

TURKEY'S POLICY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE QUESTION OF IRAQ

The Middle East issue and the question of Iraq have increasingly been the focus of attention in the international arena. In Turkey, the debate is even more relevant and intense because we happen to be in the immediate vicinity of these problems. Whatever course of action is taken on either issue, Turkey will be significantly affected. Turkey has been seriously victimized by events and circumstances beyond its control over the past decade. During the same period, no other country in the world has had to cope with so many internal and external challenges in so many different directions. If the past ten-year period can be characterized as one of conflicts, the opening years of the new millennium have been no less troubling. The tectonic shift in the geopolitical landscape caused by the September 11 attacks has led many other countries to reevaluate their priorities and revisit their strategies for dealing with the common challenges faced by the human race. The growing awareness of asymmetrical threats like terrorism, transnational crime of all types and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is, in itself, very important. An equally important fact is that humanity can only be effective in dealing with these problems if it responds to them in a cooperative spirit and collectively. If we hope to deal a decisive blow to forces of evil, remedy the ills that afflict our societies and resolve the conflicts that threaten our own well-being, we must act together, try to forge coalitions and build as strong a consensus as possible about how to tackle such issues. The same approach should also prevail with regard to the complex problems of the Middle East.

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The Middle East issue and the question of Iraq have increasingly been the focus of attention in the international arena but more so in the United States in recent months and days. Policy-makers, decision-makers, lawmakers, the media and the public at large all seem to be engaged in a heated debate regarding how to deal with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the challenge posed by Iraq.

In Turkey, the debate is even more relevant and intense because we happen to be in the immediate vicinity of these problems. Whatever course of action is taken on either issue, Turkey will be significantly affected. This explains our strong interest in seeing a peaceful and satisfactory resolution of those two burning problems. In order to fully appreciate Turkey's legitimate concerns over the course Middle East conflicts may take, one has to step back for a moment and try to see the larger picture.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the equations that governed the global strategic balance of power were fundamentally altered. This gave way to a succession of conflicts, which were mostly fuelled by pent-up ethnic and micro-nationalistic ambitions. Parts of Eurasia thus became the scene of open warfare. The conflicts in the Caucasus and the Balkans, with all their tragic human consequences, are still fresh in our memories. Even before those wars, Iran and Iraq had fought each other for a decade, and immediately afterwards, the Gulf War broke out, the effects of which are still being felt.

All of these conflicts had three things in common: They erupted in Turkey's own neighborhood; they had no direct cause-and effect relationship with Turkey; yet they almost invariably had a negative impact on us.

A major side-effect of the Gulf War was the sudden influx of half a million refugees into Turkey. Circumstances dictated the imposition of "no-fly zones" in the northern and southern parts of Iraq. Turkey has played a critical part in the enforcement of the northern no-fly zone by allowing coalition aircraft to patrol Iraqi airspace through "Operation Provide Comfort," which, as you know, later became "Northern Watch." We have cooperated and continue to cooperate closely with the U.S. in this operation.

But an unintended side-effect of establishing a specially-protected zone in northern Iraq was the creation of a power vacuum in the area, which enabled PKK terrorists to take shelter there and stage hit-and-run attacks against Turkey. Turkey shut down the oil pipeline from Iraq and became the frontline country in enforcing the UN sanctions against the Iraqi regime. Later, the conflicts in

Bosnia, Kosovo and more recently in Macedonia, created new waves of displaced people who sought refuge in Turkey in the thousands.

The impact of these developments on Turkey has been tremendous. First, the fight against terrorism, which, for us, had begun well before September 11, took a huge human toll, claiming 35 thousand lives. It also strained our economy to the limit due to increased levels of spending on defense and internal security. Secondly, enforcing the UN sanctions against Iraq presented us with a heavy economic bill running into tens of billions of dollars, one which we are still paying. These two factors also contributed to a chronically high level of inflation. Depending on the vagaries of regional politics, our tourism, transportation and foreign investment suffered losses in their own right from time to time. This picture would be incomplete if I failed to mention the devastating earthquakes of 1999, which brought renewed suffering and loss to our people.

In short, Turkey has been seriously victimized by events and circumstances beyond its control over the past decade. During the same period, no other country in the world has had to cope with so many internal and external challenges in so many different directions.

If the past ten-year period can be characterized as one of conflicts, the opening years of the new millennium have been no less troubling. The September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States triggered a new wave of geostrategic change in the world. As a result of the anti-terror campaign led by the United States, Afghanistan's Taliban regime collapsed, paving the way for national reconciliation and reconstruction in that country. As you know, Turkey has shouldered its share of the load in the international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan by taking over the command of the *International Security Assistance Force*, and by contributing 1400 troops. We are also providing assistance on a bilateral basis.

