

# Turkey vs. the Kurds in Northern Iraq: Approaching Military Intervention?

Gallia Lindenstrauss

The Turks are currently in a catch-22 situation vis-à-vis the situation in northern Iraq. There are several impetuses for massive military intervention, but the risks latent in such intervention are many. This essay studies the increased deployment of forces along the Turkey-Iraq border, the concerns regarding an escalation, and the possible ramifications of the various strategic choices facing the Turks. It also considers the impact of the recent elections in Turkey and the widespread support earned by the Justice and Development Party on the likelihood of intervention. Should the Turks become heavily involved militarily in northern Iraq, their goal would be to wipe out the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters who have found refuge there. Beyond the question of whether this objective is achievable, efforts to attain this goal could work against the Turkish opposition to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state.

In contrast to other regions in Iraq and against the background of the problems plaguing the United States in Iraq, the Kurdish area in northern Iraq is considered a relatively stable area. However, the continued stability in this region is threatened both by internal Iraqi developments and by the ever-increasing chance of massive Turkish military intervention against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) forces (now called KADEK).<sup>1</sup> The assumption is that about 4,000 PKK fighters are currently hiding in northern Iraq. The Turks, weighing which course to pursue vis-à-vis the Kurds in northern Iraq, are in a kind of catch-22 situation that contains many opposing constraints.

On the one hand, the Turks fear that Iraq's political dissolution could result in the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Doubts regarding the continued American military presence in Iraq contribute to the increasing anxiety in Ankara regarding the creation of this independent state. The noticeable increase in terror activities attributed to the Kurdistan Workers Party<sup>2</sup> has heightened pressure by the Turkish military and among Turkish public opinion for massive military intervention,<sup>3</sup> which would engage tens of thousands of troops in ground operations over a number of weeks. This is all on condition that the campaign would not become bogged down, a situation that could lead to

Gallia Lindenstrauss,  
Neubauer junior  
research associate  
at INSS

the need for a prolonged Turkish presence in northern Iraq. The situation in Turkey is even more complicated in light of the tense relations between the military and the ruling Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, which peaked with the crisis that resulted in early elections,<sup>4</sup> and there is a concern that this tension could bring about a Turkish offensive. On the other hand, the Americans are cautioning the Turks not to intervene in Iraq. Massive Turkish involvement in Iraq could undermine US-Turkish relations, which are already at a low point in part since Turkey did not allow the Americans to launch an attack against Iraq from its territory in 2003, and in light of the Turks' contention that US activity against PKK forces in Iraq has been insufficient.

### **The "Kurdish Problem" and Kirkuk**

The current situation in northern Iraq is intertwined with what is referred to as the "Kurdish Problem." The Kurds, who are said to comprise the largest nation on earth that does not have a state, are scattered mainly across four states – Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.<sup>5</sup> In all of these states, Kurdish nationalism is and has always been considered a problem, which in turn has been contained primarily through force. The 1991 Gulf War marked a turning point in Kurdish history: the Security Council resolution on humanitarian intervention in northern Iraq and the declaration of part of northern Iraq as a no-fly zone paved the way to de facto Kurdish autonomy in the north of the country. This autonomy was not accompanied by domestic quiet in the region, and the Kurds in Iraq began a violent internal struggle between the group led by Masoud Barazani and the group led by Jalal Talabani. This struggle

was partially resolved in 1998, though only after international mediation.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the Americans in 2003 brought with it new opportunities for the Kurds. As the most trustworthy allies of the United States in Iraq today and in light of the political experience they accumulated since the 1990s, the Kurds were able to influence the formulation of the new Iraqi constitution, and they have been pressing for the transformation of Iraq into a federal state. At the same time, the lack of stability in the other parts of the country and the heavy interest shown by Iraq's neighbors in determining its future have affected the Kurds' room to maneuver.

