

Litmus Test

Turkey's Neo-Islamists Weigh War and Peace

Koray Caliskan and Yuksel Taskin

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(Koray Caliskan is a doctoral candidate in politics and a fellow at the International Center for Advanced Studies at New York University. Yuksel Taskin is assistant professor of politics at Marmara University in Istanbul.)

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Hours before chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix briefed the UN Security Council on January 27, Turkey's deputy prime minister protested that the Bush administration would proceed toward military confrontation regardless of Blix's findings. "You'll declare war against an Iraq...that has taken out its white flag," said Ertugrul Yalcinbayir. "Why are you going to make a war like this against someone who has surrendered?" The same day, Prime Minister Abdullah Gul confirmed reports that Turkey is negotiating for over \$4 billion in US aid in the event of war.

Gul, titular leader of the neo-Islamist Justice and Development Party that swept into office in November 2002, has consistently claimed that Turkey will not support military action against Iraq without a Security Council resolution. In mid-January, Gul embarked on a Middle East tour in search of a peaceful solution to the Iraq stalemate and dispatched his State Minister Kursat Tuzmen with 350 Turkish businessmen to Baghdad to improve trade relations. His government also helped organize a meeting in Istanbul of the Turkish, Iranian, Egyptian, Jordanian, Saudi and Syrian foreign ministers, presumably to explore ways of averting war. Turkey's refusal to host 80,000 US troops, as the Pentagon requested, may have forced a postponement of US war plans.

On the other hand, the governing Justice and Development Party (or AKP, by its Turkish initials) recently allowed the US Army to inspect the Turkish bases from which they want to launch their offensive, and has ordered reinforcements to the eastern border. The

AKP's spiritual leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, used a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos to chide the US for its own possession of weapons of mass destruction. Erdogan described Blix's update on January 27 as "not enlightening," and reaffirmed Turkey's determination to wait for a Security Council resolution. Fatma Bostan Unsal, a senior woman member of the AKP, is reportedly among the "human shields" organized by an American Gulf war veteran who will travel to Baghdad on February 8. Yet the same AKP government has subcontracted negotiations with the US over the extent of the northern front to the Turkish military -- a clear sign that Turkey will support the US entry into Iraq when the time comes.

BITTER LESSONS

The mixed signals from the AKP, in the face of overwhelming public opposition to the impending war, reflect a decade's bitter lessons in Turkish politics. Party elites know that winning 66 percent of the seats in Parliament did not really usher them into power. No party generally accepted as Islamist can be a welcome part of the ruling civilian-military bureaucracy, who embrace militant secularism, neo-liberalism, authoritarian rule and a hawkish foreign policy as the main principles of government. As Gul and Erdogan remember, the leader of AKP's parent party, Necmettin Erbakan, was forced to sign cooperation treaties with Israel over his own objections, before being compelled to step down after a carefully designed civilian-military coup.

The AKP's election manifesto promised a flexible foreign policy, to be shaped by Parliament rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the army. Erdogan's recent rejection of the hardline nationalist stance on the Cyprus question was an emblematic fulfillment of this promise. Similarly, the party, while parroting the traditional Turkish first principle of "protecting Iraq's territorial unity to preserve the delicate balances of the Middle East," nevertheless committed to work toward solving the Iraq crisis peacefully. In the Iraq crisis, the AKP faces a litmus test, not only from the vantage point of its political base, but also from that of the military-civilian coalition, which wants to gauge the newcomer's intentions. The AKP sincerely wants to please the former; at the same time, the party knows that it cannot risk alienating the latter.

ROMANTICISM AND REALPOLITIK

Gul's attempts to broker a peace represent quite a risk for the Turkish government, which normally depends on Washington for all manner of assistance. Turkey's current economic crisis is contained by inflows of the International Monetary Fund cash, which the US could easily shut off. Ankara has shouldered the heavy burden of the 1974 invasion of northern Cyprus, and its continuing military presence there, largely because the US has looked the other way. Congressional supporters of measures to declare the World War I-era Armenian massacres a genocide could be emboldened if Turkey proved to be an unruly strategic partner. Should Turkey withdraw from Bush's "coalition of the willing," the Kurds of northern Iraq could gain more autonomy than Turkey would like, and Turkish contractors could lose their shot at lucrative contracts for rebuilding post-war Iraq. But was it really risky for the AKP to take independent diplomatic initiatives?

