

Kurdish Crisis Boxes In Neocons

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When Secretary of State Condi Rice descended the stairs of her plane in Ankara on November 2, she must have been thanking her lucking stars that her security detail was shielding her from the massive groups of Turkish demonstrators, who were wielding aggressive signs, some showing her face as the backdrop for a target practitioner's bulls-eye, and others saying, "Terrorist Condi: Hands Off Turkey." Condi may have been spared the embarrassment, but the signs and pickets were prominently shown on international television news stations. And public opinion polls reported that the popularity of the US among the Turks is about as low as that of the US Congress among American voters.

The reason for the rising tide of anti-Americanism in Turkey is simple: Washington is seen as the sponsor of the Kurdish terrorists who have been killing Turkish soldiers, from their safe haven in US-occupied northern Iraq.

Turkey is a long-term US ally and staunch NATO member, whose Incirlik military base has functioned as a vital launching pad for US operations into Afghanistan and Iraq. Thanks to the insanity emanating from the Bush-Cheney cabal in Washington, this crucial regional ally has turned into not only a leading critic of their botched Iraq policy, but potentially also a "break-away ally" who will challenge the US in the region, in pursuit of aims it rightly defines as in its own vital national self-interest.

"Kurdistan"

The name of the game is "Kurdistan." Since the terrorist Kurdish Workers Party, known as the PKK, has recently initiated a new wave of attacks against Turkish targets, killing dozens of soldiers in southeastern Turkey and abducting others, the conflict between the Kurdish insurgents, who aim at establishing an independent "Kurdistan" in a region overlapping Turkey, Iran and Syria, on the one hand, and the sovereign Turkish nation, on the other, has reached such a point that memories of the tragic 23-year-long struggle and its 30,000 dead, have been vividly awakened. No one in Turkey wants that deadly process to be repeated.

This time around, however, the conflict takes on a strategic dimension: it is not "only" Turkey vs. a domestic insurgent force—the PKK—, but, potentially, a new conflict in Southwest Asia as a whole, vectored on war-torn Iraq. For, the PKK, which has recently raised its ugly head again, is operating not out of Turkey, but out of northern Iraq, in what is known as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). And this region, which enjoys relative autonomy, is under the control of the United States, the occupying power. Thus, since the PKK renewed its terrorist attacks against Turkish military targets, {from inside Iraq}, the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the military establishment, have demanded that the US intervene to disarm the PKK, apprehend its leading figures and extradite them to Turkey.

Paying demonstrative lip service to the fable that the Iraqi government be “sovereign,” Ankara has also pressed the government of Nouri al-Maliki to move against the PKK.

The crisis reached an initial climax in mid-October, when, following PKK killings of Turkish troops, the Turkish parliament voted to approve a government plan to organize cross-border incursions into northern Iraq, in hot pursuit of the terrorists. Impetus for the vote had been provided by passage of a resolution in the US House Foreign Relations Committee, on October 10, which acknowledged the 1915 massacres of Armenians in Turkey as “genocide.” Turkey saw the committee vote as an affront, as demonstrating an “irresponsible attitude” which could jeopardize US-Turkish relations, and responded by recalling its ambassador from Washington. Furthermore, it was mooted that Turkey could close the vital Incirlik base to US operations.

After another 17 Turkish soldiers were killed by PKK terrorists on October 21, the Turkish cabinet went into emergency session. Prime Minister Erdogan, under tremendous domestic pressure to move against the threat, told the London {Times} on October 22, that his country would move to smash the PKK in northern Iraq. “The target of this operation,” he explained, “is definitely not Iraq’s territorial integrity or its political unity. The target of this operation is the terror organization based in the north of Iraq” which “must be driven out ... its training camps ... dismantled and its leaders ... handed over.” Erdogan minced no words regarding the US responsibility. “In northern Iraq,” he said, “we feel that both the terrorist organization and the [Kurdish regional] administration there are sheltering behind America.” He went on to speak about a “trilateral mechanism” which had been discussed, among the US, Iraq and Turkey to deal with the problem, but lamented that it had led nowhere.

The decision by the Turkish parliament to approve cross-border incursions into northern Iraq, sounded an alarm bell in Washington. The well-grounded fear among government officials was that, if Turkey were to make good on its threats of incursions into northern Iraq, that would provoke a reaction of the part of the Kurds inside Iraq. Not only: Kurds in Iran and Syria (as well as Turkey) could join forces with their compatriots in Iraq, and strive to establish their independent state, Kurdistan. This would be the realization of a nightmare vision hatched by the 1916 British-French deal known as the Sykes-Picot Treaty, which carved up the Ottoman Empire among the imperial powers in the aftermath of World War I. The ethnic Kurdish population, dispersed among the regions to become newly defined “states” of Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey, would come together in an entity, whose emergence would challenge the very existence of those states.