An especially problematic subject in the context of the Kurdish issue and Iraq's future is control of the city of Kirkuk. Whoever controls Kirkuk essentially controls 40 percent of Iraq's oil reserves. Kurdish control of the city will enable a Kurdish state, if established, to achieve financial independence. The Kurds are demanding the implementation of the clause in the new Iraqi constitution on a public referendum in Kirkuk, which would determine the status of the city in the Iraqi federation. The Kurds, who constitute the majority in Kirkuk,<sup>6</sup> are expected to decide the referendum and to demand connection to the portions of Iraq that are under Kurdish control. The referendum is to be held no later than December 31, 2007, but various elements, the Turks among them, want to delay it by at least two years. Beyond their concerns regarding the power that the Kurds will have should they take control of Kirkuk, the Turks claim an historic connection of the Ottoman Empire to Kirkuk, and also argue that the Turkmeni minority in the region must be protected.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, Kurdish control over the oil

**Iraqi Kurds would consider a massive Turkish invasion of Iraq as an attempt to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, and not as a limited operation against the PKK.**

reserves does not mean they will be able to transport the oil out of the area without the cooperation of neighboring states. Therefore, the Kurds also have an interest in solving the Kirkuk issue through internal Iraqi and international agreement.

### **Turkish Objectives and their Underlying Strategies**

Since 2003 it is possible to identify four Turkish objectives with regard to northern Iraq. The most important objective is to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state that controls Kirkuk. A second important objective is to eliminate the PKK forces operating in northern Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Other objectives of less importance are to guarantee Turkish influence in Iraq, particularly economic influence, and to protect the Turkmeni minority in northern Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Turkish statements, particularly by the heads of the military, regarding the possibility of massive military intervention in northern Iraq<sup>10</sup> contend that military action is necessary in order to wipe out the PKK forces that have found shelter in northern Iraq. At the same time, misgivings about such intervention and the possible ensuing ramifications must be examined in relation to the other three objectives.

It is difficult to estimate the magnitude of the force deployed recently along the Iraq-Turkey border, but it is a sizable force of tens of thousands of troops. In recent years, small Turkish forces have from time to time infiltrated behind the Iraqi border in pursuit of PKK forces. There are political and military benefits to this limited policy, since it does not entail a head-on confrontation between Turkey and the United States over the Kurdish issue. Moreover, Turkey has a series of successes with a policy of coercive diplomacy toward the Kurds. In fact, the PKK has

already declared a unilateral ceasefire in face of the threats of massive military intervention.<sup>11</sup> While it is still not clear how well this ceasefire will hold up, its very declaration testifies, at least to a certain extent, to the influence latent in the Turkish threats.

Massive military intervention would also propel the Kurdish issue to the top of the agenda, which does not necessarily suit Turkey's interests, since the international community, and particularly the European Union, looks critically on the status of the Kurds within Turkey, and despite the passage of several key laws regarding the Kurds, their actual implementation is still far off. At the same time, in light of the recent developments in Turkey and in light of the election of Sarkozy – who opposed Turkey's inclusion in the European Union – as president of France, membership in the EU is a more remote prospect. As such, the EU's positions regarding human rights will likely have less influence on Turkish actions towards the Kurds. Even if Turkey realizes its plans to build a security zone of up to 15 kilometers from the border in northern Iraq<sup>12</sup> notwithstanding American opposition, the plan would not constitute a complete violation of the rules of the game and generate the same repercussions as a massive Turkish invasion of northern Iraq.

Yet despite the advantages of restraint, there is a not inconsequential possibility that Turkey will become extensively involved in the Kurdish section of northern Iraq. Many commentators have estimated that this eventuality is not likely as long as American forces remain in Iraq, since the Americans view Kurdistan as a relative success story amid the Iraqi quagmire, and it is near certain that even if they retreat, they will still want to erect permanent American bases in Kurdistan. At the same time, the security co-

**Massive  
Turkish military  
intervention  
is liable to  
expedite the  
dissolution of  
what is left of  
the Iraqi state.**

operation agreement signed in May between the American-led coalition and the Kurdish regional government could be seen as the beginning of an American detachment from the area. In this agreement, security control over Kurdish regions was transferred to the regional government.<sup>13</sup> This transfer of control suggests perhaps that the Americans will not add a direct confrontation with Turkey to their entanglement in Iraq, even if they don't remove their forces completely from Iraq.

