

MIDDLE EASTERN PERCEPTIONS OF US-TURKEY RELATIONS AFTER THE 2003 IRAQ WAR

The US-Turkey relationship has been viewed with skepticism among certain actors in the Middle East. American attempts to promote Turkey as a successful Muslim democracy has aroused criticism from regional players who argue that liberalization should emerge indigenously, and not from external initiatives. Turkey's decision to accept an American request to deploy troops to Iraq in October 2003 was also met with a cold reception in the region. Examining the perspectives from the Egyptian, Iranian and Iraqi state run and independent media, a prevailing mood of suspicion of US-Turkey relations can be observed. Nevertheless, there are indications that Turkey could play a positive role in the region in the future. Besides analyzing these dynamics, this article examines Middle Eastern terrorist discourse to ascertain how these elements justify their violence against an American ally.

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In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, it became apparent to actors in the Middle East that encouraging the spread of democracy in the region would constitute a pillar of the foreign policy of President George W. Bush. However his administration's attempts to use post-Saddam Iraq as an example of a successful Arab democracy was undermined as American troops were not welcomed as liberators and an insurgency soon erupted against occupation forces. In this context, studying Middle Eastern perceptions of the US-Turkey relations becomes imperative. American efforts to promote Turkey as an example of a functioning Muslim democracy as part of its Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) has aroused increasing negative regional perceptions of the relationship between these two nations.

The second decisive issue that generated negative perceptions of the relationship in the Middle East was the October 2003 debate in Turkey over whether to accept an American request to dispatch Turkish troops to the "Sunni Arab Triangle." Turkey's commitment to send military forces to Iraq to otherwise bolster an American occupation received hostile reactions amongst Iraqi circles, as well as throughout the region. Although Turkey's decision in March 2003 was to not allow US forces to open up a northern front to attack Iraq during the war was applauded by some countries in the region, the troop deployment decision soon dissipated the good will that the March decision generated.

An exhaustive study of Middle Eastern perceptions of the US-Turkey relationship could be the subject of an entire volume, and this article is by no means an exhaustive study of the subject. Rather, by examining both official and independent news media in the region, it attempts to highlight how the Turkey-US relationship is perceived among official circles as well as subversive elements within the Middle East.

The following study examines the perceptions of the American-Turkish ties from Iraq and Iran, two countries that border Turkey and are affected by the fluctuations in the relationship. Examining Egyptian perceptions of these ties also proves valuable as Cairo tends to represent the focal point of Arab public opinion, otherwise referred to as the "Arab Street." Another key element is the study of how terrorists in the region perceive the links between the two countries, since these organizations justify their violence by striking at an American "ally," amply demonstrated by the attacks in Istanbul in November 2003. These four actors regard US-Turkish ties increasingly skeptical, and this view is exacerbated by Turkey's ties with Israel. The AKP government's condemnation of Israeli actions in the Occupied Territories and its willingness to negotiate a settlement between Israelis and Palestinians has had a positive reception in the region; nevertheless, these efforts remain tainted by a view that Ankara's policy in the Middle East remains dependent on Washington.

Egyptian Perceptions

Even though the US counts Egypt as one of its staunchest allies in the region, Cairo opposed the American war against Iraq and the ensuing occupation. The Egyptian news media, which tends to represent views of the political establishment, frequently expressed its criticism of US policy to Iraq as well as American efforts to democratize the region.

On both accounts, the Egyptian media was critical of Turkey's role vis-à-vis these two US policies.

Al-Jumhuriyya (The Republic), published in Cairo, is a state owned daily newspaper that has featured articles critical of US policy toward Iraq as well as its democratization efforts in the region. In the column entitled "Dividing Lines," Chief Editor Samir Rajab writes that the US actions in Iraq have only created chaos and as a result the Americans have been obliged to ask for Turkish aid to bolster their own forces in the contested Sunni Arab Triangle. He adds that, "The most eloquent proof could be the enlistment of Turkish military troops that would join the invaders, though the traditional enmity between the Turks and the Iraqis is ages old and known to all parties."¹ Rajab alleges that Turkey's willingness to deploy troops in Iraq would be a de-facto invasion, only perpetuating the American occupation.

