

# Can Americans, Turks, and Kurds Get Along in Northern Iraq?

## A Vision

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Recently, the bitterness between Ankara and Washington over Turkey's failure to extend full support to the Iraq campaign culminated in a much-feared quagmire. On July 4, U.S. Army forces detained eleven Turkish special operations troops in Sulaymaniyah, northern Iraq, possibly based on Iraqi Kurdish intelligence that they were planning to harm Kurdish officials in Kirkuk. Fortunately, no shots were fired and no one was hurt in the incident. Still, the fact remains that U.S. troops arrested soldiers from Turkey, a NATO ally viewed as one of America's staunchest friends until late 2002. Moreover, the Turks were allegedly conspiring against Kurds, America's best friends in Iraq. How to interpret this unpleasant episode? What can be done to prevent similar incidents in the future? Most important, can the United States and Turkey move forward in northern Iraq?

### Background

When the July 4 incident was first reported, Washington refrained from high-level remarks except for State Department spokesman Richard Boucher's July 7 comment that Turkish troops had been involved in "upsetting activities" in northern Iraq. In contrast, Ankara reacted vigorously. Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul called Secretary of State Colin Powell, dismissing allegations that the Turkish soldiers were involved in rogue activities and requesting the release of the detainees. The Turkish Army went even further, expressing discontent with the United States. On July 7, Chief of Staff General Hilmi Ozkok stated that the incident "had triggered the most serious crisis of confidence yet between the two NATO allies" and demanded the release of the Turkish soldiers.

### Where Do the United States and Turkey Stand?

Fortunately, the crisis withered quickly on July 7. Following a conversation between Vice President Dick Cheney and Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdogan, the detainees were released. Even so, the incident's implications for future U.S.-Turkish relations must be examined. In particular, the following questions need to be answered: Was the incident initiated on a local basis, with U.S. troops taking spontaneous action against independently minded Turkish troops and informing Washington after the fact? Or were Ankara and Washington involved in this chain of events from the very beginning?

It is difficult to ascertain Washington and Ankara's exact involvement in the episode before the bilateral investigation commission, currently in session, releases its findings. Yet, even if we assume that that the incident was of local origin -- that some Turkish soldiers engaged in anti-Kurdish activities without Ankara's knowledge, and that U.S. soldiers detained them without either Washington's authorization or due cause -- it would still be a disturbing development, highlighting the raw frustration that mid-rank field officers on both sides feel toward each other. In other words, the Iraq crisis has fundamentally recast the mutual perceptions of U.S. and Turkish soldiers: they see each other more as adversaries than allies.

If, however, the events unfolded with Washington and Ankara's full knowledge, it would point at an even worse situation, namely, that the chess game over northern Iraq and the nature of Kurdish governance there have poisoned U.S.-Turkish relations to an inconceivable level.

What Next?

Clearly, the current state of U.S.-Turkish relations leaves much to be desired, largely due to the manner in which Washington and Ankara perceive each other's agenda in postwar Iraq. Many in Ankara believe that Washington will eventually create a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, while many in Washington are convinced that Ankara is attempting to confuse matters there. This presents a major challenge: as long as the United States and Turkey are at odds in northern Iraq, there is good a chance that their relations will deteriorate further with incidents similar to that of July 4. What can be done to prevent such deterioration?

Clearly, rebuilding confidence between Washington and Ankara regarding northern Iraq will not be easy. Yet, it would help if the two parties and the Iraqi Kurds agreed to enter a period of extended cool-down in order to consider the following policy recommendations.

Recommendations for Turkey

Work with Washington to end Kurdish terrorism in northern Iraq. Turkey ought to take comfort in the fact that it has successfully won an uphill fight against the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The group was able to wreak havoc in southeastern Turkey during the 1990s in part because of its capacity to operate with relative freedom in the power vacuum that emerged in northern Iraq following the Gulf War. Now, the Turks can take advantage of the improved security situation in northern Iraq and work with the United States in disarming the PKK, recently renamed the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK).

Begin to view the Iraqi Kurds, like the Turkmens, as part of the Turkish family. For months before the Iraq war, Ankara took an active and justified interest in the Turkmens, who are closely related to the Turks. Yet, the fact remains that the Kurds are family to the Turks as well. Turkey is a nation in which people of various religious and ethnic backgrounds take pride in being Turkish (more than a few generals and politicians who fought against the PKK were themselves of Kurdish origin). These factors should be the basis of Turkey's attitude toward the Iraqi Kurds.

Recommendations for the Kurds

View Turkey as an avenue to the outside world and an anchor to the West. The Kurdish area of northern Iraq is sandwiched between Iran to the east and Syria to the west. In the short run, this leaves them with two channels to the outside world: Baghdad and Turkey. Hence, Turkey is well poised to offer Iraqi Kurds access to the West, whether for trading with Europe or exporting oil (the major pipeline running from northern Iraq into the Mediterranean Sea passes through Turkey). Moreover, as long as democracy deficits and radical Islam plague the Middle East, Turkey's secular and democratic traditions will provide the Iraqi Kurds -- whose own vigor in establishing an open society has received much acclaim -- with an ideological anchor in the West.

## Recommendations for the United States

Remember that allies such as Turkey are rare to come by, even if they are not perfect. Although many in Washington are upset by Turkey's belated support for the Iraq war, offending Turkey further (e.g., with the pending "Genocide Resolution" in the Senate, which would create nationalist, anti-American backlash in Turkey) would not further U.S. interests. Lately, Turkish public opinion, traditionally among the most pro-American, has become more anti-American. Such sentiments do not seem to be entrenched; rather, they are a product of the events of the past year. If left to brew, however, anti-Americanism could lay deep roots in Turkey. This is especially significant at a time when pro-Americanism is at a premium in the Middle East and when the situation in Iraq is not yet stable.

Remember that Turkey's importance for the United States extends well beyond Iraq. The Turkish-Israeli partnership, for example, is a valuable asset for U.S. strategic thinking in the Middle East. Ankara's support is also needed in the energy-rich Caspian basin. For instance, given Turkey's many historical and cultural ties with Azerbaijan, Ankara can play a role in securing a peaceful transition there in light of long-time leader Haydar Aliyev's fragile health. The alternative to U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the Caspian region is Russian-Iranian influence.

By working soberly and incrementally to bring Turkey back into the fold, Washington may eventually be able to establish a working relationship with Ankara. The alternative is a Turkey gone in the wrong direction.

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