

DRAFT PAPER

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New Security Architecture in the post-Iraq War Turkey, the Kurds and the US

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When the US entered Iraq in 2003, all of Iraq's neighbors in effect woke up to find themselves neighbors of the world's preeminent superpower. Syria and Iran would have had much to fear had the US succeeded in engineering a peaceful and orderly transition of power in Iraq. The insurgency and the US's inability to rebuild Iraq have proved to be quite advantageous for both of these countries precisely because it has diverted attention from them and limited the domino effect so many American Pentagon planners were hoping to see ensue.

By contrast, Turkey is the one country that has seen its interests completely upended by the turn of events. While Ankara would have very much preferred for the war not to have taken place in the first place, the Turkish government initially gave its approval to Washington wishes for the opening of a second front against Iraq. The agreement between the two would also have entailed the deployment of a significant Turkish force in northern Iraq, presumably to control the possible flow of refugees, but in reality to check Iraqi Kurdish aspirations. Complicating matters was the fact that on the eve of hostilities, the Turkish Parliament by a narrow margin rejected the agreement. In the ensuing war Iraqi Kurds gained the trust of the Americans as reliable allies. Moreover, the Kurdish region is the only place where American troops were and still are welcomed with open arms.

The chaos and insurgency in Iraq has brought Iraq to the brink of division. Kurdish demands for a robust autonomy in the north that includes the city of Kirkuk and its oil riches have not been well received by other Iraqis, Sunni or Shia. For the two years following Saddam's overthrow, Ankara has watched with great anxiety developments in Iraq which have not only strengthened the Kurds' bargaining position but has also brought the possibility of a Kurdish autonomous state and perhaps even an independent one closer to reality. The parliament's rejection of the US troop deployment also prevented the Turks from sending troops into Iraq and, thereby reducing their ability to influence events there.

Although, Turkish direct interests have been jeopardized, the fact of the matter is that Iraq is still holding together and a Kurd, Jalal Talabani has been elected interim president, a move that will both enhance Kurdish influence in Iraq but will also anchor the Kurds in

Iraq for the time being. Ankara, unlike Syria and Iran, of course, counts the US as an ally and, therefore, despite the turnabout in developments can still rely on Washington's support not to discard its interests altogether.

Still, US-Turkish relations have suffered since the advent of the war. This is a significant net loss for Ankara. The inability of Turks to influence events in Iraq has undermined their self-confidence. Their proxies in Iraq, the Iraqi Turkmen Front, ITF, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Turkish state, performed dismally in the January 30 elections. More important though, is the perception in Turkey that the US will not feel the need to pursue policies supportive of its key interests. In this vein, the Ankara government and its detractors at home point to the US reluctance, despite its promises, to militarily challenge the 4-5,000 PKK, the Turkish Kurdish insurgent group, holed up in northeastern Iraq. The fact that the US has found it difficult, if not impossible, given the tense and dangerous situation in Iraq to detach troops from other parts of the country to take on the PKK has not helped alleviate Turkish suspicions. Moreover, an incident on July 4, 2003 when US troops rounded Turkish special forces in the Kurdish town of Suleymaniyah after suspecting them and their ITF allies of conspiring to kill the Kirkuk governor, created a furor in Turkey.

In reality, however, Turkey and the US would like to see the same results in Iraq: the creation of a secular, prosperous and democratic Iraq. Neither wants to see Iraq break up along sectarian and ethnic lines. They both would like a strong central government that is not only capable of bringing back political and economic stability, but that will also be robust enough to become a future counterweight to Iran in the region. They both would not like to see the emergence of any form of a fundamentalist state in Iraq.

Where they differ is on the upcoming role the Kurds will play but more importantly on the nature of future contingencies. The US sees that the only way of keeping the Kurds in Iraq is within a federal structure and the reality of the situation dictates that ethnic lines will at least in some parts of Iraq determine this federation. Ankara has always feared the contagion effect of Kurdish independence and autonomy in northern Iraq, and had made it its solemn cause to prevent either of these from materializing. What Ankara fears most that the US would allow an independent Kurdistan to emerge in the event of complete chaos and breakdown of Iraqi authority. It is these suspicions that have helped poison the relationship.

Turkey is also at a loss regarding changes in the region. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has made an earnest effort at cultivating relations with the Muslim world and specifically with its neighbors. It, therefore, found itself in an embarrassing situation when the Turkish President Necdet Sezer decided to go to Syria in April 2004. The trip at a time when Damascus was under severe international pressure to withdraw its troops from Lebanon and adhere to UNSC Resolution 1559, was clearly going to be and was exploited by a beleaguered Assad regime as proof of international support. The trip was more of an indication that with the rapid developments countries in the region have not had a chance to adapt and work out their preferred outcomes.

