Turkey’s New Middle East Policy: The Case of the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Iraq’s Neighboring Countries

Murat Yesiltas
Ali Balci, Sakarya University
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Introduction

It can be said that Turkey has experienced a great transformation with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), a political party with Islamic roots that represents the “modernist” faction of the Islamic Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) that was found to be unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court and then banned in 2001. Since 2003, Turkish diplomacy has displayed a period of intense activity and the JDP has demonstrated a willingness to actively participate in world affairs. This intense activity is seen especially in JDP’s European Union and Middle East policies.

Its handling of the Iraqi question illustrates the intense activity of the JDP in Middle East. The JDP had articulated its policy on the Iraqi question in its party charter published before the November 2002 elections. According to this charter, the JDP opposed American intervention in Iraq and favored to solve problematic dimensions of the Iraqi question within the scheme of the United Nations (UN) citing that the breakdown of Iraq’s territorial integrity would change all equilibrium in the region. Since Turkish foreign policy makers prior to the JDP considered joining such an operation as a way of maintaining a sense of control over developments in northern Iraq, although they remained extremely reluctant, the JDP’s decision was critical.

Road to the Meetings

Turkey’s strategic importance to any campaign on Iraq was clear. Although American officials believed that they could conduct a successful attack to oust Saddam Hussein without any access to land bases in Turkey, they were aware that invading Iraq from the north as well as from the south would facilitate the invasion. Preferring an easier attack, Bush administration officials sought Turkey’s permission for the deployment of American ground troops in case of a war with Iraq. However, Turkish government was ready to meet American requests basically in all areas with the exception of the stationing of large numbers of ground forces in Turkish territories. As a result, Turkey’s new government faced its first great foreign policy question.

Turkey feared that it would encounter three risks in the event of a war in Iraq. First and foremost was the probable augmentation of the aspiration for autonomy among its own Kurdish population. According to Turkish policy makers, the overturn of Saddam Hussein might give rise to the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurdish group and such a process might encourage Kurdish separatist inside Turkey to resume their old battle against the Turkish army to form an independent Kurdish state. The second fear was related to the financial implications of the conflict. During and after the first American operation in Iraq in 1991, the Turkish economy suffered a $50 billion loss of revenue caused by a wave of Iraqi refugees flooding into Turkish territory in addition to U.N. sanctions that cut off trade with Iraq – one of Turkey’s most important trading partners. Finally, Turkey was also concerned that aligning itself too closely with Washington during the U.S.-led action would damage its relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors.

Given that Washington tried to alleviate Turkey’s economic apprehension by formulating an ambitious aid plan which made as much as $14 billion available for Turkey through low-interest loans in case the conflict

* Ali Balci, MD and Ph.D. Candidate, is a Research Assistant in the Department of International Relations at the University of Sakarya. He has written several articles on Palestinian question and Afghanistan. Murat Yesiltas, MD, is a Research Assistant in the Department of International Relations at the University of Sakarya. He has written several articles on terrorism and Iran’s foreign policy.

caused a reduction in tourism incomes and investments, it can be said that the two other factors were more determinant for the JDP’s Iraq policy. On the other hand, public opinion polls suggested that more than 80 percent of the Turkish people opposed a US-led war against Iraq, and the JDP government had promised to oppose the war during the November 2002 elections. The Turkish public also opposed the use of its territories as a launching pad for an attack on Iraq. Such public opposition drove the JDP government into a corner, and the “the meetings” continued primarily for the purpose of demonstrating to the Turkish public that it was doing everything possible to avoid the war. One government source stated: “Over 80 percent of the Turkish people are strongly opposed to a war against Iraq. Even if we don’t have much hope of success we have to be seen to be doing something.”

The Turkish government also viewed the crisis in Iraq as an opportunity to assert itself as a regional leader. In this period, the JDP’s main foreign policy strategy related to the Middle East was shaped by the chief advisor to the Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu. According to Davutoglu, Turkey is a “core country” in the broader region consisting of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, rather than a peripheral country of Europe, Asia and Middle East, and it has a great capacity to affect the developments in these regions. Davutoglu presents particularly this strategy in his book, “Stratejik Derinlik: Turkije’nin Uluslararasasi Konumu” published in 2001. He articulates that “Turkey has no chance to be peripheral, it is not a side-line country of the E.U., NATO or Asia,” and that it can not maintain traditional passive foreign policy in the Middle East nor in the international arena. It should rather undertake a central role especially within its neighborhood and apply an active foreign policy. The JDP also was sure that this new style of foreign policy would strengthen Turkey’s regional and global importance.

