

# Everybody's Kurdish Problem

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Articles & Testimony

On November 5, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet US President George W. Bush to discuss likely action against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The recent spike in terror attacks on Turkey by the PKK from northern Iraq and subsequent Turkish shelling have heightened expectations that Turkey could invade northern Iraq to battle the PKK. It is evident that the Iraqi Kurds are not on board with Turkey on the PKK issue and probably would not provide assistance to Turkey as they did in the 1990s. This stance poses a great risk to the Iraqi Kurds and their relationship with Turkey, as well as to US interests in the region. The Turks, the Americans and the Iraqi Kurds have an interest in resolving this problem. Here is why and how.

In the 1990s, Turkey was able to inflict severe damage on the PKK with the help of Iraq's Kurds. At the end of the Gulf War, the US and Turkey created a safe haven for the Iraqi Kurds in the northern part of the country. American planes regularly flew out of the Incirlik base in southern Turkey, providing an umbrella of American protection against Saddam. Not surprisingly, the Iraqi Kurds prospered under these circumstances, especially as Turkey provided them with protection and a lifeline to the outside world. Subsequently, Massoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), even obtained Turkish passports. In return, the KDP and the PUK provided Turkey with valuable assistance, including Peshmerga fighters and intelligence in its fight against the PKK.

The relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey has soured since then. Today, the PKK is based in areas of northern Iraq controlled by the KDP and the PUK. The Iraqi Kurds also reject Turkish action against the PKK.

Why have the Iraqi Kurds changed behavior? One explanation is that the KDP and PUK do not need Turkey as they used to. The Iraqi Kurds' participation in the Iraq war against Saddam has made them America's best allies in Iraq. They are acutely aware of this fact and consequently seem to think that they can do without Turkey's support in the short term. Therefore, they do not see the need for action against the PKK in order to win Turkish hearts. Rather, Iraqi Kurds appear to consider the PKK as a medium term bargaining chip vis-a-vis Turkey.

There are, indeed, a number of issues that the Iraqi Kurds seem eager to negotiate with Turkey. First, the Kurds need Turkey to look favorably upon the political future of their government, the Kurdistan Regional Government, should Iraq fall apart. Second, the Iraqi Kurds would want to bring Turkey to a compromise on the future of the city of Kirkuk. This city holds perhaps as much as 40 percent of Iraq's oil, and is contested between its Kurdish, Turkmen, and Arab inhabitants. Needless to say, at this stage, Turkey is against exclusive Kurdish control of Kirkuk.

The Iraqi Kurds seem to view the PKK as a bargaining chip that they can hand over to Turkey in future negotiations. This strategy is not necessarily wise. First of all, the rising rate of casualties in Turkey as a result of continued PKK attacks has created massive resentment in Turkey toward the Iraqi Kurds. Secondly, the strategy is based on the assumption that Turkey will wait on the PKK issue until the Iraqi Kurds are ready to bargain. This entire calculus could collapse should Turkey lose patience over terror attacks, which will likely happen soon.

The Iraqi Kurds, indeed, have a problem. One day Americans will leave Iraq, and the Iraqi Kurds will need to have neighborly relations with Turkey. The longer the PKK stalemate festers, though, the more animosity will build in

Turkey toward Iraqi Kurds.

Washington should be concerned about the issue as well, because the PKK disrupts an otherwise good relationship between America's two allies in the region. However, so long as they feel that they have America's unconditional friendship, and that therefore they do not need Turkey, Iraqi Kurds will avoid action against the PKK. This means the sword to cut the Gordian knot is in America's hands. Only when Washington makes Iraqi Kurdish action against the PKK a condition for its continued friendship with the KDP and PUK, will these two parties act against the PKK. If not, the Kurdish calculus that the PKK is a medium term bargaining chip vis-a-vis Turkey will hold. This stance, however, poses a great danger to Washington. Turkey is on the brink of an incursion into northern Iraq, which would destabilize the only area of Iraq that receives much publicity for its political stability. This is why Washington should intervene in the stalemate and bring the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey into a working partnership, a la 1990s.

One possible step for the Iraqi Kurds is to shut down the PKK's logistics lifeline, and provide Turkey with intelligence on the organization's posture. These steps would be seen as friendly gestures toward Turkey and pave the way for renewed friendship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. The KDP and the PUK have a Kurdish problem, namely, the PKK. If that problem is not taken care of, then the KDP and the PUK will have a Turkish problem. At the same time, without Iraqi Kurdish assistance, Turkey might get bogged down in northern Iraq. The U.S. will face an even larger problem: conflict between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. All sides have much to benefit from action against the PKK, and much to lose from continued PKK attacks from northern Iraq into Turkey.

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