

# Turkish-American Relations in the Context of Iraq War: From Crisis to Recovery?\*

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## Introduction

Iraq war has generated some negative impacts on the Turkish-American relations. This study focuses on the divergence of interests derived from the Iraq war and analyzes its possible implications for the future. The incidents started with the refusal of Turkish Parliament to allow American forces to locate on Turkish territories to open a northern front and the increase of terrorist attacks of the PKK stemming from northern Iraq generating anti-American sentiments in Turkish public opinion and a disappointment for both sides. Although mutual efforts to preserve the relations created some positive results, it can be said that nothing will be the same as in the past. This study argues that recently a recovery process has started for the relations and debates whether this process would overcome the resentment and open a new phase?

## (I)

### **Preserving Turkish-American Relations: From Alliance to the Partnership**

Turkish-American alliance emerged after the Second World War with the Truman Doctrine (1947) and was formalized with the Turkish entrance to NATO in 1952. Certainly, the common threat perceptions of both sides

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gave birth to this alliance. American threat perceptions about the Soviets were responded with George F. Kennan's famous "*containment policy*" discourse while the Turkish threat perceptions stemmed from the Soviet demands on Turkish territories and Straits. Moreover these demands were made at the highest level. Both sides found it appropriate to form an alliance towards the common threat.

In the Cold War era the U.S. was dominant in determining the scope of the bilateral relationship. Also, the relations were largely developed on a military basis in the framework of containment policy and NATO. Turkey played an active role as an American ally; sometimes Turkish national interests were neglected on behalf of the alliance. Thus, the role Turkey played was largely determined by the U.S. and its regional/global strategies. Turkey's role in the relationship was largely determined by its unique geographic location. As a buffer state between the Soviet Russia, Europe and the Middle East, Turkey conducted its foreign and security policy in the context of Turkish-American alliance's requirements.<sup>1</sup>

During the Cold War, Turkish-American alliance was not free from problems. Relations enjoyed cooperation and survived the conflict more than fifty years. In the Cold War, relations were sometimes very strained due to the divergences in regional and global perspectives; even though the general trend of relations was on a very favorable one. The main tensions in the alliance were the Jupiter missile crisis, the opium issue and the Cyprus issue. Negative developments stemmed from the Cyprus issue, i.e. the Johnson letter in 1964, Turkish intervention to Cyprus in 1974 and, arms embargo between 1975-1978 substantially affected the alliance negatively. Nevertheless, the common threat perception from the USSR forestalled the divergences and due to this commonly shared perception, the alliance was successfully sustained until the end of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War transformed the international system and the old threat perceptions were reevaluated in the light of new changes and challenges. In this context, some argued that Turkish-American alliance would come to an end. As, the main underlying cause for the alliance, "the Soviet threat" disappeared there was no need for the U.S. and Turkey to continue the alliance.<sup>2</sup> However, while the most identical and striking interests of the states disappeared, the alliance still survived. Both powers

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<sup>1</sup>Meliha Benli Altınışık - Özlem Tür, *Turkey: Challenges of Continuity and Change*, (Oxon: RoutledgeCurzon), 2005, pp. 104-106.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Rouleau, "The Challenges to Turkey," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 5, November/December 1993, pp. 112-113.

realized that there were new common and parallel interests that should be viewed in the context of the new international system. In addition to the new threat perceptions shared by both sides, other concerns for economic development and search for stability converged in the post-Cold War era. Cooperation in the Middle East as well as in the Balkans during the Bosnia and Kosovo crisis and collaboration in Central Asia through the 1990s may be viewed in this perspective. In this era, the relations between the two allies were redefined by as “*Enhanced Partnership*” starting with the Gulf War and as “*Strategic Partnership*” in the late 1990s.

Despite the changes in the international system, Turkish-American relations in the context of the Middle East did not have a radical change in the early years of the post-Cold War. For instance, when Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, Turkey played an important role in the U.S. led coalition, and in the humanitarian operations which followed. In this context it mustn't be forgotten that, Turkish Parliament voted a motion on January 17, 1991 and authorized the government to send Turkish troops abroad and allow American forces to attack from Turkish bases. Turkish support continued till the late 1990s in the UN's sanctions process and there were only a few suspicions(-that wouldn't be described as vital problems) occurred between U.S. and Turkey. The problems in this era stemmed from the disquiet of Turkish authorities about the consequences of the U.S. plans over Iraq's future, especially for the Kurdish populated northern part of Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Actually it can be argued that, this was some kind of foreshadowing of the events that created the crisis in 2003.