Turkey's Iraq conundrum

Turkey's Iraq problem can be explained with one word: Kurds. Having experienced numerous Kurdish revolts during the last century, Ankara has always been on the lookout for what Kurds in neighboring countries are up to. 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. When the Kurds in Turkey have not rebelled, they have engaged in the kind of political activity that has had grassroots mobilization and the extension of Kurdish rights as the primary focus. The latest Kurdish insurgency led by the PKK started in 1984 and ended in 1999 costing some 35,000 lives. It collapsed with the capture of the insurgency's leader in Kenya and his hand over by the US to the Turks.

Especially during the PKK insurgency, the Kurdish question was seen as an existential issue by the Turkish leadership; it threatened to not only destabilize the country but also to split it apart. Although a large majority of Turkish Kurds never contemplated separating themselves from Turkey, there is no doubt that a significant number took the risks associated with an insurgency to leave the homes and families to fight one of NATO's largest armies. In fact, Turkey had to expend large efforts in financial cost and military materiel to fight the insurgency which, at its peak, preoccupied some 200,000 Turkish troops and countless other paramilitaries, police and village guards.

The PKK took advantage of the tumultuous times of the Iran-Iraq war and then the post-Gulf war environment to establish bases in northern Iraq. Ankara, in return, first sought the collaboration of Saddam Hussein and later that of the two Iraqi Kurdish militias, the PUK and the KDP, to mount cross border raids. Even when the Iraqi Kurds were collaborating with Ankara the latter was uneasy about the relations between Turkish Kurds in general and their Iraqi brethren. Kinship and family ties that bound these two communities together were sufficiently strong in the eyes of the Turkish leadership that any political gains achieved by Iraqi Kurds could motivate Turkish Kurds to seek the same. Although economic conditions for Turkish Kurds have generally been better, though not by much, and they were not subject to the kind of persecution the Hussein regime wrought, culturally Iraqi Kurds benefited from far greater autonomy. This, of course, became even more pronounced following the creation of the no-fly zone in the aftermath of the 1990-1 Gulf war and the de fact formation of a proto Kurdish state, albeit a very divided one at that.

Between 1991 and 2003, the Kurds in northern Iraq lived free of Saddam Hussein's reign. While the two Kurdish factions often fought among themselves, the fact remains that the absence of Iraqi authority in northern Iraq meant that a new generation grew up without any memory of Saddam and barely speaking Arabic. In effect, the Kurdish genie in Iraq can no longer be put back in its bottle. The irony, of course, was that Turkey in a direct way contributed to this development. The no-fly zone that enabled the Kurds to live freely was made possible by the fact that US and British planes patrolling the Iraqi skies took off from Incirlik, the Turkish air force base near Adana.

Ankara, in order to have a stake in northern Iraq and contain Kurdish ambitions, decided to champion the rights of the Turkish-speaking Turkmen. The Turkish military, which had jurisdiction over all matters Iraq, created the ITF. The Turkmen were a recent discovery; while this group had in the past suffered from Saddam's ethnic cleansing operations, just as the Kurds had, Ankara had chosen to remain silent for the most part. The ITF became an insurance card of sorts for Ankara: it enabled it to have a say in northern Iraq beyond the Kurdish issue. The Turkmen themselves are divided and only some sought to join the ITF. Still, their claim to the city of Kirkuk was used counterbalance Kurdish ones.

With the advent of the war in Iraq, the creation of an interim government and the adoption of the interim constitution, Ankara has come to realize that the federal option for northern Iraq can no longer be stopped. The question for the Turks is whether on their own and in conjunction with their clients in Iraq can contain the size and responsibilities of this federal arrangement. This in effect means denying the Kirkuk and its oil riches to the Kurds, especially because oil is viewed as a potential source of revenue that could fund a future drive for independence.

Domestic Politics and Iraq:

In many ways, the AKP's primary problem is domestic. Having achieved an impressive victory in convincing the European Union to give Turkey a date to begin accession negotiations by introducing a series of domestic reforms and engineering a turnabout on the island of Cyprus, the AKP finds itself vulnerable on the Iraq front. Hardliners in the civil and military bureaucracy as well as in civil society already ambivalent about AKP's Islamic past have made Iraq a litmus test of sorts. Failure in Iraq could open the AKP to criticism and even to the possibility of its hold on power being undermined. These hardliners are not enamored with the changes brought about by the EU either. For them, the EU is a poisoned chalice precisely because it proscribes changes that will force the democratization of the Turkish political space. Inevitably, this would entail the articulation of dissident voices and demands--primarily, although not exclusively, Kurdish ones--which they fear will gnaw away at the unity of the republic.

Here one cannot underestimate the Turkmen factor: for many years the Turkmen have been built up as an alternative nationality in Iraq. Should events force Turkey to abandon them—despite Turkish claims that they represent more than 10 percent of Iraq's population, other estimates put their total number well under 1 million or 2-3 percent—the AKP will be accused of abandoning another Turkish minority. Some in the opposition, including a former prime minister, have raised the ante for the AKP by calling for an immediate military intervention—at the risk of a confrontation with Kurdish forces there—to prevent the emergence of the Kurdish entity in the north. Even within the military there have been complaints that the government does not have an Iraq policy.

