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# Turkey and the United States at a cross roads

*The impact of the war in Iraq*

Since 1945, Turkey has occupied a special place in American foreign policy. During the Cold War, Turkey played an important role in the American containment policy as the southeast bastion of NATO and as a buffer state against the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era, despite some initial confusion as to what its mid- to long-term role might be, its geographical “eye in the storm” location made Turkey a valuable partner for the US. Since 1999, the US-Turkish relationship was defined as one of “strategic partnership.”

Initially, Turkey and the US had a convergence of interests in the uncertain and volatile international environment of the post-Cold War era. For American interests, Turkey’s unique character among the Muslim countries made it a valuable asset in bridging the cultural gap between Europe and the Middle East. Its geographic position and military bases facilitated information gathering and intelligence about potential terrorist activities as well as operations against such groups. Similarly, the US was important for

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Turkish interests, for its place in the global balance of power, as a security provider, and as a key supporter in Ankara's bid for membership in the European Union (EU). In addition, US support during the 1990s for Turkey's policy of opposing Kurdish separatists was important for Turkish security since one of Ankara's major foreign policy objectives is to prevent Kurdish terrorism, as well as the establishment of a separate Kurdish state.

This article argues that even though the US and Turkey shared a convergence of interests in countering terrorism and protecting Middle Eastern stability, there was also a more serious divergence of interests, specifically over the Kurds in Iraq, which became visible before and during the Iraqi war. The crisis that was due to this divergence began on 1 March 2003 when the Turkish parliament rejected a government bill that would have allowed the US to open a northern front against Iraq from Turkish soil. The crisis deepened in July 2003 when the two countries seemed to disagree about the future of Iraq, most specifically over the status of the Kurds. Thus, this paper proposes that the Iraqi war challenged the durability and strength of Turkey's relations with the US. Turkey's special partnership with the US, institutionalized under the NATO umbrella, determined Turkey's position in the international system, which is why the crisis between Turkey and US was so critical for Ankara.

Ankara's perception that Turkey faces unprecedented threats in the post-Cold War era complicated its position vis-à-vis the US. These difficulties were due to Turkey feeling alienated and isolated in the western security system. This isolation was mostly felt as a result of Turkey's problematic relationship with the EU, which Turkey has aspired to join since 1987. The major shock came when the EU included the former Warsaw pact countries, as well as Cyprus and Malta, in the enlargement process that was launched in the 1990s, while it left Turkey out. The ambivalent relationship between Turkey and the EU led some Turkish policymakers to believe that their country was being kept out of Europe in the post-Cold War era. After 9/11, Turkey's sense of its own insecurity increased. As the only Muslim member of NATO, it was directly affected due to the apparent confrontation between the west and the Islamic world. Furthermore, international terrorism complicated Turkey's own identity crisis as some socially outcast groups in Turkey supported the goals espoused by terrorism. The sense of insecurity Turkey felt sharpened as its relations with the US seemed to hit rock bottom in 2003.

#### TURKEY'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE US PRIOR TO IRAQI WAR

Turkey's partnership with the US began at the end of the Second World War. When the US adopted its containment policy toward Soviet expansionism, it turned out that Turkey would play a substantial role. Turkey and Greece were the major recipients of financial and military aid under the Truman doctrine of 1947. Turkey played an important military role in the Korean War in 1950 and became a NATO member in 1952, and its strategic value to the US increased in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both in 1979. Throughout the Cold War years, Turkey played a crucial role in protecting Western interests in southeastern Europe. The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s altered this relationship. The post-Cold War conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and the Balkans brought a new activism in Turkish foreign policy. In the post-Cold War era, US policy makers perceived Turkey as a frontline state increasingly important for American security interests. Turkey was viewed as an important component for the European and global balances of power. As former US president Bill Clinton asserted, "I think it is very important that we do everything reasonable to anchor Turkey to the West. If you look at the size of the country, what it can block and what it can open doors to, it is terribly important."<sup>1</sup> This was already apparent during the Gulf crisis of 1990-91.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 endangered the US in two ways; it threatened to interrupt the flow of oil and it raised the profile of rogue states, such as Iraq, in a geostrategically significant region. In addressing both of these threats, Turkey was an essential ally for the US. After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Turkey immediately joined the multilateral effort against Baghdad and its contribution proved critical. First, Turkey implemented the UN sanctions regime against Iraq. Despite serious economic cost, Ankara closed down the Kerkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline, only one of two available for the export of Iraqi oil, and thereby largely contributed to the success of the economic sanctions. Second, Turkey played a key role in the implementation of the UN trade embargo against Iraq. Nearly 80 percent of Iraqi trade passed through Turkey and Iraq was Turkey's second largest trade partner. Third, Turkey tied down Iraqi troops

<sup>1</sup> Kelly Coutier, "Turkish premier expected to press Clinton on pipeline," *Washington Post*, 19 December 1997, A46.

at the Turkish border. Even though Turkey did not send troops to Iraq during the war, it joined the multilateral coalition and Iraq was required to divert military resources to the north that otherwise might have been deployed against the coalition forces around Kuwait. Fourth, the US-led coalition relied heavily on Turkish bases, most importantly Incirlik, as well as airspace, for the air campaign against Iraq. The Gulf War of 1990-91 revealed, as one commentator noted, that “Incirlik is one of the most strategically important footholds for the US in the Middle East.”<sup>2</sup>

