

Look the Other Way: U.S. Stance on Limited N. Iraq Incursions

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Articles & Testimony

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The United States has done a lot behind the scenes, such as shutting down the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) financial network in Europe, but Turks need something more tangible from the superpower US, says Soner Cagaptay, a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Turkish Research Program.

"At this stage what is tangible is something whose picture can be taken and put on the front page of Today's Zaman," he says. A tangible action is either some type of military action or the delivery of some PKK members to Turkey, Cagaptay notes.

"The question is: Aren't reported incursions into northern Iraq by Turkish troops some kind of tangible action? I think there is flexibility developing in Washington. People understand that the Turks' patience is running thin. And nobody wants to get involved more in northern Iraq, so the middle way is to let the Turks do something. So the United States is going to look the other way when there are limited Turkish incursions into Iraqi territory, especially in the hot pursuit of PKK members escaping into Iraq."

Cagaptay, currently in Turkey for a brief period of meetings and observation, told us about Turkish-American relations in the light of PKK terrorism and explained different viewpoints from the United States regarding recent political developments in Turkey.

What is the background of PKK terrorism in Turkey?

In the late 1990s because of the successful military operations of the Turkish government and the capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK was paralyzed. The capture of Ocalan and military operations against the group decreased the PKK's abilities to attack Turkey so the PKK declared a cease-fire, pulled its members out of Turkey and changed its tactics including changing its name. Since early 2000 until 2007, PKK violence decreased and the PKK stopped being a household name in Turkey. Since 2006 we have seen a spike in PKK violence. There were expectations in the summer of 2006 that increasing PKK violence would pull Turkey into northern Iraq. However, we saw a unilateral cease-fire probably orchestrated by the Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani.

Why do you think that PKK has resorted again to violence?

First of all, the PKK has never renounced violence. It declared unilateral cease-fires when it felt it necessary for its own purposes of finding room to grow or regrouping. It's unrealistic to expect that the PKK would ever renounce violence completely. For terrorists it is a tactical response rather than a political choice to renounce violence. In 1999, the PKK renounced violence because Ocalan had been captured; the group lost its mastermind, who made all sorts of strategic calls, found refuge, arms and support. The PKK basically wanted to regroup inside northern Iraq so it could raise new leadership after the capture of Ocalan. And at the same time the group had been inflicted heavy

defeats by the Turkish military. But then the Iraq war has changed the entire landscape for the PKK.

How?

What Turkey had done throughout the 1990s was cross-border operations. Because Turkey did not take part in the Iraq war, it lost its ability to move around in northern Iraq freely and keep the PKK under check. The organization, which had been crippled as a result of the military defeats of the '90s and as a result of Ocalan's capture, came back victoriously for its own sake after 2003 because it was able to find a vacuum inside northern Iraq that Turkey could not touch. Last year I think we were reaching a climax in terms of PKK violence, and especially because of pressure from Barzani, the PKK declared a cease-fire from September to May, a necessary break. Technically speaking, winter cease-fires are more a practical strategic need for the PKK where terrain and weather force it to be quiet than a cease-fire that's actually a political action.

Turkey and the US both appointed special envoys to deal with the PKK. Why didn't it work out?

I think the Ralston-Baser mission was a successful public diplomacy tool because it helped to soothe the pains of Turks last year.

How did it start?

The mission started last summer, around July and August. There were expectations that because of PKK violence again Turkey was amassing troops on the border and that these would go into northern Iraq. I think one of the ideas was to give diplomacy a chance. So the mission was created to take the steam off the Turkish public's anger and also to create a responsible person in Washington to whom the Turks could talk to discuss the PKK issue. Gen. Ralston was appointed as the envoy to encounter the PKK. Turkey appointed retired Gen. Edip Baser with the same mission. We saw early on that Ralston's mission was two sizes bigger than the shoes he was wearing because he was a retired general, not on active duty, in other words his pull inside the Pentagon was limited. As a result of that he faced structural hurdles. Nevertheless, the Turks gave him a chance.

So the mission failed because Ralston could not meet the challenge?

