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*The situation between Turkey and Kurdish guerilla groups
operating in northern Iraq*



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INTRODUCTION

Tensions on the border between Turkey and Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq have reached a fever pitch. Turkey's parliament voted in October 2007 to authorize military force inside Iraq, capping months of frustration over escalating violence and Iraq's inability to reign in the Kurdistan Workers Party. Known as the PKK after its Kurdish name, *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, the group is labeled a terrorist organization by Washington, and continues to conduct strikes inside Turkey.

Recent attacks on Turkish soldiers, and new vows to target politicians and police, have further infuriated Ankara. Yet the group, which formed decades ago to win an independent Kurdish state, has been greatly diminished in more than thirty years of resistance. Originally a well-oiled guerrilla force of some fifty thousand men and women, analysts today estimate the force is between three thousand and five thousand fighters. Nonetheless, with cross-border rhetoric increasing, some analysts say the PKK has reached a sort of equilibrium, thanks in part to its mountainous redoubts in northern Iraq, and the Bush administration's unwillingness to put pressure on Iraq to curb the group's attacks.

Source: Council on Foreign Relations

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the aftermath of World War I the Entente Powers dismantled the Ottoman Empire. According to the Treaty of Sèvres, an independent Kurdistan was to be created, but this treaty was never ratified and it was annulled by the Treaty of Lausanne. In the ensuing years there were several revolts for Kurdish independence such as the Koçkiri Rebellion in 1920, the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, the rebellion of Shaikh Abdurrahman in 1927, the founding of the Republic of Ararat from 1927-1930, and the Dersim Revolt in 1937 which left thousands of Turks, and a few hundred Kurds dead.

Kurdish nationalism began resurgence in the 1970s when Turkey was racked with left-right clashes and the Marxist PKK led by Abdullah Öcalan was formed demanding a Kurdish state. The use of the Kurdish language was outlawed in Turkey during Kenan Evren's presidency.



Kongra-Gel was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1974 as a Marxist-Leninist separatist organization and formally named the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978. The group, composed primarily of Turkish Kurds, began in 1984 its campaign of armed violence, which has resulted in some 30,000 casualties. The PKK's goal has been to establish an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey, northern Iraq, and parts of Iran and Syria. In the early 1990s, the PKK moved beyond rural-based insurgent activities to include urban terrorism.

Turkish authorities captured Öcalan in Kenya in early 1999, and the Turkish State Security Court subsequently sentenced him to death, a sentence later commuted to life imprisonment following the abolition of the death penalty. In August 1999, Öcalan announced a "peace initiative," ordering members to refrain from violence and requesting dialogue with Ankara on Kurdish issues. At a PKK Congress in January 2000, members supported Öcalan's initiative and claimed the group now would use only political means to achieve its public goal of improved rights for Kurds in Turkey. In April 2002 at its 8th Party Congress, the PKK changed its name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and proclaimed a commitment to non-violent activities in support of Kurdish rights. In late 2003, the group sought to engineer another political face-lift, renaming itself Kongra-Gel (KGK) and promoting its "peaceful" intentions while continuing to conduct attacks in "self-defense" and to refuse disarmament. In June 2004, the group's hard-line militant wing, the People's Defense Force (HPG), which had taken control of the group in February 2004, renounced the PKK's self-imposed cease-fire of the past five years.

With the aftermath of the failed 1991 uprisings in Iraq against Saddam Hussein the UN established no fly zones in Kurdish areas of Iraq giving those areas de facto independence. The PKK soon found a safe haven from which they could launch attacks against Turkey and Turkey responded with operations -- the 1995 *Operation Steel* and the 1997 *Operation Hammer* -- in an attempt to crush the PKK.

Öcalan was captured by Turkish agents in Kenya on February 15, 1999. After trial he was sentenced to death, but this sentence was commuted to life-long aggravated imprisonment when the death penalty was abolished in Turkey in August 2002.