The Turkish involvement in the 1990-91 Gulf War also had an impact on the country’s Kurdish problem, particularly the Kurdish insurgency. Since 1984, Turkey had been faced with separatist Kurdish terrorism organized by the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK). Most of the clashes with the PKK were in southeast Anatolia, but from time to time terrorist attacks were staged in large Turkish cities. During the 1980s, Iraq and Turkey had shared a common interest in opposing Kurdish separatism, as the two governments were confronted by this threat in their own countries. (There are about four million Kurds in Iraq and roughly 11 million Kurds in Turkey.) In 1987, therefore, Turkey and Iraq agreed on a right of “hot pursuit” to permit Turkey to pursue foreign-based PKK terrorists who were staging hit and run attacks inside Turkey.

During the 1990-91 Gulf War, Ankara feared that the collapse of central authority in Iraq might lead to the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, an outcome that would have inflamed Turkey’s Kurdish problem. Thus, Ankara’s foreign policy aimed to maintain Iraq’s territorial integrity and its central authority. Turkey’s Kurdish problem worsened during the Gulf War, however, when 500,000 Kurdish refugees fled from northern Iraq into southeastern Turkey. In order to deal with this crisis, Turkey took the initiative and successfully convinced its allies of the need for the creation of a safe haven (operation *Provide Comfort*) for the Iraqi Kurds. The UN created a no-fly zone in northern Iraq above the 36th parallel with security council resolution 688 to protect that population from Saddam. Equally importantly, Ankara’s policy was designed to stop the refugees from crossing the border into Turkey.

Although it was a Turkish initiative that had led to the creation of this safe haven, Ankara had paradoxically played an important role in creating

<sup>2</sup> Ian Urbana, “US bows to Turkey”, *Nation* 273, no. 15, 11 December 2001.

what it feared the most. As was always feared by the Turkish government, the absence of central authority in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War nonetheless enabled the PKK to create terrorist training grounds in the region and to stage operations against Turkey. By the end of 1991, the PKK had firmly established itself and acquired a number of bases in northern Iraq. As a result, following the Gulf War, Turkish foreign policy towards northern Iraq revolved around two objectives: to prevent the PKK from using northern Iraq as a base to stage terrorist attacks and to prevent the creation of a Kurdish state. The Turkish military stationed itself in various parts of northern Iraq in 1991 in order to prevent PKK terrorists from infiltrating Turkey through the border. In addition, the Turkish military acted as a peacekeeping force between different Kurdish factions under Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani that were fighting each other for control of the region.

It was not only the Turkish military that maintained a presence in northern Iraq after the 1990-91 Gulf War. The multilateral force that supervised the region was deployed in Turkey; its mandate was renewed by the Turkish parliament every six months. Authorized by security council resolutions, the US and British forces were stationed at Turkish bases, specifically Incirlik, to uphold operations *Provide Comfort*, *Poised Hammer*, and, following the French withdrawal in 1996, Operation *Northern Watch*. The Turkish government nonetheless always feared that the creation of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq and operations *Provide Comfort/Poised Hammer* would help the PKK and assist in the creation of a Kurdish state, particularly as the Kurds had a voice in international affairs after 1991. Indeed, the Iraqi Kurds were largely freed from Saddam's control and began to assert a right to statehood. US support for the Iraqi Kurds was met with suspicion in Turkey, as Ankara's concerns about Kurdish separatism seemed to be falling on deaf ears. The Gulf War, therefore, brought a new momentum to the creation of an autonomous Kurdish entity, for the UN-mandated safe haven "provided the Iraqi Kurds sufficient de facto sovereignty."<sup>3</sup> The Turkish-American divergence of interests in the Middle East, which was so pronounced in 2003, had already begun to emerge with these different stances toward the Iraqi Kurds.

3 Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms* (London: Hurst & Co., 2003), 315.

Still, though, the US-Turkish partnership held. Throughout the 1990s, Turkey played an important role in containing Iraq through the implementation of the trade embargo and by allowing US operations to be conducted from Turkish military bases. In the second half of the 1990s, Turkey developed a strategic alliance with Israel, with various agreements ranging from educating military personnel to sharing intelligence information on terrorist groups. The Turkish-Israeli rapprochement was welcomed by Washington as a counterbalance to the region's rogue states, Iraq, Iran, and, to a certain extent, Syria.

In return for Ankara's assistance, the US bailed Turkey out of its various financial crises in the 1990s and again in 2001, and supported Turkey's application for membership in the EU. During the 1999 Helsinki summit of the European council, President Bill Clinton telephoned Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit to convince him to accept the EU offer of candidacy for EU membership. During the 2002 Copenhagen summit of the European council, when the EU concluded accession negotiations with 10 candidate countries, President George W. Bush called Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen to stress the strategic importance of Turkey, in order to open accession negotiations with Turkey.<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that US support for Turkey's inclusion in the EU was a determining factor behind Turkey's candidacy for membership. However, the US had provided Turkey with a security umbrella or safety net that Turkey, in the absence of EU membership, could fall back on in case of a major crisis. In addition, Washington recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization in 1991, as Ankara had long demanded, and assisted Turkey in its fight against terrorism. For example, when the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured in Kenya hiding in the Greek embassy in 1999, it was the US intelligence community that had helped Turkey find him.<sup>5</sup> It was through these developments in the 1990s that Turkey's relations with the US were defined publicly as a strategic partnership.

