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Iraq: The Turkish Factor

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Summary

Turkey will likely be pivotal to any U.S. military operation against Iraq, but it has many concerns. Foremost, it seeks to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity and prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. It wants its linguistic/ethnic kin in that region, the Iraqi Turkomans, to be fairly represented in a future government. Turkey also is worried about the economic consequences of a war, especially since it is just recovering from a devastating recession. Finally, it is concerned about the possibilities for a humanitarian refugee crisis and regional instability. The Bush Administration is consulting closely with Turkish officials to assuage their concerns and has provided increased economic assistance while attempting to enhance trade through (free trade) qualified industrial zones in H.R. 5385. Turkey expects still greater rewards for its support. See also CRS Report RL31429, *Turkey: Issues for U.S. Policy* and CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime*. This report will be updated if developments warrant.

Introduction

Turkey, a long time NATO ally of the United States which borders on Iraq, will likely be pivotal to any U.S. military operation against Iraq. It is assumed that the United States would like to use Turkey's air space, the large air base at Incirlik in southeast Turkey, and probably other airbases at Batman, Diyarbakir, or Malatya that are closer to the Iraqi border. Additionally, access to the Mediterranean port of Mersin and the sharing of intelligence may be on the U.S. wish list. For its part, the Turkish government is uneasy about U.S. plans. Turks argue that theirs is the country that will be most affected by a war and oppose it for a variety of reasons. (See the following section.) Turkish officials have pressed Saddam Hussein to implement U.N. resolutions and readmit weapons inspectors in order to prevent a military intervention. They also have urged the United States to obtain what they view as international legitimacy through a resolution authorizing the use of force from the United Nations Security Council. Despite misgivings, some Turks appear increasingly reconciled to a U.S. military campaign and advocate exacting a high price from the United States in exchange for support. A few suggest that Turkey's armed forces participate actively alongside Americans to ensure that Turkey has a determining say about northern Iraq's future.

Turkey's Concerns

Turkey's concerns about a war against Iraq are many. Foremost, Turkey is concerned that Iraq's territorial integrity is maintained and, relatedly, about its linguistic/ethnic kin, the Iraqi Turkomans. Turkey also is anxious about the economic consequences of a war, having lost billions of uncompensated dollars as a result of the first Gulf war, and having just begun to recover from its worst recession in 50 years. Finally, Turkey is worried about regional stability in the wake of a U.S.-Iraq war. These concerns are examined below.

Iraq's Territorial Integrity – the Kurdish Issue. Turkey argues that the power vacuum in northern Iraq after the first Gulf war enabled the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to find safe havens from which to escalate its insurgency in Turkey. The PKK is a guerrilla/terrorist group that waged a war for independence or autonomy in Turkey's southeast from 1984-1999. Turkey fears that another war would produce a new power vacuum and result in the partition of Iraq. The birth of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq could serve as a model for Turkish Kurdish separatists, whom many Turks believe are still seeking their own state in southeast Turkey.¹

Since the Gulf War, Turkey has allowed U.S. and British planes flying from Incirlik Air Base to enforce a no-fly zone over northern Iraq (Operation Northern Watch) to protect Iraq's Kurds from Saddam Hussein and monitor his armed forces. Turkey has developed a tenuous modus vivendi with the two main Iraqi Kurdish groups, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), but it does not trust their assurances that they do not want an independent state. Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and others acknowledge that the Iraqi Kurds have a de facto state in northern Iraq, with institutions and infrastructure. But they do not want the Iraqi Kurds to take additional steps toward de jure independence.

Turkey's anxiety about possible Iraqi Kurdish statehood has increased as an American military campaign has appeared more likely. Some in Ankara suggest that the probability of war has emboldened the Iraqi Kurds to take advantage of what they perceive to be the U.S. need for their assistance. Tensions surfaced between Turkey and the KDP in August 2002 over the latter's draft constitution for a federal Iraq in which the Kurds would have greater autonomy and control of oil-rich Kirkuk.² In reaction, Turkey closed the Habur border gate, cutting the KDP's revenue sources by restricting the semi-

¹ On April 4, 2002, the PKK renamed itself the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and elected PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan as KADEK general chairman in absentia. (Ocalan was tried and sentenced to death for treason; but his sentence was changed to life without parole after Turkey abolished the death penalty.) KADEK spokesmen contend that the armed struggle is over, and that they seek to resolve issues only by the "democratization" of Turkey, without changing borders of the countries in the region. Turkish Kurds currently seek increased cultural and language rights and freedom to participate politically as a party. Turkish officials believe that the PKK/KADEK change is tactical and that separatism remains the goal.

