

HEMMED IN BY CIRCUMSTANCES: TURKEY AND IRAQ SINCE THE GULF WAR

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Ankara's approach to Iraq is influenced entirely by the Kurdish question in northern Iraq and its ramifications for the Kurds in Turkey. All other geopolitical or strategic considerations pale in comparison. Ankara has viewed the reemergence of Kurdish ethnic nationalist stirrings starting in Turkey with the PKK-led insurrection in 1984 and subsequently with the Iraqi Kurdish upheavals of 1988 and 1991 as an existential issue. For Ankara, Kurdish nationalism has the potential to lead to the dismemberment of the country. At the very least, in Ankara's mindset, the continued festering of the Kurdish issue creates opportunities for foreign powers, ranging from Middle Eastern to Western ones, to make mischief in Turkey. Even if the unrealistic fears of Turkish leaders were to be discarded, the fact remains that for a country that since its inception has perpetuated a myth of a homogenous ethnicity the Kurdish question is a deeply troubling one.

Turkey's first priority, therefore, has been to ensure the existence of a stable government in Baghdad, which will put an end to the Kurdish dreams of independence or federation in northern Iraq.

Moreover, it would want a regime that would cooperate with Ankara regionally to curb Kurdish cross-border activities, be they political or military. From this point of view, Ankara has not had much reason to criticize the current regime in Baghdad. It has a long history of cooperation dating back to the 1980s, when Turkish troops routinely and with the permission of Saddam Hussein entered Iraqi territory in hot-pursuit operations. In essence, given its current unhappiness with the power vacuum in northern Iraq, Turkey would not oppose, would perhaps even welcome, the consolidation of Iraq under Saddam's rule.

Complicating matters for Turkey, however, is its relationship with the United States and the presence on Turkish soil of the U.S. aircraft of Operation Northern Watch (ONW) enforcing the northern no-fly zone over Iraq. The irony, of course, is that ONW and its predecessor, Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), are primarily responsible for the de facto autonomy the Kurds in northern Iraq currently enjoy. OPC, in turn, was devised to help Turkey out of the Kurdish refugee crisis it faced at the end of the Gulf War in 1991. But ONW is a sword that cuts both ways. On the one hand, it undermines the Turkish

position in Iraq and encourages Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. On the other hand, it is the one card Ankara possesses that binds Washington to its priorities and needs because ONW (with its southern equivalent) has come to represent the primary leg on which U.S. Iraq policy is based. Finally, Turkey has had to establish close links with one of the two Kurdish groups in northern Iraq, Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP), in order to combat the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK).

Will the end of the PKK-led insurrection change Turkish policy? There are indications that Ankara will harden its attitude to the KDP and its rival, the PUK, to thwart their ambitions to establish a federation in Iraq in the event of Saddam's demise. In large measure, however, its attitude to the Kurds in Iraq will also be determined by the course of internal developments in Turkey, especially as the European Union accession process eventually affects them.

From the Iraqi regime's perspective, Turkey's support for existing sanctions, close cooperation with the KDP, repeated interventions across the border and continued harboring of ONW are causes for occasional diatribes in the Iraqi press. Saddam and his regime have had many occasions when they could have kindled the anti-Turkish fires in the region but declined to do so. Whereas Turgut Özal, first as prime minister and then later as president, was willing to tamper at least rhetorically with the regional status quo, the Iraqi regime knows that the current Turkish leadership is anxious to preserve it and that Ankara's support for ONW is the result of "U.S. pressure."

ANTECEDENTS

The Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 could not have started at a more opportune moment for Turkey. Reeling from an economic crisis that brought about its worst balance-of-payments crisis and a concurrent political one, Turkey had just experienced its third military coup since 1960 when the Iraqis decided to take advantage of Iranian weakness in late September 1980. 1980 also marked the beginning of a new export-oriented economic reform program in Turkey. The Iran-Iraq War enabled Turkey to act as a primary transportation route for both combatants and also export its own wares to them. As the war sapped both Iran's and Iraq's precious foreign-exchange resources, cheaper Turkish goods appeared increasingly attractive. By 1985, Turkish exports to Iraq had reached \$961 million or 12 percent of all Turkish exports. The respective figures at the onset of the war in 1980 were \$135 million and 4.6 percent.¹ This seven-fold increase in exports to Iraq (together with the increase to Iran) helped anchor the Turkish economic reform effort. These numbers would decline considerably as the war began to wind down. During the war, a second pipeline connecting the oil-rich region of Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Yumurtalik was completed, and the Turks often warned Iran not to attack these pipelines as they were part of Turkey's vital economic zone. After the conclusion of the war, the Saddam Hussein regime, bitter at what it perceived to be price gouging and Turkey's reluctance to extend credit to Baghdad, sharply curtailed Iraq's purchases from Turkey. As a result, on the eve of the second Gulf war, Turkish exports had decreased to a trickle.

But the war also entailed costs for Turkey. The diminution of Iraqi government control in its northern provinces allowed the PKK in the late 1980s to establish bases there and use the area as its strategic depth while increasingly challenging Turkish forces on the other side of the border. Turkey negotiated permission to conduct limited hot-pursuit operations against the PKK. The absence of Iraqi authority in the north also increased the self-confidence of Iraqi Kurds, who expected that the war would allow them to negotiate better terms with the central government.