In addition to providing support to the US in its efforts to purge Afghanistan of terrorist elements, Turkey did not hesitate or have second thoughts about giving firm backing to the renewed international campaign against terrorism. Yet, we are also doing our best to ensure that this legitimate struggle is not turned into a so-called clash of civilizations, as some circles would have us believe it is. Terrorism is a crime against humanity which cannot be justified under any pretext. Sources of terror, including its financial and logistical infrastructure, must be eradicated once and for all. It is also wrong to associate this scourge with any particular religion, culture, or geography. Doing so runs the risk of creating new divisions among humanity and weakening the anti-terror coalition. Turkey's engagement in the global combat against terror continues to be driven by these two convictions.

At the same time that the international anti-terror campaign got under way, the Kashmir problem, between Pakistan and India, re-intensified. For a time, there was a real danger of a new war breaking out between the two sides, with global consequences impossible to predict. Thanks to intense multilateral efforts also supported by Turkey, the crisis appears to have been defused. Closer to Turkey, the tension between the Palestinians and the Israelis has taken a dangerous new turn over the past year. The ongoing cycle of violence has already started to undo everything that has been achieved in the Peace Process so far.

These simple facts demonstrate that the greatest challenge in our part of the world remains security-based: That is, how to resolve the dormant or active conflicts in this area and achieve lasting security and stability.

The tectonic shift in the geopolitical landscape caused by the September 11 attacks has led many other countries to reevaluate their priorities and revisit their strategies for dealing with the common challenges faced by the human race. The growing awareness of asymmetrical threats like terrorism, transnational crime of all types and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is, in itself, very important. An equally important fact is that humanity can only be effective in dealing with these problems if it responds to them in a cooperative spirit and collectively. If we hope to deal a decisive blow to forces of evil, remedy the ills that afflict our societies and resolve the conflicts that threaten our own well-being, we must act together, try to forge coalitions and build as strong a consensus as possible about how to tackle such issues.

Another feature of the post-September 11 era is that there is now a greater willingness in the West to delve deeper into the problems of the Middle East and get a firm grasp of the underlying reasons for conflict and confrontation that have beset this troubled region for a long time.

In this context, the current crisis between the Palestinians and the Israelis is a source of serious concern. This is not just because of the destruction and suffering it has been causing on both sides, but also due to its potential to affect developments beyond the scope of the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. It is also highly relevant to internal politics in most Arab and other Muslim-populated countries. Time and again, it has been used to justify terrorist actions of unprecedented proportions, to legitimize launching full-scale wars and to deflect attention from the internal ills and disorders of those societies. Therefore, it is an inflammatory issue that can be easily exploited, the resolution of which is becoming more and more urgent.

The basic parameters of a comprehensive settlement in the Peace Process are already in place. They have been enshrined in *UN Security Council Resolutions 242* and *338*. The adoption of *Resolution 1397* in more recent times has brought further clarity to the foundation on which a lasting solution must be built: the vision of a Palestinian state peacefully co-existing with Israel. This vision has also been explicitly enunciated by the US Administration. We certainly welcome and support all these historic steps.

Turkey has been an ardent advocate of the Middle East Peace Process from the beginning. We took part in the multilateral track of the process and hosted meetings in Turkey. We also did our best to encourage rapprochement between the two sides on a bilateral basis. As a “facilitator,” we have tried to eliminate any mutual misunderstandings, promote an atmosphere of confidence and help the Israelis and the Palestinians maintain their channels of dialogue. Our former President, Süleyman Demirel, is a member of the Mitchell Committee, and was an important contributor to the report of the committee, which enumerates a number of steps necessary to break the deadlock in the Peace Process. Turkish observers still serve in the Temporary International Presence in Hebron, despite the fact that a Turkish officer has been murdered in a terrorist attack.

The fact that the dialogue that was established between the Arabs and the Israelis following the Madrid Peace Conference and the relative reign of stability have been shattered in the course of the past few years is grievous. Lately, spiraling violence has further escalated the crisis. The ongoing terrorist attacks by certain Palestinian groups against Israeli targets and the Israeli Government’s policy of indiscriminate and disproportionate retaliation have created a self-perpetuating cycle of violence. Logic and restraint seem to have been rendered powerless by blind rage and feelings of revenge. In such bleak circumstances, cooler heads must prevail. Replacing the existing culture of hatred and recrimination with one of empathy and dialogue is a must. If the peace talks are not resumed in a meaningful way and without delay, the region could see more bloodshed and destruction, with a growing spill-over potential.