Al-Akhbar (The News), another prominent Egyptian state owned daily, also warned of the dangers of Turkey accepting the American request to deploy its military forces in Iraq. The columnist Sayyid Al-Najjar, in an article entitled "Old Ambitions Resuscitated", alleges that Turkey's willingness to send its armed forces to relieve US troops is part of a larger irredentist agenda to regain the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk in the north of Iraq as well as curb Kurdish separatism: "The Iraqi fears are well founded. Turkey does not hide its pleasure at returning to the Iraqi territories from which it departed in 1918 with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It does not make a secret of its desire to deploy forces to northern Iraq, which would prevent the Kurds' quest to establish an independent state."² Najjar then paraphrases statements allegedly made by Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül who apparently said that the Turkish forces' presence in Iraq "would be like a third partner" for the British and US forces, thus in the columnist's view point, only prolonging the occupation of Iraq.

Ahmed Abdel-Halim, in his article entitled "Seeking Chaos" in the Cairo based *Al-Ahram* (The Pyramids) *Weekly*, points out that despite close Turkish-American ties, Ankara's priority is to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq. According to Abdel-Halim, Turkey would not withdraw its forces that were already stationed in the north, even if the request were made by the United States directly.³ While Abdel-Halim perceives Turkish-US ties as close, he argues that the Kurdish issue in Iraq is the first priority for Turkish policy makers and thus overrides American interests.

After September 11, 2001, the issue of democratic reform in the Arab world emerged as a priority in US foreign policy, as a means of encouraging social stability in the region and

¹ "Cairo Editor: US Lost Control in Iraq, Should Make 'Daring' Decision to Withdraw," *Al-Jumhuriyah*, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) GMP20031015000242, October 15, 2003.

² "Cairo Columnist Sees Iraqi Fears of Turkish Forces Deployment as 'Well Founded'," *Al-Akhbar*, (FBIS) GMP20031016000262, October 16, 2003.

³ Ahmed Abdel-Halim, "Seeking Chaos," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, September 25, 2003.

thus preventing the spread of terrorism. The link between a lack of democracy in the region and terrorism was stated by US President George W. Bush on February 26, 2003 at the American Enterprise Institute, in which he stressed the US efforts to spread democracy in this region. Several weeks later, the invasion of Iraq offered the US a platform in the heart of the region to undertake this goal. The Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) was announced during a speech made at the University of South Carolina, and was endorsed by the Turkish Foreign Minister on May 12, 2003.⁴ On November 6, 2003, months after the invasion, Bush delivered another speech at the National Endowment for Democracy, reiterating his administration's belief that democratization can end the poverty and political repression that breeds terrorism in the region.⁵ The GMEI that President Bush publicized at the NATO gathering in Istanbul in July 2004 placed Turkey at the heart of the American formula for democratization in the region, invoking regional criticism of the program towards both the US and Turkey.

Such a comparison was not greeted by enthusiasm in the Arab world, especially in Egypt. Other commentators objected to the use of Turkey as a role model as part of this program. First, some argued that Arab countries have already begun to reform without outside powers interfering in their domestic affairs, thus there is no need for Turkey to serve as a model. The GMEI was articulated without consulting the countries that it intended to reform, and the use of the Turkish model gave some circles in Egypt the impression that the US was presenting them with a ready-made formula for democratization without taking into account the historical circumstances and special characteristics that divide the Arab nations from Turkey.⁶

Another Egyptian writer, Gamil Mattar, criticized the American use of Turkey as a role model for democratization in the region by invoking an alleged historical precedent. The columnist argues that Turkey's democratic path was established by Western intervention and thus the Arab world was doomed to the same fate. In reference to the GMEI, he says, "With Joschka Fischer's announcement of the proposal that the United States plans to put before the G8 Summit, the West has thrown down the gauntlet. Now the Arabs, especially their ruling elite, must decide, and quickly, whether to take up the challenge or pretend it does not exist. The challenge, this time, is both diabolically clever and ideally timed."⁷ Then referring to Turkey's Ottoman past, Mattar says,