² Kirkuk is now controlled by the Baghdad government and is not part of the Kurdish autonomous area created in 1991. Its population is ethnically mixed: Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans.

illicit flow of diesel fuel from northern Iraq into Turkey.³ Turkish Defense Minister Sabahattin Cakmakoglu, a member of the right-wing Nationalist Action Party, claimed that Turkey has historic rights in northern Iraq dating from 1920.⁴ The KDP's official newspaper responded by threatening to turn northern Iraq into "a graveyard" for Turkish soldiers if they intervened, provoking angry reactions from Turkish civilian and military officials and media.⁵ To repair bilateral relations, KDP leader Mas'ud Barzani and other KDP officials have repeatedly affirmed the KDP's commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity and assurances for Turkey's national security and sovereignty.⁶

On September 25, the KDP and PUK agreed to a revised version of Barzani's draft constitution for a federal zone in northern Iraq, with Kirkuk as its capital, to present to other Iraqi opposition groups. Prime Minister Ecevit responded that if the Iraqi Kurds "take a step that could be tantamount to a declaration of independence ... Turkey would consider its options including use of force."⁷ Many experts say this was partly campaign rhetoric for the November 3 national election by a lame duck official. To mitigate any international misinterpretation, Foreign Ministry and military voices declared that developments in northern Iraq were under control. Yet, in the 1990s, Turkish forces had made regular incursions into northern Iraq in "hot pursuit" of the PKK, and at least 5,000 Turkish troops reportedly are there now ostensibly to control activities of the PKK and as a warning to the Iraqi Kurds.

Turkomans.⁸ Probably in part to balance Iraqi Kurdish momentum toward autonomy, Turkey has championed the rights of Iraqi Turkomans, who reside alongside the Kurds in northern Iraq. Turkomans are ethnic/linguistic relatives of the Turks. The Turkish government and Turkoman leaders recognized by Ankara claim that there are 3 million Iraqi Turkomans, although most sources, including the Baghdad government, cite far lower figures.⁹ Historically, the Turkomans' relations with other ethnic groups in the

³ The United Nations and United States waive sanctions on Turkey for the illicit energy traffic because it aids both Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds.

⁴ This was before the emergence of the Turkish Republic and fails to recognize a 1926 Turkish-British agreement giving the Ottoman Mosul Vilayet, including Kirkuk, to Britain, which as colonial power was the predecessor of modern Iraq. Other Turkish officials maintain that Cakmakoglu's comments should be viewed in the context of his defense of Iraqi Turkomans.

⁵ Turkish Daily Notes KDP Official Postponed Visit Fearing Ankara's Reaction, *Hurriyet*, August 23, 2002, translation entered into FBIS online, August 25, 2002; Turkish (Foreign) ministry says Iraqi Kurd leader's words "aggressive," Anatolia News Agency, in English, BBC-Monitoring Europe, September 6, 2002.

⁶ Dialogue can resolve problems between Turkey, Iraqi Kurd group-leader, Anatolia News Agency, in English, BBC-Monitoring Europe, September 10, 2002.

⁷ Fikret Bila, All Eyes are on North Iraq, *Milliyet*, October 3, 2002, translation entered into FBIS online, October 3, 2002.

⁸ Sometimes referred to as Turcoman and Turkmen. The latter usage, however, could be confused with the inhabitants of Turkmenistan.

⁹ Sources estimate that Turkomans constitute about 1.4% of the Iraqi population and probably number about 330,000. They have assimilated with other Iraqi groups for years. According to one source, there are about 1.5 million Turkomans in the Middle East, residing in Iraq, Iran, and (continued...)

region have been troubled. Turkey favors the Ankara-based Iraqi Turkoman Front, which calls for a unitary state in Iraq or a regionally, not ethnically, based federal government.