This strategic partnership gained new momentum following 9/11. Turkey immediately condemned the attacks and gave its full support to NATO's decision to invoke article 5 for the US. According to one US publication at the time, "the September 11 terrorist attacks have strengthened

<sup>4</sup> *Hürriyet*, 11 December 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Tuncay Ozkan, *Operasyon* (Istanbul: Dogan Kitapcilik, 2000).

military ties between Turkey and the United States and clear[ed] the way for the Turks' procurement of 50 Bell AH-1Z Cobra attack helicopters."<sup>6</sup> In addition, Turkey gave its full logistic support to the operation in Afghanistan during operation *Enduring Freedom*. The US air force that bombed Afghanistan used Turkish air space for more than 4,000 sorties during the operation, as well as relying upon the base at Incirlik for refuelling and transporting supplies. It seemed, therefore, that Turkey would continue to play a crucial role in the US-led war on terrorism.

#### TURKEY AND THE US DURING THE IRAQ WAR

In 2002, when the US began its preparations for a war against Iraq, the Bush administration had expected to be able to rely upon Turkey's logistic support and access to its military bases. The US had apparently planned to invade the country from both the north and the south simultaneously, and for this reason Washington wanted to use Turkish soil for the invasion of Iraq. On 10 December 2002, President Bush and the leader of Turkey's newly elected Justice and Development Party (AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdogan, met in Washington. During that meeting, Erdogan insinuated that Turkey might allow the creation of a "northern front" for the upcoming invasion of Iraq. The US perception of Ankara's support was reinforced when "[i]n December, the Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz returned from Ankara assured by the Turkish General Staff that Turkey was on board, save for the details."<sup>7</sup> With that understanding, on 6 February 2003, the Turkish parliament approved a prime ministry motion that allowed the deployment of US technical and military personnel to Turkey for a period of three months for the renovation and upgrading of military facilities and ports. In the meantime, US and Turkish officials were engaged in intense bargaining over the nature of compensation in return for Turkey's participation in the Iraqi war as a member of the "coalition of the willing."

In December 2002, the US first requested access to the military bases in Turkey and counted upon bringing a force of 62,000 into Turkey for the invasion of Iraq. The possible deployment of such a large military force

6 John R. Guardino, "Turkey poised to Cement Cobra Sale," *Helicopter News* 27, no. 23, 20 November 2001, 1.

7 Harry Dirella and John Stilides, "Repairing Turkish-American relations," *Washington Times*, 27 July 2003.

caused alarm among the Turkish public. The Turkish public was further alarmed when the US asked for access to civilian airports in various parts of Turkey, including Istanbul for the staging of the air campaign against Iraq. The Turkish public was concerned that the war zone would include Turkey if the civilian airports were allocated to US military use. In return for its support, Turkey was to receive US\$26 billion in grants and loans. More important, Turkey would have been given clearance to follow US troops into Iraq to assist in the stabilization of northern Iraq and to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state there. One respected American journalist suggested that this meant the US “would have escorted the Turkish foxes into the Kurdish henhouse.”<sup>8</sup> The Turkish media, by way of contrast, stressed the importance of protecting Turkish interests in Iraq, namely preventing both PKK terrorists from using Iraq as a base to hit targets in Turkey and the creation of a Kurdish state.

It was obvious from the start that the US and Turkey had different interests with respect to the Iraqi Kurds. For the US, the Kurds were perceived as natural allies in helping to defeat Saddam Hussein and implement regime change in Iraq. Turkey, on the other hand, was very suspicious of the Iraqi Kurds’ design on statehood, their support for Kurdish separatists in Turkey, and of any possible claims an independent Kurdish state might make on Turkish territory. It was highly likely that from the start the Bush administration failed to understand fully the extent of Turkish sensitivities on the Kurdish issue.

The new AKP government’s bargaining position in 2003 was based on Turkey’s experience during the 1990-91 Gulf War, and this also created tensions with the US. After that war, Turkey never received economic compensation, promised at the time of the conflict, for closing Iraq’s main oil pipeline, the Kerkuk-Yumurtalik line. Turkish losses from the war, the oil embargo on Iraq, and the UN sanctions regime were estimated to have been in the range of US\$40 to US\$100 billion annually. The losses in Turkish-Iraqi bilateral trade alone amounted to US\$30 billion annually. In the run-up to the 2003 war, Turkey tried to assess the likely costs it would incur, determine the compensation beforehand, and negotiate a contractual arrangement in order to prevent another Gulf War blow to its fragile

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, *New York Times*, 11 March 2003, as quoted by Philip Robins, “Confusion at home, confusion abroad: Turkey between Copenhagen and Iraq,” *International Journal* 79 (summer 2003): 547-67.

economy. The US, for its part, perceived the Turkish position as taking advantage of an ally.