All these factors forced the Turkish government to search for new policies which would prevent the war. The then Prime Minister Abdullah Gul started his visits to Syria, Egypt and Jordan to discuss ways to avert U.S. military strikes against Iraq. Gul first visited Syria on January 4, 2003 and

said that “Iraq is like Pandora’s box. This box should not be opened because it would be impossible to put everything back in that box again” with a view to pointing out his determination regarding the prevention of a prospective war in Iraq. Gul reiterated his stance against the war the following day when he arrived in Cairo. Stressing that a war would harm all countries in the region, Gul stated that “We agreed to try to the very end in order to prevent war.” After completing his three-country Middle East tour, he said that “We are very concerned about the issue of Iraq. We are together in this region and we have to work together and spend every possible effort to solve this problem in a peaceful way.”

Within the framework of the ongoing efforts to avoid the war, Gul started his second Middle East tour to meet the Saudi and Iranian leaders on 11 and 12 January, respectively. Gul stressed Turkey’s keenness on preventing the war in Riyadh by saying that there was only one goal for Turkey and this was a peaceful resolution. On his final stop in Iran, Gul called all regional countries to increase their efforts to impede the war by saying that “the whole region will pay a heavy price if an attack takes place against Baghdad, so all the regional countries should try to prevent the war... the greatest responsibility falls on Iraq.”

Gul’s tour of Arab countries as a quest for a peaceful solution to the Iraq problem forced the U.S. government to take another approach in its efforts to secure the use of Turkish territories for an attack on Iraq. General Richard Myers, the chairman of the U.S. Military Joint Chiefs of Staff, went to Ankara and met his counterpart, General Hilmi Ozkok, on 20 January to persuade Turkey to open a northern front facilitating American invasion of Iraq. The visit raised suspicions in Ankara that the U.S. was seeking to bypass the civilian government or to push Gul and his cabinet to accede to U.S. demands by using the Turkish Army. However, Ozkok set the new government’s mind at rest by saying that the decision was up to the political authorities. Although the statement was positive, the JDP faced a dilemma as a result of the military’s throwing the ball into the

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2 The book offers a new paradigm for the Turkish foreign policy see, Ahmet Davutoglu, Stratejik Derinlik: Turkije’nin Uluslararasasi Konumu (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001).
3 Interview with Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkishime, April-May 2004.
7 Zaman, 5 January 2003.
9 Zaman, 13 January 2003.
government's court. Either the government would have to endure animosity from the US for avoiding a clear commitment to backing its planned military campaign against Iraq or risk the erosion of electoral support by bowing to Washington's demands. Hence, the inception of the meetings offered the JDP government a chance to overcome this dilemma.

As for other neighboring countries, all of them had different reasons to attend the meetings led by Turkey. The Arab states’ main concern was the potential for a war resulting in long-term political instability throughout much of the Arab world that might have opened the door to widespread, and potentially uncontrollable, public anger. Another common concern was the possibility that Israel might have intervened in the war against Iraq or seized the opportunity of a war to escalate its already high level of violence against Palestinians.8 Iran and Syria also worried about the overwhelming U.S. power in the region. Trust in the United States was so low that any option to avert a U.S. military campaign would have received their support. Consequently, both countries embraced the proposal to prevent U.S. military operations and promote the U.N.'s role in resolving the Iraqi crisis.

Although it agreed on common concerns, Egypt saw an initiative led by Turkey as a threat against its leadership in the region. Thus, Hosni Mubarak went to Saudi Arabia on 14 January after Gul’s tour to consult with the Saudi leaders on the escalation of tensions in the region. Mubarak’s declaration during the visit that “there is no Egyptian-Saudi-Turkish coordination or initiative” illustrated his unwillingness to participate in a joint initiative led by Turkey. As far as a U.S. led invasion of Iraq was concerned, Mubarak stated: “no one can stop it. It [the U.S.] is the only superpower in the world.”9 Ultimately, the regional countries joined a Turkey-led initiative and raging anti-war demonstrations on the streets of Cairo left Egypt no choice but to acquiesce to inclusion in the initiative.

