



# TURKEY UPDATE

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## **THE US-TURKISH ALLIANCE AT THE IRANIAN JUNCTION?**

The CSIS Turkey Update of February 14, 2003, “The US-Turkish Alliance at the Iraqi Junction,” predicted that “Turkish decisions in the next few days [would] determine the future course of the US-Turkish alliance.” Just two weeks later, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) refrained from authorizing the deployment of American troops on Turkish territory as a prelude to their participation in the imminent attack on Iraq from the north, despite heavy pressure from the Bush Administration on the new Justice and Development (JDP) government. The vote and the denial of the use of Turkish territory did not dissuade the United States from proceeding to war on March 20, contrary to the apparent expectations of some leading Turkish politicians and their advisers. However, it provoked unprecedented criticism of Turkey by the US Administration and Congress, prompting equally harsh Turkish responses and serious questions about the future of the fifty year old alliance.

Despite subsequent efforts of diplomats on both sides, whose professional forte is to downplay differences while accentuating possible points of convergence, especially with long-standing relationships, it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of the divergence on Iraq. After all, one of the allies decided rightly or wrongly to go to war and sought the assistance of the other, only to discover to its consternation that the support it expected would be denied. Nevertheless, having looked into the abyss of mutual estrangement, the two governments chose to try to minimize the damage caused by the Turkish rebuff. For its part, the JDP government was understandably motivated by its appreciation of the geopolitical advantages for Turkey in the maintenance of a relationship with its superpower ally, as well as the potentially dangerous domestic implications to itself of the atrophying of the links with Washington. The Bush Administration’s decision to downplay its disappointment was influenced by the need to try to shore up diplomatic support for its military action, as well as by the desire to utilize the example of a successful ‘Muslim democracy,’ as Secretary of State Colin Powell described the Turkish model, while it sought to justify its actions in Afghanistan and Iraq in the broader context of an ambitious push to promote democracy in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world.

Although this has allowed the two sides to stress with some justification ‘the repair’ in the relationship, tensions have continued to lurk beneath the surface, just as in a troubled marriage, and the current appearance of normality is deceptive. In fact, with the Bush Administration intensifying its diplomatic campaign against Iran over its alleged program to develop nuclear weapons, while pointedly keeping the option of military action ‘on the table’ – reminiscent of the prolonged build up to the war in Iraq – it seems all too likely that the alliance will soon face another major test over Iran with all its implications.

## IRAQ AND ITS AFTERMATH

As it began to finalize its plans in late December 2002 to overthrow Saddam Hussein in Iraq after the forcible ouster of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, in the second step of its global campaign against terrorism, the Bush Administration began to focus in earnest on the question of possible Turkish support. After having been consistently warned against military action by the previous coalition government headed by Bulent Ecevit, Washington was clearly hopeful of a more forthcoming attitude on the part of the JDP government that had come into office following the November 2002 elections. However, despite sustained lobbying, which included an unusual early invitation to the White House for the leader of the JDP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in December 2002, and prolonged negotiations in Ankara on a memorandum defining the terms of possible cooperation, the new government ultimately proved unwilling or unable to mobilize its overwhelming majority in the TGNA to back the United States in the war.

The JDP's failure to respond favorably came as a profound shock to the Bush Administration, seemingly confident of Turkish backing right up to the vote, as well as to the US Congress, which had voted to authorize action, and the American public, which was then supportive of the war. The sense of disappointment was particularly strong in the US defense establishment, always at the forefront of Turkey's supporters in Washington throughout the Cold War as well as afterwards, that had been put on a new global war footing after the September 11 attacks. Significantly, evidence of the lingering American bitterness is most often provided by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who invariably cites the Turkish decision as one of the main reasons for the continuing post-war difficulties faced by the United States in Iraq. However, the TGNA vote has left its imprint far beyond the Pentagon and although President George W. Bush hosted Erdogan in the White House in 2004 as well as in 2005, the absence of a close ongoing dialogue on current issues at the highest level – previously a hallmark of US-Turkish relations – testifies to the continuing lack of warmth in the relationship.

Having just taken power, with Abdullah Gul filling in for Erdogan as prime minister prior to the latter's entry into the TGNA through a by-election in March 2003, the last thing the JDP government wanted to confront at the very outset of its term in office was a major crisis with grave foreign and domestic implications. Handicapped by serious internal divisions and the absence of a clear guidance from the powerful Turkish military establishment, which was also divided on this issue, the government tried desperately to balance the strong feelings against cooperation with America on Iraq among the JDP rank and file as well as in the country at large with the dictates of the US-Turkish relationship. This led the JDP to pursue a policy of endeavoring to prevent a war through a dialogue with the doomed regime in Baghdad and the promotion of an abortive regional peace effort right up to the very outbreak of hostilities, while simultaneously negotiating with the Bush Administration on the scope of possible Turkish help in a war to topple Saddam. The inherent ambivalence led to the extremely unusual spectacle of a defeat by a JDP-dominated TGNA of a JDP government resolution to support the United States, ultimately pleasing neither the domestic opponents of war nor Washington.

