

Turkey's Dangerous Game

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During his diplomatic attempts to avert the war now underway in Iraq, Abdullah Gul, until recently prime minister of Turkey and now foreign minister, said that he was suffering from sleepless nights. Today Gul's body language signals his distress at the deadlock faced by his neo-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP pursued a policy of brinkmanship over the conditions of deployment of US forces in Turkey, mistakenly calculating that a northern front accessible from Turkey was an indispensable part of the US war strategy. AKP leaders also thought that their bargaining with the US would gain additional time for UN Security Council members opposed to military action to stop the war. Not only did the AKP seriously underestimate the Bush administration's determination to go to war on its own schedule, but the party did not articulate a principled and consistent policy line for the consumption of the Turkish public. As a result, the civilian-military establishment and the media now blame the AKP's "undecided idealism" for failing to secure the requisite quid pro quo for Turkish acquiescence in the war effort and for precipitating the most serious crisis for the long-standing US-Turkish alliance of the post-Cold War era. At the same time, the AKP's stance has been out of step with firmly anti-war public opinion in Turkey.

BRINKMANSHIP

As the Iraq crisis intensified in January and February 2003, the AKP's seemingly bold initiatives to find a peaceful solution came to naught. Gul's efforts to unite the Arab world behind a Turkish peace plan fizzled when, at an Istanbul summit, Turkey resisted inclusion of a phrase criticizing Israel's violation of UN resolutions in the summit's

communique. His secret meeting with a close advisor of Saddam Hussein, Taha Yasin Ramadan, to suggest that the Iraqi dictator opt for exile in Turkey, also did not produce results. Meanwhile, Turkey resisted US pressure to grant access to land and air bases for the impending assault.

Most observers thought the die was cast for full Turkish participation on February 6, when Turkish parliamentarians agreed, in a vote of 308-193 with nine abstentions, to let US military engineers prepare Turkish ports and airbases for a possible attack on Iraq. Almost all who voted yes hail from the AKP, the vast majority of whose deputies, reflecting Turkish public opinion, were vocal critics of George W. Bush's drive for war. The AKP government tried to hide the identity of the bill's supporters by holding the vote in closed session. But the government's delivery of a 60 percent majority in favor was the neo-Islamists' way of proving that they can be as "rational" as the military -- the traditional custodian of the US-Turkish strategic alliance. "The decisions we make for war are not because we want war," AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now prime minister, said before the February 6 vote, "but so we can contribute to peace as soon as possible, at a point when it is not possible to prevent war. Our moral priority is peace, but our political priority is our dear Turkey."

To buy votes in Parliament for the basing of US troops, the AKP dispatched then Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis and the state minister responsible for the treasury, Ali Babacan, to Washington to negotiate for a massive US aid package, including a grant of \$6 billion, plus \$20 billion in loan guarantees. Bush reportedly likened the hard bargaining of the Turkish side to the horse trading of his native Texas. Turkish officials continually declared that their primary concern was not aid dollars, but rather joint deployment of Turkish troops with US forces in northern Iraq. Few Western commentators took these protestations seriously at the time, but they presaged the frenetic negotiations of March 24-25 to stop Turkey from expanding its "security zone" in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Prior to the original vote, US threatened Turkey that it would go to war, bases or no bases. The message was very clear: without a northern front in the war, Turkey could be excluded from post-war security arrangements, and therefore face the possible rise of a

Kurdish state in the region. US officials seemed to tolerate the AKP's dangerous game of brinkmanship only because of the implicit guarantee that the party's parliamentary majority would eventually permit passage of a bill allowing use of Turkish territory. The rude public comments of US politicians about the "Turkish bazaar," however, irked AKP deputies buffeted by vigorous peace protests at home. On March 1, the parliament rejected the bill (263 yes, 254 no and 19 abstaining) with only four votes needed to reach the necessary 267 out of 533. If the US was shocked by the verdict, Turkish citizens were as well, since US Marines were already disembarking at the port of Iskenderun. In the meantime, Parliament passed another bill that legalized the deployment of Turkish troops in northern Iraq.