The Anfal campaign and the use of chemical weapons against the residents of the Kurdish town of Halabja, of

course, ended these expectations. These two Iraqi operations caused, almost as a prelude to the massive influx of fleeing refugees at the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the first of the Kurdish refugee problems Turkey would encounter.²

Turkey, despite deteriorating relations with Baghdad, had high expectations from the war's end in 1988. The devastation visited on the combatants meant that massive reconstruction projects would be up for bids, and Turkish construction companies, which after 1980 had proven themselves in Middle Eastern markets, had a good shot at winning many. This was not to be; Saddam, feeling the pinch of his extravagant wartime spending, decided to make up for his losses with another foreign

adventure by invading Kuwait. The coalition efforts against Iraq were met with mixed emotions in Turkey. There was little sympathy for Kuwait and its ruling family and even less for a massive military operation. But for President Özal, this event represented a watershed in Middle East relations. He correctly bet on the winning side and pushed his government to anticipate events and take action ahead of time. For instance, Turkey closed down the main export pipelines to the Mediterranean foreseeing the imposition of sanctions by the international community. Özal,

always the risk taker, was also willing to take a more active role in the anti-Saddam coalition despite opposition from parliament, his own party,

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public opinion and, most important, the military brass. In fact, the chief of the general staff, Necip Torumtay, in an unprecedented move in Turkish history, resigned his post to demonstrate his opposition to Özal's plans. Allied planes based at the Incirlik base near Adana participated in the bombing campaign; even though Turkish troops were not involved directly in the action, for the first time an Arab country was bombed from Turkish soil.³

More significant, Özal had also calculated that the allied onslaught on Iraq would dislodge Saddam's regime. Therefore, it was paramount for Turkey to be at the "post-war settlement table" and not just as a spectator.⁴ For Özal, though clearly not

for most of Turkey's elite, the allied response to Saddam's invasion was the opening salvo of a new international regime to be constructed from the ashes of the Soviet Empire. In moves reminiscent of the public musings during the Iran-Iraq War, when Iranian forces were on the offensive and Baghdad's regime seemed on the ropes, Özal appeared willing to once again challenge the regional status quo. If Özal correctly foresaw the outcome of the war, he, with almost everyone else, clearly erred in underestimating Saddam's will and ability to remain in power. There was not to be a "post-war settlement table"; President Bush's unwillingness to extend the conflict and challenge Iraqi helicopters raining death on Kurdish and Shia rebels ended any hope that Saddam would be overthrown quickly.

As Saddam, with the help of the helicopters, managed to get the upper hand, some 500,000 refugees streamed toward the Turkish border with another million heading for Iran. Embarrassed by the outflow and the daily misery of these Iraqi Kurds dying in the austere mountains that constitute the border between Iraq and its two neighbors, the United States decided to act. Operation Provide Comfort was equally designed to come to the relief of Turkey, which was also looking for a way to turn back the flow of refugees. Not only was the outflow straining its resources; these refugees were Kurds, whose presence in the primarily Kurdish-inhabited southeastern provinces threatened to further polarize the situation there. With the support of Özal, OPC was initially established and included ground troops. Iraqi forces soon pulled back, and the Kurdish refugees returned to their homes. The combination of a token allied presence

in the north, in the town of Zakho, with the air cover, allowed for the creation of the autonomous Kurdish zone. The Kurds, much to the distress of Ankara, quickly organized themselves. By 1992, they had had elections and a functioning administration, even if the two faction leaders, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, continued to call the shots.

Turkey had reluctantly agreed to the establishment of OPC. The refugees had not been allowed into Turkey for fear of the creation of a permanent, Gaza-type refugee implantation, the linkage of the two Kurdish communities, and the economic burden of caring for so many people.⁵ OPC was the only way to convince the refugees to leave Turkish soil and return. More important, the plight of these refugees had attracted worldwide attention to the Kurds in general, and Turkish Kurds mobilized to help their ethnic cousins. Towns in the southeast, despite their own impoverishment, raised funds, bought necessary supplies and organized relief convoys. Such overt cross-border solidarity when combined with a still-growing insurgency clearly worried Turkish authorities and assisted the setting up of OPC. For constitutional reasons, OPC had to be approved by the Turkish Grand National Assembly, a fact which would later become a major source of contention between governments willing to extend its mandate and opposition parties intent on undermining it.

Turkish misgivings aside about the presence of the multinational force in Turkey and Iraq, collaboration between the United States, in particular, and Turkey under the umbrella of OPC enabled the Turkish military to conduct wide-scale operations in northern Iraq. These were

not hot pursuit, but rather large sweeps designed to eradicate PKK bases. Ankara corralled the Kurdish factions in northern Iraq to support such anti-PKK operations, the largest of which was conducted before the onset of winter in October-November 1992. Eventually such operations would become routine, with some entailing tens of thousands of troops.

With the insurgency in Turkey worsening and disenchantment with the conduct of the anti-insurgency campaign increasing, Özal decided to change tactics. He sought the assistance of Turkish Kurds, but more important, of Iraqi Kurdish leaders and Talabani, in particular, to get the PKK to declare a cease-fire in 1993. He openly cultivated the Iraqi Kurdish leaders and sought to win the hearts and minds of Turkish Kurds by attempting to be seen as the friend of their Iraqi brethren. This was a risky strategy that once again contradicted Turkey's traditional approach to the Kurdish issue. The experiment was cut short by Özal's death in April 1993; the cease-fire with the PKK collapsed soon thereafter. Özal had pushed these changes in spite of the fact that as president of the republic his job was largely ceremonial; Süleyman Demirel, who had become prime minister in 1991 and succeeded him as president, made sure that these policies were abandoned. With weaker leadership, epitomized by Demirel and Tansu Çiller as the new prime minister, the military managed to reassert its influence and steer Turkey back to its traditional policy options.

The Iraqi regime's approach to Turkish policy after the Gulf War was surprisingly accommodating. Baghdad saw in Turkey a country that had been pushed around by its superpower ally and also one that was sympathetic to Iraq. Özal's travails in

many ways demonstrated the difficulties involved in reaching a consensus on Iraq that was antithetical to Baghdad's interests. Moreover, for Iraq under blockade, Turkey was, with Jordan, one of the few remaining exits and smuggling routes. Also, in the early years after the war, Turkey assiduously met with Iran and Syria to reiterate its commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq. This is not to say that Iraq was pleased with the deepening relationship between Ankara and the Kurds, nor was it completely acquiescent in Turkish incursions into its territory, because they reminded everyone that Baghdad no longer controlled the north. Finally, there were longstanding issues between Iraq and Turkey. Just as with Syria, water loomed large, since both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers have their origins in the Anatolian land mass.