Quickly recognizing that its efforts were perceived as insufficient by the Bush Administration, the Erdogan government sought to make amends in a characteristically pragmatic manner by pushing a second resolution through the TGNA in October 2003 authorizing the deployment of troops in Iraq, despite the humiliating detention of a number of Turkish soldiers by the American military in northern Iraq a few weeks earlier. However, the offer was turned down, not least because the Iraqi Kurds, who had taken full advantage of the initial Turkish unwillingness to side with the United States to forge a tactical alliance with Washington, were vehemently opposed to the move. In fact, as their ability to wield a *de facto* veto underlined, following the entrenchment of their dominant position in northern Iraq at the

expense of the Turkmens and the acquisition of a greatly enhanced role in the new Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds were the main beneficiaries of the TGNA vote and constituted a major new complication in the complex dynamics of the post-March 1 US-Turkish relationship.

Having previously been dismissive of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, Turkey has been forced since the Iraq war to confront the medium to long term difficulties the Iraqi Kurdish self-rule example may set for the more numerous Turkish Kurds in southeastern Turkey, as well as the increasingly urgent problem posed by the upsurge of separatist terrorist violence directed at Turkish targets from PKK camps in northern Iraq. With the previously-exercised option of military intervention beyond its southern border seemingly excluded – at least for the duration of the US military effort in Iraq – the JDP government has been reluctantly forced to rely exclusively on the diplomatic option of urging the Iraqi Kurds to refrain from providing assistance to the terrorists, while trying to persuade the Bush Administration to use US military assets in Iraq against the PKK, with very little success.

The universal perception in Turkey of the growing separatist terrorist threat as a direct offshoot of the military action in Iraq has inevitably inflamed anti-American sentiments in the country. The Turkish public, unlike the government, is not burdened by the need to maintain a good relationship with a superpower ally and views the difficulties the United States has been facing in Iraq as a vindication of the wisdom of the TGNA vote. Evidenced not only by opinion polls which reveal a deepening distrust of America – a recent survey showed that 69.3 per cent of Turks were opposed to any cooperation with the United States – but also by the record number of viewers of the recent hit movie, *Valley of the Wolves*, which graphically depicts the Americans as villains in Iraq, the negative Turkish perception of the Bush Administration's policies inevitably makes the precarious balancing act of the Erdogan government even more difficult.

## **ON TO IRAN?**

Although the Bush Administration has been steadily losing the support of the American public for the costly war in Iraq, which has just entered its fourth year, it has not budged from its position that the conflict was an essential component of its 'global war against terrorism' and constantly reiterates its determination to pursue the campaign 'until victory.' In view of its heavy military commitment in Iraq and a weakening domestic base, which might presage a possible Democrat takeover of one or both Houses of Congress in the November 2006 elections, coupled with continuing international resentment of its military action in Iraq, it might seem prudent for the Bush Administration not to risk another potentially costly crisis in its remaining time in office. However, the recent intensification of tensions with Iran suggests otherwise.

After all, President Bush had declared Iran to be a member of 'the Axis of Evil' – along with Iraq and North Korea – as far back as January 2003, and has since made it clear on numerous occasions that his ultimate goal is regime change in that country. Significantly, the new US National Security Strategy (UNSS) unveiled in March 2006 stated that the US 'may face no greater challenge from a single country than Iran,' while defending the principle of a preemptive strike which had been outlined in the previous UNSS in 2002 prior to the war in Iraq. Although it has also been accusing Iran of 'aggravating the situation in Iraq through its agents and allies,' the Iranian nuclear program has been the primary item in the Bush Administration's hardening stance towards Tehran with Vice President Dick Cheney bluntly declaring last month that 'Iran will not be allowed to build a nuclear weapon.'

While Bush and Cheney, along with the rest of the Administration, have gone out of their way to stress that the current tensions with Iran are different to the crisis, which ultimately led to the war in Iraq, the parallels are striking. In addition to stressing the need to overthrow the regime and focusing on the issue

of the development of weapons of mass destruction to garner domestic and international support, there has also been an escalation of rhetoric against Iran and its new president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, similar to the strong denunciations of Saddam Hussein and his regime in the lead up to the Iraq war. It is also noteworthy that the Bush Administration has taken its case to the UN Security Council – where John Bolton, a leading Iran hardliner, represents the United States – to garner international backing for its policy just as it did prior to embarking on the war against Iraq. Even more significantly, the current US policymakers at the highest level are the same ones who made the decision to proceed to war to overthrow Saddam, the sole exception being former Secretary of State Colin Powell who was apparently the lone dissenter on Iraq.