**An Initiative to Prevent War**

In reaction to Washington's will to resolve militarily Iraqi crisis, foreign ministers from six Middle Eastern countries met in Istanbul on 23 January 2003 to discuss the prevention of a U.S. led invasion of Iraq to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. All of the countries, shared a common fear:

that a U.S. invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein would lead to ethnic fragmentation, i.e., a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and a Shiite-dominated state in the south. Such an eventuality would cause considerable damage, especially to Turkish and Iranian strategic interests. So, while the Turkish government tried to figure out the best possible way to promote its security interests throughout the meeting, Iran showed its willingness by stating that the holding of any meeting to resolve the crisis would be useful regardless of the venue of the meeting.10

Despite this common fear, there were disagreements over Saddam’s future and the reaction to the U.S. plan about Iraq. While Turkey championed unforced exit of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Syria and Iran refused this proposal. On the other hand, Iran insistedly objected to the original draft of the statement prepared by Turkey on the grounds that it failed to criticize the U.S. for its role in the Iraqi crisis or to mention the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.11 However, Turkey was insistent about not including any direct reference to the U.S. in the statement that might cause a backlash from U.S. politicians. The final message was addressed to the international community or the U.N. Security Council as a result of Jordan’s efforts to find a compromise:12 Turkish Foreign Minister, Yasar Yakis, excuse regarding the absence of direct reference to the U.S. in the final communiqué was interesting. He articulated that there was no direct reference to the U.S. because doing so might eclipse the main subject.13

As a result, the joint declaration at the end of the meeting focused on the Iraqi regime not on the prevention of U.S. possible war in Iraq. All of the foreign ministers called upon the Iraqi leadership to move irreversibly and sincerely towards assuming their responsibilities in restoring peace and stability in the region through a full cooperation with United Nations’ weapons inspectors by providing information on its weapons programs in full compliance with the relevant U.N. resolutions. In return the U.N. should fulfill its responsibility regarding Iraq, according to the joint statement. The ministers also called for a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the implementation of all relevant U.N. resolutions to

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achieve a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. With an oblique reference to Israel’s extensive stockpile of non-conventional armaments, the final statement pointed out that the Middle East should be a zone free from weapons of mass destruction.

**To Minimize Possible Losses**

After the outbreak of the war in Iraq, six countries sharing borders with Iraq as well as Bahrain and Egypt met in Riyadh on 18 April 2003 with the objective of evaluating the war in Iraq and its repercussions in regional countries such as the American threats to both Iran and Syria. The eight foreign ministers noted that the U.N. should play a key role in Iraq’s post-war developments and the U.N.’s anti-Iraq sanctions should be lifted after the establishment of a legitimate government representing the people of Iraq. They also added that no military government in Baghdad would be recognized unless it conducts free elections in Iraq.

Participants especially underlined the occupying powers’ obligation to withdraw from Iraq and allow the Iraqis to exercise their right to self-determination. In spite of the consensus on American withdrawal, several debates had occurred between the Syrian and Kuwaiti delegations over whether or not the communiqué coming out of the meeting should call for an immediate end to the foreign occupation of Iraq. While the Syrians were insisting on the need that this meeting give no legitimacy to the occupation of an Arab country, the Kuwaitis were not very sympathetic to this approach and stated that U.S. occupation was better than the rule of overthrown Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. In fact, the reason behind Kuwait’s absence in the meeting held in Istanbul was that its policy contrasted with the aim of the conference.

The goal of the meetings now took a new direction as war had not been prevented; the new goal was to minimize the war’s possible losses and negative effects on the region. All of the countries agreed on the condemnation of U.S. accusations against Syria that it was harboring former Iraqi leaders and seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction and called on the U.S. to use dialogue with Syria on account of the fact that U.S. intervention against Syria would bring about new instabilities in the region. According to Iraq’s neighboring countries, the United States’s strategic plan regarding the Middle East could not continue without regional countries’ consent and the United States must consider this suggestion if it wanted to promote democracy in the region. The Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Saud El Faisal’s statements were striking because his country is the most important American ally in the region except Israel. He called the U.S. as an occupying power and stated that it has no right to use Iraq’s oil and interfere in the Iraqi internal affairs.

The foreign ministers convened in Tehran on 28 May 2003, during the 30th foreign ministerial meeting of OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference), to discuss the Iraqi situation and its reflections on security in the region. The Tehran meeting dealt with the same issues addressed in Riyadh. The foreign ministers underlined the obligation of the occupying powers under the international laws, especially the Geneva Convention, to ensure the protection of the civil liberties and the cultural heritage of Iraq. The joint statement also stressed that the occupying powers should respect the stability and territorial integrity of Iraq’s neighboring countries.