I think Ralston's mission was valuable as a pain killer, but just like all pain killers the soothing effect has now worn off. You have a retired military officer and a Turkish diplomat. They are not really counterparts. One is in government, the other is not. One is military and one is a civilian bureaucrat. The time that the mission has bought Turkey, the US and the Iraqi Kurds is about to end, especially now that we see a spike in PKK-led violence.

The Turkish public does not trust the US's intentions on the issue, and statements by Turkish generals fuel that mistrust. What can the US do to help Turkey for its fight against the PKK?

Independent of who says what on the PKK issue, there is a real problem. If there was no PKK problem, there would be no Turkish troops on the Iraqi border. There is a real problem that was put on ice in 1999 that looked like it would disappear, but it has come back full force since 2002. I think the PKK is really testing Turkey's patience. Especially the suicide bomb attacks in large cities, which bring the matter to the hearts of most Turks, make this issue more and more difficult to deal with. The United States has been in charge of Iraq since 2003 and it has not delivered any tangibles to the Turks in terms of fighting the PKK. Behind the scenes there is a lot the US has done, such as shutting down the PKK's financial network in Europe, which is very important. But at this stage what is tangible is something whose picture can be taken and put on the front page of Today's Zaman.

What could that be?

Either some type of military action or the delivery of some PKK members to Turkey. The question is: Aren't reported incursions into northern Iraq by Turkish troops some kind of tangible action? I think there is flexibility developing in Washington. People understand that the Turks' patience is running thin. And nobody wants to get involved more in

northern Iraq, so the middle way is to let the Turks do something. So the United States is going to look the other way when there are limited Turkish incursions into Iraqi territory, especially in hot pursuit of PKK members escaping into Iraq.

How about the northern Iraqi or the Iraqi leadership?

Turkish operating bases inside Iraqi territory were set up in the last few years to monitor PKK activities. I think so long as Turkey is acting in that area, we are going to see a muted response. Just as the media reported that Turkey entered Iraqi territory in hot pursuit, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the White House said that such an incursion had not taken place, in a way confirming my analysis that the United States would look at the other way in the event of limited and hot pursuit incursions. But at the same time Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, who is with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership KDP, said such an incursion had not taken place either, so we see Iraqi Kurds looking the other way.

Is Turkish parliamentary approval needed for such operations?

It looks like the military said permission from Parliament is needed to send a large number of troops into Iraq. For limited incursions we are going to see the continuation of same operations.

Parliament is not supposed to legislate until after the next elections (July 22). What's going to happen?

Two scenarios: For the next couple of months we will only see limited incursions by Turkish troops into Iraq. But if we see devastating PKK violence in western Turkey, Turkey could act on political daily strategic needs.

How do recent political developments in Turkey look from Washington?

A friend wrote about this recently and asked "which Washington?" I'll take it a step further and ask "which America?" There is Wall Street, the perspective of the financial markets. What is most treasured in Turkey is political stability, which creates economic stability, and in turn which makes Turkey one of the few countries where international businesses can make a lot of money; real interest rates being so high, and Treasury bonds yielding 18 percent interest and inflation being 10 percent means an 8 percent net gain. A lot of people on Wall Street are not invested in one or the other government in Turkey, nor are they invested in one or the other political party. They are invested in whoever brings political stability. It's a practical choice more than a political choice. The support for any government will last so long as that government delivers political stability. We're seeing a Turkey that is increasingly becoming politically tense and being led down the path of political instability.

Is there also Washington's view?

I would say the people who make day-to-day decisions on Turkey and diplomats at the State Department approach the issue in a practical way. Therefore, the US needs Turkey in Iraq and Afghanistan and in the war on terror and other places. As a result of that, to continue to work closely with the government of Turkey -- whichever government that might be -- once again is more than a political choice but a pragmatic choice. It's certainly not an investment in a political vision; it's an investment in the continuation of good ties with Turkey.

Any other views?

