

Turkey's Iraq Policy

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The grand remnants of the Sublime Porte are once again re-emerging as the firmly emplaced AKP now finds itself in a position to steer Turkish foreign policy with a freer hand. Critics of the AKP's fusion of populist Islamism and capitalism have pointed to an emergent external posture dominated by an ideology that would naturally seek to gain friends with states such as Iran and terror groups as HAMAS. The former Foreign Minister, and now president, Abdullah Gul was seen as the personification of the new policy of 'depth' gearing Turkey to take a more robust role in the Middle East and one that sent a stringent message to the West, and the US in particular: Namely, that Turkish sovereignty was unassailable and that Turkey was within its own right, but more importantly power, to seek new directions in its Asiatic outreach. But rather than an expression of pan-Islamic idealism, Turkey's new 'path' is more likely to be guided by a clarity borne of a desire to plug-in to the globalized marketplace and fashion a leading regional role as the sting of EU's cold shoulder gives way to a newly energized turn eastward. The question, ultimately, weighing on the minds of many U.S. policy makers and strategists is whether a convergence can be found, if at all possible, between Turkish national interests, its government's Islamist tinge, and U.S. regional interests, particularly when it comes to that salient centerpiece dominating the geopolitical conversation of the region, if not the world: Iraq. I would argue that yes, it is, albeit with considerable need for a push by both country's leadership to assuage mutual suspicion and build upon the vast terrain of strategic common ground.

The firmly mandated AKP government understandably looks towards achieving greater regional 'depth' for Turkish Middle Eastern policy as an expression of nationalist determinism and a sense of confidence anchored by a strong domestic mandate. The new foreign minister Ali Babacan, American educated and representative of the learned and pioneering conservative class that orchestrated the AKP's fairly successful domestic policies, is now at the helm and may be the key to ushering in a new era of Turkish-U.S. relations, underscored by a common vision for Iraq and the Middle East.

He will have the opportunity to signal Turkey's good-faith in upcoming regional 'Neighbors of Iraq' conference to be hosted in Istanbul at the end of October 2007. The conference itself is indicative of potential leverage that Turkey can wield in moving forward reconciliation efforts in Iraq and brokering regional security agreements that respect Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity, something that U.S. military forces and policymakers would very much like to see. The conference offers Erdoğan and Babacan more than just an opportunity to herald Turkish regional relevance. More importantly, this gathering of regional principles, all with invested strategic stakes in a stable and functioning Iraqi state, presents Erdoğan and Babacan a prime opportunity to move forward a more profound policy guided by strategic depth void of myopic paranoia which has thus far characterized institutional views of U.S. intentions.

Turkey will invariably have an impact on the status of the mixed northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. This issue is a matter of enormous magnitude whose ultimate resolution will play a significant role in mitigating the insurgency in Iraq and supporting the government of Nouri al-Maliki in building the necessary legitimacy and broad sectarian buy-in for national political institutions. With its large Kurdish and Turkoman population, Kirkuk is an area where Turkish and U.S. strategic interests naturally intersect. Whether the city falls under the *de jure* control of the proto-sovereign Kurdish Regional Government or remains as part of a nominally coherent Iraqi state will have profound repercussions for both the Kurdish population spread throughout neighboring states and surrounding states loathe to countenance further Kurdish empowerment. By playing the role of a good-faith arbiter between Sunni

Arabs, Turkoman, and Kurds, Turkey stands to gain much in terms of extending its prestige by augmenting U.S. diplomatic efforts to find a solution to a potential powder keg that would almost certainly have wide ranging repercussions if not adeptly handled.

Beyond Kirkuk, the wider concern of national reconciliation in Iraq is an imperative that the Turkish government has already signaled its desire to involve itself—it would be incumbent upon the foreign ministry to continue and expand this track. Outreach to the Sunni Arab Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) could go a long ways in building the necessary good-faith for hard-line Sunnis to support national reconciliation initiatives. Talks with the IIP's leadership in conjunction with the dominant Kurdish parties, the PUK and KDP, would provide Turkey a unique position to leverage its geostrategic proximity and vested equity in stabilizing sectarian tension. After-all, while it is abundantly clear that the scope of the U.S. force presence in Iraq will be dramatically reduced in the following years, Turkey must still cope with the matters of Kurdish separatism and the potential of a 'spillover' of sectarian violence and exasperation of trans-regional terrorism. So rather than coloring policy based on a zero-sum mentality which would exclude recognition of parallel paths of interest with the Americans, Ankara would better serve that nationalist need by realigning its strategic calculus in harmony with U.S. military and political objectives.

On the security front, the Maliki government has pledged a pronounced intent to work closely in combating terror elements operating across both sides of the border. The violence in northern Iraq is intimately intertwined with some of the Al Qaeda elements that roam within Turkey's borders, who in turn have established lines of movement and communication that span from the Syrian border to southern Turkey and into Iran. More so, PUK leader and President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani has also made numerous public pledges in working jointly with U.S. and Turkish military in curtailing PKK activity within the areas under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government. Rather than taking the maximalist position trumpeted by hardliners among the Turkish General Staff when it comes to Kurdish matters, the Turkish government could and should demonstrate the requisite resolve to provide meaningful support to the Iraqi reconciliation process in tandem with counter-terrorism joint-efforts that recognize the benefit of reaching a *modus vivendi* with the U.S. military presence. This policy track would thus be a stark contrast from the more narrow paradigm espoused by hardline nationalist elements whose one-dimensional outlook on regional policy has thus far driven a notable wedge in U.S.-Turkish relations while simultaneously having achieved little in mitigating the outstanding issue of Kurdish separatism and Al Qaeda affiliated terrorism.

Finally, Turkey must find its voice on the looming threat of Iranian sanctions and nuclear malfeasance; and in turn position itself to handle potential fallout which could extend from any major confrontation between the West and Tehran's mullahs. Economically, it makes perfect sense to continue on the path of signing energy deals and construction of gas and refined petroleum products pipelines, despite Western consternation. Even so, the Turkish government can yet maximize strategic dividends by charting its energy policy based on congruent western interests. Turkey could instead focus energy planning towards negotiating pipelines to and from Central Asian states while in turn serving as a critical conduit for a Mediterranean pipeline servicing a Europe desperate for energy alternatives that do not beholden it to Russian manipulation. This would better position Turkey to help forestall an increasingly hostile Iranian regime that has become more bent on regional revisionism that in the long run will pose just as active a threat to Turkish security interests as it does for the U.S and European allies. A sober assessment of the geostrategic circumstances that have made the Middle East so central to European and American

interests, indicates that Turkey is capable of establishing a dominant role which the West must in turn recognize and respect. But doing so will entail a measured balance on the part of Turkey's newly cemented leadership in eschewing the bitterness that has characterized public debate on the U.S. presence in Iraq, and U.S. regional policy in general.

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