

Turkey's Day

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If there is one thing that Iraq does not need, it is additional sources of conflict and instability. Right now, the only part of Iraq that is stable and shows prospects of developing economically and politically is the Kurdish areas of the north. Though not without challenges, especially given the uncertainty over the future of Kirkuk, the Kurdish government there is working, and constitutes at least one model of success in Iraq.

But Turkish military posturing along the northern Iraqi border may soon not be limited only to a war of words or military maneuvers. The PKK attacks that have killed over forty Turkish soldiers and civilians in the last few months have created increasing pressures for Turkish military intervention -- an intervention that could destabilize the north, potentially trigger an Iranian intervention across the border, and further disrupt Iraqi oil exports in an already tight market.

The prime minister of Turkey has implied that Turkish military action will not take place prior to his meetings in Washington this week. The Bush Administration is taking the Turkish threats of military intervention seriously. Beyond simply calling for Turkish restraint, we are apparently now sharing intelligence with Turkey on the PKK, and, at least rhetorically, we have started putting some pressure on the Kurdish government to rein in the PKK.

But we are not nearly out of the woods. The problem has been allowed to fester for far too long and with too little attention. While it is easy to argue that Turkey overreacts to the problem of the PKK and any sign of Kurdish independence in Iraq, the reality of PKK attacks cannot be dismissed, and there can be little question that the new wave of PKK assaults has struck a nerve within Turkey. Prime Minister Erdogan may not want to intervene militarily in northern Iraq, but he is under increasing pressure to do so. Public sentiment is running strongly in favor of tough action against the PKK, and strongly against the lax attitude of the Kurdish government in northern Iraq which does little to stop the PKK's attacks.

Paradoxically, the PKK attacks are giving the Turkish military new leverage on the government. The Turkish military has seen its weight and power diminish recently, because the Islamic AKP party has governed effectively and built its political strength as a result. But the PKK attacks give military a new pressure point on the Erdogan government, and neither Prime Minister Erdogan nor President Gul can easily ignore the public pressure to do something.

It is within this context that the U.S. must now act. The ministerial meeting in Istanbul last week and the Erdogan

meeting with President Bush this week must yield more than symbolic steps. Erdogan needs to be able to point to something concrete to justify to his public why he is not acting militarily. Neither Kurdish checkpoints in the north nor claims by the Iraqi government that it is now taking the problem seriously are likely to have much of an effect.

What might work? Realistically, very little is going to work if the PKK attacks continue. In such circumstances, absent direct American military attacks against the PKK, nothing will prevent Turkish military intervention. Since the last thing the U.S. military wants is to have to commit forces in rugged terrain in an area where we currently face no threats to U.S. forces, we need to apply sustained pressure on the local Kurdish government to be more active in pressuring the PKK to stop. But this is only a starting point.

The Bush Administration must demonstrate publicly that it is focused on the problem in a high-level, sustained way. The ministerial meeting that Secretary Rice attended in Istanbul must not be a one-time event. Depending on the follow-up to that discussion, the Administration should establish a working group involving the United States, Turkey, and Iraq, to include representatives not just of the central government in Baghdad but also from the Kurdish government in the north. (Ironically, Turkish sensitivities over Kurdish independence have led them to avoid steps that would build the standing of the government in northern Iraq -- but this is the only governing body with any capability of dealing with the PKK threat. Turkey's own leverage with that government is great not only because of its military threats but also because of its growing investments in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq.)

This ongoing working group must involve political, intelligence, and military representatives and it must meet on a regular basis to evaluate the threat and the steps being taken to affect it. A senior U.S. official -- perhaps Eric Edelman, the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and formerly our ambassador to Turkey -- should have continuing responsibility for this working group. He could ensure high-level attention and follow-through. Moreover, such a role for him would signal to the Turkish government and public that a U.S. official who appreciates Turkish concerns has been charged with addressing the issue.

While the Bush Administration has too often tended to focus more on the Turkish military than its government and public -- witness the approach to Turkey prior to our going to war with Iraq in 2003 -- it will now be imperative to work with both. It is the Turkish military that is pressuring most strongly for intervention. Quiet discussions with them, including on the material assistance they could use along the border to be more effective in dealing with PKK attacks, could offer assurance about our support. Even better, they could also offer Turkey a reason not to launch an intervention, given our concerns, or at least without giving us more opportunities to get the Kurdish government to more actively prevent the PKK from operating.

Finally, the European Union might be enlisted publicly to express sympathy for the Turkish predicament and privately to convey to the Turkish government that they need to give the U.S. a chance to change Iraqi behavior toward the PKK. The Turkish public must see that the E.U. is aware of their point of view, while Erdogan and Gul, who have worked hard to be more responsive to the Kurdish population in Turkey because of EU demands, must know that showing restraint remains important.

Given our stakes in preserving stability in northern Iraq and in the well-being of the Kurdish government there, the Bush Administration must use the tools of statecraft to prevent a major Turkish military move into Iraq. The Turks will find it is easy to go in and so not easy to get out. Turkey doesn't need a military adventure that will cost plenty and yield few results; the Kurds don't need to be embroiled with Turkey and diverted from internal development; and we don't need one more disaster in Iraq.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of **Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World**

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