There are of course think tanks and academia. In academia you see a diverse debate on the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). People either look at this party quite critical of it or quite supportive of it, and I think that debate is more genuine in how Washington perceives Turkey than the rhetoric coming from the State Department or from Wall Street.

What does academia debate?

The question of whether Turkey can be democratic without being secular. There are some people including myself

who believe a democratic Turkey also has to be secular; that these are Siamese twins and if you kill one the other one will die.

When you talk about secularism, how do you define it?

Turkey's understanding of secularism is quite different than America's understanding of secularism. Secularism is like a dress; one won't fit all sizes. Everybody has to find their size. American secularism serves the needs of people who have come to America because they've escaped religious persecution. Everybody practices their religion according to how they want and the government doesn't get involved. The European idea of secularism, *laicite*, which is also the Turkish version, is rooted in the French historical tradition and is quite different than the American version. It developed out of a tradition of the dominance of the political space of one faith. In the French tradition this was the Catholic Church. What has come as a result of that, unlike the American tradition, which provides freedom of religion, in the European version it's freedom from religion creating a political space in which there is no religious presence or impact.

Is secularism under threat in Turkey?

There are two Turkeys for the sake of analysts. I call one macro Turkey and the other micro Turkey. Micro Turkey is a Turkey of economic estimates and figures. It is the Turkey of Wall Street. It's a country that has grown tremendously in the last five years. It's quite promising and moving toward EU accession. There is a micro Turkey that is not seen much outside of Turkey. For me, perhaps one of the best representations of micro Turkey is the demonstrations that took place in various cities. For an overwhelming number of women something must be happening at the micro level that they feel the need to go out and demonstrate. Something must be happening in their lives about how Turkey is changing or might be changing as a result of continuing AK Party rule. They showed us a face of Turkey that is worried about secularism that we have not necessarily noted because in general we have been following the macro Turkey.

How do you evaluate the recent political crisis in Turkey?

Electing a president and electing a prime minister are not the same thing in a parliamentary democracy. The prime minister is the chief executive who represents a political party and a political vision. The president is a non-partisan figure. Although the AK Party represents a powerful political movement in Turkey, it's not possible to say that it represents more than 50 percent of Turks. The problem with the current crisis is that the AK Party has overplayed its hand in assuming that the election of the president is something similar to the election of the prime minister. If the process had been carried out through consultation between the AK Party and the opposition and the vigorous debate in the media about who could be possibly the president and built consensus around that name, we would have survived this period with little political tension. In other words, had the AK Party stuck to a compromise candidate who would be Turkey's president and not the AK Party's president, it would have not only elected a president but also won the parliamentary elections and ruled Turkey until 2012.

Any forecast about the elections' outcome?

Beyond numbers, my forecast for the upcoming elections is the following: Parties that do well in the elections in Turkey are the parties that bring two elements together for their success: An established party machinery plus a charismatic leader. There are a number of established political parties in Turkey. But not all of these parties have charismatic leaders. And then there are a number of charismatic leaders such as Cem Uzan, who do not necessarily have an established political party. The winning combination I would look for is the combination of a charismatic leader and an established political party. In this regard, a charismatic leader in Turkey is someone who can connect to Turkey's new demographic majority, which is the majority that formed in the '90s and '80s as a result of massive migration to the cities, which is overwhelmingly lower middle class -- in Turkish the "varos" population. In the

income distribution of each country there are usually five quintiles. In Turkey, almost half of the population is in the fourth quintile. The definition of a charismatic leader in Turkey is what appeals to this quintile of lower middle class -- varos -- and the population in Anatolia that corresponds to varos. So whoever gets this, wins Turkey.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Turkish Research Program. He has written extensively on US-Turkish relations, Turkish domestic politics and Turkish nationalism, publishing in scholarly journals such as Middle East Quarterly, Middle Eastern Studies, and Nations and Nationalism. Dr. Cagaptay frequently writes commentaries in major international print media. A historian by training, Dr. Cagaptay wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale University (2003) on Turkish nationalism. He has taught courses at Yale and Princeton on the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. His spring 2003 course on modern Turkish history was the first offered by Yale in three decades. ❖

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