

Toward a New Era in Turkish-Iraqi Relations Regarding the PKK

by [Abdulkadir Onay \(/experts/abdulkadir-onay\)](/experts/abdulkadir-onay)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abdulkadir Onay \(/experts/abdulkadir-onay\)](/experts/abdulkadir-onay)

Lt. Col. Abdulkadir Onay is a visiting Turkish military fellow at The Washington Institute.



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Last month, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani visited Ankara for a meeting with his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul to discuss, among other things, the PKK issue. The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) currently controls a terror enclave in northeastern Iraq. The Iraqi Kurdish parties -- Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party -- flank the PKK enclave. The United States is currently cooperating with Turkey in its operations against the PKK by providing intelligence support. But this cooperation will not be successful unless the Iraqi Kurds, who have the ability to block the PKK enclave, come on board and take a stand against the group.

What can Iraqi Kurds do in this regard and how would this affect their relationship with Turkey?

The Iraqi Kurds reaped the benefits of an alliance with the United States in 2003 by providing assistance to the US against the Saddam Hussein regime. Since then, the KDP and PUK have resisted increasing US pressure to take action against the PKK enclave in northeastern Iraq, from where the PKK has carried out terror attacks against Turkey. The Iraqi Kurds cooperated with Turkey significantly against the PKK in the 1990s; during that time Turkey provided the Iraqi Kurds with vital commercial and physical access to the outside world, bypassing the Saddam Hussein regime. Turkey also supplied the Iraqi Kurds with crucial protection and access to US military support against Saddam from the Incirlik base in southern Turkey. However, since the start of the Iraq war in 2003, and with the end of Saddam's rule and the United States occupation of Iraq, the KDP and PUK have ignored their deal with Turkey. In due course, they suspended cooperation with Ankara against the PKK. Furthermore, according to western security contractors in Iraq, Kurdish local forces are now protecting the PKK and its franchise groups by facilitating or providing logistics support.

Because the Iraqi Kurdish leadership does not acknowledge the PKK as a terrorist organization, PKK terrorists can travel unhindered in northern Iraq provided, in some cases, that they inform the local Iraqi Kurdish authorities. Journalists are also given access to the PKK enclave in this territory. For example, in a recent instance a Washington Post correspondent reported from location on March 8, explaining that the enclave is not controlled by either local Kurdish authorities or the Iraqi government.

If they are to be regarded as an established authority in northern Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds ought to take action against the PKK presence in their region. The PKK has illegally seized Iraqi territory. The PKK's enclave benefits from logistics support from areas controlled by PUK and KDP. Although these parties do not control the PKK enclave, the border between their respective areas and the PKK enclave is not sealed, allowing logistics support to flow to the PKK.

Turkish officials believe that Iraqi Kurds view the PKK as a potential bargaining card in exchange for Turkish recognition of Kurdish autonomy or of a probable declaration of independence by the Iraqi Kurds. While the Iraqi Kurds have strong ties to the US, their policy of ignoring Turkey may be shortsighted. Once the bulk of the US military leaves the region, the Iraqi Kurds will be surrounded by the Iraqi Arabs to the south, Syria to the west and Iran to the east -- all neighbors the Iraqi Kurds have reason to fear. When this comes to pass, the Iraqi Kurds will need Turkey both for protection and for access to the US military in Incirlik.

Ankara views the PKK much in the way that the US viewed al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after 9/11. Presently, northeastern Iraq resembles Taliban-era Afghanistan -- especially the Pashtun areas of southern Afghanistan -- in the sense that both are lawless areas in which terrorist groups have set up shop. Hence, just as the US military has targeted al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, Turkey will likely continue to tackle the PKK presence in neighboring Iraq.

In this regard, there are a number of key steps that the Iraqi Kurds could take on the PKK issue. The first step would be recognizing the PKK as a terrorist organization, a measure that would allow the Iraqi Kurds to come on board with Turkey, the United States and the Iraqi government in this regard. Second, the KDP and PUK might be well served to consider denying the use of their land by the PKK and preventing logistics support from their cities to the PKK enclave.

Finally, the Iraqi Kurds could cooperate with Turkey against the PKK as they did in the 1990s. They could help arrest some of the PKK's leaders and destroy PKK facilities as well as facilitating Turkish policing of PKK camps. Such steps would elevate Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish ties to the 1990s' level and even beyond.

Israeli operations in Lebanon and the recent Columbian operation in Ecuador against a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia leader in early March are examples of action required when an authority allows its territory to be used for terrorist activities against a neighbor. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmdeinezhad's latest proposal, made at the summit of the 57-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference in Senegal's capital Dakar on March 13, 2008, according to which Iran, Turkey and Iraq should work together to defeat the PKK terrorists while respecting each other's territorial integrity, has already made inroads in Turkey. Indeed, it should allow everyone to see the big picture on the PKK issue: the continued PKK presence in northeastern Iraq not only drives a wedge between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds but also has the potential of bringing Turkey closer to other regional alliances.

Abdulkadir Onay is a visiting fellow in the [Turkish Research Program \(templateI02.php?\)](#)

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