



Turkey juggles dueling war demands

U.S. seeks help, but public wants no part of fight

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ISTANBUL — Under heavy pressure from the Bush administration and eager to establish itself as a bona fide player in the international arena, Turkey's new government is struggling to justify opening its doors to American troops for a possible attack on Iraq without antagonizing its own population or its Arab neighbors.

As the government tries to solidify an economic recovery, the dilemma it faces, according to Turkish officials, Western diplomats and analysts, is how to say "yes" to the United States without alienating a population that strongly opposes the war.

The latest public opinion polls by Ankara Social Research Center say 87 percent of the Turkish public opposes U.S. military intervention in Iraq. If military action were to take place, 62 percent of the Turkish public opposes allowing the use of Turkish air force bases or the participation of Turkish troops.

Only 6 percent of the Turkish public surveyed believes that Turkey should fully support the war effort with access to all Turkish military facilities and deployment of its own troops.

"This war is unpopular and no one wants to get tagged with responsibility for being the advocate," said a senior Western diplomat in Ankara, the capital.

U.S. begins inspecting bases

While senior Turkish and American officials expect Turkey, which enjoys a strategic geographical position, to support its longtime ally Washington, no one is willing to say how far the support will go. On Monday, U.S. military inspectors arrived in Turkey to begin examining bases and ports for possible use in a war.

The U.S. Defense Department is in the midst of a massive military buildup and is expected to send 150,000 troops to the region by mid-February. Pentagon officials have made it clear they would like a sizable number of those troops based in Turkey for a possible strike against Iraq from the north that would coincide with a southern prong moving in from Kuwait.

The Turkish media have reported that the United States wants to base as many as 80,000 troops in Turkey and that it wants to use bases for commando operations. In return, Washington has pledged to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to improve Turkish bases and ports.

U.S. military planners say an attack from Turkey would shorten any war, a point underlined last month by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz on a visit to Ankara. "Obviously, if we are going to have significant ground forces in the north [of Iraq], this is the country they have to come through," he said.

Juggling the competing demands of Turkish public opinion and the United States comes at a tough time for the governing Justice and Development Party. The party has been in power only two months and has as its prime minister Abdullah Gul, an able politician but one who was not elected to the post. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the party's charismatic leader, could not take the prime minister's chair because of a conviction for sedition, though efforts are under way to change the law and allow him to take office.

The two-headed nature of the Turkish government makes it all the more challenging for the high-level delegations that have been crisscrossing the Atlantic in recent months to make their cases.

"Unfortunately for the Americans there is no single person in this country today who can guarantee support. There are a half-dozen heads they have to talk to each time," said a Western analyst who works in Ankara.

Public opinion always has been of questionable significance in Turkey's top-down democracy. While the public clearly opposes assisting the Americans in a war against Iraq, its voice is not always heard in Ankara.

"This is what makes Turkey America's most valuable ally," said an official in the Foreign Ministry. "The Turkish government and its military will not hide behind public opinion. If they are treaty-bound, they will fulfill those agreements to the letter."

Still, the new government is more attentive than previous governments to public opinion, said a Western diplomat. Part of the reason is the new party's desire to strengthen its roots with the population, and part of the reason is an unease with the war itself, said the diplomat and senior Turkish officials.

"Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul both have a doubt, down deep inside," said Cuneyd Zapsu, a confidant of Erdogan and a founding member of his party. "Everyone should because this is a war we are talking about."

"But this is not just an issue of the heart. Our foreign policy must look at the larger picture," he said. "It is clear that Turkish public opinion does not support this war, but public opinion can be changed."

Gul pushing peace

While the government may find it impossible to deny the United States access to its bases and ports, Zapsu said that the civilian leaders would like to convince the public that they have done everything possible to avert a

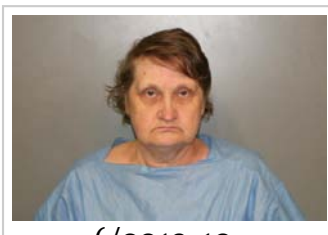
war and that the final decision was made with the approval of the Turkish military, which is the most respected institution in the country.

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