TURKEY AND IRAQ: CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

In 1991, Philip Robins wrote, "of the three Middle Eastern neighbors it is Iraq with which Ankara has the best potential for balanced relations."⁶ He cited Iraq's dependence on Turkey for access to Europe, the trade relationship, the common desire to subdue Kurdish ethnic consciousness, and even the similarity in regime types as far as the approach to religion was concerned. Phebe Marr wrote, "Turkey's geostrategic and economic interests point to a gradual, if reluctant, normalization of relations with Iraq, even while Saddam is in power. Were he to be replaced, this process would be speeded up."⁷ Although much may have changed on the ground since these assessments were made, the fact remains that they both are still correct.

The View from Ankara

Post-Gulf War Turkish policy on Iraq can be characterized as a tight balancing act involving the following issues:

- (1) Relations with the United States,
- (2) The territorial integrity of Iraq and the institutionalization of the Kurdish entity in northern Iraq,
- (3) The struggle against the PKK and its presence in the north,
- (4) The economic costs to Turkey of continued sanctions.

Relations with the United States

The Kurdish question aside, the United States and Turkey share a basic approach to Iraq. They both adhere to the principle of Iraq's territorial unity and fear, perhaps for different reasons, the consequences of the instability that would ensue were Iraq to break up. Also, they see in Saddam a potential regional hegemon likely to disrupt the established order with his zeal to acquire large quantities of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Moreover, for both, a humbled and somewhat weakened Iraq serves as a balance to Iranian regional aspirations.

But with Özal's demise, existing differences between U.S. and Turkish interests became more pronounced. The Turkish establishment's unease with OPC and the sanctions on Iraq grew with time. Even after allowing for opposition antics, parliamentary debates on the renewal of OPC accordingly became more contentious. OPC was accused of all kinds of mischief, from dropping ammunition for the PKK to stopping and picking up wounded PKK fighters. Even former president Kenan Evren argued in favor of OPC's removal. Evren crystallized Turkish

thinking when he suggested that "a force that is protecting the Kurds of northern Iraq today, one day can turn around and say that it is protecting those in the south-east."⁸ It is precisely this fear that terrified the Turkish establishment even though it knew fully well that the United States had no such intention. In fact, while supporting the right to have a life free of Saddam's repression, Washington provided complete support – certainly at the rhetorical level – for Ankara's struggle against the PKK. Misgivings at the elite level can be attributed primarily to how uncomfortable this elite was in the mid 1990s with the emerging notion of Kurds and Kurdishness; after all, until some five years earlier, to all intents and purposes, Kurds were not part of the lexicon. The fact remains that Iraq's neighbors and the Western countries have over the years, despite their clear desire to keep Iraq unified, contributed in different ways and indirectly to its dismemberment.⁹ This is perhaps the inevitable result of current policies, to which there are no good alternatives.

Leading the fight against the renewal of OPC's mandate were two political parties that seemingly came from opposite sides of the political spectrum: the center-left nationalist Democratic Left party (DLP) of Bülent Ecevit and veteran Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare party. Both had traditionally espoused anti-U.S. positions. Ecevit's opposition to U.S. Iraq policy was motivated primarily from a fear that this would lead to the emergence of Kurdish nationalist demands in Iraq as well as Turkey. He had always viewed the Kurdish issue as an economic rather than an ethnic one; he dismissed the very formulation of Kurdish demands by arguing that the inhabitants of

those parts of Turkey and Iraq were nothing more than feudal clans led by incompetents. As late as 1996, Ecevit was praising the putative agreements signed at the end of the Gulf War (after the mass exodus of refugees) between Saddam and the two Kurdish leaders, arguing, "Although the project was not up to Western standards, it could have paved the way for internal peace and accord in that country. In any case, the anachronistic feudal structure of Northern Iraq was not yet ready for a fuller form of democracy."¹⁰ The reason for the failure of this pact was crystal clear to him as well: "But the United States immediately intervened to cut off the Kurdish dialogue with Baghdad. Instead the United States chose to virtually partition Iraq and try to establish a superficial Kurdish state in the North under its own mandate."¹¹

Ecevit had good personal relations with Saddam Hussein and during the prelude to the Gulf War visited him in Baghdad, one of the few Western leaders to have done so. This visit was followed by others in 1991 and 1992. He had been a long-standing foe of sanctions on Iraq, suggesting in 1994 that Turkey pierce the U.N.-imposed embargo on Iraq, which he dismissed as an American whim. Furthermore, he saw the United States as demanding unreasonable concessions on Cyprus and the domestic Kurdish issue in return for economic aid.¹²

Erbakan and his Welfare party's objections were even more strident. OPC in their view was an occupation force. Erbakan claimed that OPC supported the PKK, transported equipment to Armenia's nuclear power plant, and survived despite the concerted opposition of the population, parliament and military because the United

States was imposing it.¹³ The December 1995 elections did not augur well for OPC; the Welfare party emerged as the largest political group in Parliament; Ecevit's DLP also scored significant gains. At victory celebrations on December 25, 1995, Erbakan wished OPC a speedy "good-bye." Once in power, Erbakan sent two of his ministers, including Justice Minister Sevket Kazan, one of his most trusted and longstanding colleagues, to Baghdad in pursuit of improved relations.¹⁴ Six months later, Erbakan as prime minister had to preside over another extension of OPC.¹⁵ This would be its last. By January 1, 1997, following the debacle in northern Iraq in fall 1996, when Barzani's KDP fighters retook the city of Irbil from his adversary Talabani with the help of the Iraqi army, OPC was replaced by a much downsized force, Operation Northern Watch (ONW). By the time Ecevit became prime minister in 1999 and his party subsequently emerged as the largest from elections that year, the renewal of ONW had ceased to be as controversial an issue as its predecessor.

