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## TURKEY AND THE WAR IN IRAQ

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With the prospect of war in Iraq looming larger by the day, the position of Turkey on a possible US attack has become more crucial than ever before. The Iraq decision is the first major test of the new AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. Since its landslide victory early in November, the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan-inspired, Abdullah Gül-led cabinet has managed to allay earlier fears of an Islamic shift in this 70-million-strong, strategically vital NATO member. The new government has positioned itself well within the pro-Western camp, aggressively pressed for EU membership, reacted favorably to the UN plan to resolve the Cyprus crisis, and continued to cultivate a close relationship with the US. Hence, despite conflicting statements recently floated in Ankara, it is to be expected that Turkey will cooperate with the US-British effort to disarm Iraq and will not resist the Bush team's attempt to install a new regime in Baghdad.

It is important to note that Turkey is not merely an indifferent bystander in the developing Iraq story. Rather, Ankara has long had vested political and economic interests in Iraq which it is determined to defend against internal and external threats. The historical connection to northern Iraq—once a major Ottoman possession and often contested by Iran—involves a complex relationship with the Kurdish population in that

region. With 10 to 12 million Kurds in Turkey itself—many dispersed in urban centers but the majority still perched in the rural provinces of eastern Anatolia—a lingering fear dominates Turkey's view of the issue. Should the moves in Iraq create even a semi-independent Kurdish state, the Kurds in eastern Turkey might actively seek to break away and join that new entity. Even the slightest hint in that direction will be vigorously opposed by Ankara, whose governing elites have consistently resisted, at times quite brutally, any talk of secession.

This question reemerges as Turks have come to believe that the Kurdish issue is, to a large extent, on its way to a satisfactory resolution. The PKK-led insurrection has been effectively suppressed following the arrest and trial of Aptullah Öçalan, the PKK's charismatic leader, who called for an end to violent resistance. As part of Turkey's attempt to qualify for EU admission by improving its human rights record, Parliament (TBMM) suspended Öçalan's death sentence and subsequently moved to set aside the death penalty in Turkey. Easing restrictions on the teaching and use of the Kurdish language has further alleviated pressing concerns by many, though not all, Turkish Kurds. Consequently, Ankara is even more determined now to prevent any regression in this regard as a result of

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adverse developments in northern Iraq.

Towards that end, the Turkish Army has already moved several thousand troops into northern Iraq, where they have been stationed for the past few months in a quasi-permanent arrangement, with US backing. In recent meetings between Turkish officials and Kurdish leaders (absent Masoud Barazani), it has been agreed that both sides will cooperate in the event of an American-led invasion. It is clear that Turkish consent to assist the US war effort will entail further deployment of Turkish troops to northern Iraq in order to foil any subversive action by the Kurds. Since Turkey can ill afford being left out of plans for post-Saddam Iraq, Ankara is almost bound to support the US on Iraq.

Under the UN sanctions regime, Turkey has strengthened its economic ties with Baghdad. Iraq's petro-economy is pumping much needed hard currency into the ailing Turkish economy and also providing the Turks with oil from pipelines running through their territory. Much of the legitimate and contraband trade from and into Iraq has been passing through the autonomous regions in the north, with enormous benefits to Turkish transport and service workers as well as to the entire Turkish economy. Wishing to increase the volume of such trade, and fully realizing its future potential, Ankara has often supported the lifting of UN sanctions against Iraq.

Not surprisingly, Turkish negotiators have been calling for an attractive US economic and financial package to sugarcoat a deal on American use of air bases and other facilities against Iraq. In an earlier visit to Ankara, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has promised generous aid in return for Turkish cooperation, which was indeed immediately promised by the Foreign Minister. This promise was quickly retracted following criticism from Army circles. Although traditionally very pro-American, the military prefers a properly

negotiated deal to a hasty giveaway. Concomitantly, progress was reported in talks on economic assistance held in Ankara last Thursday and Friday with Treasury Undersecretary John Taylor and Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman. Still, opposition leader Deniz Baykal was less optimistic, saying that "after Iraq, Turkey will pay the heaviest price for this war."

However, although Turkey seems to be safely leaning towards support of the US position on Iraq, conflicting statements from Ankara in recent days have drawn sharp domestic criticism. While AKP strongman Erdoğan is saying that support is contingent on UN endorsement, others are opposed. Still, leading figures in the government and army are widely believed to have privately assured the Bush Administration of Turkey's cooperation. This ambiguity may be attributed to three factors: given the sentiments of many of their constituents, AKP leaders are uncomfortable with lending support to an operation which is highly unpopular in Muslim and Arab countries; they wish to enhance their bargaining position vis-à-vis the US; and given the lack of enthusiasm shown by many EU members, they feel under no pressure to be among the early joiners.

In addition, one must attribute at least some of the hesitation and backtracking to AKP's lack of experience in foreign affairs. There are also some differences of opinion between Party Leader Erdoğan and Prime Minister Gül, not to mention a few problematic statements by the Foreign Minister. The Army prefers caution, warning of post-war consequences but wishing to avoid an appearance of political interference. All in all, however, it is fairly safe to assume at this point that, barring some unexpected complications, Turkey will go along with the US on Iraq, not least because of its Kurdish concerns, dire economic realities, and overall reliance on American support.