These different perspectives became extremely sensitive political issues, as the Americans accused Turkey of blackmailing the US. To make matters worse, a series of cartoons depicting Turks as belly dancers and greedy merchants were published in the American media that were then reported in the Turkish press. (Interestingly, when Erdogan visited the US in January 2004, he acknowledged that there was a correlation between the March 2003 parliamentary decision not to support the US and the cartoons in the American media depicting Turks in such an insulting fashion.<sup>9</sup>) In the Turkish domestic scene, where public opinion was already 90 percent against another war in its border, these cartoons became the final straw. According to Taha Akyol, a prominent journalist, the US had “acted in an arrogant, hurtful manner. The Bush administration’s rudeness was apparent in the negotiations.”<sup>10</sup> In the 1 March 2003 parliamentary vote that opposed granting the US military access to Turkish airspace and bases, 264 MEPs voted in favour, 250 MEPs voted against, and 19 MEPs abstained. However, since the constitution requires an absolute majority to authorize sending troops abroad and to open its territory for foreign troops, the motion was effectively rejected.

It is interesting to note that the Turkish political elite did not form a unified bloc over the Iraqi war. For example, even though the newly elected AKP government was in favour of acceding to Washington’s requests, there was still serious opposition in the party, especially among its more conservative members. In addition, the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), as well as the country’s president, were opposed to acceding to the US request. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer declared, “I do not find it right that the US is behaving unilaterally before the UN process has ended” and questioned the international legitimacy of the US policy.” The opposition CHP leader, Deniz Baykal, noted, “when the Turkish government prepared the bill, they did not take the Parliament’s inclinations into consideration.”<sup>12</sup> The outcome of the parliamentary process apparently took the

9 *Hürriyet*, 28 January 2004, 22.

10 Taha Akyol, “Why the US is continuing its build-up,” *Milliyet*, 21 March 2003.

11 *Anadolu Ajansı*, 20 March 2003.

12 Fikret Bila, “Amerika anlıyor [The US understands],” *Milliyet*, 3 March 2003.

Bush administration by surprise and Turkey's loyalty as an ally was immediately questioned. The crisis in relations with the US over the Iraqi war ultimately meant that Turkey lost the US\$26 billion deal that would have been a very welcome input to its economy. The most important impact of the crisis was, however, its chilling effect on Turkish-American relations, a safety net for Turkey since the end of the Second World War.

For the Bush administration, the outcome of the parliamentary vote came as a surprise since both it and the Pentagon believed that Turkish support was already obtained and that the vote in parliament was only a formality. The severity of the US reaction might very well have been a result of the US belief that it had received every assurance from the Turkish government about its support. The silence from the leadership of the Turkish armed forces, namely the Turkish general staff, was also surprising, with Paul Wolfowitz claiming afterward that "the Turkish military did not show any leadership on the issue." There was, therefore, a tendency to blame the rejection by parliament on the lack of open support from the generals, which according to some was an effort by the general staff to demonstrate the AKP's inexperience.<sup>13</sup> Alongside its confidence in Ankara's support, the lack of understanding by the Bush administration about Turkish domestic politics contributed to its shock. According to Ian Lesser, the US had a "limited frame for consultation and this may have been a source of misconception in Washington regarding the prospects for Turkish cooperation in Iraq."<sup>14</sup>

Immediately afterward, the developments in March 2003 suggested to observers that the relations between Turkey and the US were damaged beyond repair. With the Turkish parliament's rejection of the government's motion, the US had to reformulate its war plans and redirect its troops down to the Persian Gulf. Some US officials implied that if Turkey had allowed the deployment of US troops and the subsequent invasion from the north, the war might have ended sooner with fewer casualties. Some American media commentaries were, as a result, very derogatory as "[t]he new, Islamic influenced government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan transformed

<sup>13</sup> Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms*, 563.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Lesser, "Turkey and the United States: Anatomy of a strategic relationship," in Lenore G. Martin and Dimitris Keridis, eds., *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: BCSIA, 2004), 93.

that formerly staunch US ally into Saddam's best friend...by helping Saddam make the war longer and bloodier."<sup>15</sup> It turned out that the actual war was much shorter than expected and the real problems surfaced after Bush declared that "major combat operations" were over in May 2003. Some have argued, however, that the insurgency that the US now faces in postwar Iraq might have been less intense had the US military been able to invade Iraq from the north.<sup>16</sup>

Attempting some damage control, on 19 March 2003 the Turkish government, Iraqi opposition, and the American officials met in Ankara. In a common declaration, the parties to work towards the protection of Iraqi sovereignty, its territorial integrity and national cohesion, the utilization of Iraqi natural resources for all of its population, the prevention of terrorists forming safe havens for themselves and the elimination of support to terrorism, and the acceptance of the notion that Iraq as a whole belongs to the Iraqi people.<sup>17</sup> Participation at this meeting and the common declaration that followed showed that despite the crisis in US-Turkish relations, Turkey still expected to play a central role in the Iraqi crisis. One day later, on 20 March 2003, the Turkish parliament also approved the prime ministry motion on the dispatch of Turkish troops to Iraq and permission for US warplanes to use Turkish airspace. Turkey wanted clearance to deploy troops to Iraq to prevent a refugee flow, to provide humanitarian assistance, to establish refugee camps, and also to keep an eye on the Kurds. That was why, this time, the opening of Turkish airspace to US jets was directly linked to agreement on the right to send troops to Iraq. As it turned out, Turkey first opened its airspace to the American jets only for humanitarian purposes.

