

## COMMENTARY

**Balancing Relations with Turks and Kurds**

By Bulent Aliriza,  
February 29, 2008

On February 21, Turkish troops crossed into northern Iraq to attack bases belonging to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The operation was Turkey's biggest cross-border incursion in over a decade and followed a series of Turkish air strikes on PKK targets since December. While Turkish civilian and military leaders were consistent in their assertions that military action would continue, the operation was abruptly terminated on February 29 by the Turkish General Staff (TGS).

Although a White House spokesman confirmed on February 22 that the United States was "notified in advance," Washington began to display unmistakable signs of discomfort as the operation proceeded with no clear end in sight. Significantly, it was Defense Secretary Robert Gates who assumed the task of sending public signals to Ankara from Canberra on February 23 and New Delhi on February 27 that the operation should be "as short as possible," then personally delivering the message in Ankara on February 28.

A few hours after the apparent failure of Gates to obtain assurances on a quick withdrawal from Turkish civilian and military leaders, President George W. Bush bluntly stated in a White House press conference that "the Turks need to move quickly, achieve their objective and get out." While the TGS statement announcing the withdrawal and a subsequent statement by Chief of Staff Yasar Buyukanit categorically denied "external influence" in the decision to withdraw, the sequence of events certainly seems to suggest otherwise.

The Bush administration had begun to back Turkish efforts to fight PKK terrorism in northern Iraq by providing actionable intelligence after the November 2007 White House meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The policy change had reversed the potentially dangerous deterioration in relations caused by Washington's previous unwillingness to respond to Turkish requests for support. On February 26, Erdogan pointedly stated that he "appreciated the intelligence provided by our strategic partner the United States about terrorists in northern Iraq." However, the Turkish decision to escalate from selective airstrikes to a prolonged ground operation complicated Washington's efforts to balance the interests and expectations of its long-standing Turkish ally and its newer Iraqi Kurdish allies.

Erdogan had announced soon after the start of the operation that Bush and Iraqi prime minister Nuri al Maliki had been informed that the attacks were "directed solely at PKK terrorists" and "limited in scope as well as duration." However, Erdogan had also stated that "the troops would return only after achieving their objectives," a goal Erdogan and other Turkish leaders reiterated throughout the operation. To be sure, Erdogan recognized that action against an organization responsible for terrorist attacks on Turkish targets enjoyed the support of the vast majority of Turks. Equally importantly, the operation facilitated cooperation between the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government and the TGS at a time when there was heightened concern that the easing of the ban on the Islamic headscarf would once again strain a complicated relationship. It is interesting to note that President Abdullah Gul gave his approval for the headscarf legislation just a few hours after the attack began.

To the satisfaction of the Turkish government, the initial reaction of the Iraqi central government, which has little authority in northern Iraq, was muted. However, on February 26, the Iraqi government issued a statement expressing its "rejection and condemnation" of the military action, characterizing it as "a violation of Iraqi sovereignty" and calling on Turkey "to withdraw its troops immediately." While the harsh tone may have reflected the influence of the Iraqi Kurds, who resented the unilateral military incursion into their region, it nonetheless helped to increase the pressure on the Bush administration, which is strongly committed to the Baghdad government and its cohesion.

For their part, Iraqi Kurdish officials claimed that the operation also aimed at weakening the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and warned of the possibility of clashes between Turkish forces and peshmergas. As the Kurdish Parliament formally condemned the Turkish action, these concerns were conveyed by Iraqi Kurdish civilian and military

leaders to their American counterparts and, much more significantly, by Masoud Barzani, president of the KRG, directly to President Bush.

While Turkey does not recognize or deal directly with the KRG, it has been endeavoring to maintain good relations with the Iraqi central government. Accordingly, special envoy Ahmet Davutoglu was dispatched to Baghdad on February 27 to explain the reasons for the operation. In retrospect, it is apparent that the overall effort may have been undermined by comments made by Davutoglu following his meeting with Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari. After Zebari, an Iraqi Kurd, had reaffirmed that the action was “unacceptable” and “violated Iraq’s sovereignty,” Davutoglu, who was standing next to him, bluntly asserted that Turkey would accept “no timetable until the terrorist bases are eliminated.”

It is significant that until February 21 Turkey had refrained from conducting a ground incursion into northern Iraq after the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. As Turkey would almost certainly not have launched the operation without American support and promptly withdrew after that support began to waver, there are legitimate questions over the precise course of future U.S.-Turkish cooperation against the PKK. Needless to say, the Bush administration will try to sustain the improvement in its relationship with Turkey, and Bush has reconfirmed that the PKK remains a common enemy. However, as the recent events demonstrate, Washington will also try to maintain its relationship with the Iraqi Kurds, who are its most reliable tactical partners in Iraq.

The predicament that the United States will continue to confront is to satisfy the Turks’ expectation that it will back a policy of ultimately eliminating the PKK while showing sensitivity to the Iraqi Kurds’ opposition to armed action against ethnic brethren sheltering in their territory. The ideal solution for Washington is for its two allies to begin a cooperative dialogue. The willingness of Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, an ethnic Kurd, to accept the recent invitation by his Turkish counterpart to make his first trip to Ankara as president will be an important indicator of how events might unfold.

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