However, when the 9/11 attacks occurred Turkey supported the U.S., and participated in the U.S.-led coalition under the NATO umbrella for the Afghanistan mission. Also it must be mentioned that both sides tried to diversify and develop the cooperation channels in the post-Cold War era in economic, commercial and social fields along with the military ones. But as discussed below, the alliance's existence became precarious with the developments in Iraq.

## (II)

### **Turkish-American Alliance at Stake? : The War in Iraq**

Although Turkey supported the United State's war on terror in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and participated in the operation in Afghanistan, American policy towards Iraq created a gap between

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<sup>3</sup>Bill Park, “US-Turkish Relations: Can the Future Resemble the Past?”, *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 1, March 2007, p. 44.

Washington and Ankara. American desire to expand the war on terror front to Iraq did not receive a warm welcome in Turkey. In this context, it can be argued that the bilateral relations became very jittery with the events of 2003 and their aftermath. It became very difficult for both sides to repair the relations.

While the Afghanistan operation is in progress, Washington targeted Iraq and sought support to topple Saddam's regime. In Bush's words, "*The world is also uniting to answer the unique and urgent threat posed by Iraq, whose dictator has already used weapons of mass destruction to kill thousands. We must not and will not permit either terrorists or tyrants to blackmail freedom-loving nations.*"<sup>4</sup> Ankara was in a dilemma when Washington called for Turkish "*full and complete cooperation*" for a possible operation against Iraq. Ankara was on the same line with the U.S. and against an anti-democratic regime having weapons of mass destruction in a neighboring country. According to a poll conducted in March 2003, more than 67 per cent of the public had negative opinions of the Saddam regime.<sup>5</sup>

Ankara had fears of the possible outcomes of an intervention in Iraq. Thus, Turkey suffered much not only economically but also in security terms because of the instability in Iraq during the 1990s. Due to the first Iraqi crisis, Turkey's economic losses were estimated between 40 and 60 billion dollars not including the human costs stemmed from PKK attacks based in Northern Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, huge public opposition to an attack on Iraq also affected Ankara's position. In several public polls conducted just before the war, about 90 per cent of Turks were against the war as well as Turkish participation in this process. More than 90 per cent of the public opinion had not been convinced by the U.S. justifications for an intervention.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless newly elected Turkish government initially supported the White House and prepared a motion to be introduced in Parliament vote in order to allow the deployment of foreign troops and to send Turkish

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<sup>4</sup>*Radio Address of the President to the Nation*, 23 November 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/11/20021123.html>, (Retrieved May 24, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Nasuh Uslu et.al., "Turkish Public Opinion Toward the United States in the Context of the Iraq Question", *Middle East Review on International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2005, pp. 75-107.

<sup>6</sup>Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Iraq Policy: The War and Beyond", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, August 2006, pp. 185-186.

<sup>7</sup>Uslu, loc.cit.

<sup>8</sup>Actually, if 3 more members had voted on behalf, the motion would be accepted. Thus 264 members votes were on behalf while 251 were against the motion and 19 abstentions were in the 550-seat Parliament.

troops abroad. But refusal of this motion by the Parliament on March 1, 2003 was the first event that caused the rift.<sup>8</sup> Turkish Parliament's decision was seen a disappointing act especially by the U.S. who took Turkish support for granted. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza stated, "...we were in the White House's Situation Room and when we learned the decision of the Turkish Parliament, we were shocked"<sup>9</sup> Then the U.S. canceled its plans to open a northern front and launched the war on March 20, 2003. Disappointment of Washington was so high that along with the public criticism made by various American officials for Turkish refusal between 2003 and 2004, in 2005 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld explicitly blamed Turkey for the chaotic situation in Iraq. According to Rumsfeld "*Had we been successful in getting the 4th Infantry Division to come in through Turkey...the insurgency would have been at a lesser intensity than it is today.*"<sup>10</sup>

Turkish Parliament voted for another government motion disallowing the U.S. to use Turkish territories and Turkish airspace to cross into Iraq for airborne attacks in late March. This new motion also allowed the government to send Turkish troops abroad, namely northern Iraq. The latter caused another rift between both powers. Since the U.S. developed relations with the Kurdish opposition groups to struggle with Saddam for years, the absence of Turkish support on the eve of the war brought the parties closer. However, a Turkish decision to dispatch troops in northern Iraq would create a conflict with Turkey and Kurdish groups and this would eventually damage U.S.'s goals in the ongoing war. That's why President Bush warned Turkey on the possibility of a military confrontation of Turkish and American forces if Turkey sent troops to northern Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Actually, this issue was a special point in the tough negotiations prior to the vote of the motion while both sides insisted on their positions, they eventually agreed.<sup>12</sup> But with the refusal of the motion by Turkish Parliament the U.S. showed an explicit stand against Turkish military involvement in North Iraq.