Such efforts could not, however, hide the two countries' growing differences. As the sides negotiated over the dispatch of Turkish troops to Iraq, the crisis in relations between Ankara and Washington deepened. In the absence of Turkish support, the US had relied upon the Kurdish population in Iraq in defeating Saddam Hussein. Since the Iraqi Kurds did not want

<sup>15</sup> William Safire, "Turkey's wrong turn undermines a genuine friendship," *New York Times*, 25 March 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (New York: Praeger, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> *Radikal*, 20 March 2003.

any Turkish involvement in Iraq, the failure of the AKP government's motion on 1 March 2003 (that which refused access to US bases) effectively ended Ankara's involvement in northern Iraq. This later became apparent when Necirvan Barzani from the KDP declared in January 2004 that "the Turkish Armed Forces should withdraw from Northern Iraq or face the consequences."<sup>18</sup> The March rejection pushed Turkey out of Iraqi politics, and signalled that one of Turkey's major foreign policy objectives, namely the prevention of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, would be harder to achieve.

As the US and the Kurds grew closer, Ankara also felt that its concerns about the Turcoman minority (approximately three million people, or roughly 16 percent of the pre-war Iraqi population) were being totally disregarded. For example, Kerkuk, which has a substantial non-Kurdish (that is, Arab and Turcoman) population, was declared to be a Kurdish city by Kurdish leaders. When the Kurdish peshmerghas took over the city in summer 2003, one of the first things they did was to destroy the legal registration documents for the Kerkuk population and land registries that belonged to the Turcoman and Arab populations. Later, the Kurds brought Kurdish gravestones to cemeteries in Kerkuk from other regions to assert that Kerkuk had always been predominantly Kurdish.<sup>19</sup> These developments were alarming in light of other incidents of interethnic violence, and the potential for far more in postwar Iraq.

The Kurdish problem that Turkey had always faced assumed a completely different form after the US intervention in Iraq. Indeed, it seemed almost certain that the Kurds in Iraq had become de facto American allies as a consequence of the war. Some Turks nonetheless claimed that the Americans actually were supporting the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq as Washington had come to see the Kurds as their natural allies against Saddam since 1990.<sup>20</sup> Equally importantly, the Kurdish factions stated that they would support the US on the condition that it withdrew its support from Ankara on the Kurdish issue. As a result, when, in summer 2003, the US government granted Turkey US\$8.5 billion in return for the losses incurred during the war, the US congress tied this grant to the

<sup>18</sup> *Sabah*, 28 January 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Mumtaz Soysal, "Kaygi [Concern]," *Cumhuriyet*, 30 January 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Baskin Oran, *Kalkik Horoz, Cekic Guc ve Kurt Devleti-Poised [Hammer and the Kurdish State]* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1996).

condition that Turkey not send any troops to northern Iraq. This linkage, unacceptable to Ankara, was why the grant was never brought to the attention of the Turkish parliament and was not implemented. Turkey, instead, stated publicly that it would take all necessary measures to protect itself against threats that might derive from the absence of a central authority in Iraq. The US feared that if Turkey were to send troops to Iraq, then the US would face a Turkish-Kurdish confrontation. This was undesirable because the US needed the Kurds to create a new Iraqi political system. In addition, the Americans were suspicious that Turkey had territorial ambitions in Iraq. In response to these fears, the Turkish chief of staff, General Hilmi Özkök, declared, “Turkey will not enter Northern Iraq with the aim of fighting or occupation. We do not have any intention to establish a permanent buffer zone.”<sup>21</sup>

The crisis between Turkey and the US took a further downward turn when, on 4 July 2003, the US arrested members of the Turkish special operations forces, who were on a special mission in Suleymaniye in northern Iraq. Both sides knew that the Turkish military presence in northern Iraq was in accordance with the post-1990 Gulf War arrangements. In fact, that particular team had been deployed there since 1996, having been invited by the KDP, led by Massoud Barzani. Turkey did not send any additional troops to Iraq throughout 2003, as it had already had some deployed in northern Iraq since the early-1990s on peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. Over time, the Turkish military and Iraqi Kurds had fashioned a gentlemen’s agreement to curb the activities of the PKK in northern Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

The arrests in Suleymaniye, therefore, took Ankara by surprise. The US first declared that it had intelligence from the Kurds that the Turkish troops were planning to assist in the assassination of the newly appointed governor of Kerkuk, a charge that Turkish government denied. Turkey, it was argued, was trying to destabilize northern Iraq to advance its own interests, but in doing so prevent the US from achieving its own policy goals there.<sup>23</sup> Coming after the disagreement of March 2003, the Turkish media stated that the detention revealed that the US “does not consider Turkey as an ally anymore.”<sup>24</sup> A former

21 Oktay Eksi, “Özkök’un uyarıları [Özkök’s warnings]” *Hürriyet*, 27 March 2003.

22 Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms*, 320.