Iraq policy, because of its impact on the domestic Kurdish question, remains the one area where the traditional elites with their suspicions of AKP's nationalist credentials will dig

in hard. Even within the AKP the more nationalist MPs have occasionally voiced their concern over the events in Iraq. AKP itself because of its own internal contradictions has found it hard to deal with Iraq. After all, most AKP members come from backgrounds in which they were steeped with anti-American rhetoric. As the Iraq war was approaching in 2003, the AKP government even made an attempt at organizing the regional countries to prevent the war from occurring. The dislike for the Iraq operation also hinders AKP's room to maneuver. On the eve of the January 30 elections and in the days following them, the Turkish political leadership proved incapable of welcoming these developments. Although most of the world, including the Europeans lauded the elections, the AKP instead was quite critical of the conduct and results and questioned their legitimacy.

Ironically, the perceptible improvement in conditions following the January 30 elections and the ITF's dismal performance in them has provided the Turkish government with some room to breathe and not to be pushed hastily towards an uncompromising position on Iraq. The Turkish prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, and foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, have backed away from their unconditional support for the ITF.

The European Union, which provided a tremendous boost for the AKP government, is in some ways also the latter's most convenient excuse for resisting hardliners. Europe has made it clear that it would take a dim view of any Turkish intervention in the Iraq which would set the process of Iraqi rehabilitation back. Support for Turkey in Europe is at best lukewarm. Hence some EU countries' governments would be quite willing to jettison Ankara from the list of candidates at the very first sign of trouble.

Turkish Kurds, exhausted after a 15-year insurgency that wreaked havoc with their lives, led to the destruction of thousands of villages and hamlets, are not keen on the resumption of armed conflict. Turkish Kurds' hopes that conditions on the ground, especially economic and political ones, would improve with the PKK's 1999 declaration of a unilateral ceasefire and the capture of its leader have been disappointed. Moreover, the amnesty they had expected failed to materialize as well. In part confident of EU attention, there is a great deal more Kurdish activism today in Turkey than five years earlier. Any attempt by Turkey, therefore, to intervene in northern Iraq could well serve to spark another confrontation at home precisely because of the close links existing between Turkish and Iraqi Kurds. Any renewal of the domestic Turkish-Kurdish conflict and the state's efforts at repressing it would be seen by the Europeans as another indication of Turkey's undesirability. By contrast, any attempts by the Turkish government to extend a hand to Iraqi Kurds would be perceived well by Turkish Kurds. In the past, when President Ozal had engaged Iraqi Kurdish leadership in a dialogue, Turkish Kurds had responded very positively.

An alliance of sorts with Iraqi Kurds would help Turkey in many different ways. First and foremost it would help cool still unresolved deep domestic differences with Turkey's Kurdish population. At the very least, they who want to join the EU as much as any other Turkish citizen would have very few reasons to upset the proverbial apple cart.

Second, the Iraqi Kurds as long as they remain engaged with Baghdad, provide an important moderating influence over any future Iraqi government. Because Turkey would loathe seeing another Iran emerge on its borders, it would need the Kurds to act as a buffer or as an influential voice of reason in Baghdad. Iraqi Kurds themselves are far more interested in an opening to the West through Turkey than cementing relations with the Arab world. Both they and the Ankara government are interested in curtailing or balancing Iran's influence in Iraq. They cannot do it alone but they could do it together. Yet, to extend a warm and collaborative hand to Iraqi Kurds could expose the government to domestic criticisms and this is the dilemma it faces.

Conclusion

By exposing the Turkish government's domestic vulnerabilities and creating a sense of uncertainty, the Iraq war has pushed Turkey off balance. Turkish reactions to US actions have led to a questioning in Washington of that country's value as an ally. As temporary this sentiment may be, the fact of the matter is that for Washington, Turkey is no longer a critical ingredient for the conduct of its Iraq policy. Whereas during the containment phase of Saddam Hussein, it would be safe to argue that Washington could not have maintained pressure on Saddam without Ankara. Ankara was then the anchor of US policy, whereas today Ankara has been transformed into a role of demandeur.

This said, the US still values Turkey as an ally in a region where not only Washington has to tackle difficult questions relating to Iran's nuclear problem, but is also engaged in an attempt to completely reshape the Middle East. Turkey's assistance—not of the sort exhibited with Sezer's Syria visit—would be vital. As a potential member to the European Union, Turkey embodies all that can be accomplished in Middle Eastern societies through openness, political and economic.

In a Middle East engaged in a transformation, Turkey's role as a democratic country with a vibrant civil society willing to elect parties to power that only a few years ago were considered domestic pariahs without conjuring up regime changes is terribly important.