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<sup>8</sup>Matthew Bryza's speech at the Ninth Turgut Ozal Memorial Lecture: *Invigorating the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Partnership*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 24, 2008.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.smh.com.au/news/After-Saddam/US-blames-Turkey-for-Iraq-chaos/2005/03/21/1111253960989.html>, (Retrieved 15/07/2009).

<sup>11</sup>Aylin Güney, "An Anatomy of the Transformation of the US-Turkish Alliance: From 'Cold War' to 'War on Iraq' ", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2005, pp. 351-352.

<sup>12</sup>James E. Kapsis, "The Failure of U.S.-Turkish Pre-War Negotiations: An Overconfident United States, Political Mismanagement, and a Conflicted Military", *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 10, No. 3, Article 3/10 - September 2006.

<sup>13</sup>The Liaison Office of Turkish Armed Forces in Sulaymaniyah was established in 1995.

The third event which put the allies at odds was the detention of 11 Turkish Special Forces officers in Sulaymaniyah on July 4, 2003.<sup>13</sup> Even symbolically Turkish-American relations never faced a deeper crisis before. For Turkey, this was the most shocking event not only on political grounds but also on military grounds. According to Chief of General Staff Hilmi Özkök "...this incident created the biggest crisis of confidence between the two countries..."<sup>14</sup> The negative impacts of the detention soared when it was learned that sacks were put on Turkish officers heads, a humiliating action which should had been known to the U.S.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for the first time in two allies' history as well as in NATO's history, officers of an ally were arrested by another ally's soldiers.

Favorable American attitudes towards Iraqi Kurdish groups including on the Kirkuk issue was one of the problematic points of the relations for Turkey. Thus, Turkey declared its "red lines" before the American-led operation, as it would not let an independent Kurdish state be created in northern Iraq, and would consider such an action as *casus belli*. But facts on the ground were slightly different and American excessive attitudes towards Iraqi Kurds drove Ankara to urge Washington for a possible civil war and Kurdish secession.<sup>16</sup> In this context Washington's ignorance of the rights of the Iraqi Turkmens in the new political construction process also added tension to relations. The veiled warnings from Washington before the war to provide Turkish support for the war may be related to this situation. Thus, it is claimed that if Turkey wanted to say something on Iraq's future it must have involved itself in the war.<sup>17</sup>

Last but not the least, Washington's reluctance to cooperate with Turkey in the fight against PKK terrorism was another disturbing point for Turkey in the relations regarding Iraq. Thus, even PKK transformed itself as Congra-Gel and this was also called as a terrorist organization by Washington, Turkish authorities received little effective help to struggle against this organization based in Qandil Mountain in northern Iraq. PKK's suspension of unilateral ceasefire with Turkey in September 2004 which was effective since 2000 added new tensions to the relations.<sup>18</sup> Because it's claimed that it was the PKK members who restarted the attacks on Turkey had crossed over from northern Iraq. This was one of the most

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<sup>14</sup> *Aksam*, July 8, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> The detention issue was also named as "Sack Issue".

<sup>16</sup> *Turkish Daily News*, November 6, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Güney, p. 351.

<sup>18</sup> Altunışık, p. 192.

important issues in public opinion that according to a poll conducted in Turkey, 75 per cent of respondents consider Washington's attitude towards PKK as the biggest problem in bilateral relations.<sup>19</sup>

All these issues and the American-led war itself caused the growth of anti-Americanism in Turkey. For instance, according to Pew Global Attitudes Project's surveys, in 1999-2000 more than half of Turks had favorable opinions of the U.S., while this rate decreased to 15 per cent in 2003 and couldn't reach to 50 per cent until now.<sup>20</sup> It's an ironic situation to mention an alliance and strategic partnership while Turkish people's perceptions towards the U.S. were on the lowest levels.. However, some issues were mentioned and criticized by the U.S. officially and unofficially in order to prevent the increase of anti-Americanism. Among them, the most prominent ones were the *Metal Storm* which is a political-fiction novel sold 435 thousand in eight months and *Valley of the Wolves-Iraq* a movie which was the most expensive one with a budget around 10 million dollars and watched by more than 4 million people just in 6 months.<sup>21</sup>

