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AMERICA AND TURKEY

A Marriage Gone Sour

By Jürgen Gottschlich in Istanbul

US President George W. Bush worked to improve US-Europe relations this week, but meanwhile, America's once-strong partnership with Turkey continues to erode. The Turkish population is more anti-American than ever and the Kurdish question in Iraq threatens to lead to an open break.



The piece could not have been more provocative. Just the headline of the article by Senior Editor Robert L. Pollack published last week in the *Wall Street Journal* was enough to make Turkey's blood boil: "The Sick Man of Europe -- Again." The article then went on to detail the collapse of the once-close relationship between the United States and Turkey.

The headline was chosen deliberately -- a play on the label given to the pre-World War I Ottoman Empire as it slid toward collapse. Pollack's point: Old leftist dogmatism and a new tendency toward Islamism have erupted into an intense anti-Americanism that may even exceed the amount of hate for America seen in Arab countries. "Most of the heritage of Ataturk (the liberal-minded founder of modern Turkey) is at risk of being lost," Pollack wrote. Turkey is becoming narrow-minded and paranoiac and "it has no friendship for the US and is not accepted by the European Union (EU)."

Namit Tan, spokesman for the Turkish foreign ministry, tried in vain to calm the waters last Friday in a press conference. "It's not entirely fair what Mr. Pollack wrote in his article," he said. "He listed all of the problems, but he completely played down all of the good sides of the Turkish-American relationship." But despite Tan's attempts at damage control, Pollack's article struck an open nerve.

The article came out of a trip Pollack had made accompanying a Pentagon delegation to Turkey's capital, Ankara. While on the trip, he also met with the US Ambassador to Turkey Eric S. Edelman who, apparently, gave vent to his frustrations to Pollack. The commentary that resulted complained bitterly

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about the ingratitude of the Turks in the face of 50 years of US protection and aid to the country.

Turkey going its own way

And indeed, Pollack's article is, first and foremost, documentary evidence of American disappointment with the Turkish government. In contrast to earlier US-Turkey relations when Ankara would play the role assigned them by the Americans without complaint, Turkey is now, especially since the Iraq War, much less likely to play along.

The American frustrations with Turkey have been especially apparent in the Pentagon. In a recent appearance on "Larry King Live," US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave an indication of just how irritated he is with Turkey. The continuing resistance in the Sunni Triangle, said Rumsfeld, is partially a result of the fact that the 4th Infantry Division was not able to attack Iraq from the north over the border with Turkey. The Turkish parliament, in March 2003, denied the American military the right to station troops in Turkey prior to the attack on Iraq.



DPA  
US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice didn't have much to offer Turkey during her visit there earlier this month.

"Because of that," Rumsfeld said, "the Sunnis north of Baghdad never really got engaged in the war and an insufficient number were captured and killed in that part of the country. And they didn't really ever experience the full power of the United States military. ... So that and the fact that we couldn't get that division in from the north was unfortunate in my view."

At the time of Turkey's 2003 refusal, Rumsfeld's Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz accused the Turkish military of not having appreciated its leadership responsibilities to its country. On Saturday of last week, Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, once again accused the Turkish military of abdicating its leadership role. Speaking before the Council of Foreign Affairs, he said the importance of the Turkish-US relationship needs to be made apparent to the Turkish population. He also said that the Turkish government needed to do something against growing anti-Americanism in the country. Otherwise, the close bilateral relationship might be endangered.



That could be a tall order. From the very beginning, the overwhelming majority of the Turkish population was against the war on Iraq. And that attitude still hasn't changed -- it has even been strengthened recently by the American attack on Fallujah and the bombardment of the town Tal Afat near Mosul -- a town primarily populated by Iraq's Turkish-speaking Turkmen minority. In addition to this emotional rejection of the war among the population, however, there are also a number of concrete Turkish national interests that the Iraq war makes more complicated. Since the American invasion of Iraq, the Turkish

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Mustafa Kemal Ataturk is still celebrated as the founder of modern Turkey. The Americans say though that the country is forgetting what he stood for.

government has been demanding that the US Army prevent the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) from using northern Iraq as a base for operations against Turkey, or allow the Turkish army to take care of the problem itself. The problem has become much worse since the summer of 2004 when the PKK revoked its participation in the Turkish-Kurd ceasefire in south-eastern Turkey and once again began regular attacks on Turkish military bases and police stations in the region.

What about the "PKK terrorists?"

The Turkish military is especially angry that, contrary to assurances of action by the Bush administration, the US has turned a blind eye to a group the Turks refer to as "the PKK terrorists" while at the same time demanding that the world unite against terrorism. America tolerates the PKK chiefly because the Kurds in Iraq are the only local group that provides real military support to the US military. As such, Turkey's military no longer believes US assurances that it will not allow the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq.

For the Turks, the local elections in the Kurdish city of Kirkuk in northern Iraq were a litmus test. Held at the same time as the Iraqi general election at the end of January, the US military allowed, under Kurdish pressure, 70,000 Kurds who live outside of Kirkuk to register and vote in the city, thereby assuring a victory of the Kurdish List. Indeed, the Americans also introduced no mechanism to check whether this group of 70,000 -- who were banished from the city under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship -- were actually Kurds.

For the Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani, however, it was clearly a power play. The Kirkuk Province is the center of oil production in northern Iraq and it was important for Talabani and Barzani to demonstrate the region's Kurdish sympathies. It is now much more likely that Kirkuk will be assigned to a Kurdish district in the upcoming negotiations on the federal divisions of Iraq. Indeed, the Kurdish leadership in Iraq has said quite openly that Kirkuk's inclusion in the Kurdish district is the only way to make the area, and a possible future Kurdish state, economically stable. Barzani and Talabani are, at the same time, trying to ensure that any future agreement includes the establishment of a Kurdish state as a possible option in the future.


The nightmare of ethnic violence in northern Iraq

But a Kurdish state in northern Iraq is exactly what the Turkish military does not want. It would be a nightmare scenario that would, the leadership fears, substantially strengthen the Kurdish separatist movement in south-eastern Turkey.

When US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a stop in Ankara as part of her European trip at the beginning of this month, she had little of substance to say about the Kirkuk issue. Even a card-carrying Bush fan like *Hurriyet* columnist Cuneyet Ulsever was forced to resign himself to the fact



that the US government apparently hasn't yet reached a decision on what the long-term status of Kirkuk should be. If the situation there escalates to armed conflict among the Kurds, the Arabs and the Turkey-sponsored Turkmens, Turkey's Commander in Chief Ilker Basbug has warned that Turkey would probably be forced to get involved.

AFP 
Kurdish turnout in the Iraq elections in late January was quite high.

But this scenario isn't the only reason the Americans are now warning against growing anti-Americanism in Turkey. The US military is currently using the Turkish military airport in Incirlik as an important hub for transporting supplies into Iraq. If the situation with Iran and Syria should intensify, Incirlik would become all the more important. For Turkey, on the other hand, an attack on Iran would, according to a Turkish diplomat who asked not to be identified, be an "apocalyptic scenario." Indeed there is a very real chance that, if it came to military action against Iran, the Turkish parliament would once again deny US access to Turkish bases.

Meanwhile, the anti-American atmosphere in Turkey continues to fester. At the moment, a new novel is making the rounds in the country -- one that has apparently been read with interest by members of the Turkish military. It is called "Metal Firtina" (Storm of Steel) and depicts the worst-case scenario of Turkish troops confronting the US military in northern Iraq. The conflict escalates and the US invades Turkey. The book is, of course, just fiction. But that a Turkish author conceived such a story line at this stage of Turkish-US relations is quite telling.

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