Should Turkey become extensively involved militarily in Iraq, it can expect strong Kurdish opposition. After sixteen years of autonomy in Iraq, the Kurds are not expected to forfeit this achievement readily.<sup>14</sup> Thus even though there is no significant support among Iraqi Kurds for the violent methods of the PKK, they would consider a massive Turkish invasion of Iraq as an attempt to take control in order to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, and not as a limited operation against the PKK.<sup>15</sup>

Already in 1997 Turkey sent 40,000 soldiers into Iraq for an operation that lasted six weeks. A comparison to Turkey's prior massive involvement in Iraq is interesting since it not only reflects on the chances of renewed Turkish intervention, but also points to both potential delaying factors and the possible ramifications of such intervention. In 1997, Turkey was faced with broad opposition to its intervention on the part of Arab states, the European Union, and the United States, but chose to act nonetheless. At the same time, in 1997 there was no massive American presence in Iraq. While in the late 1990s the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire that was maintained more or less until 2005, this was mainly a result of pressure exerted by Turkey on Syria to expel PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from its territory and his subsequent



capture in Kenya in 1999. Thus it is difficult to imagine a step that Turkey can currently take against the PKK that would have as dramatic an effect as Öcalan's arrest.

Massive Turkish military intervention is liable to expedite the dissolution of what is left of the Iraqi state. In this case, intervention could create a situation that counters Turkish interests, particularly if the Shiites or extremist Sunni factions take control over the southern portions of Iraq. Thus, instead of the Kurdish area constituting a theoretical buffer state for the Turks, a massive Turkish presence could position it directly against the Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis, and also Iran, which would try to expand its influence in these areas. On the other hand, Turkey's refusal to let American forces enter Iraq from its territory may have cost it its influence over Iraq's future. A broad military offensive might thus actually catapult it to a central role at the future negotiating table.<sup>16</sup>

An additional though less viable scenario is that Turkey would agree to a division of Iraq into two or three states and the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq would receive the status

*Demonstrators with Kurdish flag (February 12, 2006) mark the anniversary of the capture of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan*

of a state. The likelihood of such a scenario is slim since Turkey is concerned that the establishment of an independent Kurdish state could spur its large Kurdish population to join the Kurdish state and even demand the annexation of portions of southeast Turkey to the new state. Iran and Syria share Turkey's concerns over an independent Kurdish state, and it is highly likely they would cooperate with Turkey to prevent such a scenario. This third scenario, though remote, highlights the drawbacks to a policy of force. In recent years, Turkish financial investments in northern Iraq have grown substantially, such that a Turkish interest has been created in the continuing development and stability of northern Iraq.

Moreover, while it seems that Turkey has mainly followed a policy of oppression toward the Kurds, there were also advantages to a more benevolent approach to the Kurds. Thus, both due to the relatively revolutionary policy of President Turgut Özal in his final years in relation to the Kurds in Turkey, and due to the legislative changes the Turks were forced to make to promote their candidacy for EU membership, a situation has been created whereby the Kurds in Turkish territory currently enjoy a number of cultural rights, such as, for instance, the right to speak in the Kurdish language. Despite the very limited nature of these gains, it seems that they have helped reduce the support among the Kurds in Turkey for the PKK's violent actions. Indeed, the widespread support (52 percent) earned by the Justice and Development Party in the Kurdish areas of southeast Turkey suggest a Kurdish inclination to cooperate with the incoming government.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party is less influenced by Kamalist tradition, according to which a

Kurdish nationality doesn't even exist and Kurds are referred to as "mountain Turks." From this standpoint, despite the traditional Turkish position that invalidates an independent Kurdish state, the Justice and Development Party could adopt a different policy toward the Kurdish issue and lay greater emphasis on the Islamic dimension that unites Turks and Kurds. Moreover, Turkish Kurds display more support for the Justice and Development Party than for competing parties.