"REALISTS," BUT STILL NATIONALISTS

Furious commentators in the Turkish media predicted that the US would take its revenge. Indeed, after the start of the US-British invasion, the Turkish military was not allowed to deploy large numbers of troops in a northern Iraqi "security zone," and on the evening of March 27, up to 1,000 US paratroopers dropped into Kurdish-controlled territory north of Kirkuk to forestall a "preemptive" Turkish incursion. On March 26, Turkish chief of staff Gen. Hilmi Ozkok said that Turkey would only deploy its troops "in coordination with the United States." Those Turkish hawks who vocally asserted Turkey's alleged historical rights in Mosul and Kirkuk while the US-Turkish negotiations were taking place have now fallen into a sulk. "I find it hard to understand that those beyond the oceans, who say they are threatened, do not believe Turkey when it says it faces the same threat from right across its border," remarked Ozkok.

Whenever Turkey's painful dependence on the US is made visible, the political elite, including the leadership of the AKP, becomes quite angry. While they are "realist" enough to take the lucrative relationship for granted, the elite does not want to face up to dependence's implication that the glorious days of Turkish empire are decidedly in the past. These contradictory sensitivities were inflamed in February by Germany, France and Belgium's threat to veto Turkey's demand that NATO activate its Article 4 mandating allied help for member states under an impending external threat. The Turkish press

largely explained the threatened rebuff as proof of European unwillingness to defend Turkey. This sense of betrayal by the Europeans is a common theme in Turkish politics, but in February it was used to rationalize Turkey's helplessness in the face of the otherwise despised demands of the US.

At the same time, Erdogan employed the time-honored language of Turkish nationalism to decry reports that leadership of Turkish forces stationed in northern Iraq would be reserved for the US military, complaining, "This is an insult to the Turkish army and its capacities for self-command." On the other hand, to lobby for votes for granting access to Turkish airspace and bases, Erdogan reminded his party and its followers of the power vacuum that could emerge in the region if the Turkish army were not actively involved in the war effort. This hypocritical nationalist fervor that aims to hide the otherwise subordinate position of Turkey shows striking continuity with the Turkish political culture prevalent throughout the Cold War era, and contrasts markedly with the hopes of some observers upon the AKP's electoral sweep in November 2002 that the neo-Islamists would follow a radically different path in its foreign policy.

PEACE MOVEMENT'S MOMENTUM

While the AKP bargained with the US, Turkey witnessed the ascendancy of an even stronger anti-war movement. Once identified with the radical left, Islamism and the Kurdish movement, and hence successfully marginalized by the mainstream media, the peace activists of Turkey were so popular that even MTV-style talk shows spoke of them with sympathy. NGOs which had absented themselves from the streets in the past began to attend peace demonstrations. For its part, the AKP declined to mobilize its grassroots network for the demonstrations, but also did not explicitly discourage them from coming out. Hence, Islamists began coming together with leftists to improvise new forms of mass protest, for example, an organized campaign to switch off the lights every day at 8 pm. When the Istanbul governorate, citing "security concerns," prohibited peace activists from gathering in conjunction with the worldwide demonstrations organized for February 15, they held a press conference instead, attracting 10,000 people. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap between the enormous anti-war sentiment among ordinary citizens and the

relatively small street protests. The "Turkish street" cannot be compared with the huge crowds assembling in London, Cairo or Damascus.

February 15 was also the fourth anniversary of the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in Kenya in 1999. Some Kurdish groups resorted to violence to call attention to the state's ongoing refusal to permit Ocalan to meet with his lawyers. Tangible differences in the agendas of the peace activists and supporters of Ocalan contained the potential to divide the anti-war movement seriously, and recriminalize activism in the media.

For a while, the media and the secular-nationalist elites of Turkey did not seem greatly disturbed by the increasing momentum of the peace movement, and they actually welcomed the dilemma it posed for the AKP. Because the AKP is the party in power, in their thinking, the public would hold its politicians primarily responsible for any problems that come up during and after the war. These elites further calculated that if they were able to channel the AKP government into staying the course of partnership with the US, the neo-Islamists' political base could only suffer. Parliament's rejection of US demands for land and air bases changed this calculus; since then, the mainstream media has sharply attacked the peace movement. The typical allegation is that a "curious partnership of leftists and Islamists" (described in some outlets as an "axis of evil") had trapped the AKP deputies in a compromising position, leading to the humiliation imposed upon Turkey by the "coalition of the willing" and continual warnings from the European Union against deployment of Turkish forces in northern Iraq. Others accused the AKP itself of deliberately seeking to separate Turkey from her Western allies.