23 Dirella and Stilides, “Repairing Turkish-American relations.”

24 Tufan Turenc, “Türkiye bedelini ödüyor [Turkey pays the price],” *Hürriyet*, 7 July 2003.

diplomat and a prominent journalist, Gunduz Aktan, asked, “Have the American forgotten how they felt when they saw their diplomats, eyes bandaged, dragged out of the (US embassy) in Tehran during Khomeini’s revolution? Turks today feel the same thing about the U.S. treatment of their soldiers. Like Americans, they too will not forget.”<sup>25</sup> The Suleymaniye incident was the first time in NATO history that one ally used military force against another, and it suggested that the strongest link between the US and Turkey, namely military cooperation, had become unreliable as well. According to General Ozkok, “[t]his incident has unfortunately led to the biggest crisis of confidence ever between the U.S. and Turkish armed forces.”<sup>26</sup> In an effort to dampen these new tensions, a joint US-Turkish commission was immediately established to investigate the detention of the Turkish troops, and it concluded by the end of July that the entire incident had been the result of a misunderstanding.

The Suleymaniye incident nonetheless alerted both sides that their much-valued relationship had suffered a serious blow. Consequently, a breakthrough development seemed to emerge in late summer 2003 during Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul’s visit to Washington when the US yet again asked for Turkish troops to be deployed to Iraq. Turkish support for the US request to send new troops to Iraq was tied to “how the PKK issue is resolved between the US and Turkey.”<sup>27</sup> According to Ankara, some 4000 to 5000 PKK—renamed KADEK in 2003—terrorists were hiding in the mountains of northern Iraq. As the US by then constituted the political authority in Iraq, the Turkish position was that the US should deal with these terrorists and that Turkey could not pull out of northern Iraq. Nevertheless, in October 2003, the Turkish parliament, acting on the US request, authorized sending troops to Iraq. But when the Iraqi governing council opposed any Turkish military presence, the US withdrew its request. The Iraqi Kurds took this position because they believed that Turkey’s regional policy was a significant obstacle to the achievement of Kurdish statehood. This incident also was important in illustrating the different preferences of

25 Gündüz Aktan, *Radikal*, 7 July 2003, as quoted by Yigal Schleifer, “U.S now seeks Turkish troops for north Iraq”, *Post Gazette*, 22 July 2003.

26 Dexter Filkins, “US frees Turkish soldiers, but relations remain strained,” *New York Times*, 7 July 2003.

27 Fikret Bila, “PKK/KADEK anahtar [PKK/KADEK is the key],” *Milliyet*, 30 July 2003.

the US on the one hand and the Iraqi governing council on the other. On 7 November 2003, Ankara announced that it was not sending troops to Iraq. Still, various Kurdish leaders declared that if Turkey did not withdraw all of its forces already deployed in northern Iraq, they would begin a military campaign against them.<sup>28</sup> According to Behram Salih, a senior member of the Patriotic Union for Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurds made a mistake then by turning the issue into a Turkish-Kurdish dispute and the Iraqi Kurds needed to establish friendly relations with Turkey.<sup>29</sup> It is perhaps even more interesting to note that the Bush administration did not publicly react to these remarks. In short, different and opposite interests over the political role of the Kurds in Iraq seriously complicated efforts to improve US-Turkish relations during the last months of 2003.

#### US, TURKEY, AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM

When US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Turkey immediately after the war in Iraq began in 2003, he declared that Turkey was important as a partner in the US-led antiterror coalition. In the post-9/11 period, Ankara's active involvement in the coalition's operations against al Qaeda in Afghanistan had clearly demonstrated Turkey's commitment. Turkey also played an important role in 2003 in Afghanistan when it took over the command of the international security and assistance force (ISAF) and deployed 1,280 troops to Kabul for a period of six months in mid-year. Indeed, this term was subsequently extended by two months and only concluded in February 2004.

The first real breakthrough in the Turkish-American relations that had been strained by the crisis over the Iraqi war, came only towards the end of 2003 after the terrorist attacks in Istanbul. First, on 15 November 2003, two synagogues were attacked, and five days later, the British consulate and the headquarters of the HSBC bank were hit: 65 people were killed, including the British consul, Richard Short, and close to 1000 were wounded. The November bombings in Istanbul opened a new front in the war against terrorism, as they were the first attacks on NATO soil after 9/11 by terrorist groups with links to al Qaeda. They were significant not only in terms of their impact on Turkish security, but also in terms of their implications for

<sup>28</sup> "Barzani'ye tepki [Reaction to Barzani]," *Sabah*, 28 January 2004.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the war against terrorism launched in 2002. The attacks underlined the strategic importance of Turkey, because as a secular democracy in a country with a predominantly Muslim population it has the capacity to balance the radical, anti-American elements in the Middle East. Indeed, this is precisely why it was attacked: the organization that assumed responsibility for the attack, the Abu Hafz Al-Masri Brigades, claimed that Turkey was targeted because of “its membership in the crusader NATO Western military alliance and its ties with the Zionist entity Israel.”<sup>30</sup>

The terror attacks ultimately reduced tensions between Turkey and the US, and a rapprochement seemed to begin. At the end of 2003, the US and Turkey agreed on new patterns of cooperation, specifically in the reconstruction of the Middle East. On 1 January 2004, the US began using Incirlik for rotating troops in and out of Iraq. In addition, the Pentagon and the Turkish Chief of Staff also agreed on using it as an anti-terror base in the war against terrorism and for staging crisis operations.