Of relevance to Turkey's interests is the residence of many Turkomans in Kirkuk, an oil-rich region in Northern Iraq. Turkey does not want that oil to finance an Iraqi Kurdish state. In the event of a U.S. military operation against Iraq, some analysts suggest that Turkey could use its sincere concern for the Turkomans as a pretext to intervene and prevent the Iraqi Kurds from controlling the oil reserves.¹⁰ Turkish Foreign Ministry officials deny having such designs and claim that they would not interfere in Iraq's internal affairs. They compare their concern for the Turkomans to their feelings for Bulgarian Turks under communist rule, and say that they only want to see Turkomans similarly represented in a democratic Iraq.¹¹ The same mistrust of Turkey's alleged territorial ambitions was expressed during the first Gulf War, but the inaction of Turkey's military then seemed to prove suspicions groundless. Moreover, Turkey and Iran agree on the need to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, and Turkey would not likely act contrary to this agreement. Turkey and Iran have not battled each other for centuries despite their different political systems, sometimes uneasy relations, and occasional skirmishes.

Economic Factors. Turkey's opposition to a war against Iraq also is motivated by economic concerns. Before the first Gulf War, Turkey closed its border with Iraq, then one of its major trading partners, and abided by international sanctions. Turks estimate the cost of the closure at \$30 billion to \$100 billion, and argue that the international community never compensated Turkey for its losses. As a result of the U.N.'s humanitarian "oil-for-food" program begun in December 1996 and of the semi-illicit trade in diesel and crude oil, bilateral Iraqi-Turkish trade now totals about \$1 billion annually. The two neighbors hope to reach pre-Gulf War trade levels of about \$2.5 billion annually. Turkey does not want this positive trend reversed.

Turkish officials and others fear the economic damage a war might inflict could include rising oil prices, loss of foreign investment, collapse of the vital tourism sector, closure of the oil pipeline from Iraq to Turkey's Mediterranean coast, and loss of border and other bilateral trade. Achievement of the goals of a painful economic reform program also might be set back. Turkey generally has not contemplated benefits that might ensue from normal economic relations with a post-Saddam Iraq because they are seen as uncertain long term prospects, while Turkey has many immediate needs in the aftermath of an impoverishing recession.

Humanitarian Issues. Turkey notes that the Gulf War created a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds to Turkey and a humanitarian crisis of enormous

⁹ (...continued)

Turkey. Colbert C. Held, *Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples, and Politics*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 2000, p. 104. Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz questioned Turkey's Turkoman numbers as "exaggerated" during a visit to Turkey in September 2002.

¹⁰ Turkoman Bargaining, *Sabah*, July 23, 2002, translation entered into FBIS online, July 23, 2002.

¹¹ Analogy by Undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry Ugur Ziyal at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 28, 2002.

proportions for which it was unprepared and received what it considered to be unjust criticism. In the event of a new war, Turkey has contingency plans to establish camps for refugees on the Iraqi side of the border as well as at several sites in southeast Turkey.

Regional Stability. Finally, Turkey is concerned about the potential for postwar regional instability, including the unleashing of now latent interethnic and religious disputes and a worsening of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Ankara would prefer the United States to give priority to solving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

U.S. Policy

The Administration is attempting to assuage Turkey's concerns and gain its support for possible military action against Iraq. While in Turkey in July 2002, Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz declared that a separate Kurdish state in northern Iraq was unacceptable to the United States.¹² When Secretary of State Colin Powell saluted the Iraqi Kurdish parliament on October 4, 2002, he claimed that they shared the U.S. vision for a "democratic, pluralistic, united Iraq" with its "territorial integrity intact." Some Turks nonetheless believe that the United States is telling the Kurds and Turkey what each wants to hear. Yet, no U.S. official has expressed support for a Kurdish state.