These statements articulated the meetings’ new aim. Although the participants were unable to prevent Washington’s Iraqi war, they tried to block more injury from emanating out of the war. The meeting also offered a platform to Tehran for its response to Washington’s allegations that a report by the opposition National Council of Resistance of Iran stating that the Tehran government built a uranium enrichment plant proved that Iran was trying to make a nuclear bomb and that Iran also was harboring senior members of the al-Qaida terror group. “Our world has suffered from both violent dogmatists and arrogant powers,” Khatami said. “On the one side, terrorism and fanaticism have distorted religion and, on the other side, the resort to the use of force, domination and unilateralism have made a mockery of concepts such as freedom and democracy.”

**A Search for a New Policy**

After the war on Iraq, foreign ministers of seven states in the neighborhood of Iraq attended a fourth meeting held in Damascus on 1 and 2 November 2003 to discuss the current situation in Iraq and to get some assurance for Syria against threats from the U.S. and Israel. Although the meeting’s main agenda was Iraq, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari did not attend because his invitation had been delayed by the host country. Behind

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the scenes, there was a disagreement about Iraq’s attendance at the meeting. While Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, close U.S. allies, reportedly threatened to boycott the gathering if Iraq was not invited, Iran and Syria favored that he come after an agreed agenda on the grounds that the Interim Government of Iraq appointed by the U.S. did not represent Iraqi people. Turkish officials said that Turkey had brought no objection to Zebari’s participation in any form, be it as a full participant in all sessions or only in the final session after basic decisions are set in previous sessions. In the end, all countries agreed that Iraqi foreign minister could attend the meeting after Sunday, the first day of the meeting, but Zebari refused the invitation because he didn’t regard the qualified invitation as proper.

The participants called on all parties in Iraq to respect the territorial integrity of the country according to U.N. Security Council resolution No. 1511, whose seventh paragraph stipulates the importance of formulating a time-line for the transfer of power to the Iraqi people, and condemned any attempt that lead to the division of Iraq. In addition to emphasis on the Iraqi integrity, foreign ministers of neighboring countries underlined the need for the United Nations to undertake the role of leadership in Iraq and set a timetable for withdrawal of the occupying forces from the country. Even though most regional governments championed the U.S. withdrawal, Iraq’s neighbors were starting to worry about the consequences of an American failure to stabilize Iraq, which would culminate in a chaos in the region.

Foreign ministers also pointed out that Israel had misused regional developments and assumed an aggressive attitude against Syria by bombing a training camp near Damascus on 5 October and demanded Israel to terminate such attitudes causing regional tension.

The foreign ministers condemned the terrorist explosions targeting the civilians by calling on the Iraqi authorities to bear responsibility and called on Iraqi officials to cooperate with its neighbors in fighting against terrorist groups amid US charges that foreign militants were behind the wave of violence. This statement was important for Turkey and it was included the final communiqué as a result of Turkey’s insistent request. Turkey’s aim was to cooperate with Iraqi administration in the fight against the Kurdish Workers Party - Kurdistan Freecom and Democracy Congress (PKK-KADEK) whose members have been based in northern Iraq and organized terrorist assaults in Turkish territories. Like Turkey, Iran supported the statement too because People’s Mujahideens, an opposition group, has used Iraqi territories to perform its anti-regime actions. In fact, it can be said that these two participants’ emphasis on the importance of territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq was an indirect result of these apprehensions.

In response to the invitation by Kuwait to attend a meeting of Iraq neighboring countries to discuss the new developments in Iraq, the foreign ministers of regional countries and the representative of the United Nations Secretary-General came together in the meeting held in Kuwait on 14 February 2004. All of the participants agreed on some subjects such as the territorial integrity of Iraq, preparing the ground for the withdrawal of occupying powers as soon as possible, and providing advice and technical expertise for formulating the constitution, holding elections, and expediting the transfer of power.

Participants also welcomed the Agreement in Iraq on 15 November 2003 which was designed to entrust the Iraqi transition to where it rightfully belongs, the Iraqis as a whole. They also articulated that this plan would follow its proper course and be instrumental in enabling Iraqis once again to assume their full sovereignty and establish a fully representative form of government. During the meeting, the main differences among the participants emerged over the withdrawal of U.S. force from Iraq. While Syria and Iran wanted the withdrawal completed by 30 June 2004, the date set for the transfer of power to Iraqis by the occupying powers, Kuwait avoided any phrasing regarding withdrawal.