I say 'this time' because a similar gauntlet was cast down before the Ottoman Sultanate a century or more ago. Istanbul chose to ignore it, and, within a few years, Turkey was walking the path that the West had staked out for it. Both then and now, there was a ground swell for reform, and in both instances there was a war that gave the West the opportunity to press for changes beneath a banner of reform.

⁴ Burak Akçapar, Mensur Akgün, Meliha Altunışık, Ayşe Kadioğlu, "The Debate On Democratization In The Broader Middle East and North Africa: A Civic Assessment From Turkey," *Istanbul Paper # 3* (İstanbul: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, 2004.)

⁵ Ahmed Abdel-Halim, "The Long Road to Reform," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 1, 2004.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gamil Mattar, "Throwing Down the Gauntlet," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, March 4, 2004.

The writer stresses the irony that Turkey would play host to the NATO Summit discussing the GMEI:

Just under a century ago, the Western campaign against the Ottoman Sultanate ended with the secularization of Turkey. Istanbul has become the model that the West hopes to see repeated in the largest number of Islamic nations possible, starting in the Arab world. I have little doubt that the Istanbul meeting will give special focus to military aspects without which the Western initiative would not be complete. The Americans know full well that Turkey's relationship with NATO has always been the guarantee that Turkey will adhere to the 'reformist' path it chose, or that was chosen for it, in the last century.⁸

Mattar perceives Turkey's democracy as a product of Western intervention, rather than an indigenous political process, and thus underlines his belief that Turkey's use as a model for the GMEI, hides a Western agenda to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Arab nations with the aim of producing the same result.

In an interview with the Dubai based *Al-Arabiyya* satellite channel, Ambassador Ahmad Abu al-Khayr, former assistant to Egyptian Foreign Minister, stressed that the GMEI was doomed to failure since the United States had lost its credibility in the region, especially after the Iraq War. He stated that America's citing Turkey as an example of democracy was part of an American effort to make the GMEI look more attractive to the Arabs who would be reluctant to follow the Israeli democratic model.⁹

In the aforementioned articles, a common theme emerges that any regional initiatives taken by Turkey in conjunction with the US arouse distrust among Egyptian circles. In both cases of the Turkish troop deployment decision and its role in the GMEI, the Egyptian media, often reflecting the official state view, tends to depict a hidden Turkish-American agenda to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Arab states.

Iranian Perceptions

Iranian-US tensions are at a highpoint, as Tehran is accused of developing a nuclear weapons program that could threaten the region, of harboring terrorists with connections to *al-Qa'ida*, and of supporting organizations Washington has deemed as terrorists, such as the Hizbullah in Lebanon. As a result, the relations between its neighbor Turkey and the United States are perceived as a security threat. Turkey's linkage with the GMEI has also received a critical reception among Iranian circles. In June 2004, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said there was no need for such a program in the region or a nation to serve as a model, since, "The Islam which we are following and defending binds us to such a vision of society."¹⁰ In July 2004, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi labeled the GMEI as a tool to establish "Zionist" (i.e. Israeli) hegemony over the

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Al-Arabiyyah Talk Show Discusses US Greater Middle East Initiative," *Al-Arabiyyah Television* (FBIS) GMP20040313000004, 1900 GMT, March 11, 2004.

¹⁰ "Khatami Says Protagonists of Greater Middle East Initiative Are Deceitful," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, (FBIS) IAP20040623000110, 1806 GMT, June 23, 2004.

region.¹¹ In Hassan Hanizadeh's opinion column in the *Teheran Times*, he argues that the GMEI is a modern day version of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a reference to the secret World War One plan between the British and French to divide the spoils of the Ottoman Empire.¹² He argues that the GMEI is meant to divide the nation so that Israel could achieve a state "from the Nile to the Euphrates" and that Israel is trying to gain a foothold in northern Iraq to achieve this goal.

