq and hold them in a security zone.

Two Decrees

In an effort to improve Turkey's bargaining position, the Turkish government decided to separate the issue into two different motions requiring parliamentary approval. The Turkish constitution stipulated that the arrival of American military personnel onto Turkish soil for the proposed modernization effort would require such approval, and the deployment of military units in Turkey, including the landing of U.S. combat forces en route to Iraq, would require parliamentary approval. The government could have combined both of these issues into a single comprehensive motion but did not. The foreign ministry and the military thought this was the proper way to proceed, but the

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prime minister thought otherwise, so the government chose to submit a motion to the parliament authorizing only the first part of the request: the upgrading of the military infrastructure in Turkey. This was approved by a safe margin: 308 in favor, 198 against. The second part of the U.S. request remained on hold. Had the two motions been combined into one, they might have passed comfortably.¹⁵

The “accident” of 1 March 2003. The second motion, which entailed the landing of U.S. combat forces en route to Iraq and the deployment of their support units on Turkish soil, finally came to the Parliament on 1 March 2003.¹⁶ Despite the prime minister-elect’s strong appeal, around 100 AKP parliament members defected in a closed vote and the resolution was defeated. The parliament refused the government’s request for permission to invite U.S. ground troops into Turkey and refused to allow Turkish troops to cross into northern Iraq. Public opinion was overwhelmingly against a war Turkey considered unjust.¹⁷

Turkish-American relations. U.S. officials were shocked at the decision. Despite the great disappointment, the U.S. official position was to respect Turkey’s democratic will. However, once the war

began, the United States had to rely on cooperation with the Kurdish factions and their militias in northern Iraq, as Turkey had feared. It later surfaced that Turkey allowed U.S. Special Forces passage to northern Iraq and the use of Turkish airspace, *before* the parliament’s decision. Turkey also allowed the transportation of wounded U.S. soldiers to the Incirlik base in Adana. In an effort to ease tensions and as a sign of Turkey’s continuing importance, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Ankara on 2 April 2003 and offered Turkey one billion dollars in grants or eight and a half billion dollars in loans. The U.S. Senate approved the loans on condition that Turkey would not unilaterally send troops to northern Iraq.¹⁸

The major casualty of this ordeal was close relations between the Pentagon and the Turkish armed forces. In addition, both sides started redefining the 1990s strategic partnership between the two countries. From an American perspective, the Turkish military failed to be steadfast when the United States called upon it in a moment of need. However, Turkish politicians denied “turning their backs” on the United States, and pointed to domestic public opinion, national security interests, and bureaucratic and domestic complications.¹⁹



(AP Photo)

A member of the Kurdistan Workers Party, known by its Kurdish acronym PKK, is seen near the Iraq-Turkish border, north of Baghdad, Iraq, 28 October 2007.

What Did We Learn?

Pursuing a multi-track diplomacy with several actors within Turkey led to confusion and false promises. Having a clear and legitimate point of contact for negotiations is important. In addition, understanding the domestic environment within a country is critical. In this case, negotiations became void due to general elections and an administration change.

Even though relations have been on the mend since the United States pledged to support Turkey in its fight against PKK terror in November 2007, the two militaries still hold grudges against each other.²⁰ Military-to-military relations need repairing. Both militaries have to develop a better understanding of each other's concerns and learn to have a more open dialogue. In judging each other's decisions, both sides need to take into account the domestic situation within the two countries and better understand their respective operational environments. One possible way to achieve this might be to increase opportunities for exchange programs for cadets in the service academies to promote mutual understanding. Both sides should take better advantage of international military education and training opportunities at available facilities. Opportunities for language training of cadets and officers might also prove useful in promoting mutual understanding.

As former U.S. Ambassador Mark Parris has noted, the United States considers Turkey a "European country," and due to Cold War logic, the State Department assigns it to the European Bureau, and the Pentagon assigns it to European Command (EUCOM). However, since the end of the Cold War, the most difficult issues in U.S.-Turkish relations have arisen in the Middle East, an area that is the responsibility of Central Command (CENTCOM), which does not have the same expertise or understanding of Turkey. On the other hand, European specialists who are unfamiliar with the crises on Turkey's borders fill key jobs relating to Turkey for which CENTCOM specialists might be better qualified. The result is often deadlock, which Turkey perceives as disregard. One possible solution is to fill key jobs in both EUCOM and CENTCOM with people who have expertise in both regions.²¹

For its part, Turkey vastly overestimated its importance to the United States. Some claim that by refusing the motion to allow a northern front, Turkey was trying to prevent the Iraq war.²² Turkey did not realize how serious the United States was about invading Iraq, and did not realize that the United States would do so regardless of whether Turkey supported it or not. Such a misperception points to the urgent need for mutual understanding of contemporary operational environments and military intentions. **MR**

NOTES

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