The Kuwait conference was significant in that it was attended by Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari. He stated that “the new Iraq is trying its best to achieve harmony with neighboring states instead of the past experience of contradiction and opposition that prevailed during the ousted regime’s era” and confirmed that his country is willing to sign a non-aggression, security guarantee and good neighborliness treaty with all neighboring states. The underlying intention of Zebari’s comments was to prevent the infiltration of armed elements into Iraq from neighboring

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96 Turkish Daily Nezir, 4 November 2003.
99 Cumhuriyet, 3 November 2003.

35 Turkish Daily Nezir, 16 February 2004.
neighboring countries” to an international conference on Iraq’s future. This meeting was important for neighboring countries on account of the fact that it offered the possibility of exchange of ideas with the occupying powers and the other countries interested in Iraqi affairs.

In the final communiqué coming out of the meeting, participants agreed upon the condemnation of terrorism and kidnapping, support for process led general elections and the significance of debt reduction in Iraq’s reconstruction. These proposals were concrete indicators of the new aim of the meetings: the restructuring of postwar Iraq. However, the conference’s communiqué carefully avoided setting a deadline for the withdrawal of coalition troops although it mentioned that the mandate of the Multi-National Forces in Iraq was not open ended and that it would expire in accordance with U.N. Security Council resolution 1546 adopted in June 2004 on the completion of the political process. It can be said that this contradiction stemmed from participants’ conviction that possible withdrawal would cause unwanted results. Arab League Secretary-General Amr Musa stressed this point by saying that “the situation in Iraq cannot be reduced to just question a of military occupation and resistance. There is also a descent into chaos, sectarian strife and civil war. These are issues of great concern to neighboring countries, and to the region as a whole.”

In other words, a stable Iraq represents a common interest for all the participants, even if it means being under occupation.

Although the overall tone of the conference was supportive of the interim Iraqi government, there were some criticisms raised during the meeting. The Iranian, Egyptian and Syrian governments accused Washington of using excessive force to quell rebels in Iraq. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit expressed that the policy of violence and intimidation and the overuse of force would only lead to further divisions, damage and destruction. Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul stated that there were some efforts aimed at to changing the pattern of population in certain regions and intimidating some people by alluding to Kurdish politics which was intended to prevent Turkmen attendance in the elections. He evaluated such politics as “adventurous efforts” and highlighted that they would harm the unity of Iraq.

In the context of the prevention of terrorist infiltrations, the meeting of
interior ministers and security officials from Iraq’s neighbors held in Tehran from 30 November to 2 December 2004 was important. Interior ministers and security officials from Iraq’s neighbors and Egypt attended the meeting to discuss “Iraq’s situation, control of common borders, assistance to Iraqi border guards as well as cooperation among neighboring countries and the Iraqi government.” The meeting ended with a commitment to boost cooperation on border control and to combat the transfer of money, weapons and drugs that finances terrorist activities. The participants also underlined that restoration of stability and security to the war-torn country would facilitate the controls over its borders and expressed their readiness to provide training and equipment upon the request of Iraq to the Iraqi police force and border guards to assist the Iraqi government for the restoration of stability in Iraq.

The seventh meeting of Iraq’s neighboring countries’ foreign ministers started in Amman on 6 January 2005 to discuss the situation in Iraq and its effects on the region. Jordanian Foreign Minister Hani Muliki summarized the meeting’s agenda by saying that the conference in Amman of Iraq’s six neighbors would back “appropriate and transparent” elections in Iraq. Muliki stated: “Our intention is to give full support to the Iraqi interim government to be able to hold elections in the most appropriate and transparent way, and to make sure the elections include all Iraqis.” However, the hidden agenda of the meeting was the promotion of the broader participation of Sunnis in the elections.

Although the foreign ministers agreed on the support for the steps taken by the Interim Government of Iraq to hold general elections on 30 January 2005 leading to a Transitional National Assembly in charge of drafting a constitution for Iraq and confirmed their cooperation with the Interim Government of Iraq in broadening political participation during the elections, some countries insisting on greater participation of the Sunnis wanted the elections to be postponed during the meeting. In fact, there was a disagreement on the increased participation of Sunni among the participants. For example, King Abdullah II of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan accused Iran of intervening in Iraq’s domestic affairs by trying to create a Shiite-dominated “crescent” extending from Iraq to Lebanon.” King Abdullah also said that more than 1 million Iranians had entered Iraq with the encouragement of the Iranian government - many to vote in 30 January elections. This was the reason Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi boycotted the meeting and sent a lower-level Iranian official, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefhi, his place, even though Jordan’s government spokesman, Esni Khedhr, asked for Iran’s active presence at Amman’s Iraq Neighbors Conference.

