

Ankara lines up behind a war against Iraq

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On February 6 the Turkish parliament officially agreed to permit the use of military bases in Turkey by American military forces for a war against Iraq.

The media were excluded from the meeting of parliament. Of the total 550 deputies, 308 voted in favour of the resolution which enables the US to station an estimated 4,000-strong engineer corps in the country for the purposes of expanding Mediterranean ports and airports for an offensive against Iraq. Those voting in favour of the resolution represent around three quarters of the deputies of the Party for Justice and Development (AKP), which won an absolute majority in recent Turkish national elections and is led by Recep Tayip Erdogan.

According to the Turkish news channel NTV, Prime Minister Abdullah Gul (AKP) and the chief of the Turkish general staff, Hilmı Özkök, agreed to permit the US to station 38,000 troops in the country. The US air force will be able to carry out attacks on Iraq from the military air bases at Diyarbakir, Batman and Incirlik. An additional three air bases and at least one Mediterranean port are also due to be put at the disposal of US forces. The parliament is scheduled to make a final decision on February 18. The vote in favour is regarded as a matter of course.

The latest decision by the Turkish parliament makes a mockery of Erdogan's former rejection of the prospects of "bloodletting, tears and death" resulting from a war with Iraq. Forgotten are the declarations of solidarity by the moderate Islamist AKP for its Muslim brothers in neighbouring countries. The decision also flies in the face of Turkish public opinion, which is overwhelmingly opposed to war.

Head of government Gul openly defended the about-turn by the government by arguing that it was better for Turkish interests to side with the imperialist aggressor rather than with the victim. "Now we have to consider the nation's interests, and this requires our acting

alongside the US in a possible war," he said. "For the sake of our national security, we cannot be an onlooker to developments in our neighbourhood. Without Turkey's participation, a Kurdish state could be founded in northern Iraq, a development that the nation is adamantly opposed to."

Due to popular opposition to war the Turkish government avoided taking a clear stance for some period of time and subsequently came under heavy pressure from the Bush administration. Most recently, representatives of the American government had increasingly bypassed the elected government and turned directly to the Turkish military. At the same time the American side indicated that, in the event of inadequate Turkish support, the US would be unable to prevent an occupation of the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul by Kurdish separatists. Turkey has its own eye on these two cities with their substantial oil interests and fears that their occupation by Kurds could provide the economic basis for an independent Kurdish state, in turn reigniting Kurdish nationalism inside Turkey itself.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, the US has agreed that in exchange for Turkish cooperation the Turkish army could occupy northern Iraq. This prospect is greeted with consternation by the Kurdish Democratic Party (DPK) of Massud Barzani, which has controlled this region up to now.

Agreements to this effect are said to have been struck on the same day as the latest parliamentary vote between US special representative Zalmay Khalilzad and both Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish representatives in Ankara. Khalilzad is reputed to have given the Turkish army the green light to advance into northern Iraq. He also warned the Kurds against any plans on their part for an "occupation" of Mosul and Kirkuk or further attempts to develop their independence.

Apparently it has been "agreed" that Mosul and Kirkuk should be taken by American troops. The

number of Turkish troops which will be permitted to advance into northern Iraq remains unclear. There are rumours that the Turkish contingent will be equivalent in size to the number of US troops to be sent into Iraq from Turkey.

The Turkish army has already assembled troops in the southeast of the country which are pursuing scattered units of the Kurdish PKK and which, in the event of an Iraq war, could penetrate deep into northern Iraq to establish a security zone at least 30 kilometres wide. Transportation to the Turkish-Iraqi border is already under way. There are also alleged to be 1,200 Turkish soldiers already in northern Iraq, whose job is to intimidate the Iraqi Kurds and hunt down the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party).



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