Therefore, we strongly support the idea of holding a new international conference to put the Peace Process back on track. We have also indicated our willingness to host this event in Turkey. Similarly, we support the efforts made by the *Quartet* to calm the situation and address the plight of the Palestinian people. It would be wrong to think that the problem of terrorism can be resolved by military means only. There is a pressing need to take concrete action towards alleviating the tremendous economic difficulties innocent Palestinians still live under. Only then can we begin to hope that the swamp, feeding the scourge of terrorism, will eventually be drained.

In this context, we fully recognize the necessity for a full-fledged reform in the Palestinian government structures. In this day and age marked by the rise of concepts like pluralism, transparency and accountability, no nation is less deserving of democracy than any other. The Palestinians are no exception, but they also have a right to choose their own leaders. Attempts from the outside to impose leaders or install new administrations without popular backing may be counterproductive. The Palestinian people must be allowed to change their leaders through the normal political process.

At the same time, the Palestinian Administration must be encouraged to engage in meaningful reforms for the good of its own people. We believe the “*One Hundred-Day Plan*” launched by the Palestinian Administration is a courageous step that must be supported. We also believe that structural change within Palestine and the resumption of the Peace Process can be accomplished simultaneously. One does not have to precede the other. If this can be achieved, then the chances of real progress towards a comprehensive settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians will have been greatly boosted, possibly leading the way to a resumption of the multilateral track of the Process as well.

The case of Iraq presents the other major challenge in the Middle East. Speculations about military action against Saddam Hussein and an imposed regime change continue to occupy the international agenda. The Iraqi opposition groups have been meeting in the U.S. and in Europe more and more frequently to discuss strategies regarding the future of Iraq. Despite the U.S. Administration’s declared policy of bringing about a regime change in Baghdad by any means, there is as yet no clear blueprint for what the post-Saddam Iraq should look like.

Even more importantly, there are significantly divergent views about ways of handling the Iraqi question both inside the U.S. and between the U.S. and the other countries, notably European ones. Lately, some European Union members like Germany have begun to display a more vocal opposition to military action in Iraq and are making it clear that they will stay out of it. In Britain, there are growing second-thoughts about the wisdom of a new war in the Middle East.

Unlike the case of the Gulf War or the anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan, the international community seems far from being in agreement on the need for taking forcible action to oust and replace the regime in Baghdad, let alone being able to build a coalition to that end. Under such circumstances, any premature military intervention in Iraq without a solid basis of international support is bound to give rise to serious questions of legitimacy, moral justification and political correctness.

But, the actual dangers, risks and consequences inherent to a renewed war in Iraq at this time far outweigh purely academic concerns on the legality and usefulness of such action. Such consequences cannot be explained away in terms of the overly simplistic euphemism “collateral damage.” The issue has a direct bearing on the vital and indispensable national interests of those states that are certain to be negatively affected by a renewed conflict at their doorstep. Let me try to elaborate, starting with Turkey’s domestic concerns.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the first phase of the Iraqi question, triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, created enormous difficulties for Turkey, in the inter-related areas of domestic security, economic development and regional stability. For the better part of the past decade, Turkey had to grapple with these problems and received little international support for its efforts. For instance, despite our repeated applications to the U.N. for appropriate exemptions from the Iraqi sanctions regime, our pleas went unheeded. Although the oil-for-food program provided a degree of relief to the Turkish economy, it is nowhere near being sufficient to compensate for our economic losses, which are now in excess of 40 billion Dollars.

Furthermore, in the course of the last decade, Turkey was forced to wage a costly but necessary fight against foreign-sponsored terrorism. Terrorism disrupted economic activity in certain parts of the country and led to massive internal migratory pressures. The social fabric of our rural and urban areas underwent important changes. In the end, we won the struggle against this particularly violent brand of terrorism. But just as we had embarked upon the gradual process of healing the wounds, we were struck by two earthquakes and a major economic crisis. So, you can imagine that the last thing Turkey needs or wants right now is a new regional war with potentially devastating side-effects.

Another reason Turkey wants to avoid a war has to do with the transformation it has been going through. Following its designation as a candidate for European Union membership at the Helsinki Summit of 1999, Turkey has launched an extensive program of domestic political reforms, parallel to the economic restructuring program. This is the most radical and far-reaching set of reforms ever undertaken in Turkish history. Recently, for instance, the Parliament adopted a new package of legislative amendments, thereby lifting capital punishment in peacetime and allowing our cultural diversity to better flourish through broadcasts in and private teaching of languages other than Turkish.