US-Turkey relations received a further boost in January 2004 when Erdogan met with Bush during an official visit to the US. While together, they jointly declared, “the US and Turkey are bound together in a joint campaign against terrorism and that Turkey’s accession to the EU will be the biggest victory against Al-Qaeda.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the US made it clear that it supported Iraq’s existence within its recognized borders, stating that “Iraq’s territorial integrity will be protected in a federal structure and the Turcoman minority’s rights will be protected.”<sup>32</sup> During that meeting, the American government gave Turkey additional assurances that Iraq’s territorial integrity will be protected, thereby reducing the initial Turkish opposition to a federal arrangement in postwar Iraq.

Equally important from Ankara’s perspective, the US recognized Turkish concerns about PKK/KADEK (renamed Kongra Gel) terrorism and a new-shared understanding emerged at the beginning of 2004. According to the State Department’s spokesman, Richard Boucher, “[t]he US is fighting against the PKK in Northern Iraq and will not allow the PKK to establish itself in Northern Iraq.”<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, Paul Bremer, the US administrator

30 “Terror where East meets West,” *Economist*, 21 November 2003, 1.

31 *Sabah*, 29 January 2004, 22-24.

32 Soli Özel, “The future of Iraq’s politics,” *Sabah*, 5 February 2004.

33 *Sabah*, 18 January 2004.

of Iraq, declared, “for the US military administration in Iraq, the PKK/KADEK/Kongra Gel is a terrorist organization and its leaders must leave Iraq.”<sup>34</sup> An important Turkish concern over the future of Iraq was, for the time being, settled. Turkey and the US began, therefore, to explore different possibilities for enhancing cooperation in the reconstruction of that country. For example, Turkey proposed repairing US armoured vehicles in its own factories rather than having the Americans send them back to the US for repair. Another indicator of the rapprochement was that, while Germany, France, and Russia were excluded, Turkey was included in the first list of countries that could compete for the tenders worth US\$18.7 billion allocated by the US for the reconstruction of Iraq. Indeed, Turkish firms began to extend their already well-established joint ventures in Iraq by the end of 2003. The crisis in relations seemed finally over when on 5 April 2004 Bush declared, “Turkey and the US are making the world a more secure place.”<sup>35</sup>

The developments following the Istanbul bombings were important in rebuilding the strategic partnership between Turkey and the US, particularly as Washington continues to pursue an ambitious regional agenda. In 2004, the US adopted a plan called the greater Middle Eastern initiative that aimed at bringing democracy and liberties of the region’s countries. In this plan, Washington assigned an important role to Turkey as a model for democracy for Muslim countries. Ankara rejected the idea that it should be a model for other Muslim countries, but US policymakers seem to continue to view Turkey as such. In terms of Turkey and the war on terrorism, its support to the US initiative in Afghanistan under the auspices of NATO remains solid. Turkey not only took up the command of ISAF for eight months in 2003, it also sent 260 troops and three helicopters to the ISAF force in 2004. In addition, when NATO created a post as NATO’s civilian representative, that post was given to Hikmet Cetin, a former minister of foreign affairs. Cetin took up his post in January 2004, and his tenure was extended for another six months in June 2004.

During NATO’s Istanbul summit (28-30 June 2004), Turkey and the US also seemed to have reached a new level of understanding. Several decisions had important implications for Turkey’s relations with the US. First,

34 *Sabah*, 29 January 2004.

35 “Turkey and US are making the world a more secure place,” *Anadolu Ajansi*, 5 April 2004.

NATO agreed to assume the task of training security forces for the new Iraqi government and it was expected that Turkey would provide important training sites. Indeed, the decision to enlarge the tasks assigned to the Incirlik base flowed from NATO's decision. Second, NATO decided to increase its forces in Afghanistan and establish provisional reconstruction teams (PRTs) that would extend NATO's ISAF's grip beyond Kabul. Ankara volunteered to take responsibility for a PRT in Takhar. Third, the Bush administration requested that Turkey assume command of ISAF for a second time in 2005 for a period of six months.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, in October 2004, in NATO's defence committee, Turkey was assigned the command role for ISAF starting from February 2005 for another six months. Last but not least, the US's greater Middle East initiative was adopted by NATO under the label of the "Istanbul cooperation initiative," a decision that foresaw extended cooperation between NATO members and the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, warning signs persist. Positive intergovernmental relations did not presage a warming of public opinion. Interestingly, the crisis between Turkey and the US over the Iraqi war seems to have seriously harmed the Turkish public's view of the US, as the *Trans-Atlantic Trends* survey of 2004 demonstrated. According to that study, only 28 percent of the Turkish public (the lowest among NATO members) support the US.<sup>38</sup> While this might prove unimportant, it is also possible that such low levels of support might have negative implications for the future of Turkish-US relations.

#### CONCLUSION

Turkey had enjoyed the benefits of its strategic partnership with the US in the 1990s, especially in the Middle East and with Washington allowing it a relatively free hand in northern Iraq. However, all of this came to an end with the crisis in early 2003 over the Turkish position on the Iraq War. Indeed, Turkey's relations with the US seemed to be one of the casualties of that conflict. More specifically, diverging interests between Turkey and the US over the postwar status of the Iraqi Kurds significantly undermined that

<sup>36</sup> *Sabah*, 21 May 2004.

<sup>37</sup> "Istanbul Kararlari," *Sabah*, 29 June 2004.

<sup>38</sup> *Transatlantic Trends 2004*, German Marshall Fund cosponsored project, 21.

strategic partnership. This development was surprising to many observers because traditionally there had always been a high degree of convergence between Turkish and American foreign policy objectives over regional security.