DARK DAYS AHEAD?

Should the AKP falter during some kind of war-induced crisis in Turkey, one of the most extensive nationalist-conservative coalitions in the republic's history may take its place. No alternative leftist or liberal forces seem capable of stepping into the void. The left-leaning Republican People's Party (CHP) resisted the closed session on February 6 and voted no, hoping to gain support from the over 90 percent of the population who

disapproved of the government's cooperation with the US military buildup. But this party prides itself on being the founder of the republic, and has allied itself frequently with the republican conservative line of the military-civilian elite. The CHP took a hard line against the AKP's initiative to resolve the deadlock in divided Cyprus. Many groups on the left are jumping on the bandwagon of reaction in the name of a left nationalism. Recently, the leadership of the True Path Party -- a party which traces its lineage to the 1950s center-right Democratic Party tradition that was the result of the first alternation of power in the history of the republic -- passed to Mehmet Agar, an ex-minister of interior affairs who is infamous for his relations with far-right paramilitary groups illegally used against Kurdish rebels in the 1990s.

As Turkey's economic crisis has deepened, the Young Party, led by prominent businessman Cem Uzan, notorious for his cheating of worldwide economic giant Motorola, has also arisen. Thanks to dazzling commercials disseminated by his powerful media conglomerate, Uzan's party scored 7.2 percent of the voters in the November 2002 elections, outstripping the 6.2 percent garnered by the Democratic People's Party, which is particularly influential in the Kurdish-dominated regions. Ironically, Uzan has attracted the support of significant numbers of the urban poor by railing against the structural adjustment programs dictated by the International Monetary Fund and the concessions demanded of Turkey for acceptance into the European Union. His populist line could win over additional poor voters, who cast their ballots in large numbers for the AKP, if the AKP government cannot fulfill its constituents' high expectations in the immediate future. In short, the failures of the AKP to avert the war, to secure European Union membership and to keep its promises to alleviate the burdens of the poor will not favor the forces of the left. Rather, the result could be a National Assembly that recalls the dark days of the early 1990s.

The possible failure of the AKP would also be expected to discourage serious initiatives on the part of the Turkish government toward a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish question. Rather, maintaining a state of strained inertia, each side is watching as the other repositions itself. The "war party" in Turkey is patiently waiting for an opportunity to resuscitate the national security state. Indeed, the Turkish authorities were determined to

enter northern Iraq in part to "pacify" the PKK guerrillas in the region. The AKP did not dare to question the generals on the necessity of an extraterritorial operation. This tacit consent to the prerogatives of the "the custodians of the Republic," in the face of criticism from the EU and the US, lessens the AKP's ability to democratize Turkey and erode the power base of the custodians. For the time being, no political actor in Turkey seems to be ready to transcend the language of security and strategy in talking about the Kurdish question.

NEO-ISLAMISTS AND EUROCRATS

In terms of domestic Turkish politics, the AKP leadership's halting and partial enlistment in Bush's war could be seen as a decision to defer its reform agenda for the sake of gaining recognition from the established elite. Should the AKP continue down this road, they will be forced into further concessions. But the AKP has other cards to play in its struggle for a lasting place in the political system. The neo-Islamists do not vigorously challenge the injustices of the global economy, and appear ready to renounce "populism" in favor of "real economics," positions that will be warmly welcomed as a shot in the arm of the otherwise declining prestige of the neo-liberal consensus in Turkey.

Should Turkey be willing to stabilize its political life in line with the criteria of the EU, Brussels will welcome a reformed Turkish polity as a stabilizing element in the EU itself. In the immediate run, neither the Eurocrats nor the masters of the global economy would likely worry about the rise of a moderate Islamist counter-elite as the old republican elite faded into obsolescence, lest the persistence of the old elite invite more radical and unpredictable change. Despite its considerable tactical mistakes during the Iraq crisis, the AKP still possesses the wherewithal to inaugurate significant political reform that would gradually diminish the power bases of their rivals. Clearly, the neo-Islamists' quest for inclusion among the military and civil elites of Turkey will never be realized: their rivals understand that danger to their power too clearly. The AKP's only option is to contribute to the normalization of the political debate and further democratization of Turkey by mobilizing internal and external support. Along the way, however, the party will have to

defy the lessons of Turkish political history which teach that any spirit of serious reform is doomed to languish in the prisons.