

# DEMOCRACY

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### Tend to Turkey

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**I**n the wake of the Iraq debacle, the United States will occupy a position of greatly diminished stature and leverage among the many allies that stepped forward to offer unqualified support immediately after September 11, 2001. No relationship has been more badly damaged in this relatively short period of time, or is in greater need of repair, than the alliance between the United States and Turkey. Although America's standing has declined precipitously across Europe, Turkey is the one NATO country at risk of becoming strategically unmoored.

The war has had a profound and disorienting effect on Turkey—the only Muslim nation anchored in the West through bilateral ties with the United States and membership in NATO. In some polls, Turks are reported to have the least favorable public opinion of the United States among countries surveyed. The Bush

Administration's actions have ominously alienated a generation of young people unfamiliar with the positive legacy of American global leadership. Across the population, a slow process of disenchantment and disengagement has taken place. If this negative trajectory is not reversed, Turkey could seek alternative affiliations—most likely with its Islamic neighbors or with Russia—at the expense of its connections to the United States and Europe.

How could such a dramatic rupture with Turkey have occurred? In short, American policymakers ignored or misread Turkish politics, disregarded legitimate Turkish concerns, and launched an invasion of nearby Iraq with substantial negative consequences for Turkish interests. In preparing to go to war, the United States aggressively sought Turkish permission for the Fourth Infantry Division to cross Turkey in order to enter Iraq from the north. The pressure Washington put on Ankara—and the perception in some Turkish circles that the United States sought to bribe the country to secure its agreement—redounded negatively in the domestic debate, resulting in the Turkish Grand National Assembly's failure on March 1, 2003 to approve a resolution permitting U.S. troop transit into Iraq. In reaction, the Pentagon severely curtailed contacts with the Turkish military, essentially freezing it out of the action precisely at the moment that its leaders felt Turkey's vital interests were being imperiled. On the policy side, high-level visits were postponed or canceled, and regular consultations between the Department of Defense and the Turkish military's General Staff were suspended. Further, Turkish offers to send troops to Iraq were repeatedly rebuffed, reinforcing the impression that Turkey was being excluded from shaping events that would have serious implications for its security. At the time of the invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Americans rejected a proposed Turkish deployment of 20,000 troops in the north on the grounds that it could lead to conflict between Turks and Kurds; later in 2003,

when the U.S. sought support for peacekeeping and reconstruction, Turkey's proposal to send 10,000 soldiers was rejected by Iraq's Governing Council.

In Turkish eyes, the American war effort has substantially destabilized their neighborhood and severely exacerbated their most important security challenge: the continuing terrorist violence perpetrated by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). An unintended consequence of U.S. policy since the first Gulf War has been the emergence of a safe haven for the PKK in northern Iraq. This territory, largely controlled by Iraqi Kurds, has been the only relatively stable region of the country. As a result, American policymakers have resisted appeals to expand the U.S. presence there, concentrating forces on more volatile areas. Concomitantly, the Kurdish leadership of northern Iraq has failed to use its influence to effectively rein in PKK violence.

Finally, a separate but profoundly exacerbating factor in Turkish domestic opinion has been the reaction to the protracted process of negotiating accession to the European Union. As prominent European leaders—including the recently elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy—make xenophobic statements about how Turkey does not belong in Europe, Turkish popular feelings of alienation from the West are being stoked and nationalist and/or Islamist alternatives are becoming more attractive. Unfortunately, because the Bush Administration has squandered American credibility with its allies, Washington's ability to influence European thinking and decision-making on this matter is at an all-time low. Looking to the future, the EU members' failure to effectively respond to Turkey's desire for inclusion may result in an irreparable breach with the Muslim world at a time when many European states face significant internal problems with integrating their own Muslim populations. The schism that could result from excluding the leading example of a Western-oriented, secular democracy from the European club will only reinforce

those who believe that co-existence between Western and Muslim civilization is impossible.

All plausible scenarios for Iraq's future are viewed with suspicion by Ankara, particularly the growing prospect of an independent Kurdistan. The Turkish military views Kurdish statehood as an existential threat to Turkey's security. Sudden Kurdish autonomy could trigger a war pitting the Kurdish *peshmerga*—which have strong ties to the United States—against the Turkish army, to whom the United States and its NATO partners have Article V mutual-defense obligations. Although there is legitimate concern about instability on Iraq's other porous borders, particularly the one it shares with Iran, American policymakers should not allow these preoccupations to distract them from the explosive potential of the Iraqi-Turkish frontier.

As the United States seeks to disentangle itself from Iraq, it needs to do all that it can to avoid a worst-case scenario between Turkey and the Kurds. It should work intensively with the Turks and legitimate representatives of the Kurds of northern Iraq to develop solutions to complex problems in which each has a stake. Some efforts have been made: Over the past two years, the United States has tried to establish a "trilateral" mechanism bringing Americans, Turks, and Kurds together, but this has been difficult to achieve for a variety of reasons, including Turkish reluctance to give greater legitimacy to Kurds representing the governing structures of the north. The United States needs to impress upon its Turkish allies and its Kurdish friends how important this process is to avoiding escalation and to building a more secure future for the region. In the near term, these discussions should focus on reducing tensions and severely constraining PKK activities; in the longer term, they should address trade, transit, and other means of promoting prosperity on both sides

of the border.

In response to the deteriorating relationship between Washington and Ankara, the Administration appointed former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph W. Ralston to spearhead an effort to counter the PKK in August 2006. Ralston has labored behind the scenes to rebuild channels of communication between the American and Turkish militaries that were severed in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, and he has been instrumental in advancing a number of important bilateral initiatives. His work should be sustained and reinforced. It should also be mirrored by parallel U.S.-Turkish efforts to reweave the fabric of the relationship diplomatically, economically, culturally, and educationally.

At the same time, the United States should actively encourage commerce between Turkey and the Kurdish north. There is already a new reality on the ground: The Turkish private sector, investing heavily in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, has a stake in the success of the northern region. In Turkey, some enlightened observers are also calling for a reappraisal of Turkish interests vis-à-vis the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, advocating a leading role for Turkey in building a stable northern Iraq through greater trade and investment. They also support expanded efforts to promote education and development in the Kurdish areas of southern Turkey.

Less optimistically, NATO needs to do contingency planning for a scenario in which PKK violence escalates and Turkey invokes Article V. A failure to respond to an ally's call for help has the potential to further corrode allied confidence in the American security commitment. This could stimulate actions that would be directly contradictory to American national security goals for the region and beyond.

There is another security dynamic to consider: Experts focused on diminishing the

threat of nuclear proliferation are debating whether the United States should withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe. While in the future this may be plausible if fully supported by all NATO members, this is not the time to raise further questions about America's commitment to extended deterrence or the reliability of the security guarantees that undergird its alliances and provide reassurance. Otherwise, countries like Turkey may seek to develop their own nuclear programs, which will not only set back nonproliferation goals but could stimulate others to follow suit.

The challenges facing the United States in leading and managing its relationship with Turkey are both common and unique. They are common in the sense that negative attitudes toward American policy are prevalent in many countries that have been U.S. allies since the end of World War II. What makes Turkey unique—and uniquely important to American interests—is its heretofore successful blending of many elements that coexist uncomfortably or not at all in many parts of the world today. Turkey is secular, it is Muslim; it is Western-oriented but also deeply connected to the Islamic world. It is committed to democracy and economic reform, all the more so under the current leadership of an openly religious party. Turkey's success in managing these competing and sometimes conflicting influences is crucial to bridging the growing chasm between the West and the Islamic world. Its success in doing so must therefore be a high American strategic priority as well. **D**