

# Turkmens, the Soft Underbelly of the War in Northern Iraq

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## Brief Analysis

**W**ith the northern front in Iraq being officially launched today, coalition forces may soon move toward the city of Kirkuk, which they began bombing on March 21. Kirkuk, claimed by Kurds as the prospective capital of a Kurdish region in postwar Iraq, is the bastion of the Turkmens, a Turkish-speaking community that shares close historical, social, and cultural ties with the Anatolian Turks in neighboring Turkey. Their fortunes will be closely scrutinized in Turkey during and after Operation Iraqi Freedom. If Turks feel that the Turkmen community is being discriminated against or threatened, they could force Ankara to take action, perhaps undermining what remains of U.S.-Turkish cooperation in Iraq.

## Background

No reliable contemporary data are available on the size of the Turkmen population. The 1957 Iraqi census -- the last in which the Turkmens were permitted to register -- counted 567,000 Turkmens (9 percent of the population) among Iraq's population of 6,300,000. The census also counted 819,000 Kurds (13 percent of the population).

The Turkmens' ratio in the Iraqi population may have dropped since then. The Turkmens are more urban and middle-class than Iraq's other Muslim communities, so they are likely to have experienced slower population growth. Moreover, the Ba'ath regime's forced Arabization policies -- including a ban on non-Arabic education, broadcast, and associations as well as expulsion of non-Arabs from the major cities of northern Iraq -- seem to have had some impact on the Turkmens. Even so, given the growth of the Iraqi population as a whole (currently estimated at 23 to 25 million people), the Turkmens are likely more than 1 million strong today, perhaps as many as 1.5 million.

The Turkmens live in a rather compact section of northern Iraq. While the Kurds dominate the mountainous northern and eastern portions of the region -- much of which they control as autonomous zones run by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) -- an overwhelming majority of the Turkmens inhabit the foothills and plains in the southern portion currently ruled by Saddam Husayn. (Baghdad is home to a large Turkmen community as well.) The traditional Turkmen homeland is a band of territory stretching over 150 miles from Telafar in the northwest through Mosul and Kirkuk to Tuz in the southeast. In this area, the Turkmens constitute pluralities in many towns, while in cities such as Erbil and Kirkuk, large Turkmen communities enjoy preponderance due to the fact that they are better educated and wealthier than other Muslim communities.

## Political Organization among the Turkmen

Despite their advantages, the Turkmen have been overshadowed by the Kurds in recent decades:

the Turkmen are almost equally divided between Shi'i and Sunni Islam, unlike the more tribal and feudal Kurds, who are overwhelmingly Sunni;

the Turkmen did not take up arms against Saddam until recently;

since the end of the Gulf War, the majority of the Kurds have lived in their autonomous areas, developing significant cultural and political institutions, while the Turkmen have remained oppressed under the regime in Baghdad, which has shut down most of their own such institutions.

In the late 1990s, the Turkmen took steps to redress their political weakness. In 1995, twenty-six Turkmen groups merged under an umbrella organization, the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITC), in order to facilitate united political action. Only a few groups remained outside this organization, most notably the Turkmen Islam Union (TIB), composed of Shi'i Turkmen. The ITC has served a useful purpose, rallying most Turkmen around a common political platform for the first time in modern history. The Turkmen also gained leverage in the aftermath of the 1992-1996 civil war between the KDP and the PUK. An American-Turkish-brokered ceasefire assigned Turkey responsibility for maintaining peace between the Kurdish factions. The agreement also created a Peace Monitoring Force (PMF) headquartered in Erbil and composed of non-Kurds, namely Turkmen and Assyrian Christians. Since its inception in April 1997, the PMF has served as a training school for the Turkmen; more than 2,000 of them have participated in the force, receiving professional military instruction from the Turkish army.

## Turkmen Welfare during and after the War

Despite achieving enhanced military and political organization over the past few years, the Turkmen may still be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of war. First, most of them live in the large cities of northern Iraq, such as Kirkuk, which have yet to be captured by coalition forces. If close combat becomes necessary to secure these cities, the Turkmen could be caught in the crossfire. Second, tens of thousands of refugees -- mostly Kurdish, but also Turkmen and Assyrian -- were driven away from their homes in Kirkuk and other northern cities during the Arabization campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s, and most of them are eager to return home after a coalition victory. If not monitored properly, the return of these refugees could result in reverse ethnic cleansing; in particular, the Kurdification of Kirkuk and other cities could put the Turkmen already living in these areas in jeopardy.

## Turkish Perceptions

In general, the Turks care greatly for the welfare of Turkish communities in neighboring countries. Until recently, however, the Turkish public paid little attention to the plight of the Turkmen, despite their persistent subjection to Ba'ath Arabization policies over the past few decades. This lack of interest seemed to be rooted in the fact that the Turks have traditionally paid little attention to Iraqi politics, including the nature of Saddam's regime, his actions against the Turkmen, and his efforts to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, Turkey's attitude toward the Turkmen seems to have changed lately, with the Turkish media following their fate closely. Much of the Turkish public suspects that, after the war, the Turkmen will be forced to live under Kurdish factions such as the KDP and the PUK.

Although huge political demonstrations are rare in Turkey, the plight of Turks in other countries is perhaps the one issue most likely to attract masses to the streets. For example, during the late 1980s, when the communist regime in Bulgaria began a campaign of forced assimilation among the country's Turks, millions demonstrated in Turkey, compelling Ankara to take action. In 1989, then-prime minister Turgut Ozal amassed troops along the Bulgarian border and successfully persuaded Sophia to reverse its assimilation policy. Hence, if the Turkmen are placed in

harm's way during the current war or disregarded in its aftermath, Turkish public opinion may become inflamed once again, perhaps spurring Ankara to intervene in northern Iraq.

In order to avoid such a situation, the coalition must find ways to incorporate Turkmens in any new Iraqi government. Structuring the postwar government explicitly along ethnic lines would run the risk of exacerbating ethnic tensions. That said, Iraqis and outsiders will inevitably scrutinize the ethnic composition of any new Iraqi leadership, so it will be important that Turkmens feel they have a fair share in running Iraq.

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