

The Iraq Study Group Report and the PKK: Dealing with an American Problem

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Brief Analysis

The recently released Iraq Study Group (ISG) report successfully lists Turkey's major concerns about instability in Iraq. The report states that Turkish anxiety over "operations of [the] Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), . . . a terrorist group based in northern Iraq . . . that has killed thousands of Turks," are so serious that Turkey might "go after the PKK themselves." PKK terror is definitely Turkey's most serious concern. Yet, surprisingly, the report, which suggests that efforts to stabilize Iraq will move ahead only if all of Iraq's neighbors contribute to the process, does not offer a single policy suggestion on how to address the PKK issue in order to bring Turkey on board.

This is a significant gap. Unless the PKK issue is resolved, Turkey will not fully commit itself to stabilizing Iraq. Accordingly, the PKK issue is as much an Iraqi and American problem as it is a Turkish problem, and, in addition to Turkey's ongoing efforts, action on their part is required to solve it.

The PKK, Turkey, and Iraq: The Big Picture

In July alone, the PKK killed twenty-three Turks, and the ongoing violence remains the most important domestic issue in Turkey. According to a November poll conducted by TESEV, a Turkish think tank, terrorism ranks among the public's top concerns, equal to major issues such as high inflation, from which the Turks have suffered for nearly four decades.

The PKK has used the four years since the start of the Iraq war to enhance its presence in northern Iraq, setting up a fully functioning enclave (with training camps, storage facilities, and reconnaissance and communications centers) around Qandil Mountain along the Iraq-Iran border, as well as various camps across the area. These bases provide training and coordination for attacks into Turkey. PKK violence emanating from this region, which is under U.S. military supervision but is actually controlled by Iraqi Kurdish parties—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—is inciting intense Turkish resentment against both Iraqi Kurds and the United States. As far as the Turks are concerned, both parties are implicitly sanctioning the PKK attacks by not dealing with the terrorist group's presence in northern Iraq.

Iraqi Kurds have suggested they have nothing to do with the PKK. Yet the group's camps and the Qandil enclave would have withered away if not for the electricity, fuel, food, money, arms, and reinforcements that flow to them

through KDP- and PUK-controlled territory. PKK terrorists regularly cross these territories into Turkey. The KDP is particularly complicit, as PKK leader Murat Karayilan lives in safety in the Barzan area of northern Iraq—the tribal homeland and bastion of KDP leader Massoud Barzani—and appears often on Kurdistan TV, the official KDP network.

The ISG report suggests that “Turkey opposes an independent or even highly autonomous Kurdistan because of its own national security considerations.” Turkish concerns on this issue should be evaluated within the context of the PKK presence in the area: Turkey opposes a Kurdish entity in the region because it harbors a terrorist group. Far from being imaginary, these concerns are based on a real-life threat similar to that posed to Israel by Hizballah-dominated southern Lebanon.

The PKK as an American Problem

The PKK is now America’s problem for two reasons. First, the continued PKK presence in northern Iraq curbs Turkish enthusiasm to help stabilize Iraq. Second, the PKK issue is eating into the very foundations of U.S.-Turkish relations. Many in Washington are puzzled over the persistent deterioration of Turkish attitudes toward the United States since the start of the Iraq war. These individuals are trying to figure out the right public diplomacy steps to take in order to improve bilateral ties.

However, because the Turks interpret lack of U.S. action on the PKK as complicity, rebuilding U.S.-Turkish ties is now beyond the pale of diplomacy alone. In other words, unless there is U.S.-sanctioned action against the PKK, America’s ties with Turkey will continue to suffer, and Ankara will accelerate its improving political, military, and economic ties with Iran, Syria, Russia, and—increasingly—China. The gravity of the threat Turkey perceives in the PKK presence in northern Iraq means that, at this stage, symbolic gestures such as the closing of PKK offices across Iraq will not suffice. Continued U.S.-Turkish intelligence cooperation against the group will also fail to win the Turks’ hearts and minds. After years of delayed action, the Turks will be convinced of U.S. commitment to the issue only when they see Washington take definitive actions—such as eliminating the PKK leaders and camps in northern Iraq—that can be publicized on the front pages of major Turkish newspapers.

In this regard, the State Department’s recent creation of a new office—“Special Envoy for Countering the PKK”—and the appointment of Gen. Joseph Ralston to this position are positive first steps. Yet, unless General Ralston’s job description involves actually combating the PKK, his mission may only make a bad situation worse and further undermine U.S.-Turkish relations. The creation of this office has raised Turkish expectations that the United States is now considering action against the PKK. Symbolic, cosmetic steps will only increase Turkish frustration.

Washington’s dilemma is that it cannot commit its already stretched resources to combating the PKK. But then, such action does not have to be carried out by the United States. Instead, it could be undertaken by Iraqi Kurds. Left to their own devices, Iraqi Kurds will not confront the PKK. But they need America as much as America needs them. The Kurds in Iraq are surrounded by hostile forces that include Syria, Iran, and Iraqi Arabs (all of whom resent the Kurds’ alliance with the United States). The KDP and PUK would take action only if Washington presented them with a grave choice between either combating the PKK or losing America’s backing in an increasingly volatile geography. By doing so, Washington can make action against the PKK a win-win scenario for all sides involved. Importantly, the United States would win Turkey’s heart in the bargain, and gain a potential ally in Iraq.

In the past, Turkey has taken matters into its own hands regarding the PKK. In 1998, after years of diplomatic talks with Syria, Ankara—deciding it was time to use force—massed troops on the Syrian border and threatened Damascus with immediate war if it continued to harbor the PKK. Today, Turkey’s anger over PKK safe havens in northern Iraq is at least as serious. The ISG report singles out northern Iraq as the nation’s only stable region. If Iraqi Kurds—and the United States—shy away from action against the PKK, even that stability will be at grave risk.

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