The Founding Fathers of Kurdistan

If Sykes-Picot were the result of a rotten deal between imperial France and Britain, the threat of a Kurdish entity in the region today must be chalked up to imperial-thinking factions in Britain and the United States. It is now an open secret, which the Bush crowd thought it had been able to keep under wraps, that W. and his crew have been long-term sponsors of the PKK, and worshipped as such by the terrorist group itself. On October 30, the {International Herald Tribune} ran an article reporting on the fact that supplies for the group are allowed to pass through a government checkpoint in Raniya. Former American Ambassador to Turkey Mark Parris was quoted saying, “That couldn’t have happened without their permitting them to be there. That’s their turf. It’s as simple as that.” The IHT piece went on to report how the PKK-linked Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (KDSP), which operates freely in Raniya and Sulaimaniya, has a leader, Fayik Muhamed Ahmad

Golpi, who is an outspoken fan of George W. Bush. After the 2004 US elections, Golpi sent W. a letter, congratulating him and wishing him luck in his plans for transforming the Middle East. The IHT article also noted the role of the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), the branch of the group seeking independence from Iran.

Turkey has long accused the US of supporting the PKK and allied Kurdish separatists, on the obvious grounds that the terrorist group has lived and flourished under American occupation in Iraq. It is a well-documented fact that, since the 1991 Desert Storm war against Iraq, the US had set up the notorious “no fly-zones” in the north (and south), which provided air cover to the Kurds (and the PKK). On July 20 of this year, then-Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul reported on Turkish television, that PKK terrorists had been arrested in possession of weapons manufactured in the US. Gul said, “US officials told us those were the weapons they handed over to the Iraqi army. 1,260 weapons captured from the PKK,” he said, “are American made. We documented it to the US.” According to the {New York Times} in August, US Defense Department officials confirmed that weapons provided by the US to Iraqi military and police trainees in 2004 and 2005 had indeed ended up in the hands of the Kurds. On October 28, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki joined with his Turkish counterpart, Ali Babcan, in a press conference, to denounce the foreign sponsors of the Kurdish groups threatening to detonate an explosion in the region. Mottaki cited the PKK, the PJAK (or PEJAK) and the MEK/MKO (Mujahideen e-Khalq), an Iranian terrorist group operating also from Iraqi soil against the Islamic Republic. In November 2006, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh had reported to the {New Yorker} that “In the past six months, Israel and the United States have been working together in support of a Kurdish resistance group known as the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan. The group has also been conducting clandestine cross-border forays into Iran.”

Ankara: US, Iraq Must Rein PKK In

The Turks have rightly demanded that the US, as the occupying power in northern Iraq, take action to curb the PKK, and have asked the allegedly sovereign Iraqi government to do the same. They have also stated that the KRG, led by Massoud Barzani, has protected the PKK. Erdogan was quoted by {Hurriyet} as saying outright, “[Barzani] is in a position of aiding and abetting the terrorist organization in that region.” For his part, Barzani has repeatedly refused to hand over PKK elements to Turkey, “no matter what the cost.” Orders to the KRG to close all PKK offices have been cheerfully ignored.

However, as it became evident in late October, that the Turks would make good on their threats to send some of the 100,000 troops they had amassed on the border, into northern Iraq, to seek out and kill PKK terrorists, the Iraqi Kurdish authorities changed their tune. One reason is that Turkey made good on its threat to impose economic sanctions on northern Iraq. Flights between Istanbul and Irbil were stopped beginning November. As reported by {BBC}, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek said after a cabinet meeting October 31, that they had started “military, political and diplomatic measures” against the PKK. “The targets of these measures are the terrorist organization and those groups which are supporting, aiding and abetting it,” he said. Though no details were released, the measures could entail a boycott of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This could mean a cutoff of food imports, electricity supplies, and other imports. Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari announced at the same time, that checkpoints were being set up on the Turkish-Iraqi border to cut off the PKK supply lines.

Not surprisingly, the PKK began to cry uncle. Falah Mustafa Bakir, the head of foreign

relations for the KRG, said November 2, that he hoped Turkey would “reconsider its position and work for a peaceful solution.” He claimed the KRG did not support PKK terrorist activity. On November 2, it was reported that a PKK leader, Abdul Rahman al-Chadirchi, was calling on Turkey to present a peace plan to overcome the crisis. This came after Turkish troops had succeeded in hunting down and killing dozens of PKK elements in Turkey.