**Why the Meetings?**

A debate had occurred between the participants about the usefulness of the meetings. While some countries, such as Iran, articulated that the meetings were not necessary any more, Syria and Turkey were insistent on the continuation of the meetings on account of the fact that they are platform for the exchange of ideas among the neighboring countries. For example, the “federation idea” was championed by Iraq and Jordan in the Amman meeting. When Zebari explained that “the idea of federation” meant geopolitical division not ethnic division, Turkey’s apprehensions disappeared. As a result, the “federation idea” was accepted in the context of the sovereignty, independence and the territorial integrity of Iraq. The foreign ministers addressed another important issue for Ankara in their final statement that condemned the attacks on “transport” in Iraq, a reference to numerous attacks on Turkish drivers transporting goods into Iraq. Close to 80 Turkish citizens, nearly all of them truck drivers, have been killed in attacks in several parts of Iraq.

The countries neighboring Iraq met for the eighth time on 29 April in Istanbul, Turkey. In the meeting, representatives from global organizations, such as the United Nations, the Arab Union, the European Union and the Organization of Islamic Conference along with seven neighbor countries of Iraq, discussed the importance of assuring stability in Iraq. All participants underlined again that United Nations should undertake a broader role in political process and economic rehabilitation of the country after the war. In contrast to the previous meeting, all countries attended the meeting at foreign ministerial level except Saudi Arabia and it was agreed that the neighboring countries meetings are a

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18 Milliyet, 7 January 2005.

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30 Radikal, 7 January 2005.
31 Zaman, 7 January 2005.
51 Turkish Daily News, 7 January 2005.
52 Zaman, 30 April 2005.
process and will continue until Iraq’s stability is established.\(^{33}\)

Every participant had different agenda during the meeting. In the preparation for the meeting, the Iraqi committee asked for the readjustment of the installments of Iraqi’s foreign debts collection on the grounds that the economic situation in Iraq was deteriorating. However, participants turned down Iraq’s demands by stating that “These issues should be discussed bilaterally. They are not the agenda of such a meeting.”\(^{34}\) Iraq’s Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari also wanted to erase their remaining debts from Turkey which was remainder from Saddam Hussein’s period. Turkey pointed out the difficulties that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program brought along with some legal restrictions and explained that Iraq’s demands would not be realized.\(^{35}\)

Turkey had long complained to Iraqi officials and, particularly to U.S. officials, that the members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) facilitated the activities of terrorist organizations which directly threatened Turkey’s national unity and the stability of Iraq. Erdoğan raised this concern by saying that “Initiatives which were started within regional scope should become concrete. We should rapidly set arrangements to prevent leaks of terrorists and other illegal elements on both ways in borders with Iraq because Iraq has become a training field of terrorist organizations at the moment.”\(^{36}\) The neighbors sharing Turkish concerns also expressed their determination to increase cooperation on the overall border security with Iraq including exchange of intelligence to prevent terrorist and other illegal infiltrations to and from Iraq in the final communiqué.\(^{37}\)

In his statement during the meeting, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi stressed the importance of supporting the Ibrahim Jaafari led transitional government in Iraq. He also articulated that he hoped that the transitional government would hold a referendum on the constitution and elections would be guaranteed through participation of the Iraqi nation from all religious and political background. He also warned against harmful effects of provoking groups against one another and sowing seeds of discord in Iraq over the country’s future and stability and the security of its neighboring states and the whole region.\(^{38}\) In short, Tehran’s main concern over Iraq was its stability.