To sum up, while there were only minor problems in Turkish-American relations before the Iraq war, the policies, perceptions and attitudes of both sides were diversified. However with the Iraqi crisis the gap between two allies grew. The main reason for the worsening of Turkish-American relations regarding Iraq is the divergence in the security calculations and expectations of both countries. The U.S. demanded Turkish support according to its own threat perceptions and global requirements but not by considering the facts on the ground. As Secretary of State Collin Powell stated later, Ankara could probably accept over-flight rights but would be unwillingness to agree to the movement of large numbers of American troops on its soil.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Turkey demanded an understanding for its unique position in the vicinity and possible consequences of an operation in Iraq.

The immediate impact of the war is the mistrust and crisis of confidence between two old allies. The situation became so critical that both states started to use different leverages to exercise pressure on each other. For

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<sup>19</sup>Güney, p. 482.

<sup>20</sup>"U.S. Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative", <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=247>, (Retrieved 15/07/2009).

<sup>21</sup>James E. Kapsis, "From Desert Storm to Metal Storm: How Iraq Has Spoiled U.S.-Turkish Relations," *Current History*, November 2005, pp. 380-389; Both issues were raised during the interviews made with the State Department and other officials in the U.S.

<sup>22</sup>F. Stephen Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership : U.S.-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change*, Rand Corporation, 2010, pp. 12-13.

instance, while Turkey made efforts to develop close relations with other neighboring countries like Iran and Syria rather than cooperating with the U.S. in order to prevent the negative consequences of American-led invasion; Washington seemed to use other leverages such as allowing excessive latitude to Kurdish groups and to use the Armenian issue and PKK. So that in the years between 2003-2005 one could hardly define Turkish-American relations as alliance or strategic partnership. However, both sides realized that there are more common points than differences in the Middle East and elsewhere and took steps to improve the relations.

### (III)

#### **Recovery Efforts in Turkish-American Relations**

Ankara and Washington endeavored immediately after the crisis to bring the relations back to their former level. By reevaluating the faults in policies, Michael Rubin from the American Enterprise Institute wrote that *“Nor can the March 1 vote - or the July 4 incident - fully explain subsequent US-Turkish tension. Irritants in bilateral relations have included misguided US diplomacy in the run-up to the war and an American failure to properly address PKK terrorism, as well as counterproductive Turkish strategies regarding Iraqi Turkmen and Kurds.”*<sup>23</sup> According to Rubin, because of the mistakes made in the process, the relationship will take years to build; and even if either side is indispensable to the other, both capitals would lose much if their relations deteriorate further.

Both sides became aware that cooperation rather than conflict in Iraq would better serve their bilateral interests. Namely, preventing the dissolution of Iraq and maintaining stability is acknowledged as a vital concern for both sides. That's why, even the mutual disappointments derived from different events; Ankara and Washington hesitated to follow revengeful policies. Just in 2005, Washington made approximately 40 official visits to Turkey. Respective visits followed this and despite the critical and anti-Turkish strain within the Bush administration, the official level of the relations tried to be improved.<sup>24</sup>

In this context Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Washington on November 5, 2007 reflects a cornerstone for the improvement of the relations. As stated above, for the Turkish public

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<sup>23</sup>Michael Rubin, “A Comedy of Errors: American-Turkish Diplomacy and the Iraq War”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2005, <http://www.meforum.org/701/a-comedy-of-errors-american-turkish-diplomacy>, (Retrieved 15/07/2009).

<sup>24</sup>Park, p. 49.

opinion as well as the politicians, the most important issue in Turkish-American relations was the failure to act jointly against PKK. Erdoğan's visit came just after a heavy PKK attack against a Turkish military post in the Iraqi border. It can be argued that this was one of the most decisive visits for the future of Turkish-American relations. Erdoğan stated before the visit that *"Turkey has run out of patience with the terrorist attacks being staged from northern Iraq"* adding *"relations between the United States and Turkey were undergoing a serious test."*<sup>25</sup> Joshua Walker from Princeton University and a former official in the State Department's Turkish desk, defines Turkish demands as an ultimatum for the U.S.: *"...November 5 may well be the first time that a Turkish prime minister has given an ultimatum to a US president."*<sup>26</sup> In this visit, Washington offered firm commitment to sustain joint intelligence and military efforts on the ground in northern Iraq.