Besides the GMEI, there are other aspects of the US-Turkish relationship that Iran perceives as a threat. *Sharg* (East) is a daily paper linked to reformist elements in Iran. In his article entitled, "Ups and Downs of Iran-Turkey Relations," Arif Vahid Naavan writes that tensions between the two countries have prevailed since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. He describes such tensions as "dark clouds in their mutual sky due to the closeness of Turkey and Israel in various forms." He argues that setbacks Turkey faced in the past on its road to European Membership have driven it to forge closer ties with the US and Israel. The writer criticizes joint military maneuvers between Turkey, the US and Israel. Naavan also states that Iranian allegations that the Turkish companies, Turkcell, the cellular phone network provider and TAV (Tepe Akfen Vie, responsible for the construction of the Imam Khomeini International Airport) were connected to Israeli companies led to tensions between the two countries. Naavan further alleges that in retaliation, Turkey gave permission to the US to make use of its airspace over the towns of Batman and Malatya so that the Americans could conduct reconnaissance flights to gather information on Iranian nuclear facilities.¹³ The writer indirectly states that American military use of Turkish airspace is a matter of speculation, but nevertheless indicates the distrust and fear on the Iranian side over this issue.

The writer applauds Turkey's decision not to permit US forces to attack Iraq in March 2003. He writes: "When the decision about the matter was referred to the parliament, the parliament killed the resolution and did not allow such a bill to be approved. The war began without Turkey's support, and Saddam was overthrown in less than a month; but what is important is that America respected the vote of the Turkish parliament." The writer uses this precedent to challenge Turkey to respect the decision of the Iranian parliament (*Majlis*). It was the *Majlis* vote that decided to cancel the cooperation with Turkcell and TAV, and even though Iranian President Khatami disagreed with the motion, he decided to respect the vote. Naavan writes that, "All these processes in Iran have taken place according to principles of democracy in our country, so this must be quite comprehensible for Erdoğan and his colleagues, whose country is being governed by principles of democracy."¹⁴ Hence, he argues Turkey should not have retaliated against, "our democracy and our parliament's vote" by allowing US forces to use its

¹¹ "Kharrazi Says US Greater Mideast Initiative Aims at Strengthening Zionist Hegemony," (FBIS), *IRNA* IAP20040716000048, 1428 GMT, July 16, 2004.

¹² "Daily Says US 'Greater Middle East' Plan Modern Version of Sykes-Picot Accord," *Tehran Times*, IAP20040317000042, March 17, 2004.

¹³ "Writer Traces 'Ups and Downs' of Iran's Past Relations With Turkey," *Sharq*, (FBIS) IAP20041111000064, November 2, 2004.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

airspace. He argues that if such rumors of US air flights from Turkey are true, it could damage the warming of relations between Tehran and Ankara.

Opposed to *Teheran Sharg*, the newspaper *Keyhan* (The Nation) is closely linked to conservative elements in the Iranian government, and thus carries more critical views of US-Turkish relations. In an editorial entitled, “Zionists’ Move to Muddy Waters in Iran” by Abdolhamid Zargarian, he writes of an alleged arms smuggling operation into Iran orchestrated by Israel, Turkey and the US. Zargarian writes that in the southern Iranian province of Khuzestan, bordering Iraq, their military forces discovered traffickers smuggling 1,600 small arms designed in Israel but manufactured in Turkey.¹⁵ Given that the US occupied Iraq, the writer concludes that all three parties were involved in an effort to destabilize the Islamic Republic by bringing about a “regime change” from within its borders.

The Iranian articles, just as those in Egypt, expressed their distrust of the GMEI, as well as of Turkey serving as the role model of a successful democracy in the region. In both cases, the writers from these countries argued that democratization has begun from within and should not be a result of American initiatives. Additionally, some news media have reflected the hardline, conservative view in Iran that a tripartite American-Israeli-Turkish alliance is attempting to undermine the Islamic Republic.