Later that year, the second meeting of the interior ministers of Iraqi neighbors was held on 18-19 July in Istanbul to discuss the possibility of exchanging security information to bolster border control to prevent the flow of insurgents in and out of Iraq. The recipient of irreparable damage to its soldiers at the hands of the PKK before and during the meeting, Turkey stressed the urgent need for border security. Turkish Interior Ministry Abdullah Akso stated that “countries should unite to fight against terrorists. Turkey has recently been attacked by the terrorist PKK which is still active in northern Iraq. We must ensure the security of our borders. To stop terrorist activities, we should take effective security measures along our borders.” As a result, the communiqué issued after the meeting stressed the need for taking appropriate measures to prevent terrorist groups from using the territory of states as bases for recruiting, training, financing, planning, inciting or launching of terrorist operations.\(^{39}\)

**A General Evaluation: Failure or Success?**

The effects of the meetings can be analyzed in three different contexts; firstly its effects on the relations between Turkey and Middle Eastern countries; secondly its effects on Iraq crisis; and finally its effects on the relations between regional countries and the U.S., both ally and adversary.

The meetings were important for Turkey because it lacked close relations with the Middle Eastern states since the establishment of the Turkish Republic as a secular and westernized state. During the Cold War period, the Turkish governments did not seek out close relations with all Arab regimes and Iran. Even in its participation in the Baghdad Pact from 1955 to 1958, Ankara maintained a non-active and low-profile posture in its approach to the Arab World.\(^{40}\) The Kurdish question shaped Turkey’s relations with the Middle Eastern countries in the first years following the Cold War and Ankara made no improvement on its relations with these countries. With the accession of the JDP, Turkey’s policy about the Middle East changed.\(^{41}\)

The original purpose of the meetings was to prevent a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. After the war materialized, the meetings took on the goal of decreasing the negative effects of the war on Iraq and the region. Although

\(^{33}\) Zaman, 30 April 2005.

\(^{34}\) Zaman, 30 April 2005.

\(^{35}\) Hurriyet, 1 May 2005.

\(^{36}\) Turkish Daily News, 2 May 2005.

\(^{37}\) Tehran Times, 1 May 2005.

\(^{38}\) Turkish Daily News, 20 July 2005.


the first aim was not accomplished, the latter was realized.

Finally, these meetings have influenced the relationships between the U.S. and regional countries. American allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey criticized Washington’s policies during the meetings and collaborated with Iran, “a rogue state,” and Syria, “a dangerous country.” On the other hand, some claims were made that the U.S. used the meetings to control the developments in the region. It was even alleged that the initiative came against a backdrop of extensive talks and exchanges of messages between Ankara and Washington to ensure that the working paper for the Istanbul meeting was approved by the U.S. 10

It can be said that the accession of the JDF gave rise to a new period in the relations between Turkey and the Arab countries and that the meetings played a significant role in this transformation. Although there were some concerns about Turkey’s pioneering in the beginning, these concerns have diminished in the long term. Critics have underlined that the Arab countries’ failure to take the lead in providing a scenario to avoid the war in Iraq caused an initiative led by Turkey. It was very disappointing for Arab countries since they had to wait to be invited by Turkey, a country who has a military alliance with Israel, to coordinate policies on Iraq. 11 On the other hand, some critics thought that this initiative would “open the door to Arab-Turkish cooperation.” 12 In the end, “1 March memorandum” wiped out Arab concerns about Turkey. According to Arab public opinion, Ankara almost challenged Washington and proved that it was not a shepherd of American imperial design in the region by refusing to endorse a proposal empowering the government to allow U.S. troops to be stationed in Turkey and refusing to send Turkish troops to northern Iraq.

Having solved the “confidence crisis,” the meetings transformed into a forum where Middle Eastern countries could discuss the questions related to the region. The meetings also provided an opportunity to solve regional issues among the countries - questions related to borders and terrorism between both Turkey and Syria and Turkey and Iran before the Iraqi war that affect regional stability negatively. During his visit to Turkey in January 2004, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad stated that the meetings at the foreign ministerial level had had positive effects on Iraq, particularly and the region generally in that they have contributed to the construction of a broader peace basin in the Middle East. 13 In the context of broader peace basin, Syria has recognized Hatay as a province belonging to Turkey and also agreed on Turkish concerns about PKK terrorism. Also, while the summit of the foreign ministers of Iraq’s neighbors was being held in Damascus on 1 and 2 November 2003, the energy ministers of the six countries participating in the summit were holding an energy meeting in the same capital. Turkish Energy Minister Hilmi Guler said that Turkey wanted to cooperate with the neighboring countries in the energy sector during the meeting. In short, the strategic importance of the meetings offered Turkey the opportunity to create a distinct foreign policy towards the Middle East. 14

