

# Turkey's Northern Iraq Dilemma

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Brief Analysis

**T**urkish Foreign Minister Erdal Inonu arrives tonight as part of a tour of major Allied capitals to explain Turkey's military operation in northern Iraq. In Washington--far more sympathetic to the Turkish action than European capitals, yet nevertheless insistent that it be "limited in duration and scope"--Inonu probably hopes to focus on ideas for a post-withdrawal security regime in northern Iraq. Its dilemma has been to devise an anti-PKK regime that is both effective and diplomatically and politically acceptable; its way out of the dilemma may lie with the Iraqi Kurds.

Why Turkey is in Iraq...

Turkey had several reasons for staging its 35,000-troop ground-and-air operation into northern Iraq March 20. First, Ankara genuinely seeks to put a dent into the PKK's capabilities. Second, the operation is intended to send several messages: to the PKK, that the Turkish military is aggressive and has long reach; to Turkish domestic audiences, that the Ciller government is resolved to be proactive against the PKK; to Iraqi Kurdish leaders, that they should plug their border, as they pledged to do in 1992; and, perhaps most important, to allies in Operation Provide Comfort--Britain, France, and particularly the United States--and the rest of the international community, that the status quo in northern Iraq, with freedom of movement for the PKK, is intolerable.

Thus far, Turkey has had mixed success at best in accomplishing its objectives. By its own admission, it has found little more than 10 percent of the 2,400-2,800 PKK fighters it said were rooted in northern Iraq. Aware that a Turkish operation was imminent, most of the PKK fighters apparently melted away before the operation began. It also seems unlikely that significant lasting damage can be done to PKK infrastructure, given its guerilla style of operation, but that remains to be seen. The Turkish public has been highly supportive of the operation thus far, but Turkey's allies, particularly the Europeans, have not.

...and Why It Will Likely Withdraw

Ankara's statements over the past several days indicate it has scaled back the objectives of its operation. Rather than seeking to rid northern Iraq entirely of the PKK, the Turks now say they will leave when PKK "camps and facilities" and other "infrastructure" have been destroyed. Turkey thus appears to be paving the way for withdrawal, at least from most of the area it now occupies. It is a good bet some Turkish withdrawal will have begun by the time President Clinton and Prime Minister Tansu Ciller meet April 19.

The Ciller government is likely to move toward withdrawal, both because of Western reaction and for its own reasons. Negative reaction to the operation from key European allies is a primary factor, with Germany's decision to suspend military deliveries and \$100 million in military aid only one element. Far more important is Turkey's desire to maintain the viability of a customs union agreement reached with the European Union (EU) March 6. That agreement, which would begin to break down economic barriers between Turkey and the EU next year, represents Turkey's biggest step toward integration with Europe and probably its greatest diplomatic triumph since it entered NATO in 1952. The economic implications alone are significant for struggling Turkey, but the signing of the agreement touched off a celebratory mood in

Turkey mainly because of its symbolic implication that Turks are taking a major step toward their long-held dream of integration with the West.

The deal is not final, however. Although inked by foreign ministers, it still must be approved in the fall by the European Parliament, where the battle will focus on Turkey's human rights record. Both German and French senior officials have warned that Turkey's military operation in northern Iraq--unfairly or not-- puts passage of the customs union agreement in doubt.

For its own part, Turkey probably wants to avoid an extended, large-scale occupation. Former military chief Necip Torumtay, among others, has warned that an extended occupation could be counter-productive, since it would become difficult over time to distinguish northern Iraqi civilians from PKK--a shorthand warning that, if it lingers, Turkey could find itself the target of northern Iraqis as well as the PKK.

#### Post-Withdrawal Issues

For Turkey, the next important issue is what sort of regime should be established to restrain the PKK after this operation is over. Inonu has said that Turkey "must no longer face the necessity to stage repeated operations such as this."

Unfortunately for Ankara, none of the post-withdrawal options are both appealing and workable, particularly since the international community opposes an extended, wide-scale Turkish occupation. In the end, the Turks probably will have to pursue merely the least bad option. That may mean a revival and revision of Turkey's 1992 security agreement with Iraqi Kurds.

A recent statement distributed by the Turkish prime minister's office says that a "durable temporary solution" should include "increased cooperation and contact" in the border area between Turkish security forces and the forces of the two leading Iraqi Kurdish militias, Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Given U.S. interests in both Turkey and northern Iraq, this may provide the best solution to a thorny problem.

There is some irony here. Despite the failure of the Turkey-Iraqi Kurdish security agreement that followed Turkey's last major incursion in October 1992, Ankara nevertheless is again convinced that a local solution, one supported by Iraqi Kurds, remains the only viable approach. It also appears to be the only plausible approach to which the international community will not object.

For Iraqi Kurds, adopting an aggressive posture against the Turkish-Kurdish PKK is a difficult task, given common ethnic ties. In return, Turkey should make itself a more robust economic partner and provider of humanitarian assistance to the north. Ankara could supply electricity to Dohuk, a major Iraqi Kurdish city long blacked-out by Saddam. Turkey could also support an easing of the application of UN-mandated sanctions to the liberated north, which would improve Iraqi Kurds' living conditions and send a signal to all Iraqis that life is better, not worse, without Saddam. It might even consider recognizing the Kurds' demand for a decentralized, federated Iraq in exchange for Kurdish renunciation--in writing, if necessary--of any claims to statehood, thereby averting any

negative effect on Turkey's domestic Kurdish issue.

Decisions like these would be tough for Ankara, since they would alter long-standing policy. Nevertheless, they would likely encourage the Iraqi Kurds to overcome the political difficulty of actively confronting the PKK and cooperating with Turkey. And, a local agreement arrived at by Turks and Iraqi Kurds would best promote U.S. interests in regional stability and insulate Turkey from international criticism.

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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