

## 360 Degrees from Erbil: The Iraqi Kurds Need Turkey

Mar 20, 2008



Articles & Testimony

On a recent trip to Iraq, I visited the three northern provinces that fall under the auspices of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). I happened to be in Erbil, the region's capital, during the recent Turkish incursion into northeastern Iraq to disrupt the terror camps of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). After taking in the view of Mesopotamia from Erbil's hilltop citadel, I asked Iraqi Kurdish leaders for a 360-degree view from Erbil, specifically inquiring about the KRG's perception of what its external threats are. To my surprise, Iran topped the list, and Turkey consistently ranked at the bottom -- even though Turkey was, at that very moment, carrying out military operations inside northern Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds indeed have bigger worries than Turkey, and the KRG leadership is actually seeking Ankara as a long-term ally. Indeed, if the Iraqi Kurds can deliver on the PKK issue, Turkey could potentially become their staunchest supporter.

Iran is the Iraqi Kurds' greatest perceived threat, perhaps because Tehran has significant intelligence assets within the KRG and also supports Kurdish Islamist terror groups. Tehran has the ability to hurt Iraqi Kurds if they ever cross Iran. Accordingly, the KRG feels that it must be largely complacent towards Tehran as it fears Iran's wrath.

Things are better between the Kurds and the Arabs, but the Kurds are on the losing end here, too. Between 2003 and 2006, when a majority of Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs were against America, the Iraqi Kurds were a significant ally for the United States in Iraq. This equation earned the Kurds American backing in Baghdad. In due course, the Kurds achieved many gains, such as recognition of the KRG as a federal entity.

That situation, however, changed after 2006. First, the United States co-opted the Sunni Arabs through the Awakening Councils. Then, Washington made peace with the Shiite Arabs. The new relationship with Sunni and Shiite Arabs has allowed the United States to zoom out from Baghdad and see the big picture in Iraq. Washington has realized that if Iraq is to work, the modus operandi must continue to satisfy the Arabs, who constitute the vast majority of Iraq's population.

Hence, throughout 2007, the United States backed the Arabs over the Kurds on several crucial issues. First, in February 2007, Washington pressured the Kurds until they agreed to a hydrocarbon law favorable to the Iraqi Arabs and the central government.

The Americans dealt a second blow to the Kurds on the issue of Kirkuk. Washington pressured the Kurds to drop their insistence on carrying out a referendum in Kirkuk by the constitutionally mandated deadline of December 31, 2007. The referendum would have annexed oil-rich Kirkuk to the KRG, fulfilling a Kurdish dream.

These U.S. actions have convinced the Kurds that America is abandoning them in favor of the Iraqi Arabs. Meanwhile, the Arabs continue to score victories against the Kurds now that they have learned to form ad hoc majority blocs in the Iraqi parliament to block or reverse earlier Kurdish gains.

Challenged by the Iraqi Arabs, threatened by Iran, and feeling abandoned by the United States, the Iraqi Kurds have turned to the remaining regional power: Turkey. Accordingly, KRG leaders express only warmth and friendship towards Turkey, adding that they hope for a long-term alliance with Ankara.

This is all for the better. In fact, there exists much fertile ground for friendship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds, from pro-Western views to oil deals. However, the PKK remains a major stumbling block for this relationship. The PKK, an organization which has caused over 30,000 deaths in Turkey, currently controls an enclave in northeastern Iraq, flanked by Iraqi Kurds. Although the Iraqi Kurds were a tremendous help to Turkey against the PKK in the 1990s, today they are not willing to play the same role.

Turkey views the PKK in northeastern Iraq in a light quite similar to how the U.S. military based in Afghanistan views al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas. Both northeastern Iraq and tribal regions of Pakistan are lawless border areas in which terrorist groups have set up shop. Hence, just as the U.S. military takes the liberty to attack al-Qaeda camps in the tribal areas of Pakistan from Afghanistan, Turkey will continue to tackle the PKK presence in northeastern Iraq. The sooner the Iraqi Kurds accept this military conclusion, the faster their relationship with Turkey will turn around.

Perhaps the KRG needs Turkey more than Turkey needs it. Even if the Iraqi Kurds were to establish control over Kirkuk's vast oil reserves, they could not export this oil without the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, the only oil transit line connecting landlocked northern Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey. And, assuming that the Iraqi Kurds recover their frail relationship with Washington, once [the] United States pulls out of Iraq, will the Kurds receive ready American protection without the Incirlik base in Turkey? Finally, the Iraqi Kurds have much to hope for in terms of economic development, but will this not prove difficult without Turkey's cooperation, as the only developed economy bordering Iraq?

A relationship between Turkey and the KRG that would be enormously beneficial for both sides cannot come to fruition until the Iraqi Kurds agree to the necessity of action against the PKK. Now that Turkey and the United States are confronting the PKK together, KRG action against the PKK would strengthen ties between the Iraqi Kurds and Washington on a major policy issue, repairing an ailing relationship. Is the Erbil citadel high enough for the Iraqi Kurds to see the best path to the future?

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