In the aftermath of the elections, it is not yet clear towards what direction Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will lean, or whether he will manage to withstand the military pressure for massive military intervention. Support for the Justice and Development Party rose from the previous elections' 34 percent to 47 percent in the recent elections, and while because of the nature of the Turkish electoral system and the entry of a new party into the parliament this support translates into fewer parliamentary seats, the elections are still testimony to staunch support for the ruling party and for Erdoğan himself. In the course of the campaign it was not clear if the pressure by the military to intervene in northern Iraq did not derive from the military chiefs and old elites wanting to portray Erdoğan as insufficiently steadfast in his struggle against terrorism and reduce support for his party.<sup>18</sup> Thus, for instance, after Erdoğan declared that before Turkey enters Iraq to deal with the Kurdish terrorists it must first complete the struggle against the terrorists within its own borders,<sup>19</sup> opposition representatives said that Erdoğan's declaration indicated that he never truly understood the struggle against terrorism.<sup>20</sup>

The tension between the military and the Justice and Development Party is likely to continue, and thus pressure for military in-



tervention will likely be maintained, whether it stems from internal political strife or from authentic security concerns. Nonetheless, election results indicate that the Turkish military has been weakened politically, and therefore Erdoğan might have earned an historic opportunity to adopt a revolutionary policy towards a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and towards the Kurds in Turkey.

## Conclusion

Erdoğan, who must decide how to act vis-à-vis northern Iraq, is confronted with the far-reaching internal and international ramifications that will emerge from any decision on this matter. Erdoğan faces heavy pressure by military leaders and among public opinion, and this pressure can be expected to intensify following any future terrorist attack attributed to the PKK. On the other hand, massive Turkish military involvement could not only fail to achieve the goal of capturing all the PKK fighters located in Iraq, but could also serve to expedite the final dissolution of Iraq into two or three states – a development that is not desirable to Ankara. The Turkish dissatisfaction over the lack of sufficient American action against the PKK forces who have found shelter in northern Iraq has led to tremendous tension in relations between Turkey and the United States. The cooling of relations between Turkey and the United States as well as Turkey being distanced from the European Union<sup>21</sup> influences the chances of cooperation between Turkey, Iran, and Syria in general and in relation to the Kurdish issue in particular. Turkish-Iranian-Syrian cooperation, even if limited, will have a significant effect on regional developments. In particular, the warming relations between Turkey, Syria, and Iran will affect Israel's ability to continue close cooperation with

Turkey, since the strategic logic behind such an alliance will be weakened.

## Notes

- 1 Following the events of September 11 and the ensuing American struggle with terrorist organizations, the PKK party changed its name to KADEK (the Congress for Freedom and Democracy in Kurdistan). Since the nature of party's activities has not changed, however, the prior name is still widely used.
- 2 In recent years, the number of those killed in PKK attacks has risen significantly. Since the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, 40-60 people were killed each year. In 2005, the number rose to 200, and in 2006, more than 600 people were killed. S. Peterson, "Tensions on Iraq Border Rile Turkey," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 8, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0608/p01s04-woeu.html>.
- 3 J. Gottschlich, "Turkish Military Leaders Pushing for Invasion of Northern Iraq," *Spiegel Online*, June 8, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,versand-487452,00.html>.
- 4 This crisis peaked with the opposition of the military to the candidacy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the Justice and Development Party for president, and against the background of advancing the parliamentary elections due to the failure to achieve a sufficient majority for the election of Abdullah Gül – also from the Justice and Development Party – to the presidency.
- 5 Various estimates of the size of the Kurdish nation, ranging from 7 million to 25 million, can be found in A. Manafy, *The Kurdish Political Struggles in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey: A Critical Analysis*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005), pp. 4-5. According to the estimates of the CIA World Factbook, there are about 14 million Kurds in Turkey (20 percent of the population), 4-5.5 million in Iraq (15-20 percent of the population), and 4.5 million in Iran (7 percent of the population). In relation to Syria, there is only an estimate regarding the overall non-Arab minority in the country, which number about 10 percent, and there

