

## Allied Forces

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### Articles & Testimony

**W**ith the U.S. having transferred sovereignty to Iraqis earlier this week, the Kurds find themselves in a more precarious position than at any time in the last year. On June 8, the U.N. Security Council accepted a new resolution dictating the guidelines for post-U.S. Iraq. The resolution did not mention the autonomy that Kurds have meticulously constructed in northern Iraq since 1991; nor did it refer to the Kurds' growing independence in Iraq since the end of the most recent war. The absence of such acknowledgments from the resolution went a long way toward confirming the Kurds' worst fears about the direction of post-Saddam Iraq: that the country's majority Arab population will take the nation's destiny into its own hands, without regard for the aspirations of the Kurdish minority. With the U.S. gone, Kurds increasingly face the prospect of political isolation in their own country.

Confronting hostility from their neighbors to the south, Kurds may now seek friendship to their north. During much of the 1990s, Kurds enjoyed a mostly chilly relationship with the Turkish government in Ankara, which has always been wary of Kurdish nationalism. So it may seem odd that an alliance, or at least a warming of relations, with Turkey is now very much in the Kurds' interest. But the Kurds cannot afford to be isolated on both their southern and northern flanks at the same time. They need allies in a region generally hostile to their aspirations. As a result, it would not be surprising to see the Kurds make overtures to Ankara in the months ahead.

The Kurds, of course, have enjoyed autonomy and relative success in building their society during the last thirteen years. But relations with their neighbors have not always been smooth. Operations during the 1990s by the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)--which used northern Iraq as a base to attack southeastern Turkey--led to a deterioration of relations between Ankara and the two governing entities in that region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). And since the ouster of Saddam, the Kurds have frequently been at odds with Iraqi Arabs to their south. At the onset of war, when Turkey refused to allow the U.S. to open up a northern front against Saddam, the Kurds moved to fill the void. The two Kurdish parties, already close with the U.S., became America's only and best allies in Iraq, hoping that in return Washington would reward them. Shortly after the war, the KDP and PUK expanded their territorial control, grabbing parts of north-central Iraq, including the city of Kirkuk, which sits atop 40 percent of Iraq's oil. In Baghdad, the two parties made clear that the rest of Iraq would have to take them seriously. According to one member of the Iraqi Governing Council whom I spoke to while traveling in Iraq this past winter, "When the Council discusses business regarding northern Iraq, the Kurds do not

allow anyone else to join in the debate." The KDP and PUK made sure their autonomy was mentioned in Iraq's interim constitution. More importantly, the Kurds won the right to veto the permanent Iraqi constitution if they found it detrimental to their interests.

Not surprisingly, these gains by the Kurds have only frustrated non-Kurdish Iraqis. Such privileges are unfair, they say, because the Kurds are a relatively small minority in Iraq, making up just 15 to 20 percent of Iraq's population. Iraqi Arabs resent that Kurds secured their rights through U.S. favor. When I spoke last winter to Shiite notables and tribal and religious leaders in southern Iraq, many referred to the Kurds as "infidel" collaborators and seemed very unhappy with their gains in post-war Iraq. This feeling is as potent among the Sunnis as among the Shiites. On June 14, five Kurdish fighters whose car broke down outside the Arab city of Samarra in the Sunni triangle were ambushed and killed. The episode was similar to the brutal slaying of U.S. contractors in Fallujah on March 31: The corpses of the five Kurdish men were abused and burnt beyond recognition. If this atrocity indicates anything, it is that a simmering hatred for Kurds endures among many Arabs.

Arab distrust of Kurds has undermined U.S. efforts to secure Iraq. Washington has started to appreciate the fact that its constituency in Iraq includes not only the Kurds, but also the country's Arab majority population, especially Shiites. Back in March, when Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Sistani expressed dissatisfaction with Kurdish veto powers in the interim constitution, Washington first tried to placate him. When that strategy backfired, however, the U.S. acquiesced to Shiite demands and approved the June 8 U.N. resolution that failed to mention the Kurds.

Now that Iraqis have reclaimed their sovereignty, Kurds will likely find themselves opposing the rest of Iraq on a number of issues, ranging from secularism to the future of the Kirkuk oil fields. The Kurds seem unlikely to budge on secularism. The PUK Minister of Cooperation and Foreign Affairs, Abdul Rezzak Mirza, says that "secularism is an outstanding issue between the PUK and the rest of Iraq. If secularism is not written into Iraq's constitution, we will use all our means to fight and resist that."

