

Turkey's War on Terror

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Summary

In an age of war on terror, Turkey pursues its own war against the escalating PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terror. The dynamics that led to a parliamentary motion for a cross border operation into Northern Iraq will have implications for Turkey's relations with Washington, Baghdad and other capitals in the region. The Expanded Meeting of the Neighboring Countries of Iraq held in Istanbul on 2-3 November 2007 coincided with Turkey's intensive regional diplomacy. There are serious challenges to ending PKK terrorism and finding a lasting solution to the Kurdish problem. The Erdogan Government must fight terrorism in a way that will not jeopardize the process of democratization and political reforms in Turkey.

In an age of war on global terror, Turkey pursues its own war against the escalating PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terror. The PKK increased its attacks on Turkish troops and civilians and more than 30 soldiers were killed just in a two-week time. Turkey has long been faced with the PKK terror, and the Turkish struggle against the PKK has gone through different stages. There is now a neo-nationalist moment within Turkish society against the PKK terror and this new mood strongly urges the government to take measures ranging from tight internal security measures to military incursions into Iraq.

According to this neo-nationalist mindset, Turkey is surrounded by a wider project of disintegration, which is being carried by the PKK with the support of the U.S. and European countries. The pressure on Turkish government is to fight in all these fronts to put an end to the PKK terror. In response to the terrorist attacks and as a result of mounting public pressure, the Turkish National Assembly voted on October 17 in favor of a motion authorizing the government for cross border operations in Iraq.

While an incursion into Northern Iraq looks more likely than ever, Turkey's renewed war on terror has domestic, regional and international dimensions. The current crisis over the PKK installments in the areas under the rule of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will have implications beyond the Turkish-Iraqi border.

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Domestic Environment

Turkey's political agenda has been taken hostage by the escalation of PKK terrorist attacks. Such issues as the new draft constitution and the referendum for constitutional amendment have been sidelined by the public outrage against the killing of Turkish soldiers. As the recent demonstrations show, Turks take the PKK violence very seriously and consider every killed soldier and civilian a martyr. A popular slogan during the funerals said that "martyrs shall not die, homeland shall not be divided." Turkish people's psychological mood seems to be converging with the political and security elite's decisive will to initiate a new and intensive struggle against the PKK terror.

The nation-wide consensus on the struggle against PKK terror was witnessed during a session in the General Assembly of the Turkish Parliament when 507 MPs from three different parties and independents voted in favor of the motion for military action. The only opposition came from the Democratic Society Party (DTP) which has links to PKK. Total vote against the motion was 19.

Although Turkey's political and security elites share the same concerns as the people demonstrating on the streets, they also called for calm and patience. Both President Abdullah Gul and Chief of Staff Yasar Buyukanit said that they share the pain and sorrow of Turkish society but underlined the need for controlling the public anger. Turkish government's show of resolution seems to have achieved some success in controlling the public mood.

A day after the killing of 12 Turkish soldiers in Daglica, Hakkari province of Turkey, President Abdullah Gul invited Prime Minister and Chief of Staff and heads of opposition parties to discuss the escalating terror. The National Security Council had a 7 hour meeting for discussing the measures against terror on October 25, 2007. The NSC proposed economic sanctions against Northern Iraq according to which the trade with Iraq will be channeled through Syria. It is estimated that this will cost the KRG about 400 million USD per year.

This NSC proposal shows the Turkish preference of the use of diplomacy and economic measures before a large scale military action. However, although Prime Minister Erdogan said several times that they will consider all possible options, he never ruled out the possibility of cross-border operations. Turkey's civilian and security elite has already started the process of developing a new multi-dimensional policy against the PKK.

Regional Dimension

Turkey's decisive stance and the backing of the motion started an intensive diplomatic traffic in the region. Syrian President Bashar Assad paid an official visit to Turkey and expressed Syria's support to Turkish struggle against the PKK, including a possible military operation in Northern Iraq. Iraq's Vice President Tareq Hashemi paid a quick visit to Turkey and Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan talked to his Iraqi counterpart Nuri al-Maliki. The Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan paid visits to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq and

Iran. These visits followed the earlier visits to Syria, Palestinian territories, Jordan and Israel. Turkey is now pursuing an intensive regional diplomacy and putting pressure on the Iraqi central government to take action against the PKK cells in Iraq.