Iraqi Perceptions

In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, Iraqi perceptions of the US-Turkish relationship were effected significantly by the developments revolving around the American request to send Turkish military forces to the restive areas around the towns of Falluja, Ba’aquba and Ramadi, otherwise referred to as the “Sunni Arab Triangle.” On October 7, 2003 the Turkish Parliament passed a motion authorizing the deployment of its troops to Iraq; however, strong Iraqi opposition made the US reconsider such a move.¹⁶ Examining the Iraqi media during this debate illustrates how the various communities in the country perceive these ties. The predominant fear among Iraqi circles, especially among the Kurds was that if the US allowed Turkey to deploy troops into Iraq, Turkey could be in a position to raise its historic claims to the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Kirkuk.

The American request caused objection in the Iraqi Interim Governing Council (IGC), a body made up of twenty-five Iraqis designed to represent the nation until the US restored sovereignty to Iraq in June 2004. The debate represented a crisis between the IGC and the US, with the former explicitly stating that they opposed the entry of troops from neighboring countries into Iraq.¹⁷ The objection was partly due to the fact that the invitation came from the US and not from Iraq itself. One member of the Council said in

¹⁵ “Turkey, Israel, US Said Deeply Involved in Arms-Smuggling Operations Into Iran,” *Keyhan International*, (FBIS) IAP20050308000006, March 2, 2005.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Iraqi responses to issue see, Ibrahim Al-Marashi, “A New Chapter in Iraqi-Turkish Relations?: Examining the Iraqi and Arab Reactions to the Proposed Turkish Deployment to Iraq,” *Insight Turkey*, January-March 2004.

¹⁷ “IGC Reportedly Reaches ‘Compromise’ on Stand toward Turkish Troops’ Deployment,” Al-Jazirah Satellite Channel Television, (FBIS) GMP20031008000053, 0800 GMT, October 8, 2003.

a news interview, that despite the objections he believed that, “US interests will remain more important in all the decisions it (the US) will make, and it will not listen to what the Council says.”¹⁸ An Iraqi editorial explained that despite the IGC’s objection, the US continued to insist on its decision, since it was in dire need of a “Turkish shield” to protect the US troops from the chaos in Iraq. The editor argues that the presence of 10,000 troops in Iraq, would only safeguard the interests of Turkey and not those of the Iraqi nation.¹⁹

A political body representing the tribes of Iraq issued a statement reflecting the fluctuations in US-Turkish relations. It stated how surprised they were that after Turkey’s decision to deny permission to US forces to enter Iraq from its territories Ankara changed its stance and agreed to send Turkish troops to participate in the coalition. They asked, “This makes us wonder why the Turkish government has changed its stance and view now.”²⁰ Such a question alluded to whether Turkey made this decision to ensure that the Iraqi Kurds did not declare an independent state.

Several Iraqi independent papers stressed that the troop deployment, referred to in some publications as the “US-Turkish plan”, would only contribute to perpetuating the occupation and aid Turkey in realizing its historical claims to the north of Iraq. In the daily Iraqi newspaper *Al-Safir* (The Diplomat), the author was opposed to the Turkish troop decision, saying it was a request from the US government. He took issue with the American claim that since the troops are Muslim, they would be less likely to be attacked and argued that the motion was part of a greater Turkish plan to achieve hidden ambitions inside Iraq.²¹ This view was expressed by another independent paper, *Al-Mustaqbal al-Hurr* (The Free Future) which claimed, “For many years and for reasons that are known to everyone, successive Turkish governments have been trying to establish a foothold in Iraq.”²²

