

# Turkey prepares to line up behind US war vs. Iraq

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Ninety years ago Leon Trotsky compared the political course of underdeveloped countries to a barge which has been taken in tow by a steamboat. “The captain of the steamship has to show initiative in choosing a course, whereas the man in command of the barge is bound hand and foot..” This is how Trotsky wrote about the Serbs at that time.

The same maxim applies to modern Turkey and its stance regarding a war with Iraq. The war is roundly rejected by the Turkish people. According to an American opinion poll over 80 percent of all Turks are opposed to the US using its bases in Turkey for a war against Iraq. Influential political circles in the country are also dismayed at the prospect of a war which would inevitably entail considerable economic losses and also fuel social unrest. Nevertheless it is regarded as certain that Turkey will support an American-led war. The course of events is determined by the steamer in Washington and not the barge in Ankara.

The Turkish press is currently discussing why, despite misgivings, it is necessary for the country to toe the line of the US. Contrary to some reports in the American and European media, little effort is made in the Turkish papers to disguise or democratically dress up the real aims of an Iraq war. The imperialist aims of a war against Iraq are openly noted and the pluses and minuses for Turkey in connection with such a war are discussed without any particular scruples.

In the prominent Turkish daily *Milliyet*, columnist Sami Kohen acknowledges that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction are only one of the reasons for the Americans to go to war: “This is one of the reasons, while the other has to do with the US quest to take oil resources under its control. Yet the US real goal is much more comprehensive and suffused with hubris. The Bush administration wants to establish an altogether ‘new order’ across the entire region. And that involves necessary regime changes in certain countries in this region in line with the US strategic concerns. Thus, the whole problem comes down to overcoming such obstacles as Saddam in order to lay the foundations of US dominance over the Middle East. This is the underlying and long-term goal the US has its sights on in carrying out a possible military campaign in Iraq.”

Kohen concludes that the US cannot be persuaded to take an alternative course and that therefore it is preferable for Turkey

to take sides with the Bush administration. “Unsurprisingly, Ankara’s top political and military officials have begun to think more and more that Turkey shouldn’t stand outside of a war in Iraq. They see the disadvantages of doing so outweighing its advantages. Should Turkey decline to participate in a common front in this war alongside the US, this will no doubt end up costing us American support that we need in a great many areas.”

Kohen goes on to make the point that the Turkish elite should not content itself merely with America’s favour—it should also ensure that it gets a portion of the booty when it comes round to handouts: “(However, this is) not merely the question of Turkey’s ‘dependency’ on the US. As I mentioned above, the US military intervention has to do with its broader designs for the future of the entire region. And Turkey cannot and should not stay out of this process. Can Turkey be a mere spectator to the establishment of a new order in Iraq, and especially in northern Iraq? As a ‘strategic partner’ of the US, is it not in Turkey’s interests to stand alongside Washington? Turkey’s place in a possible Iraq war is already defined. The only problem remaining is the degree of its involvement in this operation.”

Two days previously another columnist of the paper, Fikret Bila, summed up the thinking of the heads of government: “The US will do what it’s determined to do. It will do this whether Turkey supports it or not. In such a situation, Ankara’s putting itself into the thick of developments will yield better results than sitting outside.”

These quotes indicate the depths of subservience and political cowardice which characterise the Turkish bourgeoisie. It is completely incapable of opposing Washington even if it fears the social and economic consequences of a war. The priority for the Turkish bourgeoisie is to haggle over the appropriate price - although in this respect it is prepared to make do with the bones thrown to it from Washington’s table.

The roots of this reaction are to be found in social relations inside Turkey itself. The population of 63 million lives in bitter poverty. The average monthly income for a worker is less than 150 euros and the economic crises of the past few years have had disastrous repercussions for much of Turkey’s small business sector. The despised Turkish ruling caste can only

maintain power with financial and military support from America and Europe. The country is especially dependent on American-approved IMF credits and US armaments deliveries. For Turkey in the long term therefore, there is more to lose by aggravating its most important paymaster than by any participation in war.