**Erdoğan may have earned an historic opportunity to adopt a revolutionary policy towards a Kurdish state in northern Iraq and towards the Kurds in Turkey.**

- are no exact numbers regarding the Kurds. A common estimate is that there are roughly 1 million Kurds in Syria. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>; Manafy, *The Kurdish Political Struggles*, p. 4.
- 6 According to the new Iraqi constitution a "demographic normalization" of Kirkuk will also be carried out. This means the expulsion (with limited financial compensation) of Arabs who were moved into Kirkuk by Saddam Hussein in order to try and balance the large Kurdish population and the Turkmeni population in the city.
  - 7 D. Igantius, "A New Threat in Iraq," *Washingtonpost.com*, April 18, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/17/AR2007041701457.html>; H. J. Barkey, "Turkey and Iraq: The Perils (and Prospects) of Proximity," *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 141, July 2005, p. 9, [www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr141.html](http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr141.html).
  - 8 O. Frahm, "Northern Iraq and Its Neighbors: The Regional Dimension of the Kurdish Question," *Insight Turkey* 9, no. 1 (2007): 101; Barkey, "Turkey and Iraq," pp. 1-2.
  - 9 The issue of defense of the Turkmeni minority is a relatively new issue in Turkish foreign policy, and surfaced in Turkish statements only during the 1990s. The Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF), a Turkmeni political party supported by Turkey, estimates that the Turkmenis constitute about 8-11 percent of the Iraqi population, but according to independent researchers, their numbers are only 2-3 percent. Barkey, "Turkey and Iraq," pp. 6-7.
  - 10 For instance, "Turkish General Seeks Iraq Raids," *BBC News*, June 27, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6246484.stm>.
  - 11 S. Hacaoglu, "Kurdish Rebels Declare Cease-Fire in Turkey," *Washingtonpost.com*, June 13, 2007, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/12/AR2007061202089.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/12/AR2007061202089.html).
  - 12 U. Enginsoy, "US Cold toward Turkish Buffer Zone inside Iraq," *Turkish Daily News*, June 16, 2007, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=75950>.
  - 13 "Kurdistan Signs Security Accord with US," *Middle East Newslines*, June 3, 2007.
  - 14 In an unofficial referendum held together with the Iraqi parliamentary elections in the spring of 2005, 95 percent of those asked responded that they support a declaration of independence of a Kurdish state. K. Katzman and A. B. Prados, "The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq," *CRS Report for Congress*, March 14, 2005, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/44128.pdf>.
  - 15 M. Ali Briand, "What Should be Done or Avoided to Enter Iraq," June 23, 2007, *Turkish Daily News*, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=76595>.
  - 16 H. Ozoglu, "Will Turkey Seize Northern Iraq?" *History News Network*, June 14, 2007, <http://hnn.us/articles/32032.html>.
  - 17 I. Traynor, "Turkey Raises Hopes of Peace with Kurds," *Guardian*, July 24, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/turkey/story/0,,2133351,00.html>.
  - 18 Y. Schleifer, "Turkish Military Presses for Iraq Offensive," *ISN Security Watch*, June 6, 2007, [www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=17707](http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?id=17707).
  - 19 S. Tavernise, "Turkish Premier Opposes Move on Militants in Iraq," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/13/world/europe/13turkey.html>.
  - 20 "Opposition Outrage at PM's Remarks," *Turkish Daily News*, June 14, 2007, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=75804>.
  - 21 R. Menon and S. Enders Wimbush, "The US and Turkey: End of an Alliance," *Survival* 49, no. 2, (2007): 129-31, 142.