U.S. officials are closely, and with increasing frequency, consulting their Turkish counterparts. Secretary of State Colin Powell, Wolfowitz, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman met with Undersecretary of the Foreign Ministry Ugur Ziyal in Washington in late August 2002. Vice President Dick Cheney spoke to Ziyal on videophone. Such high level meetings with an undersecretary are beyond the dictates of normal diplomatic protocol, but Ziyal is one of the ministry's experts on the Middle East and the Turkish General Staff Chief of Plans was in his delegation. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Elizabeth Jones then visited Turkey in September. Most recently, Commander of the U.S. Central Command General Tommy Franks, responsible for Iraq, and NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe and Commander of the U.S. European Command General Joseph Ralston met Chief of the Turkish General Staff General Hilmi Ozkok and other officers in Ankara on October 21. Franks said that the purpose of his visit was "collaboration, consultation, and discussion," and that he had made no requests. On October 23, President Bush conferred via telephone with Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. General Ozkok will visit the United States, November 4-10, when he will meet Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others in Washington and General Franks at CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa.

The United States is paying attention to Turkey in other ways. After the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the Administration resumed foreign aid to Turkey which had been mostly discontinued in 1998 as part of a policy of "aid graduation." The United States provided \$28 million in military aid and \$200 million in economic assistance in FY 2002, largely to support Turkey's command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Since 1999, the United States, as the largest contributor to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has helped Turkey obtain \$31 billion in financing to

¹² AA Details Wolfowitz Address at TESEV Meet on US-Turkish Relations, Ankara Anatolia in English, 15 July 02, entered into FBIS online, July 15, 2002.

enable it to recover from financial crises and to undertake major economic reforms. The United States also has promised a new economic partnership with Turkey focused on trade. The first step is the creation of Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) from which Turkish goods could be exported to the United States without tariffs as part of the U.S.-Israel Free Trade Agreement. (See H.R. 5385, Miscellaneous Trade and Technical Corrections Act of 2002, Sec. 2002, Designation of Israeli-Turkish Qualified Industrial Zones, agreed to in the House on October 7, 2002.) Some Turks are disappointed in the potential of QIZs because they exclude textiles, Turkey's main export to the United States, from duty free status.

Some Turks may have unrealistic expectations of U.S. assistance that might result from support for a war as they envision millions or billions more in aid. Yet, after the first Gulf war, the United States increased aid and donated 1,000 M-60 tanks to Turkey, totaling billions.¹³ There also is the option of forgiveness of all or part of Turkey's military debt to the United States. As of the end of 2000, Turkey owed about \$1.6 billion in outstanding principal for direct loans and \$2.8 billion in outstanding principal for guaranteed loans. Much of the debt carries high interest rates; forgiveness would be costly and require congressional action.¹⁴

Turkey expects the United States to exert pressure on the European Union (EU) summit in Copenhagen in December 2002 to set a date for the EU to begin accession negotiations with Turkey. A European Commission progress report issued on October 9 failed to recommend that a date be set, and Turkey hopes that European political leaders will redress that failing at their summit. The United States had energetically prodded the EU to name Turkey as a candidate for membership in 1999.

Outlook

Because Turkey highly values its alliance with the United States, is indebted to the United States for its help at the IMF, and wants to help determine Iraq's future, most observers expect it to support U.S. efforts against Iraq by allowing U.S. forces to use its bases and other facilities. This will likely happen due to the influence of the Turkish military and foreign policy bureaucracy no matter which party or parties win the November 3 national election. Iraq is not an election issue. After any U.S.-Iraq conflict, there is a risk that Turkey will be disappointed if the economic rewards for its support fail to meet its expectations. That in itself may not irrevocably harm the U.S.-Turkish alliance. If Iraq is tacitly partitioned and the region is destabilized, Turkey may demand an active U.S. role in restabilizing the situation. Turkey could be affected by instability in its neighborhood and bilateral U.S.-Turkish relations might deteriorate if Ankara is dissatisfied with U.S. policies in the post-war period.

¹³ Umit Enginsoy, NTV, October 21, 2002, translation entered into FBIS online October 21, 2002.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury and the Office of Management and Budget, *U.S. Government Foreign Credit Exposure as of December 31, 2000, Part II, Region, Country and Dependency Tables*, pp. 306-307. Note, in 1990, Congress cancelled Egypt's \$6.7 billion military debt as a reward for its cooperation against Iraq. And, between 1994 and 1998, Congress forgave \$702.3 million of Jordan's debt at a cost of \$401 million.