Although US allies in Western Europe are generally supportive of a tougher line if not of military action, with Russia and China reluctant to join the international consensus Washington has been endeavoring to build, even on the imposition of UN sanctions, it seems very unlikely that there will be authorization for any kind of armed action in the near future. However, it also seems unlikely that the crisis, which moved to the UN Security Council following the International Atomic Agency's (IAEA) referral of Iran's nuclear activities, can be defused unless the increasingly defiant Iranian leadership drastically modifies its position on nuclear development or the Bush Administration unexpectedly abandons its current policy of forcing an end to the Iranian program.

In fact, with Ahmadinejad's extremely provocative statements about 'wiping Israel off the face of the map,' Israeli statements of concern about the existential dangers of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons and public reaffirmations by Bush of his commitment to defend Israel against such a threat, it is becoming difficult to see how the Bush Administration will be able to avoid a stark choice between utilizing its reported plans for a military strike on Iran – either on its own or with a new 'Coalition of the Willing' – with all its dangerous regional and global consequences, and allowing the Islamic Republic to proceed to the acquisition of a nuclear capability, with equally serious potentially consequences. However, even if the Bush Administration ultimately refrains from the military option, the crisis seems certain to have a major impact on relations with Turkey and the JDP government.

## **EXTERNAL CRISIS, DOMESTIC COMPLICATIONS**

For the moment, the Bush Administration has been confining itself to relatively low-decibel diplomacy with the Turkish government, including a briefing in Ankara in February by the US Ambassador to the IAEA, Greg Schulte. However, as the crisis escalates, the JDP government is likely to find itself the object of closer US attention. It seems unlikely that the Erdogan government will be asked for direct support for any possible military action, not just because the Bush Administration has not forgotten the March 1 experience, but also because the reported bombing plans apparently do not assume Turkish logistical backing. While that may change as the crisis unfolds, the higher current priorities for Washington are to ensure that Ankara gradually distance itself from Tehran, refrain from any effort to mediate – especially important after the experience of the uncoordinated JDP invitation extended to a Hamas delegation following the Palestinian elections – and, in due course, fully participate in diplomatic efforts and sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

US pressure to join the campaign against Iran would be extremely unwelcome to the Erdogan government as it would undercut two fundamental goals in its foreign policy, namely the development of good relations with all of Turkey's neighbors and to act as intermediaries between the West and the Islamic world. Throughout his term in office, Erdogan has been endeavoring to formulate a new slant in Turkish foreign policy involving the balancing of the alliance with the United States and eventual accession to the European Union (EU) with a stronger relationship with the rest of the Islamic world and thus to emerge as the indispensable bridge between its two worlds. Being obliged to side openly with the United States

against Iran would effectively scuttle this effort. Moreover, in view of its location as a direct neighbor of Iran, Turkey would be particularly susceptible to the negative effects of the gathering storm over Iran.

Having seen Turkey simultaneously buffeted by post-war instability in Iraq – in addition to the incremental rise in deaths due to PKK terrorism, over a hundred Turkish truck drivers have been killed in Iraq during the past three years – the JDP government would view with alarm the additional costs a US-Iranian confrontation would bring. The Turks have bitter memories of the economic losses due to their participation in the decade-long embargo against Saddam after his invasion of Kuwait and would not be favorably disposed to assuming similar costs, which would inevitably follow the interruption of contacts and trade with Iran. An important source of gas for the Turkish energy market, Iran also sends almost a million of its citizens to Turkey as tourists every year while serving as the primary conduit for Turkish trade with Central Asia. At a broader level, the Turks also have serious reasons for concern about the negative impact growing regional tensions and the possibility of conflict would have on foreign investment and, consequently, on the management of the growing Turkish current accounts deficit.

In any case, cooperation with the United States is far from desirable to most Turks. A recent opinion poll discovered that 79.2 percent were opposed to military action against Iran while 74.2 percent apparently considered America the main threat to world peace. Needless to say, the Iranians are doing their best to take advantage of the Turkish mood. On March 29, Ahmadinajad praised the JDP's 'new attitude towards a stronger role in the Islamic world' and called for 'Islam to become the foundation for Iran and Turkey on global issues,' while the Iranian Ambassador in Ankara was quoted by *Radikal* on April 8, as saying that the US was 'using the PKK to stir up trouble in Turkey and the Middle East,' Iran was 'ready to cooperate with Turkey on this issue as in the past' and that Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul was expected in Tehran to discuss closer relations in the near future.