Although Erbakan claimed to have received concessions from the United States in June 1996, which allowed him to claim credit for the transformation of OPC into ONW and thus fulfill his election promise, this change did not significantly alter U.S. policy toward Iraq. The fact of the matter is that Erbakan and Ecevit were not the only ones perturbed by the presence of OPC. The list included the military as well, which had been very uneasy about the whole enterprise.¹⁶ Ironically, in order to justify its own recommendation for the renewal of OPC's mandate, the government in every instance had to fall back upon the advice of the National Security Council (NSC), the powerful military-

civilian body that serves as the institutional and primary conduit for the military leadership's preferences. In this game, the military through the NSC played a critical role; on the one hand, it fanned the flames of discontent while, on the other, it presented itself as a reliable intermediary between the United States and the Turkish Parliament.

The Turkish elites' deep suspicions of the U.S.-led multinational operation notwithstanding, OPC's mandate was routinely renewed primarily because it came to symbolize the mutual dependence relationship between Ankara and Washington. The need to both contain Saddam and protect the Kurdish enclave elevated OPC/ONW to a critical component of Washington's policy. In effect, the United States became dependent on the forces based at Incirlik to sustain its anti-Saddam policy. This, in turn, provided Ankara with significant bargaining chips even though OPC had been established just as much

to protect the Kurds as it had to enable the Turkish government to remove the Kurdish refugees from the border areas. In this sense, Turkey's Iraq policy cannot

be dissociated from its relationship with the United States. OPC/ONW bought a certain degree of immunity from U.S. criticism of its cross-border raids into Iraq as well as its human-rights violations in the Kurdish areas, insurance against the repetition of the 1991 events and goodwill in the U.S. Congress. As a minister in the Erbakan-led government, Necati Çelik stated in defense of its

decision to renew OPC, "not only did the NSC argue against a denial, but, when your defense industries' dependence on the United States is about 75 percent, you cannot conduct a policy despite the United States."¹⁷ The United States did not just need Turkey for OPC/ONW, but also for putting pressure on Saddam during periods of acute tension between Baghdad and the international community. During the February 1998 crisis between Baghdad and Washington, an initially ambivalent Ankara began to side with the United States on the presence of WMD in Iraq, as Washington promised it support with international financial institutions, arms sales, incursions into Iraq and Patriot deployments.¹⁸ The request for Patriots, however, revealed that despite their aversion to OPC/ONW, the Turkish elites were also bothered by Saddam's drive to acquire WMD capabilities. History had demonstrated that this was not the most reliable of neighbors.

Moreover, almost from the beginning of the creation of OPC, Ankara deftly used the U.S. need for it to extract concessions from Washington regarding Iraq. At first, it

demanded the opening of the pipeline from Kirkuk to the Mediterranean. Washington successfully argued at the U.N. Security Council for mandating that Iraq export at least 50 percent of its oil through Turkey as part of the oil-for-food Resolution, UNSCR 986. Despite its fervent wish to tighten the noose around Saddam, the United States also sided with Ankara, most recently

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during the discussions relating to UNSCR 1284, the latest iteration of UNSCR 986, to exclude Turkey's trade with Iraq through the Kurdish areas from the sanctions regime.¹⁹ When the two Iraqi Kurdish factions fought each other, U.S. efforts to mediate included the Turks and, in fact, the process that began in Drogheda (Ireland) was concluded in Ankara, earning it the title of the Ankara Process. Still, the Turks were unhappy not to be in the room when U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright negotiated a final agreement between the two leaders in Washington in fall 1998.²⁰ Moreover, they were disturbed by references to federalism in the final document signed by all the parties. Ever suspicious of NGO-type activities in the north, which many Turks assumed were designed to prepare for the establishment of an independent state, Ankara, soon after Mümtaz Soysal became foreign minister in July 1994, drastically curtailed access to the north.

Just as Erbakan discovered that he could not substantially shift Turkish Iraqi policy, Ecevit was faced with a similar situation soon after assuming power in 1999. He invited Tarik Aziz, Iraq's deputy prime minister, to Ankara, much to the consternation of Washington, which had stepped up its efforts to unseat the regime in Baghdad. Unfortunately for Aziz, his visit coincided with the capture and return to Turkey of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader. In view of the presumed U.S. help in Öcalan's capture, Aziz received a cold shoulder from Turkish authorities.²¹ Ecevit, in fact, even agreed to an expansion of the rules of engagement for ONW aircraft patrolling Iraqi territory above the 36th parallel, enabling pilots to retaliate against Iraqi radar and missile tracking and

firing incidents by choosing among a wider range of targets. In the end, Ecevit, notwithstanding his previous uncompromising rhetoric on the inadvisability of following the United States on Iraq, chose to do just that.²²

In sum, the mutual dependence of Turkey and the United States on each other enabled each to make certain concessions to the other. The United States was careful not to criticize Turkish cross-border operations, gave full support to the anti-PKK struggle, was somewhat subdued in its criticism of Turkish human-rights violations, and supported Turkish demands for exceptions from the sanctions regime. In exchange, Turkey made the best of what it perceived as an unfavorable set of conditions in northern Iraq to satisfy U.S. preferences. At a fundamental level, however, Turkish and American preferences are incompatible. While the United States will accept nothing less than a new regime in Baghdad, the Turks are wary that a new regime will be weak and beholden to the northern Kurdish groups.