With the invasion of Iraq in 2003 much of the arms of the former Iraqi army fell into the hands of the Kurdish Peshmerga militia. The Peshmerga became the de facto army of northern Iraq and many of its weapons found their way into the hands of other Kurdish groups such as the PKK and the PJAK (a PKK offshoot which operated in Iran). With the influx of weapons the PKK attacks have increased in both strength and frequency. On May 22, 2007 there was yet another suicide bombing in Ankara which killed 8 and wounded over 100. This attack was attributed to the PKK and the Turkish army decided to launch a military action against them. As of June 2007, over 15,000 PKK fighters are believed to be in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Sources: Wikipedia, Federation of American Scientists

THE ISSUE

Turkey, like every other country surrounding Iraq, has seen its interests upended by the conflict in that country. For the past three decades, turmoil in Iraq has been a source of both instability and opportunities for Ankara. Ever since the end of the Gulf War in 1991, Turkey has found itself more deeply involved in Iraqi affairs. The unpredictable set of events unleashed by the current war in Iraq unnerves Turkish decision makers and public alike. The current situation represents a conundrum for Ankara: because of its proximity, it is propelled to act in Iraq both in defense of its interests and, simultaneously, with a great deal of caution and restraint for fear of further entangling itself in what appears to be a quagmire.

Turkish interests in Iraq have remained fairly stable over the years and are primarily motivated by the fear of a possible politicization of Turkey's own Kurds. These interests can be reduced to two specific and primary factors: The first is to deny any Turkish Kurdish insurgent group, such as the PKK, a safe haven in northern Iraq. Second, and more important, is to minimize the contagion effect on Turkey's Kurds that may emanate from the political activities of Iraqi Kurds; this factor requires the containment of Iraqi Kurds' political ambitions, be they the creation of an autonomous entity in northern Iraq, with the oil-rich city of Kirkuk at its heart, or straightforward independence.



With an estimated 12 million citizens of Kurdish origin living in its borders, Turkey accounts for the largest single group of Kurds residing in the region. Turkey has been wary of the rebellious Iraqi Kurds' influence because of its experience with its own Kurdish population, which has rebelled on a number of occasions since the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Periods of quiet were marked by extensive political activity and grassroots mobilization designed to challenge the state. The last such insurgency collapsed in 1999 when PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured and imprisoned. Instability in Iraq, first during the Iraq-Iran war and later following the Gulf War and the UN-imposed sanctions period, enabled the PKK to use northern Iraqi territory as both a staging ground for raids into Turkey and a sanctuary where it could enjoy a respite from Turkish counterattacks. As a result, Ankara, especially during the height of the Kurdish insurgency in the late 1980s and 1990s, was keen on collaborating with Baghdad to mount crossborder raids designed to eliminate the PKK's rear bases.

Although it retreated to northern Iraq following its 1999 defeat and announcement of a unilateral ceasefire, the PKK nevertheless remains a fighting force capable of creating problems for Turkish security forces. In fact, it abandoned its ceasefire in summer 2004 and resumed fighting, leading to numerous clashes since. Still, the organization, which has suffered many defections and internal dissension, no longer represents the kind of existential threat to the Turkish Republic that it did in its earlier days. This diminished threat stems primarily from reforms engendered by the EU accession process that have provided Turkish Kurds with alternative means of achieving some minimum of cultural expression. Also, the fifteen-year insurrection took a tremendous toll on the region's Kurdish civilian population, which does not want to see it resume. The diminished Kurdish threat does not mean that political activity among the Kurds has ebbed; indeed, it remains a constant source of worry for the Turkish political elite—Kemalist and non-Kemalist alike. For instance, the 2005 traditional Newrouz celebrations by Kurds in Turkey were marked by many instances of defiance and veneration for the imprisoned Öcalan.

Despite these developments, the fear of the Iraqi contagion effect is still one that dominates Ankara's thinking. The most explicit and recent public articulation of this anxiety came from former Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, who argued for a Turkish military intervention



into northern Iraq not just to support the Turkmen there but also to prevent what Turkey sees as more serious and dangerous developments from occurring. Pointing out the fact that Kurds in Iraq are organizing themselves politically, he argued that they

want to create a powerful political party that will incorporate them all. They will succeed in this. They are also thinking of creating a parallel Kurdish party in Turkey. They may succeed in this. After succeeding in this, they will query why should we live in two distinct territories. After a political evolution they will be asking Turkey to give up territory.