The Extended Iraqi Neighbors meeting in Istanbul on 2-3 November is a signal of Turkey's ability to pursue regional diplomacy for the Iraqi cause. Turkish sensitivities on the territorial unity of Iraq and the PKK terror dominated the agenda of the meeting and generated support from the Iraqi neighbors as well as the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The final declaration underlined the urgent need for cooperation against terrorist groups in Iraq.

Baghdad is closer to the Turkish position than ever before. Despite his continuous change of positions, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, in reference to the PKK, said that "we do not want to sacrifice our cultural and economic relations with Iraq because of a terror organization." Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari added that "we have agreed that the position we should take is a common one to fight terrorism. We will not allow any party, including the PKK, to poison our bilateral relations." Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Regional Government, stated that Iraq should not be a launching pad for any terrorist activity.¹

In his visit to Baghdad, the Turkish Foreign Minister Babacan handed the Iraqi officials a list of six demands to avoid Turkish military operation. Turkey's demands are to stop support to PKK militants, close PKK shelters and training camps in Iraq, and extradite leaders of the terrorist organization.² Despite positive statements from high level Iraqi officials, one should expect no major step from the Iraqi side soon. The diplomatic channel between Ankara and Baghdad did not yield any concrete results. The visit by a high level Iraqi delegation to Turkey on October 26 ended without an agreement.

Turkey's dilemma is the contradictory policies of the Kurdish regional government in Northern Iraq. Central Iraqi government seems closer to the Turkish position but does not seem capable of taking measures against the PKK. Barzani also has his own dilemma. There is an ongoing Kurdish nation building process in Northern Iraq. Barzani supports this process and does not want to be in a position of harming any Kurdish group.³ On the other hand, there is increasing pressure in Iraqi domestic politics and regional countries, in particular from Turkey, as well as from international community that the PKK terror should not be tolerated. Barzani is also aware of the fact that he needs to open up to Turkey at one point to secure their existence in Northern Iraq. Barzani must take action against the PKK if he wants to preserve the image of a responsible politician and keep good relations with Turkey. He is caught between Kurdish nationalism and being a responsible statesman. Increasing pressure on Barzani may force him to pay more attention to Turkish security concerns. Turkey's intensive diplomatic attack and possible economic measures concentrate

¹ *Hurriyet*, 23 October 2007; *Hurriyet*, 24 October 2007.

² Sudarsan Raghavan, "Maliki, Under Turkish Pressure, Vows to Curb Kurdish Rebels," *Washington Post*, 24 October 2007.

³ A former MP in Turkish Parliament and leading figure in Kurdish politics in Turkey, Leyla Zana, calling for Kurdistan regional government, said that "no honorable Kurd delivers his brothers to end up their lives in prison." This statement shows the sensitivity of the issue and burden of Kurdish nationalism on Barzani. See, *Milliyet*, 26 October 2007.

on this. One may speculate that if Barzani moves in this direction, Ankara may adopt a milder policy line toward him.

International Dimension

Turkish diplomatic activities are not only limited to the regional level. Turkey's possible incursion to Northern Iraq ringed alarm bells in the U.S. Following the motion vote in the parliament, Under Secretary of Defense Eric Edelman, a former US ambassador to Ankara, and Assistant Secretary of State Dan Fried paid a visit to Ankara and met with senior Turkish officials. The relations between Turkey and the U.S. were already deteriorating because of the Armenian Genocide Bill which defines the casualties of Ottoman Armenians during their deportation in 1915 as "genocide". US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates talked to their counterparts and asked the Turkish government for time. The Armenian bill seems to have been put on the backburner for the time being and this is interpreted to be a good step on the part of Washington. With the Turkish side growing out of patience, Erdogan's visit to the US on November 5th resulted in the further U.S. guarantees for collaboration in the fight against terror. Erdogan made it clear that Ankara will not spend more time with previously inefficient mechanisms like triple coordination of the U.S., Turkey and Iraq and reserves the right to pursue a cross-border operation in Iraq against the PKK.⁴

Turkey's relations with the European countries are also marred by a number of problems. PKK's political and financial existence and its propaganda activities in Europe are the main sources of friction between Ankara and several EU countries. In the midst of the debate about a possible military operation, Erdogan paid a visit to Britain on October 23rd. He underlined Turkish government's decisive stance to employ every possible measure to put an end to the PKK terror. His British counterpart Gordon Brown stated that Britain would "step up" counter-terrorism cooperation with Turkey.⁵

In addition, Turkey's signing of "Strategic Partnership Document" with Britain is a major achievement for Turkish diplomacy in the EU. Brown's support was followed by the EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn who underlined that the EU "condemns all terrorist attacks and understands Turkey's need to protect its citizens."⁶ However, the EU line is still in favor of diplomatic measures and against a Turkish military operation.