Territorial Integrity and the Kurdish Entity

In Ankara's view, the dismemberment of Iraq as a consequence of current international policy is a very real possibility. Therefore, Turkey's first priority is to ensure Iraq's territorial integrity and prevent the Iraqi Kurds from creating an independent state of their own. Even though relations with Iran and Syria have deteriorated over the last few years (in the case of Syria there was an improvement following Öcalan's expulsion), the three countries are agreed on checking the ambitions of Kurds in northern Iraq lest the demonstration effect further politicize their

own Kurdish populations. Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem strongly stated Turkey's view when he argued, "We are against judging the situation in Iraq along religious or ethnic lines. We cannot imagine an independent entity in southern Iraq based on religion, or in the north based on ethnicity with the centre of the country staying only Arab."²³ Although much of Turkish concern has focused on the possible emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, the possibility, however unlikely, of a Shia-dominated state in the south is also a worrisome possibility. Such an eventuality could provide Iran with another regional ally with which to influence events in the Middle East.

From the beginning of the Kurdish "problem," the Turkish government tried to enlist the help of both the KDP and the Patriotic

Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to help it control the PKK. In 1992, both groups cooperated with the Turkish military in a sweep of the area. As relations between the two factions worsened, Turkey had to rely increasingly on its forces to fight the PKK in Iraq. In 1995, for instance, Ankara conducted a six-week operation entailing some 35,000 troops.²⁴ Still, geography – the KDP's territory abutted Turkey's – and Massoud Barzani's more traditional and less nationalistic outlook allowed Ankara to work more closely with the KDP. Most PKK fighters tended to be holed up in the mountains controlled by the KDP, which also meant that during cross-border incursions, Turkey needed the KDP more than the PUK, whose territory

bordered Iran. Because PUK leader Jalal Talabani refused for a very long time to unequivocally denounce the PKK, Ankara mistrusted the PUK. It suspected the PUK of providing safe passage and even basing rights on its territory. As relations between the two Kurdish factions worsened, it became increasingly difficult for the PUK to access Turkish territory, and it found a natural ally in Tehran. In 1996, following the initial KDP and Iraqi attacks that dislodged the PUK from its traditional strongholds, including Suleymaniya, it counterattacked. Over the ensuing year, both sides fought sporadically; in November 1997, retreating KDP forces, however, had to rely on Turkish assistance to halt the

PUK's advance and stabilize the front.

As there has been no return to the pre-Gulf War status quo,

Ankara's second-

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best option in northern Iraq has been to weaken and keep in check signs of consolidation of the northern autonomous government. From this respect, the Kurdish elections of 1992 were an unwelcome event. On the other hand, the division of northern Iraq between the two factions has clearly set back the ambitions of these Kurds. Following the Drogheda and Ankara accords, Turkey has also assumed a critical role in monitoring the cease-fire. Ankara, however, will not be satisfied with a post-Saddam arrangement that ends up creating a federal state in Iraq, as the Kurds have been demanding. Although Turkey benefits from continued divisions among the Kurds, a unified Kurdish leadership beholden to Ankara would

probably provide it with a greater say in future Iraqi developments.

Even Ankara's relationship with the KDP has shown signs of strain, especially since Öcalan's arrest and the end of the PKK-led insurgency.²⁵ With the violence abating in the southeast and subsequent decline in the need to cooperate with Barzani's forces, the Turkish leadership has tried to demonstrate the limits of its tolerance for Kurdish activity. In March 2000, at the instigation of the military high command, a furor erupted over the KDP Ankara representative's Nevruz (Kurdish New Year) reception, which European Union representatives attended. In July 2000, the Turkish establishment viewed the KDP representative's invitation as a ruse to pass itself off as a diplomatic mission.²⁶ The Turkish government, in an uncharacteristic move interpreted by many as another slap at the KDP, after an 18-month absence, invited Talabani to visit Ankara and accorded him a warm reception.²⁷

To blunt arguments about Kurdish exceptionalism, Ankara has also trumpeted the rights of Turcomans in northern Iraq. The number of Turcomans, many of whom do not live in the Kurdish-controlled territories, has been subject to wild exaggerations although no real count exists. Ironically, it is Ecevit who has been at the forefront of the quest for recognition of the Turcomans as a separate ethnic group in Iraq, even though he does not envisage a separate area for them. In Ankara, as a result of attempts to interfere in the politics of the Turcomans in Iraq, more than one "representative" organization exists today. Turcomans were employed by the international community as cease-fire observers. The Iraqi regime has historically been antagonistic to the Turcomans, and they

have been subject to the same human-rights violations that all other Iraqis have experienced. Still, for Turkey, the Turcomans represent a card which, if well played, can give Ankara some say in post-Saddam arrangements, especially should the Kurds decide to ignore them.²⁸

While both Kurdish factions have maintained contact with the regime in Baghdad for good measure, it is Barzani who has had the closest links. Ironically, as much as the Turks would like to see the two Kurdish factions cooperate with Saddam, the very existence of a Turkish-KDP tie has enabled the latter to keep Baghdad at arm's length and keep its options somewhat open. Iran plays a not dissimilar role with the PUK.

Turkey's greatest challenge is the fact that after almost ten years of not living under Saddam's tutelage, the Kurdish population in northern Iraq is likely to resist strongly any effort aimed at bringing back total Iraqi control. Despite the hardships caused by intra-group fighting, Kurds in northern Iraq have not previously experienced as long a period of "independence" as this one. It has served to strengthen their consciousness and deepen their ethnic ties. Moreover, the oil-for-food resolutions (favored by Turkey), by allocating 13 percent of all Iraqi income to the north, have given rise to an unprecedented level of prosperity there. The Iraqi regime had always been stingy with non-oil investments in the north. Perhaps the greatest irony is that the separation of the north has even injected an element of competition between the two Kurdish parties, each trying to show its residents that it is better at providing vital services.

Even if Iraq does not end up becoming a federated state, as a result of autonomy

arrangements signed in the 1970s, the Kurds have nominally received rights even under Baathi leadership that far exceed those of their brethren in Turkey.²⁹ Hence, any accommodation for Iraqi Kurds within the territorial limits of Iraq is likely to include meaningful acknowledgement of their separate status and identity. How then will Turkey react if it has not managed to come to terms with its own Kurdish problem?

