

US war plans intensify political crisis in Turkey

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In spite of all attempts to convince it otherwise, the Turkish government has so far expressed scepticism—at least on the surface—in regard to a military operation in Iraq to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. Behind this political stance looms Turkey's deep social and economic crisis as well as the unresolved issue of the Kurds, once again arousing bitter dispute among the various sections of the Turkish establishment.

The US has pulled out all diplomatic stops to win over Turkey for a war against Iraq, but with little visible success. In mid-March US Vice President Dick Cheney flew to Turkey as part of a Middle East tour and met up with both Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and General Chief of Staff Hüsseyin Kivrikoglu. Just before his departure, Cheney cancelled a press conference. Relieved, Ecevit announced that “at present” there were no plans for an attack on Iraq.

However, observers assume that the die has long been cast in Ankara and that Turkey will support US war plans. While Ecevit knows that he can scarcely influence the American government's decision, he wants at least to lever as much advantage as possible from his consent to an attack on the neighbouring country.

To this end he flew to the US at the head of a 200-strong delegation last January. Referring to the Middle East expert, Cengiz Candar, the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* newspaper reported at the time that Ankara was placing two conditions on its support for renewed military operations against Iraq: that “no independent Kurdish state would come into existence in northern Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein” and that there would be “compensation for financial losses incurred by Turkey in a new war in Iraq”.

Iraq is an important trading partner for Turkey. According to some estimates, the country has suffered

losses of US\$ 40-60 billion since sanctions were imposed following the Gulf War in 1991. So far the US has promised Turkey just \$228 million as compensation for taking over the command of NATO troops in Afghanistan. According to the report cited, the Turkish government is “therefore increasingly of the opinion that a continuation of the status quo in Iraq is not in Turkey's interest”.

After Cheney's recent visit, Ecevit repeated his warnings to Bagdad. He immediately sent Saddam Hussein letters to say that Iraq had to adhere to UN resolutions and allow weapons inspectors into the country.

In addition, the US has been using the Turkish air force base Incirlik for the bombing of Iraq for a long time and, according to press reports, has already applied for rights for continued use. Moreover, the US is supposed to have begun construction of an air force command centre in Eskisehir in western Turkey.

As far as Turkish domestic politics are concerned, any support undertaken for a war against Iraq would thrust Ecevit into a tight-rope situation. The forcible installation of a compliant regime in the neighbouring country or its occupation is roundly rejected by the population.

The Turkish government has come under additional pressure as a result of Israel's major offensive against the Palestinians. Turkey is the only Islamic country to have both diplomatic relations and a military pact with Israel. Among other things, a major \$668 million project has been planned for Israeli armaments firms to modernise Turkey's battle tanks. The demand from Islamic representatives to discontinue the project caused a storm in parliament. The joint military exercise of the “Anatolian eagles”, announced to take place this year in southern Turkey, has also come under

criticism. Its initial phase, from the end of April to the beginning of May, has already been cancelled by the Israeli military.

If opposition to the government's foreign policy were to combine with a further deepening of the economic crisis, resulting inevitably from an attack on Iraq, the domestic situation threatens to spin out of control.

Turkey has already experienced serious financial crises in November 2000 and again in February 2001. These led to a devaluation of the lira by about 50 percent and plunged the country into its worse recession since the Second World War. Thousands of firms went bankrupt and more than a million Turks lost their jobs. Last year the average income fell 27 percent, to \$2,160.

Since this economic and social collapse, the parties of the Turkish establishment have enjoyed little support. Leading in opinion polls for some time now is the Islamic opposition, which has meanwhile split into two parties and also loudly criticised US war plans.

In order to survive economically the government is heavily reliant on credit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Up to the year 2003, the IMF has approved a total of \$31 billion, which must be ratified from instalment to instalment. In mid-April the allocation of \$1.1 billion is to be ratified, disbursement being made subject to further conditions. Approximately 61,000 employees in public service and state-owned enterprises will lose their jobs in the course of the year.

With the US government holding a virtual power of veto in the IMF, Ecevit is dependent upon its goodwill. Consequently, he would be incapable of seriously opposing a war against Iraq. His only concern is to up the ante for his compliance as high he can.

In an interview with CNN he gave mainly economic reasons for his doubts about the war. If there were to be a war like the one now looming over the region, foreign investment and tourism would collapse, he argued. Performance particularly in these two fields is crucial for satisfying the demands of the IMF's redevelopment programme and the EU's membership criteria, both of which the Turkish government began to implement in the face of considerable working class opposition last year.

Besides economic doubts, Turkish politicians and media have recently expressed the fear that, in the event

of a war, Iraq could disintegrate with the emergence of a Kurdish state in the north, which in turn would once again fan Kurdish separatism inside Turkey.

Two Kurdish states already in effect exist in northern Iraq: one region is controlled by Masud Barzani's KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) militia, the other by Jalal Talabani's PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). However, Turkey is also contributing to the balkanisation of Iraq. Ankara is supporting nationalist groups from the Turkmen minority who have also formed their own militias.

Most of the PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan) fighters in northern Iraq have withdrawn from the area since officially ending their guerrilla campaign against Turkey. Meanwhile, the PKK has not only relinquished the demand for an independent Kurdish state; it has also signalled its willingness to support a war against Iraq. Last year its chairman, Abdullah Öcalan, still languishing in a Turkish death cell, called for support for the US and Turkey "to impose democracy on Iraq".



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