Another Iraqi independent daily, *al-Firat* (The Euphrates) conducted interviews with Iraqis over their opinions of the “US-Turkish Plan.” Their responses reflected the general sentiment expressed in other Iraqi news outlets. An attorney, Yunus Muhammad Jasim responded, “I do not approve of the deployment of Turkish or other forces because that entrenches the occupation. The US Administration and the US forces are committing a big mistake by allowing Turkish troops to enter Iraq under the cover of maintaining security. We want to remove the occupiers from our country, so how can we accept the deployment of Turkish troops in our cherished north?” Another respondent, Abbas

¹⁸ “Iraq Congress Member Comments on Turkish Forces Deployment,” *Al-Jazirah Satellite Channel Television*, (FBIS) GMP20031008000139, 1303 GMT, October 8, 2003.

¹⁹ “Iraqi Paper Rejects Entry of Turkish Troops into Iraq,” *Al-Qasim al-Mushtarak* (FBIS) GMP20031016000081, October 16, 2003.

²⁰ “Iraqi Tribal Leaders Issue Statement Opposing Turkish Military Deployment,” *Al-Ta'akhi*, (FBIS) GMP20031010000241, October 9, 2003.

²¹ “Iraqi Paper Says Iraqi People to Deal With Turkish Troops as ‘Occupation Forces,’” *Al-Safir*, (FBIS) GMP20031012000188, October 11, 2003.

²² “Iraqi Editor Expresses Opposition to Presence of Turkish Forces in Iraq,” *Al-Mustaqbal al-Hurr*, (FBIS) GMP20030925000170, September 23, 2003.

Shabanah, said “We oppose the presence of Turkish or any other foreign troops. Such a presence serves the interests of the United States only. The United States is seeking to consolidate its occupation of Iraq by bringing in neighboring countries in order to humiliate the Iraqis under the pretext of maintaining security and stability.”²³

Iraqi views of the US-Turkish relationship focused on the issue of the troop deployment, rather than the GMEI. Perhaps, from the Iraqi viewpoint, the matter of democratization was a mute debate, as many realized that a democratic Iraq would be in a stronger position to ask the US forces to leave. However, in their view the presence of Turkish troops on Iraqi soil would only prolong the occupation, and thus they objected vehemently.

Terrorist Perceptions

Examining terrorist perceptions of Turkey has become imperative in light of the November 2003 bombings in Istanbul. The US-Turkish relationship has been a means to justify these violent attacks, and while the perpetrators were from Turkey, nevertheless the attacks were applauded among terrorist factions in the Middle East. Examining such perceptions helps understand the animosity towards this alliance and gives an insight into the terrorist mentality which could rationalize these attacks.

After the two Istanbul synagogue bombings in November 2003, the Arabic newspaper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* received a claim from a faction called the Abu Hafz al-Masri Brigade, linked to al-Qa’ida, which praised the attacks. The Brigade is also believed to be behind the suicide bombings at the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad on August 7, 2003 and the attack on the United Nations headquarters on August 19 of the same year. While the terrorists explained that the synagogues were targeted because it was believed they served as bases for Israeli intelligence, the statement quickly turned against the US: “We say to the criminal Bush and his valets among the Arabs and foreigners, in particular Britain, Italy, Australia and Japan: you will see the cars of death with your own eyes in the centre of the capital of tyranny. They will not be limited to Baghdad, Riyadh, Istanbul, Djerba, Nasiriyah, Jakarta.”²⁴

Following the attacks against the British consulate and the HSBC Bank in November, the same purported Al-Qaida unit issued another statement that appeared on an Islamist website, entitled *Al-Mujahidun* (The Holy Warriors), applauding the attacks. The statement apologized for the fact that innocent Turkish Muslims were killed in the attack, but blamed them for going near, “the diplomatic, economic or military headquarters of America and its allies; for our real war, which will begin soon, will have no boundaries

²³ “Iraqi Paper Opinion Poll: Iraqis Oppose Deployment of Turkish Troops,” *Al-Furat*, (FBIS) GMP20031023000191, October 21, 2003.