By the beginning of 2004, mutual efforts to repair the damage to bilateral relations were well underway. Both sides appeared to realize that, despite serious differences over northern Iraq, they shared a common interest in regional stability. Given US foreign policy objectives of bringing democracy and stability to the region, Turkey can still play an important role for American policy in the Middle East. It is the only secular democracy with a Muslim population and has close ties with Europe. It has been an associate member of the EU since 1963, and a candidate for membership since 1999. That is why Ankara retains a crucial role to play in Washington's greater Middle East initiative. Furthermore, Turkey still is an important security partner for the US in the Middle East. It is the major transit route for immigration from east to west, especially from the Middle Eastern countries to western Europe. It has expertise in dealing with terrorism, and its experience combating PKK terrorism in southeastern Turkey's mountainous terrain might enable the military to transfer these skills to the Iraqi conflict. Third, its involvement in the Afghanistan campaign demonstrated its capacity in adjusting to new security risks and threats. Turkish efforts in information and intelligence gathering on terrorism, especially with regard to al Qaeda's activities, has assisted the US in its war on terrorism. Last, Turkey has a history of cooperation with the Iraqis and this record of dealings might help in the reconstruction of Iraq. It is for these reasons that the US has labelled Turkey a key player in the reconstruction of Iraq and the creation of a stable Middle East region.

Nevertheless, the US faces a major dilemma with regard to Turkey. It needs to balance its support for the Iraqi Kurds with its foreign policy objectives towards Turkey. Washington already recognizes that Turkey plays and could continue to play an important role in its war on terrorism. At the same time, the US relies on the Iraqi Kurds for the reconstruction and stabilization of Iraq. That relationship, however, alienates Turkey and appears to threaten a key foreign policy objective of Ankara, namely the prevention of an independent Kurdish state. Thus, what lies ahead for American foreign policy is a continuing need to balance these conflicting interests and objectives.

Turkey faces a similar dilemma. It needs US support for its security and to advance general economic and political interests. It nonetheless fears the consequences it sees of US support to the Kurds in Iraq and worries that Kurdish nationalism, which is arguably being fuelled by US support, could spill over into Turkey. This is the real cause of the 2003 crisis between Turkey and the US; their differences over the Kurds and the miscalculations on both sides brought their relationship to a breakdown point. These differences are not yet resolved, even if they have recently been papered over.

During NATO's Istanbul summit in June 2004, it became apparent that Turkey and the US had overcome the crisis in their relations that had emerged in early 2003. Nevertheless, the differences in the Turkish and American perceptions concerning the Iraqi Kurds persist and will constitute to be a thorn in future bilateral relations and for the reconstruction of Iraq. Despite these diverging interests, Turkey and the US still have important ties, especially in the war on terrorism, opposing rogue states and assisting in the reconstruction of Iraq. In these areas, Turkey carries significant weight. Mutual recognition of these basic facts seems to be the position that both sides reached in 2004. One should note, however, that as long as the US has a presence in Iraq, Turkish and American interests might clash. This is not to claim that Turkish opposition alone could prevent the Iraqi Kurds from establishing a state of their own, especially if in the future the US should support, or acquiesce to, such a development. Nevertheless, Ankara still believes very strongly that an independent Kurdish state would carry significant potential for regional instability and directly threatens vital security interests of Turkey. Should such a scenario become more likely in the future, Turkey's relations with the US would descend into a crisis much worse than that in 2003.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Two main areas that continue to impact Turkey's relations with the US are the reconstruction of Iraq and Turkey's possible membership in the EU. The choice of Jalal Talabani, an Iraqi Kurd, as Iraq's president and the emergence of new ties between Iraq and Turkey in the aftermath of the US intervention in Iraq, may have reduced Turkish fears about the future of Iraq. Since 2004, Turkey has established extensive commercial ties with the new Iraqi government, treated Iraqi victims in Turkish hospitals, supplied electricity to Iraq, and welcomed new Iraqi airlines in its new route to Istanbul.

In addition, Turkey is active in the training of Iraqi security forces as part of a NATO initiative, all with the ultimate objective that Iraq would remain united. In the words of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “Iraq’s unity is a strategic imperative.”<sup>39</sup>

To turn to the second area, Turkey’s EU membership, the US made its position explicit during the general affairs council of the EU on 3 October 2005. During the meeting of the council, there were intense and heated debates when Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik objected at the meeting to opening accession negotiations with Turkey. In response, US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice reiterated US support for Turkish membership in the EU, and tried to reconcile the Turkish government and the EU council. This incident illustrated that Washington clearly perceives that Turkey’s accession to the EU would advance the US foreign policy objective of stabilizing the Middle East and at the same time contribute to the American greater Middle East initiative: “a Turkey anchored in Europe will be an even more reliable partner for the transatlantic family and a positive force for advancing peace, prosperity and democracy.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, with the opening of accession negotiations between Turkey and the EU, Turkey’s relations with the US entered a new era as well.

39 Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “Turkey is committed to the new Iraq,” *Wall Street Journal*, 30 August 2005, A10.

40 Anthony Browne, “Path to EU opens for Turkey after last-minute deal”, *Times*, 4 October 2005.