The rocky reception in Turkey for the prime minister's Middle East visits made them seem miscalculated indeed. Tuncay Ozilhan, chairman of the board of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, decried the government's "closed and indecisive stance" toward Iraq. "When you come to a point where you cannot solve the problem by yourself..., side with your allies. Turkey, being a democratic country, should never side with a totalitarian regime." The business leader's remarks echoed the hegemonic position of mainstream journalists and commentators: even if Bush's planned attack on Iraq is not a just war, it is inevitable. Mehmet Y. Yilmaz, editor of the widely read daily *Milliyet*, spelled out the mainstream consensus. "It is certainly a necessity of being a human being to object any war, whether in Iraq or somewhere else. Yet, when it is inevitable, we know that turning an anti-war stance to an intellectual romanticism is meaningless.... Romanticism cannot be a national strategy."

Pro-war writers in the Turkish press have infused their realpolitik -- we can't be part of the "axis of evil" -- with a tinge of Orientalism -- oh, the Arabs, you know how they are. So willingly have they acquiesced in war that Prime Minister Gul wondered out loud if a few journalists had received portions of the \$200 million allocated by the US for winning foreign hearts and minds. Turkish chief of staff Gen. Hilmi Ozkok, presumably in a

position to know, once said that "America begins to pay a few writers, so that they can write in favor of the US interests, and by using the media, wages a psychological war." Gul's speculation was denounced in an exaggerated manner by the press, and the prime minister had to retract his statement.

OPPOSITION IN IMMENSE NUMBERS

Despite the pro-war tilt of the media, there is a growing, if still scattered anti-war movement in Turkey. The latest opinion polls conducted by the Ankara Social Research Center showed that 94 percent of the population opposes the use of Turkish bases and troops to attack Iraq. Fully 87 percent of the population opposes any US military intervention in Iraq. These immense numbers have yet to be organized, though in recent days anti-war protests in Turkish cities have been louder and better attended.

Multiple and often unrelated motivations inform anti-war sentiment. A group of businessmen argue that Iraqi-Turkish economic relations, which have sustained severe damage since comprehensive UN sanctions were imposed upon Iraq in 1991, will worsen further. Business also fears a shrinkage of foreign exchange as tourism-related income comes close to collapsing in the event of war. But this sector of Turkish opinion is unwilling to reach out to other anti-war forces in the country.

The traditional anti-war camp, generally considered an extension of radical leftist organizations or the Kurdish nationalist movement, was greatly weakened during the state's war against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) in the 1990s. Moreover, the radicals' rhetoric hardly rings any bells in the more general public space in Turkey. Their analyses of the perils of war, US interests and the centrality of oil in military calculations -- however articulate and morally sound -- have generally been kept out of the mainstream media, if not silenced by the police.

Islamist reaction to the war talk has so far been quite muted, though there are signs of future demonstrations. Fourthly, a group of social democratic trade unions and non-governmental organizations criticize Turkey's involvement with the US war plans on ethical and political grounds. In the last two months, the unions and NGOs organized

various demonstrations in urban centers, but they are far from powerful enough to bring together the distinct groups sharing an anti-war stance. At times, tensions embedded in domestic politics have derailed attempts at forming more inclusive coalitions. At an anti-war meeting in Eskisehir, members of the far-right Confederation of Unions of Public Employees of Turkey stalked out shouting, "We cannot be with those who betray our country." Some of the other groups in attendance had chanted "Long Live Peace" in Kurdish.

GIVING PEACE A CHANCE?

The AKP's halting search for a peaceful solution to the Iraq crisis has been praised in the majority of European capitals. Greece's foreign minister wanted to attend the Istanbul summit, dubbed the "Regional Initiative on Iraq," yet he was politely turned away. German foreign minister Joschka Fischer visited Turkey during the summit and expressed his sympathies, and the French conveyed their congratulations. During Erdogan's talks with Russian officials and recent visit to China, both states openly supported the AKP's attempts to avert war.