²⁴ “Al-Qa’ida Claims Istanbul Blasts, Warns of ‘Cars of Death’ in US: Arab Paper,” AFP (FBIS) JPP20031117000056, November 16, 2003.

and will show no mercy towards the tyrant of the era and his allies.”²⁵ The statement later posed a question directly to Turkey:

As for you, Turkey, isn't it time you left the Crusader army and returned to the Islamic nation? Isn't it time you withdrew your army from Afghanistan; stopped all ties with the Zionist entity; stopped providing America with soldiers for Iraq; left the Crusader-Atlantic alliance? We consider the government of Turkey as a first-class agent for America and therefore it must choose - peace or America.²⁶

The Crusader symbol is a potent term that runs throughout terrorist discourse to refer to the US and its allies. The demand for Turkey to stop providing America with “soldiers for Iraq” did not take into account the fact that US later asked Turkey not to provide soldiers in October due to the Iraqi objections. Al-Qa’ida had already accused Turkey of collaborating with the “American occupation” of Iraq; in addition, this group had branded Turkey as one of “the tyrannical governments which rule Muslims” and which prevents them from establishing “an Islamic caliphate.”²⁷

Another website that reflects Middle Eastern perceptions of the Turkey-US alliance is that of the Islamist student group, *Al-Muhajirun* (The Emigres). While the group is based in the UK, it nevertheless reflects the militant ideology of the Egyptian cleric Abu Hamza, currently jailed in London on charges of inciting religious hatred. In a posting after the bombings entitled, “Why Turkey?” it stated:

The bombing of two Jewish synagogues in Turkey over the last week claiming the lives of over 35 people with another 300 seriously injured, has underscored the deepening crisis confronting US policy in the Middle East in the wake of the war against Iraq. Far from the “turning of the tide” in the “war on terrorism,” as Bush proclaimed aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Lincoln earlier in the year, the U.S. invasion has only exacerbated deep political and social tensions throughout the whole region, including Turkey.²⁸

Al-Muhajirun also levels another charge against Turkey: “They stood by the U.S. in its illegitimate war against Islam and Muslims in Iraq (even though its own population was against this move), allowing for its bases in Incirlik and elsewhere to be utilized by the *Kuffar* (Unbelievers) to oppress Muslims and gain a ‘way over the believers’.”²⁹

Various terrorist factions in the region justify their violence against Turkey as a means of striking an American ally. They remain blind to tensions that have emerged between Turkey and the US, such as those expressed in the March 2003 parliamentary debate or to the fact that Turkey did not deploy its forces in Iraq in October 2003. In the terrorist discourse, Turkey remains an object of criticism due to the secular nature of its government which contradicts their vision of a unified Islamic *umma* (nation). Despite

²⁵ Reuters, “The Cars of Death Will Not Stop,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2003.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ “Why Turkey?”, *Al-Muhajirun*, available at www.al-muhaajiroun.com

²⁹ *Ibid.*

the differences that have emerged between Turkey and the US, these groups point out that Turkey is still a member of NATO, and thus a partner in the “Crusader alliance.”

Conclusion

While regional perceptions of the US-Turkish relationship are generally negative, they do not necessarily reflect the perceptions of Turkey per se. News media in Egypt has supportive of Turkish attempts to foster peace between Palestinians and Israelis, a goal that Cairo actively seeks as well. The Iranian media, many agencies of which reflect official opinions in Tehran, has also pointed out that relations have improved between the two countries, especially in terms of trade. While Iraqi views were critical of Turkey’s willingness to deploy troops in Iraq, all communities, including Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen, have expressed their desire for cooperation between Baghdad and Ankara in the future. Distrust in the region tends to arise when Turkey is deemed a partner to American initiatives in the Middle East.

Despite the overwhelming criticism of the GMEI, Turkey can still play a positive role in the region, as long as it encourages reform through domestic dialogue, with local cultural characteristics in mind. Playing a role in forging a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, could give Turkey an unprecedented standing in the region which could dissipate the tensions created by its perceived cooperative links with the US.