The Struggle against the PKK

Until Öcalan's capture and the unilateral cease-fire declaration by the PKK, Turkey was primarily concerned with limiting the ability of the PKK to use the north of Iraq as a staging ground for attacks. The mountainous and generally difficult terrain was ideal for the Kurdish insurrection, providing a strategic depth of sorts. This was especially true of the tri-border area between Iran, Iraq and Turkey. The north will remain an area of concern to Turkey because the PKK can always try to rebound from its crisis situation, especially if Öcalan is executed or dies in prison. It is also possible that another organization could emerge in the not-so-distant future to replace the PKK. The Turks have invested heavily in northern Iraq, and after numerous cross-border operations, have come to know the terrain. Northern Iraq's unsettled status provides ideal opportunities for mischief. What is, of course, not clear to Ankara is whether a rehabilitated Saddam-led regime in Baghdad might encourage such activities as a means of exacting revenge.

Former President Demirel had suggested that changes in the Iraqi-Turkish boundary might become necessary. He was, he claimed, reflecting on the difficul-

ties created by the terrain in preventing incursions from northern Iraq.³⁰ His comments elicited wide-ranging criticism from the Arab world, including Iraq and Egypt. Although this was not the first time Demirel had made that argument, he dropped the matter. It nevertheless created anxiety that Turkey might want to use its preeminent position in the area to modify the border.

Costs of Continued Sanctions

One of Turkey's most important concerns with respect to Iraq has been the loss of their economic relationship following the imposition of the U.N. sanctions. In fact, Turkey has claimed that it has suffered the most from the Gulf War's economic impact and, therefore, is deserving of special consideration under U.N. rules. Ankara's estimate of the direct cost to its economy is well over \$35 billion. Although this figure is inordinately high considering that Turkish exports to Iraq had dwindled to a trickle before the invasion of Kuwait, the border areas have suffered considerably from the embargo. The twin forces of the embargo and the 16-year civil-war-like conflict have devastated the economy of the southeast. The insurgency was close to its peak when the Kuwait invasion occurred and disrupted trade flows in the region. The conflict in the southeast also led to the depopulation of thousands of villages, most of them by Turkish security forces.

The oil-for-food resolutions may not have completely satisfied Turkey's needs, but they have provided it with an important degree of relief. Trucks cross into Iraq either to deliver goods purchased by the government in Baghdad as part of the resolutions or for purposes of smuggling.

The smuggling is a two-way street; in addition to commodities such as cigarettes and tea, cheap oil purchased on the Iraqi side of the border makes its way back into Turkey. Iraq has spread its contracts for purchases as widely as possible, and Turkey has been disappointed in its share. Following the acceptance of UNSCR 1284,

a 140-member Turkish trade delegation led by the foreign trade undersecretary went to Iraq to seek new opportunities.³¹

Turkey had also demanded to be accorded the identical rights Jordan had, such as the right to purchase

oil in Iraq for domestic consumption (this is in addition to the oil exported through the pipelines) and to export its wares.³²

Ankara, therefore, is anxious to see the end of the U.N. economic sanctions on Baghdad.

THE PERSPECTIVE FROM BAGHDAD

The regime in Baghdad is just as preoccupied as Turkey with the evolution of the Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. The realization of Kurdish ambitions in the north could easily lead to the dismemberment of Iraq. So far Iraq has not demonstrated undo worry about Turkey's role. Given its limited capabilities to influence events in the north, Baghdad probably sees Turkey's involvement, as Ahmed Chalabi, the head of the oppositionist Iraqi National Congress, has argued, as a counterbalance to Iran's ambitions in northern Iraq and

elsewhere.³³ Baghdad, especially after the Gulf War, had limited means to pressure Turkey, and, with the end of the PKK-led insurrection, it lost another possible point of leverage. Turks have often accused Iraq of providing support, although not in the same magnitude as Syria and Iran, to the PKK.

Saddam is unlikely to do anything at this stage which would enrage the authorities in Ankara, pushing them further into the U.S. embrace and denying himself the profits of illegal trades.

More important, however, from Iraq's perspective is Phebe Marr's observation of the changing strategic situation in the region and the resulting weakened position of Iraq. Following the demise of the

Soviet Union, Iraq

was left without a patron, especially when compared with Turkey, which enjoys U.S. support.³⁴ The regional imbalance is made all the more difficult for Iraq as long as the Arab-Israeli peace process continues to proceed, even if at a snail's pace. With ONW, Turkey represents the forward line of U.S. power. Baghdad has seen that even with the most friendly of Turkish governments, policies have not changed much. On the other hand, if Ankara has not deserted the United States, it has not gone out of its way to help Washington pursue its other goals, namely the "overthrow" strategy put in place with the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998. Baghdad can be satisfied with the fact that Ankara has had a measured approach to Iraq. In fact, unlike the United States, it has continuously encouraged the Kurdish factions to make their peace with the regime.

Turkey is still an important outlet for Iraqi exports and a source of imports (legal and illegal) and will remain so no matter what happens to the regime in Baghdad. Saddam is unlikely to do anything at this stage which would enrage the authorities in Ankara, pushing them further into the U.S. embrace and denying himself the profits of illegal trades. As for Turkish incursions into Iraq, Baghdad has criticized them, but, as Ghassan al-Atiyah has argued, "Given the isolation and embargo to which it is subjected, Baghdad can do no more than try to exert political pressure. That includes threatening, without necessarily carrying out the threat, to align itself with Syria or even Iran."³⁵