Although this move is part of our drive to meet the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership, the reforms are basically in the long-term interests of the Turkish nation, and are intended to consolidate the internal peace and order of the country. At such a critical point in time, what we need is sustained tranquility and stability on our borders, so that our social transformation is achieved smoothly and without disruptive shock-waves from the outside. Military action in Iraq, especially if it results in the division of the country, could therefore have serious repercussions for our domestic peace and order, possibly even leading to a resurgence of terrorism.

An additional element which must be factored in when contemplating changes to Iraq's regime relates to the prevailing perceptions and realities in the Arab world. Whether we believe it to be correct or not, Arab masses tend to see a linkage between the case of Iraq and the plight of the Palestinians. Skillful Arab opinion-makers can easily galvanize their public against what they regard as the Western intention to subjugate a defenseless and crippled Arab country. People in most Arab countries are already seething with rage over the way the Palestinians are being treated and the fact that the Peace Process has been at a standstill for a number of years. They may have other pent-up political and economic grievances against their own regimes.

The real state of affairs in the Middle East points to a group of Arab governments in a clearly explosive situation only waiting for the spark to set it off. Intervention in Iraq despite clear Arab opposition and in disregard of the feelings of the Arab man and woman in the street could easily light the fuse of massive social unrest and internal disorder in some countries. It could conceivably also erode whatever support the Arab countries are lending to the anti-terror coalition put together after the September 11 attacks.

It would be ideal if Iraq could one day become a truly democratic country posing no threat to others and at peace with itself. The peoples of the other countries in the Middle East also deserve the best standards of democracy, freedom, human rights and prosperity. It is in the interests of the West to encourage progress in that direction. But building democracy in the Western sense is a painful process that takes time, perseverance, education, sustained exposure to a ever-expanding world and ultimately popular support. Let us not forget that Western nations got where they are today in centuries. Even though it would be incorrect to presuppose that Arab countries will have to work that long to achieve true democracy, it would also be naive to think that such profound transformation can be achieved overnight, especially by simply removing regimes and installing new ones without any democratic credentials. And in that particular corner of the world, if democracy is seen to be imposed from outside by dint of force, the attempt, no matter how well-intentioned, may even backfire.

In light of all these considerations, Turkey has opted to follow a policy of engagement towards Iraq, rather than further isolating and pushing the Baghdad regime into a corner. This means we are taking pro-active steps to persuade the Iraqi regime to comply fully with U.N. resolutions and allow the weapons inspectors back into the country without preconditions or delay. It is obviously Iraq's responsibility to do its best to eliminate suspicions about its perceived appetite for acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Clearly, the best way to do that is to re-engage in result-oriented cooperation with the U.N. by abandoning procrastination. We are also telling them, and the world, that any concrete steps they take in that direction must be rewarded by the international community. Iraq should be given the clear perspective of seeing the sanctions lifted once well-defined, measurable benchmarks are achieved.

Along the same lines, I would also like to underline our sensitivity on the issue of Iraq's future. Turkey simply cannot afford to have a repetition of the bloody ethnic conflicts that devastated the Balkans and the Caucasus, immediately beyond its southern borders. The dismemberment of Iraq would dangerously upset the existing balances in the region and create renewed instability with consequences that no one can safely predict. Therefore, we attach utmost importance to the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity. That is an absolute line in the sand as far as Turkey is concerned.

On the other hand, deciding the next form of government for Iraq is a matter for the Iraqi people. But it concerns all of the Iraqi people, not just selected groups or a few segments of population. No matter what form it may ultimately take, the solution must be based on the political unity of Iraq. This entails treating all ethnic groups equally, including the Iraqi Turkmen, which are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq. Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and other ethnicities need to achieve a broad consensus among themselves about what is the best way for them to ensure their safety and well-being, while preserving Iraqi national identity. They must remember that in multi-ethnic societies, empathy, compromise and cooperation are the only options for ensuring national unity and survival.

Iraq is blessed with a critical natural resource in the form of oil. If used wisely, fairly and for peaceful purposes, the wealth from this asset could re-shape the destiny of the Iraqi people. Conversely, using oil as an incentive or disincentive for political purposes may complicate and even poison the already intricate relationships among Iraq's diverse ethnic groups. For that reason, we believe the prospect of apportioning the common wealth of the country must not be employed as a bargaining chip in the discussions over Iraq's future.

All of these factors show that Iraq's case is indeed special and that assessments on Iraq require utmost care, profound knowledge and due diligence. So, our hope is that the problems concerning Iraq will be resolved in a peaceful manner and on the basis of international legitimacy. Turkey is committed to working closely with its allies and friends to that end.

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