As for Kirkuk, although the city is multi-ethnic, at least one Coalition Provisional Authority official suggested to me that Kurds want to keep it for themselves. By laying exclusive claims to Kirkuk, the Kurds have united all their adversaries--the Turkmens, Shiite and Sunni Arabs, and even Moqtada al-Sadr from southern Iraq--around a common cause. Banners of Sadr loyalists and Turkmen parties flew together at a recent anti-Kurdish demonstration in Kirkuk. To keep Kirkuk, the Kurds will have to confront the whole of Iraq. In fact, so long as the Kurds are perceived as America's favorites, all of their moves will be checked by a broad alliance of unlikely bedfellows.

Enter Turkey. Because America's primary interest at the moment is in stabilizing Iraq, the Kurds can no longer count on our unqualified support; and as a result they need other allies. The Kurds' two other neighbors, Iran and Syria, seem unlikely to fill this role. Tehran is wary of the Kurds' secularism and pro-western orientation; and Syria, which recently experienced a Kurdish uprising, is growing anxious over Kurdish nationalism. But Turkey could fit this bill. But for that to happen, the Kurds will have to placate Turkey on two issues: the PKK and Kirkuk.

The PKK lies at the heart of Turkey's distrust of the Kurds. The group renounced its unilateral ceasefire on June 1 and substantially increased attacks on Turkey after a five-year lull. PKK offensives will increasingly become a major cause of concern for Ankara. In order to win Turkish support, the KDP and PUK will need to crack down on the approximately 5,300 PKK terrorists currently residing in areas under their control. Should the PKK launch sensational attacks into Turkey, as it did in the 1990s, the Turkish government will come under popular pressure to enter northern Iraq to destroy the group's bases. Such a scenario poses a major challenge to Iraqi Kurds who would find themselves battling on two fronts--against Turkey in the north, and against Arab Iraq in the south. But if the KDP and PUK were to help the U.S. and Turkey shut down the PKK, they would achieve two goals. First, the parties would signal to the U.S. that they are willing to fight terrorism even when it is Kurdish terrorism. Second, by acting against the PKK, the KDP and PUK could restore themselves to the good graces of Ankara.

Then there is the problem of Kirkuk. Exclusive Kurdish control of the city would be unpopular in Turkey because of the city's substantial population of Turkmens. For the Kurds, reaching out to Turkey would likely mean working out some kind of power-sharing arrangement in Kirkuk with Arabs and Turkmens. Of course, such a settlement would make obsolete one of the reasons for Kurdish estrangement from Baghdad--and that estrangement is, in turn, the reason the Kurds need an alliance with Ankara. But with so many other sources of tension between the Kurds and the rest of Iraq--namely, secularism, the degree of Kurdish autonomy, and the perception among Arabs that the U.S. favors the Kurds--the Kurdish relationship with Baghdad would still be rocky even with a resolution on Kirkuk. So a settlement on Kirkuk would bolster the chances of a Turk-Kurd alliance without obviating the need for that alliance in the first place.

Contrary to common wisdom, the gap between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey is neither wide nor unbridgeable. Rather, it is a recent phenomenon related to the PKK's emergence in northern Iraq. In the early 1990s, the Iraqi Kurds had a cordial relationship with Ankara. Turkey supported U.S. efforts to protect them against Saddam Hussein and extended a helping hand to KDP leader Massoud Barzani and PUK leader Jalal Talabani. The two visited Ankara often and traveled all over the world with Turkish diplomatic passports. Throughout much of the 1990s, the KPD and the PUK were allied with Turkey. Relations between the two parties and Ankara soured only when the PKK became a significant force in northern Iraq, creating worries that the KDP and the PUK were more interested in helping the PKK than in their partnership with Turkey. If the Iraqi Kurdish parties were to take decisive action against the PKK now, they would once again earn Turkey's confidence.

Turkey, it turns out, also has an important reason of its own to want improved relations with the Iraqi Kurds: Both Ankara and the Iraqi Kurds are very interested in a secular government in Baghdad. In this endeavor, then, Turkey, the KPD, and the PUK are natural allies. Which is why there is reason to believe that should the Kurds make overtures to Ankara, the Turkish government would be more than willing to listen. In any event, the Kurds' alternative--to remain sandwiched between an unfriendly Turkey to the north and a hostile, powerful alliance of non-Kurdish Iraqis to the south--is not an attractive one. ❖

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