Iraqi concerns about Turkey extend beyond northern Iraq to water security. Both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers originate in Turkey and flow through Syria into Iraq. The ambitious 22-dam South-eastern Anatolia Project (known by its Turkish acronym GAP) has already led to serious differences with Syria. Although Syria is anxious, following Turkish threats in the fall of 1998 that led to Öcalan's expulsion from Damascus, to patch up its relations with Ankara, water will remain a serious problem for the region. It remains to be seen how Syria in the post Hafiz Asad era will deal with the water issue, but clearly a weakened Iraq does not serve Damascus's interests at this time. Similarly, Iraq cannot take on Turkey alone and would need Syria's help. Before the Gulf War, Saddam had assumed a more aggressive tone with Turkey on this issue. In May 1990, during a visit to Baghdad, then Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim Akbulut found Saddam insistent in his demand that Turkey increase its allocation of the Euphrates waters. When the Turks

declined, he refused to renew the 1984 security protocol that allowed Turkish hot-pursuit incursions into northern Iraq.³⁶

Öcalan's expulsion and the general perception of the "Turkish-Israeli alliance" as an attempt at a possible hegemonic arrangement blessed by the United States will continue to worry the Arab states. The Turkish-Israeli relationship has been the focus of much speculation. Whether this is an alliance or just a relationship is, at some level, immaterial if the regional powers perceive it to be a new power constellation. While there are obvious strategic, commercial and psychological benefits that each side derives from closer cooperation with the other, three aspects have eluded many observers.³⁷ First, this relationship's sudden surge is, in part, the result of its artificial containment by the Turkish side for political purposes. Second, while it is true that the military opened the way for the improved atmosphere, it was also the military regime that, in November 1980, had reduced bilateral ties to the lowest possible level of second secretary. Finally, although Israel as far back as the days when David Ben-Gurion was prime minister had been interested in developing a robust relationship with Turkey, it is Ankara that took the initiative this time. But there is no question that the Jerusalem-Ankara link can be a convenient distraction to explain away Hafiz Asad's retreat on Öcalan. Similarly, because Turkey's increased self-confidence is (incorrectly) perceived to be the result of this "alliance," future policies of states neighboring Turkey will continue to include it in their calculations.

Strategically speaking, Iraq, as a neighbor of Turkey, has to take into account the possibility that Turkey, despite protestations to the contrary, may one day

assume a more aggressive posture. The recent reopening, even in passing, of Turkish discussions regarding Mosul and Kirkuk reminds Iraq of the potential security dilemma it may face in the future.³⁸ But perhaps closer to home is the future prospect of a regional water-related stalemate, which is quite likely to materialize not only because of the GAP but because of the burgeoning population's increased demand for water. Hence, if sanctions are ever lifted, Baghdad may actively court other countries to balance Turkey.

Looking at Turkey from the Iraqi Kurds' perspective, it is clear that they, like the regime in Baghdad, have limited choices. The PUK's past flirting with the PKK notwithstanding, Ankara has called the shots precisely because it controls the Habur crossing and access to the United States. Ankara has correctly calculated that, irrespective of Washington's efforts with regards to the PUK and the KDP, these two factions will in the end have to pay a great deal of attention to Turkish wishes. Although the current situation is tenuous, the Kurds would rather live with the status quo as long as possible. With every passing day, their institutional hold increases while the memory of Iraq recedes in the minds of the people. On the other hand, their own rivalries have not helped win greater international support.

CONCLUSION

One way to look at Turkey's careful policy on Iraq is as a no-lose one: it has not alienated the regime in Baghdad unneces-

sarily, but neither has it upset would-be successors to Saddam, should he be replaced by a non-Baathist regime. However, Turkey has not won the admiration of either set of protagonists. Should sanctions end and Saddam be rehabilitated, Baghdad will continue to rely on Turkey to export its oil, to purchase goods and to provide a commercial outlet to Europe. But Turkey is unlikely to win large contracts from Saddam compared to other countries that have "stood with him throughout the ordeal." Similarly, an oppositionist leadership will worry about Turkey's past links to Saddam and be more inclined to solidify its relations with those who supported Saddam's demise. On the other hand, if Iraq remains unified, Turkey can legitimately claim to have survived a regional storm of monumental proportions without undermining its primary relationship, that with the United States.

Iraq too has played its cards carefully with Turkey and can be expected to continue to do so. Taha Yassin Ramadan's outburst in February 1999 threatening to bomb Incirlik was probably nothing more than an ill-advised expression of frustration. How the regime – if it survives – may recalculate its future course of action with Turkey after the sanctions regime is ended remains to be seen. Saddam is not a leader likely to stay still, and he continues to harbor ambitions for a greater role in the Arab world; after all this is what propelled him into two dangerous foreign wars. It may be that the next crisis will be triggered by a combination of his unbridled ambitions and a thirst for revenge and water.

¹ Turkish exports to Iran benefited from an even more spectacular gain; they increased from \$85 million in 1980 to \$1,079 million in 1985. For additional information on this period, please see Henri J. Barkey, "The Silent Victor: Turkey's Role in the Iran-Iraq War," in *The Iran Iraq War: Strategic and Political Implications*, ed. Efraim Karsh (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 133-153.

² Some 60,000 refugees crossed into Turkey by August 1988. Some were forcibly repatriated after the Iraqi regime declared an amnesty even though no one believed in its sincerity. See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), pp.360-61.

³ Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 119.

⁴ Necip Torumtay in his memoirs tells of Özal's preoccupation with northern Iraq and its possible benefits for Turkey. See his *Orgeneral Torumtay'in Anilari* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayinlari, 1993), pp. 115-16. Özal, in effect, was challenging the traditional cautious modus operandi of Turkish foreign policy. See Malik Mufti, "Daring and Caution in Turkish Foreign policy," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Winter 1998, pp. 48-9.

⁵ Baskin Oran, *Kalkik Horoz: Çekiç Güç ve Kürt Devleti* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1996), pp. 50-53.

⁶ Philip Robins, *Turkey and the Middle East* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1991), p. 58.

⁷ Phebe Marr, "Turkey and Iraq," in *Reluctant Neighbor: Turkey's Role in the Middle East*, ed. Henri J. Barkey (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1996), p. 67.