Turkey's Options

Turkey's renewed war on terror is now based on a multi-dimensional, complex and dynamic policy. The crucial question is whether this policy line will produce a new end to Turkey's old story of fighting terrorism. Turkey achieved considerable progress in the new measures both at home and in international level. The domestic and international context has been reshaped in a way that will facilitate the struggle against the PKK. There are, however, a

⁴ Milliyet, 6 November 2007.

⁵ "Iraq Pledges to Tackle Kurdish Fighters," *Guardian*, 23 October 2007.

⁶ "EU Tells Turkey to Think Twice Before Military Action," *Today's Zaman*, 26 October 2007.

number of issues that need to be handled carefully in Turkey's renewed efforts to fight PKK terrorism.

- 1- Turkey has been successful to reconcile democracy and security in a manner in which democratization has brought more security to the country. The struggle against terror should not curb reform process, reverse the achievements in democratization and endanger the advancements in political freedoms and human rights. The crucial issue is to pay attention to the sensitivities of the Kurdish problem and address the terror problem in a way that it will not lead to the marginalization of the large Kurdish population in Turkey.
- 2- The current consensus on the government's measures against the PKK terror may lose its strength in the process. The government could be in a delicate situation to manage security concerns and keep the public consensus and support behind its renewed war on terror.
- 3- There is a Kurdish nation-building process in Iraq. Turkey should continue to pursue its policy of protecting the territorial integrity of Iraq and refrain from actions that may give the Kurdish nationalists a pretext to create an imagined "Turkish threat" for nation-building.⁷ There is need for an effective public diplomacy to explain Turkey's intentions to fight terrorism while playing a constructive role in the solution of the problems of Iraq.
- 4- There should be an open channel for dialogue with the Kurdish regional government in Northern Iraq. There is an emerging necessity to get into dialogue with the Kurdish leaders in Iraq to reconcile Turkey's policy of fighting PKK and preserving Iraqi territorial unity.
- 5- Iraqi neighborhood forum is an important achievement for the whole Middle East in a time of war and chaos and Turkey should continue its efforts in inter-regional diplomacy. The Iraq meetings should be expanded to include economic and cultural issues. Iraqi neighbors and Iraqi government find a legitimate ground to express their concerns and expressions.
- 6- Turkey's dynamic regional policy should target a new two-track policy to increase Turkey's leverage in the region. First, it should prioritize Turkey's increasing civil-economic role in the Middle East. Second, there should be a long-term planning and strategy for preparing the ground for Turkish military presence for peaceful purposes in the area.
- 7- Despite the long list of problem areas and tensions between Ankara and Washington, the relations with the U.S. are critical. Turkey and the U.S. have an experience of cooperation for a long time. Washington's support for Turkey against the PKK should be seen as a part of the two countries' strategic partnership. The U.S. hesitance to support Turkey is certain to increase the U.S. double standard image and anti-American sentiments in Turkey.
- 8- The PKK existence in the European countries must be brought to an end. There is urgent need for official and public diplomacy to create a public opinion in the EU for

⁷ Ibrahim Kalin, "Kurdish crisis offers a chance for lasting peace", *Financial Times*, November 1, 2007.

Turkey's war against the PKK. This should be complemented by a process of serious and effective negotiations with the Europeans to end PKK activities in Europe.

- 9- Turkey's involvement in such international organizations as the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference as well as its active diplomacy in the United Nations are important for the diplomatic struggle against PKK as well as strengthening Turkey's position in international diplomacy. The extended Iraqi neighbors meeting has brought together regional diplomacy and international efforts by bringing the U.N Secretary General and the U.S. Secretary of State together with the Iraqi neighboring countries.
- 10- Iran fights against PJAK and the increasing speculations on the U.S. backing of this organization add a new dimension to the Northern Iraq-based terrorist activities. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki pursued a shuttle diplomacy between Ankara, Damascus and Baghdad but no solid plan came forward. Iran pursues its struggle against the PJAK through unilateral means and opposes foreign involvement in Iraqi territories to preserve Maliki government's position in Iraq. Such an attitude is likely to erode the basis of a potential cooperation between Turkey and Iran in the fight against the PKK/PJAK.