Just as the beginning of the JDP's term in office was a bad time for the Iraq crisis, this is also a particularly difficult time for the Iranian crisis. The growing separatist terrorist threat, which is now claiming victims on a virtually daily basis, and the accompanying tensions it has generated in the southeast, have ended realistic hopes of dealing with what Erdogan has identified as 'the Kurdish problem' in a political manner and might well lead to demands for a return to some kind of martial law with all its negative implications for the southeast as well as Turkey's EU-related process of reform. In fact, the Kurdish issue has already crept back into the ongoing dialogue between Turkey and the EU, exacerbating tensions the government has hitherto been eager to conceal stemming from the effective stalling of the accession process under the Austrian presidency. With the continuing deadlock over Turkey's refusal to open up its ports and airports to the Greek Cypriots, there is now a very real danger of what Olli Rehn, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, called 'a train wreck' in the Turkish-EU relationship before the end of the year.

To be sure, with his populist touch and his ability to shape his message to appeal to growing nationalist sentiment, Erdogan has been able to ensure that the JDP stay far ahead of its rivals in the polls and to maintain an unusual degree of party solidarity. However, the worsening situation in the southeast, the failure to translate the positive developments at the macroeconomic level into tangible benefits to the man in the street, the persistent corruption allegations which have undermined the JDP's declared mission to bring transparency to public administration and continuing uncertainty over Erdogan's possible plans to seek election as president in April 2007, could still affect the JDP's political fortunes in the next parliamentary elections. However, as always, the real wild card in the Turkish political equation is the relationship between the civilian authority and the military establishment, which could well be aggravated by the Iranian crisis.

## **READING THE CIVILIAN-MILITARY TEA LEAVES**

Although many members of the Turkish General Staff (TGS) had serious reservations about the assumption of power by the JDP because of its Islamist origins, the Chief of Staff, General Hilmi Ozkok, made clear from the outset his willingness to work with the new government. While Ozkok's stance undoubtedly caused unhappiness among his fellow generals as well as lower-rank officers, his ability to work with Erdogan certainly helped to ease tensions during the JDP's term in office. With Ozkok's long tenure due to end in August 2006, there is growing but muted concern in the JDP about its future relationship with the military establishment. Ozkok's expected replacement, General Yasar Buyukanit, the Commander of the Land Forces, has not enjoyed an easy relationship with the government and has publicly criticized the JDP – including most recently on the Hamas visit – as was underlined by the recent controversy relating to the inclusion of his name in an indictment prepared by a prosecutor in the southeast about covert military activities in that region. However, as Erdogan confirmed publicly after a strong reaction from the TGS, the JDP government is wary of interference in the military promotion process. It is worth recalling that the Demirel government had intervened in the process prior to the 1980 coup only to clear the way for General Kenan Evren to become Chief of Staff and to overthrow civilian authority.

Significantly, the highest echelons of the TGS Buyukanit will soon lead is different to the military leadership which failed to give a clear lead on cooperation with the United States in March 2003. Although Ozkok and Buyukanit were reportedly in favor of assenting to the American request, a number of four-star generals were opposed, including General Aytac Yalman, then Commander of the Land Forces. Their reservations were apparently tied to their distrust of the JDP and its links to Washington, as well as to their suspicions of the United States. However, Yalman has now retired from the TGS, along with other top generals who shared his views and, consequently, Buyukanit is likely to find it easier to recommend cooperation with the United States on a future occasion.

Buyukanit visited Washington in December 2005, on a trip which was clearly designed to sweep away the last vestiges of the post-March 1 tensions between the TGS and the Pentagon and with General Ilker Basbug, who is slated to replace him as Commander of the Land Forces and, in 2008, as Chief of Staff, reportedly on good terms with General Peter Pace, the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, we are likely to see an easier relationship between the Turkish and American militaries in the coming years. Significantly, Basbug stated last year that the US-Turkish relationship was 'too important to be reduced to a single issue,' even as he expressed disappointment with the continuing failure of the US military to curb PKK activities in northern Iraq.

As we look ahead, a very difficult future scenario for the JDP government would see a worsening of the Iran crisis, to which it would almost certainly respond with the kind of ambivalence it displayed in the Iraq crisis, encouraging the Bush Administration, which is far less enthusiastic about its own Middle East democracy initiative after the Hamas victory, and, consequently, less bound to cooperation on this issue with a Turkish government with Islamist origins, to put even greater emphasis on the improving military to military contacts with Turkey and thus to take advantage of the TGS's greater willingness to openly articulate the dangers to Turkey of Iran's nuclear ambitions. This would undoubtedly exacerbate domestic tensions in Turkey during the prolonged pre-election period, particularly if separatist violence further worsens and the EU process, which has been invaluable to the JDP government in making its case that it was not taking Turkey away from the West, as well as in reshaping civilian-military relations, is stalled.

**Bulent Aliriza**  
**Director, Turkey Project**

**Seda Ciftci**  
**Research Associate**