Indeed, an effective cooperation between Turkey and U.S. has started with this visit in order to fight against PKK. By providing real-site intelligence with Turkey, Turkish Armed Forces able to make aerial attacks on PKK bases operating in northern Iraq. Another sign of improvement of relations occurred on the Kirkuk issue. A referendum for the status of Kirkuk has planned initially on November 15, 2007 was first delayed to 31 December. In order to improve the relations with Turkey, the date of the referendum was consistently delayed. Beside, Turkey's new regional activism in the Middle East also received a warm welcome and was appreciated by the U.S. Turkish engagement with Syria, Iran and Hamas initially criticized by Washington, led to realization that the U.S. would also benefit from this engagement. Bill Park from London University emphasized that focus of the relations started from *"military cooperation and strategic location"* to *"soft security approach"* was derived from a shared commitment to regional democratization and stability.<sup>27</sup> Several other developments were appreciated by Washington including Turkey's mediatory role in in-direct talks between Syria and Israel in 2006, engagement with all Iraqi and Lebanese groups to maintain local and regional stability, initiatives concerning the Iranian nuclear issue, and in

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<sup>25</sup>Ann Scott Tyson and Robin Wright, "U.S. Helps Turkey Hit Rebel Kurds In Iraq", *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2007.

<sup>26</sup>Joshua Walker, "Turkish Ultimatum to Washington", an Op-Ed, *Today's Zaman*, November 8, 2007, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=126510>, (Retrieved 17/07/2009).

<sup>27</sup>Park, p. 46.

general means “facilitator” role in regional conflicts such as between Syria-Iraq.

President Obama’s visit on April 6-7, 2009 also highlighted the improvement in relations. The visit was a sign of bolstering Turkish-American strategic alliance. Because the visit was the first of the newly elected President to a Muslim populated country and made as a part of European tour, rather than Middle East. Also the visit was made without paying a visit to Greece as it was usually done before. All these can be interpreted as the signs of rapprochement in the new era. Thus, the President confirmed Turkey’s importance as an ally in the context of NATO and its support for Turkish accession to EU. In fact, some argued that with Obama’s visit, Turkish-American relations improved into a “golden era”.<sup>28</sup> This is a slightly fancy suggestion, but it can be observed that relations are better than 2003. Both countries did not limit the improvement of the relations about Iraq. They diversified new cooperation channels in Arab-Israeli dispute, opening alternative energy corridors through the Caucasus and even facilitating the dialogue between Washington and Tehran about latter’s nuclear program along Iraq.

#### (IV)

#### **Concluding comments.**

Iraq war certainly was the deepest crisis in the context of Turkish-American relations in the post-Cold War era. The immediate impact of the war was that, it bore disappointments and crisis of confidence for both countries that would not be forgotten for many years. However, Ankara and Washington never intended to burn their bridges. Both sides endeavored immediately after the crisis to bring the relations back to their former level and if possible, to develop further. Of course, bringing the relations back would not be so possible. Both countries will continue to keep the disappointments in mind. In this context, the recent recovery process seems to bear some fruit for the relations. At least it seems that Ankara and Washington did not lead themselves to a stalemate in the Iraqi imbroglio. Both acknowledged in different ways that cooperation must be continued and would not be limited only to Iraq.

It must be noted that the relations cannot be executed on the same conditions as it was in the Cold War. One of the long run impacts of the Iraqi’s crisis is that if the U.S. desires to continue relations with Turkey as a

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<sup>28</sup>“Repairing the bridge”, *Economist*, 3/14/2009, Vol. 390, Issue 8622, p. 57.

strategic ally, then it must regard the concerns and reservations of Ankara more thoughtfully. It would be helpful if the U.S. would limit its expectations of Turkey in order to avoid disappointments. Turkish-American relations should not be executed only in military needs. Some efforts were made to diversify the relations before, but had not been accomplished. Now both sides recognize the need to develop political, economic and cultural relations along the military cooperation. These impacts should be regarded in the context of Turkish new regional stance. In a troubled and hostile region Turkey's new engagement is attributed to her soft power; diplomacy rather than military power and compromise rather than conflict. This approach would not harm U.S. interests in the region; instead it would supplement them.

In conclusion, one might say that the recovery process (mentioned above) does not mean that problems concerning Iraq would not occur anymore. The future of Iraq has the potential to put the strategic alliance at stake again. It is expected that both states would learn their lessons from the past events, and not allow any problem to turn into a deep crisis.

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