Iraqi Kurds have a history of rebelling against the central government in Baghdad. There are strong tribal, familial, and historical bonds that unite the two Kurdish communities across the Turkish-Iraqi international border. Following the 1991 Gulf War, when half a million Kurdish refugees fleeing Saddam Hussein's retribution ended up on Turkey's border (another one million ended up on Iran's border), Ankara agreed to a limited U.S.-UK military mission (which would eventually be called Operation Provide Comfort) to enforce a no-fly zone over northern Iraq. Although the mission allowed the Iraqi Kurds to return home, it also provided the space for an embryonic Kurdish state in northern Iraq. However, intra-Kurdish rivalries between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan not only hampered this development but also allowed Ankara to play one faction against the other. Turkey has maintained a contingent of well-armed forces estimated between 1,200–1,500 soldiers within northern Iraq to keep an eye on both the PKK and the Iraq Kurdish parties and their militias. Even after the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Turkish troops have remained there with Washington's acquiescence.

More sensitive is how the government and its powerful detractors within the state establishment each will approach the issue. Although adamantly opposed to Kurdish independence in Iraq, Turkish elites feel powerless at the moment to influence events on the ground. The Kemalist elite—the secular and nationalist hard-liners in the military and civilian bureaucracy and their supporters—has tied itself in knots by marrying itself to the Iraqi Turkmen community and using it as a wedge with which it can justify a Turkish intervention in northern Iraq.¹ Also, by making strong their opposition to the Iraqi Kurds' aspirations, the Kemalists have also limited their own room to maneuver. Hence, any attempt by the government to seek a



compromise in northern Iraq—most likely to stave off a worse eventuality—is likely to engender a domestic political crisis. Such a crisis could have dire consequences for Turkey's prospective membership in the European Union (EU), which advanced significantly on December 17, 2004, with the decision of the EU's European Council summit in Brussels to open negotiations with Turkey this fall based on its progress on accession criteria agreed to at the 1993 European Council summit in Copenhagen (the so-called Copenhagen Criteria).

The dilemma for Turkey is one of ascertaining a risk-minimizing policy vis-a-vis Iraq at a time when the future of the country is indeterminate. Turkish leaders not only have to balance their own domestic preferences but also must prepare for the worst as they currently define it. Ankara's conundrum extends beyond the probable emergence of a Kurdish entity in northern Iraq and includes the disposition of the other parts of the country, including the future of the Turkmen minority. Clearly, as it defines its immediate interests, Ankara would perceive an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, with Kirkuk as its capital and the Turkmen under its tutelage neighboring a rump "fundamentalist" Iraqi state or two, to be its worst scenario. Unlike any other difference it may have had with its principal strategic ally, the United States, over a variety of issues, the direct involvement of the United States in Iraq complicates matters for Turkey. Turkey will be careful not to alienate Washington, irrespective of its relations with the EU, especially considering the importance the U.S. attaches to an eventual resolution of the Iraq crisis in a manner that does not compromise its image, credibility, and influence in the region.

Source: United States Institute for Peace

SOLUTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Kurds live in many countries but received a chance to realize their dream of an independent state only in Iraq. For 15 years they have lived separately from the rest of Iraq, thanks to the protection of the international community. They became involved in Iraqi society after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, and some of them now hold high political posts, such as President Talabani.



However, Iraqi Kurdistan remains a state within a state, with its own parliament, president, army, language and rapidly growing economy. Iraqi Kurds have attained a status which Kurds living in Turkey, Iran and Syria can only dream about.

This also serves as a powerful irritant for Ankara, Tehran and Damascus, who cannot do anything to change the situation. They can only set Kurds against each other and thus distract them from fighting for their rights. Judging by what Talabani and Barzani have said, the Kurds have seen through the trick.

The invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan will not save Turkey from the KWP. A ground operation will definitely fail in the mountains of Kurdistan and there will be many casualties among peaceful civilians and troops. The Turkish authorities know this and have therefore postponed the invasion, opting instead for moves along the border.

A military operation will not solve the Kurdish problem, but still, Ankara cannot ignore the KWP's raids and terrorist attacks. The only way out is to find a comprehensive solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey.