This applies not only to all the old discredited parties which, in elections two months ago, failed to reach the 10 percent necessary for representation in the Turkish parliament. It also applies to the new “shining hope” of Turkish politics, the Islamic “Party for Justice and Development” (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan’s victory was basically a product of two factors—first he was able to awaken hopes amongst the impoverished and the social layers based in the countryside in a fairer system of politics. Second, he appealed to those broad sentiments opposed to a war with Iraq. Only shortly after the recent elections he declared: “We do not want blood, tears and death.”

A trip to Washington at the start of December was sufficient to bring him into line. Erdogan, who occupies no official post in Turkish politics apart from his chairmanship of the AKP, was welcomed to the White House by President Bush and then worked on in turn by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and leading members of the US military. The official diplomatic jargon for the meeting was: “Top US military officials briefed Erdogan and his entourage in detail.”

A report in the Turkish newspaper *Star* commented dryly: “The briefing had the expected impact on the Turkish delegation.” The paper then went on to quote Erdogan: “We would prefer the problem were solved through peaceful means, but I now see that war is growing more probable than ever.”

Erdogan then went on haggle over a price. The *Star* reports: “Erdogan told every top US official he met in Washington about Turkey’s sensitivities and expectations from the US. He reminded the Bush administration that the nation had lost some \$100 billion since 1991’s Gulf War. Moreover, he stressed that the delicate balances of Turkey’s economy would be shattered and that the country’s prospective losses were estimated at \$48 billion if the US hit Iraq once again. He added that Turkey’s tourism trade would suffer enormously and that commerce along the southeastern borders of the country near Iraq would die. And then he opened the way for the US to make ‘an adequate offer’ to Turkey.”

But Erdogan was disappointed, according to the Turkish newspaper: “Yet no such offer came from Bush. Even Erdogan himself was shocked by the paltry amounts of money the US offered for the compensation of Turkey’s losses, and he made no secret of it: ‘They first spoke of \$2 billion, and then even ratcheted this to \$1 or \$2 billion.’”

At this point Erdogan was forced to object. “This attitude on the part of the US led Erdogan to put forth new reservations about taking an active role on the Iraq issue. ‘Turkey is a

democratic country,’ he said.”

One should look once again at the chain of events. Only after the failure of the US to make “an adequate financial offer,” did Erdogan reflect on the significance of democracy. He even threatened a referendum, the outcome of which would have been certain!

Both Erdogan and the Bush administration were absolutely clear that the former would never attempt to put such a referendum to the Turkish people. Even if Erdogan was able to dupe part of the old Turkish establishment and ensure his recent election victory against the combined opposition of the Turkish media and large parts of the state apparatus, he remains a representative of the Turkish business world which fears nothing more than popular discontent and the mobilisation of the masses.

In the meantime US officers have begun to prepare the airports of Diyarbakir, Malatya, Batman and Mus in the southeast of Turkey for air attacks against Iraq. There are also reports that up to 50 truckloads of military equipment have been transported over the Turkish-Iraqi border and handed over to CIA agents. Turkish newspapers report of plans to station 90,000 American troops in Turkey—30,000 distributed between the various US bases in Turkey and 60,000 for a direct invasion of Iraq.

Officially there has still been no agreement on the part of Turkey to American war preparations. Officially nothing has been decided. The final word rests with the Turkish parliament—officially. In fact, American diplomats and military personnel are undertaking non-stop visits and meetings in Ankara. Barely a week goes by without a trip to the Turkish capital by a high-ranking US official or general.

Last week it was the turn of General Richard Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, while his colleague, the American ambassador Robert Pearson, met with representatives of the Turkish economics community to discuss “compensation.” There still appears to be no agreement on any big sums of money and it is quite likely there will be none forthcoming. Instead the Turkish “friends” will be made an offer they cannot refuse, i.e., reminded behind closed doors of the essential military and economic interests tying Ankara to Washington.



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