On January 23, however, the summit released a joint declaration that was far from anti-war in essence. Thanks to arduous Turkish negotiating, the statement mostly consisted of accusing Iraq of stubbornness in failing to meet the demands of the UN. The statement read, "We...solemnly call on the Iraqi leadership to move irreversibly and sincerely towards assuming their responsibilities in restoring peace and stability in the region." The text carefully forgets that US aggressiveness toward Iraq had necessitated the meeting, and that as recently as March 2002 the signatories were directing their diplomacy toward ending the UN embargo on Iraq.

The declaration also underlined the territorial integrity of Iraq as a priority in the six states' foreign policy objectives. All the ministers, except the Turkish representative, wanted to call upon the US to give peace a chance. Turkey overruled this provision on the grounds that the US has been working hard for a peaceful resolution. Despite offering numerous objections, the Turkish delegation ultimately could not prevent the summit

from including a paragraph demanding implementation of all relevant UN resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as those binding Iraq.

How far can the AKP government go in its search for peace? Does it really have a sincere pro-peace agenda? The AKP knows very well that alienating the US would facilitate the efforts of political enemies to form a powerful domestic coalition against neo-Islamist government. Party leaders paid a visit to Washington almost a year ago to seek American friends for their future government, and skillfully drafted a pro-American ideological platform that sounds "reformed" when compared to the rhetoric of their Islamist predecessors. On the other hand, the AKP cannot afford to alienate voters and sympathizers by appearing to enlist in Bush's campaign to unseat Saddam Hussein.

TIME WILL TELL

Perhaps a good test of the AKP's sincerity is to remember the grassroots political network they mobilized to great effect before the November 2002 election. The party leadership could deploy its foot soldiers anew, to give at least a reluctant hand to the peace movement. So far they have not done so, and party officials have even expressed scorn for citizen activism. Parliamentary speaker Bulent Arinc, referring to peace demonstrations in northern Cyprus, recently said, "There is no place in the world where democracies are governed by the streets. We cannot let the masses, who shout and chant on the streets, and who perhaps were deceived, adversely affect the future of the country." Time will tell if this classic statist position is a sign that the ice is melting between the AKP and the Turkish establishment, or if the opinions of Arinc are somewhat isolated within the party.

Surrounded as the AKP is by the small, yet violently powerful ruling civilian-military bureaucracy, which has resigned itself to getting what it can from war, it is naive to expect the party to resist the impending conflict actively. The AKP's unwillingness to engage more deeply in peace efforts betrays the same opportunistic and fatalistic attitude that prevails inside the civilian-military bureaucracy. The former sees a red line they cannot cross in domestic politics, whereas the latter espies a red line they can't even hope

to cross in international politics. In addition to their fatalism, however, the AKP leaders are contributing to pro-war spin by discursively exaggerating American demands and then presenting those they accept as the result of tough bargaining. The government makes a show of publicly denying British requests to use Turkish bases, as if British planes do not take off from Turkey to bomb the northern no-fly zone in Iraq on an almost weekly basis.

The AKP is playing a game familiar to followers of Turkish politics. Heirs of Erbakan's National Salvation Party, they feel like the ones who were left out, the voices of the voiceless, representatives of the long-suffering and silenced majority. The neo-Islamists want to reverse the power equation. With 66 percent of the seats in Parliament, they would seem to enjoy a popular mandate to adhere to their stated principles. But to keep their place in the governing civilian-military coalition, the AKP has chosen to adopt the establishment's logic. Instead of representing the unrepresented anti-war majority, the AKP allows the US to consult directly with the pro-war military. While US neo-conservatives justify "regime change" with dreams of democratizing the Middle East, the AKP is assisting the US in staging a war from Turkish territory against the express wishes of ordinary citizens. Bold if ineffective anti-war statements from Gul and others may save face in the short term, but will not pay off in the long run. Even if collective amnesia is a hallmark of not only Turkish but all modern politics, wars are not soon forgotten.