Whether or not Turkey will move militarily into northern Iraq, will be decided officially, only following talks that Prime Minister Erdogan will hold with President Bush in Washington on November 5. Statements made by Rice, as well as US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, on November 2, stressed Washington’s desire that the Turks desist from any such military cross-border incursions. Ankara, however, has argued: if the US waged war on Afghanistan and invaded Iraq, on grounds that elements from those distant countries had been involved in terror attacks against the US, why should Turkey not do the same in a country on its borders? Speaking at a parliamentary group meeting of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) at the end of October, Erdogan said that he would ask President Bush to “clearly define [the US] road map” to deal with the PKK. He said it was a “test of sincerity, and that if the US failed to act, “we will do our own job” i.e. invade Iraq and mop up the PKK.

Regional Peace Efforts

The dangers inherent in a Turkish military incursion across Iraq’s borders, are best appreciated by Turkey’s immediate neighbors, Iran, Syria and Iraq itself. These three countries host Kurdish minorities who could be catapulted, by a Turkish attack, into a military campaign to establish an independent Kurdistan, thus destabilizing all three nations. It is for this reason, that the three have taken steps to defuse the crisis before it blows up. In a coordinated effort, Syria and Iran have been consulting to eliminate the PKK threat, preferably without Turkish military action inside Iraq.

On October 28, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan was in Tehran to discuss his country’s option of invading Iraq to pursue the PKK. The Iranians told him they did {not} support such a military move. This was an important move, since Tehran had earlier supported Turkey’s military moves, and even participated in joint attacks against the Kurdish terrorists. On October 29, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki visited Damascus for talks with President Bashar al-Assad, and his counterpart Walid Muallem. The latter stated after the talks, “The Iranians have initiated efforts which complement those of Syria, because we want to give a political solution a chance.” Mottaki was quoted by the {Turkish Daily News} saying, “The PKK terrorists threaten not only Turkey but also Iran and Syria,” and added, “The terrorist operations from the north of Iraq create a destabilizing effect throughout the region.” Mottaki went on to Baghdad, for talks there. A meeting was held in Istanbul November 2-3, of the foreign ministers of the region, and included all Iraq’s neighbors, plus the permanent members of the UN Security Council, and some G8 members. It is in this context that Condi Rice travelled to Turkey. As of this writing, the meeting is taking place, and no results have been announced yet. However, it was expected that Iran could play a major role. Mottaki had announced that Iran would present a plan to solve the crisis. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, after meeting with Mottaki in Baghdad October 31, “urged Iran to help defuse the border crisis between Turkey and the PKK and to give its entire support at the Istanbul conference,” according to a statement from his office, reported by {Tehran Times}. At the same time, Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari said he and Mottaki agreed that the conference should not be “highjacked” by this issue, and should address Iraq’s security overall.

Significantly, Zebari also called on the US and Iran to continue the tripartite (Iran, Iraq, US) talks which had taken place in Baghdad at the ambassadorial level. Mottaki, according to a report in the Lebanese paper {Daily Star}, said the reported “readiness of the Americans for a new round of talks” was something Iran did “consider positively.” It was in this context that Mottaki announced that Iran would “deliver a plan regarding the situation in Iraq,” at the Istanbul meeting.

This would be key, since the US is the occupying power and chief ally of the Kurds. If the Kurdish terrorist threat is to be eliminated and therefore a Turkish military move prevented, the US must shift gears and move credibly against the PKK. Thus far, the US has merely claimed it is “sharing intelligence” with Ankara. On November 1, Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morell was quoted by the IHT saying, “The key for any sort of military response, by the Turks or anybody else, is actionable intelligence. We are making efforts to help them get actionable intelligence.” But such claims lack credibility, given past performance. As Erdogan complained in an interview to the {Times} of London on October 22, a “trilateral mechanism” had been set up among the US, Iraq and Turkey to deal with the problem, but it “yielded absolutely no results.” Essentially the same point was made by former NATO supreme commander in Europe Ralston, who said on October 29, that a diplomatic effort which he had led, to stop the terrorist PKK, had failed. During his one-year tenure functioning as special envoy on the PKK issue, Ralston had tried to set up such a tripartite mechanism, but failed, and this prompted his resignation. Iranian sources have told me that intelligence Tehran had supplied to Baghdad, on the PKK (presumably “actionable”) had been welcomed, but that the Iraqis had been prevented by the US from acting on it.

Thus, the key to defusing the Kurdish crisis, which threatens to blow up the entire region, lies in Washington, and in US willingness to cooperate with Iran, the regional power with considerable influence in Iraq as well as Turkey. The simmering Kurdish crisis, therefore, is putting the neocon cabal in Washington on the spot. It cannot have its cake and eat it too. It cannot maintain the PKK and the entire Kurdish separatist apparatus as an asset, and at the same time ask Turkey to continue its role as a regional ally. It cannot pretend that Iraq be stabilized, and at the same time demonize and threaten military action against Iran, the key regional power capable of contributing to stability. In Washington, the chickens have come home to roost.

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