As for the meetings’ effects on the Iraq crisis, these were planned before the beginning of the meetings. Before the initiative started, Gul aimed to realize three goals through the meetings; 1) A peaceful resolution to the situation in Iraq, 2) Calculating and minimizing possible losses in the event of a war, and 3) Restructuring post-Saddam Hussein or post-war Iraq. According to Ahmet Davutoglu, then Gul’s chief advisor, “in order to force Saddam’s hand, Turkey will step up pressure on Baghdad after a declaration is issued at the Istanbul summit. The Turkish government wants Saddam to cooperate fully with the U.N. weapons inspectors. If Turkey and the Arab countries fail to avert a possible war, they will try to calculate possible losses and make every effort to minimize these for both themselves and the Iraqi people. In the third phase, if the U.S. does end up waging a war against Saddam, Turkey and the Arab countries want to take an active role in restructuring post-war Iraq.” 15

In the final analysis, Gul’s and his advisor’s foresights came true. The first meeting focused on the prevention an Iraqi war and endeavored to persuade the US and Iraq to find a peaceful solution. Although it failed to prevent the war, it can be said that the following meetings decreased the negative effects of war on Iraq, a country whose future is interlinked with the stability of the region as a whole. Some important improvements were made in these meetings on the subjects of the struggle against terrorism

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14 Turkish Daily News, 3 November 2003.

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and Iraq’s territorial integrity. After the capture of Saddam Hussein, the meetings focused on the reconstruction of postwar Iraq and especially emphasized the introduction of democracy in this country. Participants also expressed their readiness to provide training and equipment upon the request of Iraq to the Iraqi police force and border guards for the restoration of stability in Iraq.

The American response to the meetings was limited to some statements indicating that Washington was not going to allow Iraq’s neighbors to interfere in its affairs because Turkey and other states attending the meetings were aware that they would not prevent the war. The most important indicator of Washington’s moderate reaction was the presence of its allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, in the meetings. In Kuwait’s case, the reason behind its absence in the first meeting was that Kuwait believed that the meetings were a counter-reaction to American policies on Iraq. Kuwait’s attendance in the following meetings demonstrated that its concerns about the meetings’ aims were wiped out. In short, the meetings were not a counter-reaction to American policies related to Iraq. The countries in the region just wanted to create a platform for the exchange of ideas regarding their concerns about the situation in Iraq and the occupying power, the United States.

This assertion can be contravened on the grounds that Iran and Syria, known adversaries of Washington, attended the meetings. Given that these countries were probable the next targets of Washington, it can be argued that these two countries intended to use the meetings as a means to block American policies in Iraq and the region. However, two factors weaken the argument. First, Iran and Syria could have attended the meetings to exchange ideas about the developments in the region. Second, Washington may very well have condoned the presence of these two countries in the meetings as a means of manipulating the other regional countries. For example, after Washington accused Damascus of helping in the transit of insurgents and weapons across the border into Iraq, Turkey and other moderate countries warned Syria to retreat during the meetings. As a result, the claim that the meetings were a counter-reaction to American policies is a poor probability. General statements in the final communiqués of the meetings also strengthened the idea that these meetings were not a counter reaction.

In contrast to the meetings, the concrete piece that stood in the way of the U.S. realizing its agenda, obtaining permission to use Turkish territory to launch an invasion of Iraq, more than annoyed Washington. In fact, the “1 March memorandum” was perceived by the U.S. as a betrayal of its trusted friend, and it proved a disaster for the U.S.-Turkish alliance. According to American policy makers, if Turkey proved unwilling to support Washington on such an all-important issue as a war in Iraq, what good was its strategic location? For instance, the notorious 2003 Sulaymaniya incident was, as General Hilmi Ozkok stated, “the biggest crisis of confidence between the two countries” since the U.S. arms embargo against Turkey in 1975. On July 4, 2003, American soldiers arrested eleven Turkish Special Forces troops operating in the northern Iraqi city. Some political observers related the US detention of the Turkish Special Forces to Ankara’s refusal in March to allow U.S. troop deployment on Turkish soil during the U.S.-led Iraq war.

In the final analysis, it can be said that the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Iraq’s Neighboring Countries was a successful project. Unlike any previous attempts at cooperation the regional countries came together to solve a regional crisis. All of the participating countries agreed that Iraq’s territorial integrity is necessary for the stability in the region. The meetings also paved the way for the rapprochement of some of the regional countries. Finally, the meetings were an important factor in mitigating the historical prejudices between Turkey and the Arab world.

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66 Zaman, 7 July 2003.