

Fighting With or Without Turkey?

Lessons and Implications

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Brief Analysis

It is unclear whether the Turkish parliament will re-vote or approve the deployment of U.S. troops in Turkey in preparation for an attack on Iraq. Turkish military cooperation -- or its absence -- may either facilitate or, respectively, complicate an American military operation. Even if the Turkish parliament were to approve the move, potential fault lines could challenge a Turkish-American partnership in the event of war. In this environment, Operations Provide Comfort (OPC) I and II of the early 1990s -- when Turkey, the United States, and other NATO allies collaborated closely in northern Iraq to establish a safe haven for Kurds -- may prove instructive.

GORDON RUDD

Two important dynamics determined the manner in which the two OPCs were conducted. The first was the movement of Iraqis -- mostly Kurds -- across the Turkish border in the late 1980s, which most sources put at 60,000 or more, with another 100,000 in Iran. These displaced persons did not receive status as international refugees from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees agency, nor did they receive any other international support. They therefore quickly became a burden for Turkey.

The second factor was Operation Proven Force, a component of the air war against Iraq. Operation Proven Force was based out of Turkey, permitting U.S. European Command (EUCOM) to assist U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM, responsible for the Middle East) with air forces. Turkey permitted American aircraft to operate out of the Incirlik base in south central Turkey, and these sorties comprised about 10 percent of total air assaults going into Iraq during Operation Desert Storm.

The 1991 uprisings in the north and the south of Iraq, which broke out a month after Operation Desert Storm terminated, drove many Iraqis toward the borders of their country, mainly in the north and northeast. About one million people fled Iraq during this period, with 600,000 crossing into Iran and 400,000 crossing into Turkey. Turkish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were the first to bring relief to the refugees, but Turkey simply could not address this humanitarian disaster on its own. As a result, the United States -- with Britain and France -- put together a three-phase relief operation, with each new phase emerging as new requirements were identified.

For example, OPC marked the first time that the U.S. military worked in coordination with local NGOs for an extended period. This relationship developed in response to a culture clash in the field between the U.S. Army's Special Forces units and the NGOs, which had an approach to the humanitarian problem that differed from the military's command-and-control procedures. NGOs were not normally under the authority of the military; yet -- in the context of a military operation -- U.S. forces had to maintain control of all groups operating in their areas of responsibility. Hence, the Special Forces formed a special relationship with the NGOs.

OPC also marked the first time that the U.S. military and the international community jointly participated in a "humanitarian intervention" operation. Subsequently, new humanitarian operation models evolved, such as the use of military service-support units in place of combat units. Those advocating the use of these units in place of civilian

aid agencies argued that the military would be useful in both coordinating the tasks of the many NGOs operating independently from one another and ensuring a safe environment for relief workers.

If it proceeds with regime change in Iraq, the United States may face a humanitarian crisis with basic characteristics similar to other humanitarian crises: displaced persons, refugee movement both within the country and across the borders, and large numbers of civilians subject to residual conflict. The challenge is to obtain an early assessment of the situation so that the problem can be defined and an appropriate mission mandate developed.

GERALD THOMPSON

In 1991, Kurds and other northern Iraqis were living in an economically sealed space. UN sanctions had cut off commerce with the external world, and Saddam Husayn had imposed an internal blockade on the region. The Iraqi military withdrew during the postwar uprising, presumably in order to preserve their assets and to protect the regime in Baghdad. The Iraqi government's administrative mechanism in northern Iraq was also withdrawn. Government officials were not being paid, while support for the education and medical systems ceased.

But nothing stays the same in northern Iraq for very long. By 1993, most of the refugees in Turkey or Iran had returned (only about 20,000 refugees remained in Turkey, with a more substantial number in Iran, many of whom had been refugees since the mid-1970s), and the reconstruction of northern Iraq began. The Kurds held elections and formed a workable regional administration. They had revenue streaming from the tariffs they were charging on the oil trade over Habur Bridge between Turkey and northern Iraq. This trade was a violation of UN sanctions on Iraq, but was nevertheless permitted to continue without objection by the United States or Turkey. The allied-enforced no-fly zone was in place; some concerns surfaced about the future of OPC, as every six months the Turkish parliament had to renew authorization for the operation. But the situation in northern Iraq was not much affected by the political debate in Turkey. The political and military status quo seemed to be effective, but without an apparent endgame.

America's knowledge of the Kurdish question in northern Iraq was minimal in 1991 but has since evolved. One factor that the United States must grasp is the importance Turkey places on the protection of its sovereignty. In the early 1990s, the Turkish General Staff had a strong interest in maintaining a positive military relationship with the United States and with other coalition partners in OPC. At the same time, Turkey was in a fierce struggle against PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) separatism and, no matter how often reassured, was uncertain about U.S. intentions. For that reason, the Turks insisted upon having operational control of all activities taking place in their zone of interest. With this experience as background, it would not be surprising if the Turks want to make sure that any future war in Iraq will not create new uncertainties in the region, or usher in further political instability.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ayca Ariyoruk.

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