⁸ Quoted in Oran, op. cit., p. 115.

⁹ Ofra Bengio, "The Challenge to the Territorial Integrity of Iraq," *Survival*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 91-92.

¹⁰ Bülent Ecevit, "The Middle East and the Mediterranean," address to the 45th IPI World Congress in Jerusalem (Ankara: Democratic Left Party, mimeograph, March 25, 1996), p.6.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Hürriyet*, April 19, 1994, quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, April 19, 1994.

¹³ *Milli Gazete*, June 29, 1995.

¹⁴ Amatzia Baram, *Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Studies, Policy Paper #47, 1998), p. 112.

¹⁵ This was a very contentious debate because even the social democrats of the Republican People's party had announced they would vote against it despite their numerous affirmative votes when they were part of a governing coalition. Moreover, there was tremendous pressure on Erbakan to show that he was capable of standing up to the United States. Ironically, Erbakan's Welfare party was also the party most violently divided over the renewal because many of its Kurdish-origin deputies from the southeast were strongly in favor of maintaining OPC for fear that Saddam would quickly overrun the north.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Mehmet Kocaoglu, *Uluslararası İlişkiler Isiginda Ortadogu* (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basimevi, 1995). Kocaoglu expresses his suspicions regarding the true motives and behavior of OPC forces by repeating the various allegations against the operation.

¹⁷ *Yeni Yüzyil*, August 8, 1996.

¹⁸ Metehan Demir, "Washington pressures Ankara on Iraqi crisis," *Turkish Daily News*, February 5, 1998. During the same crisis, then-Deputy Prime Minister Ecevit strongly opposed the possibility of U.S. military action to get Sadam to comply with UNSC resolutions and Foreign Minister Cem took a trip to Baghdad to convince the Iraqis to obey the United Nations.

¹⁹ Mehmet Ali Birand, the veteran columnist, argued in 1996 that it was wrong for Turkey to think that it could use OPC to bargain on a whole slew of issues, including Turkish-Greek relations, Cyprus and arms sales. In fact, U.S. and European silence on the continuous cross-border operations is a sufficient payoff, "Hem Çekiç Güç'ü kov, hem hareket yap. . ." *Sabah*, June 15, 1996.

²⁰ Turkey decided in retaliation to "upgrade" its diplomatic relations with Baghdad to full ambassadorial level. Deputy Premier Bulent Ecevit said the dramatic move was in response to the agreement between the two Kurdish factions which had "accelerated a process aimed at perpetuating the de facto partition of Iraq," *Mideast Mirror*, October 1, 1998.

²¹ Demirel refused to see him and what was perceived as a visit to create a wedge in Turkish-American relations ended up as a major setback for Iraq. Aziz was not helped by Iraqi Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan's statement to the effect that Iraq might target the Incirlik base should ONW operations continue, *Turkish Daily News*, February 17, 1999.

²² This does not mean that the issue is free of controversies. Ankara's decision to raise the level of its representation in Baghdad not only caused consternation in Washington, but also got mired in the controversy on the U.S. House of Representatives attempt to pass a non-binding resolution on the Armenian genocide. As the proposal made progress through the first committee, the process of appointing a new ambassador to

Baghdad was speeded up (*Radikal*, September 26, 2000).

²³ Agence France Press, August 25, 1999.

²⁴ Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey and the Kurdish Safe-Haven in Northern Iraq," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1996.

²⁵ After Öcalan's conviction, the PKK declared that it not only was going to adhere to a cease-fire, but would also pull its rebels out of Turkish territory, thereby ending a 16-year insurrection.

²⁶ *Radikal*, March 23, 2000.

²⁷ *Al-Hayah*, July 28, 2000, FBIS translated text. "Turkey's high-level reception of Talabani also signals Ankara's growing unease over the [I]KDP's activities. Ankara has been particularly disturbed by the [I]KDP's using titles which give the impression of an independent state," *Turkish Daily News*, July 27, 2000.

²⁸ Ferai Tinç, "Kurt devleti mi?" *Hürriyet*, December 24, 1999. When Barzani included a Turcoman representative in his regional government, other Turcoman groups, on the basis of proportional representation, argued that they deserved half of the seats.

²⁹ Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), pp. 168-171.

³⁰ Quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, May 10, 1995.

³¹ *Milliyet*, February 26, 2000.

³² Sükrü Elekdag, "Irak ambargosu," *Milliyet*, February 7, 2000.

³³ Orya Sultan Halisdemir, "INC President Chalabi: Turkey should end its mediatory role," *Turkish Daily News*, November 7, 1997.

³⁴ Marr, "Turkey and Iraq," op. cit., p. 64.

³⁵ Ghassan al-Atiyah in *al-Malaf al-Iraqi*, June 1997, quoted in *Mideast Mirror*, June 2, 1997.

³⁶ Süha Bölükbasi, "Turkey Challenges Iraq and Syria: the Euphrates Dispute," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Summer 1993, p. 25.

³⁷ Space considerations do not allow for a comprehensive analysis of the Turkish-Israeli connection, but numerous articles have been penned on this subject which highlight the complexity of the relationship, including the domestic ramifications especially in Turkey. For further analysis please see Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish-Israeli Relations and the Turkish Identity Debate," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Autumn 1997, pp. 22-37; Amikam Nachmani, "The Remarkable Turkish-Israeli Tie," *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1998, pp. 19-29; and Alan Makovsky, "Israeli-Turkish Relations: A Turkish 'Periphery Strategy?'" in *Reluctant Neighbor*, pp. 147-174.

³⁸ For an excellent discussion on this issue, see François Georgeon, "De Mossoul á Kirkouk," *Maghreb-Marchek*, No. 132, April-June 1991, pp. 38-49. Georgeon makes the point that at the height of these discussions in the mid 1980s, the issue did not catch the imagination of the Turkish public, which was more focused on economic concerns.