The Kurdish problem calls for international assistance. It should be put on the agenda of the UN Security Council alongside the problems in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, the Sudan, and other issues. This is what the KWP is trying to achieve by provoking a conflict between Ankara and Baghdad, as well as with Washington, which is currently responsible for Iraq. The

In any case, military solutions should be avoided, as has been overtime underlined by officials from all sides. What should be on the top of the priorities of the negotiators wishing to put an end to this dispute is for peace to prevail.

Source: Russian News and Information Agency

BLOCK POSITIONS

From Ankara's perspective, chaos or civil war in Iraq, the creation of a Kurdish state in the north with Kirkuk as its capital that would serve as a magnet or model for Turkey's own Kurdish population, or a combination of the above, are nightmare scenarios. At the mercy of forces beyond its control, Turkey is anchoring its strategy in commitment to the political process in



Baghdad and, as part of that, a peaceful solution to the Kirkuk question. It also is banking on progress in accession talks with the European Union to reduce any appetite for secession its Kurdish population might still harbour.

Turkey's fundamental interests in Iraq:

1. Prevent the division of Iraq along sectarian or ethnic lines that would give rise to an independent or confederal Kurdish state (with the oil-rich city of Kirkuk as its capital), thus supporting aspirations for a similar entity from Turkey's own extensive Kurdish population.
2. Protect the Turkish-speaking Turkmen minority, which resides primarily in northern Iraq.
3. Eliminate the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the Turkish Kurdish insurgent movement, which has sought refuge in the northeast of Iraq following its defeat in 1999.
4. Prevent the emergence of a potentially hostile nondemocratic fundamentalist Iraqi state.

The U.S., which remains Turkey's strategic ally, and the EU have a common interest in encouraging Turkey to play a constructive role. They should work proactively to resolve the Kirkuk question, strengthening relations between Ankara and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, and promoting investments that would give the Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey evidence of the benefits it would gain from Turkish accession to the EU. Ultimately, the challenge is, through such measures, to give Turkey the means to exert a positive influence over the course of events in northern Iraq generally and Kirkuk in particular.

Sources: Crisis Group, United States Institute for Peace

QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION MUST ANSWER

- Handling with rhetoric that inflames passions over Kirkuk, the Kurds and Iraq's Turkomans.
- Financial support to the Iraqi Turkoman Front.



- Committing to the peaceful resolution of the Kirkuk question and respect whatever settlement Iraqis agree upon among themselves.
- The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline.
- Trade and investment in northern Iraq, working directly with the Kurdish parties where possible.
- Conditioning the Kurdish public for a compromise solution on Kurdish national aspirations, including an advanced degree of autonomy within a decentralised Iraq and a special status for the city and governorate of Kirkuk.
- Strengthening of international relations (esp. between the Turkish government and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership).
- Human rights of people in the region.
- Estimating the role of the Security Council and the UN in general to the conflict.

Source: Crisis Group

CONCLUSION

Analysts are divided on how likely a cross-border incursion by the Turks into Iraq is, or whether it would be successful. It is noted that PKK fighters are “nimble and familiar with the terrain” and stand a chance “of holding off Turkish troops” should they attack. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said a military strike is not imminent; the Turkish parliament has approved military strikes into Iraq anytime during the next year. Others say the PKK has shifted tactics yet again, and is ready to return to the bargaining table. “In the last few years the PKK has begun to change its conduct and it now may be ready for a peaceful approach within Turkey,” Falah Mustafa Bakir, head of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s foreign relations department has stated that: “Our understanding is that the PKK may be prepared to join the political process in Turkey, and it is left to the Turkish government to seize this opportunity for a potential political solution to this problem.”

Either way, some observers blame third states for emboldening the separatists. “The de facto autonomy enjoyed by Iraqi Kurds [following the fall of Saddam Hussein] has encouraged



the PKK,” notes the *Economist*. “The Turks have held back from retaliation, largely because they hoped that America would deal with the PKK itself.” So far, that hasn’t happened.

Source: Council on Foreign Relations

LINKS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

<http://www.iraqupdates.com/>

<http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/val/sospo/vk/koivunen/theinvis.pdf>

<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/pkk.htm>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5292122.stm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/video/2007/11/01/2078206.htm>

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<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/10/15/iraq.turkey/index.html>

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<http://www.turkishweekly.net/news.php?id=51211>