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# Untangling the Turkey - Iraqi Kurdistan - PKK triangle

By Marko Attila Hoare, 21st December 2007

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**1. Supporting Turkey's destructive anti-Kurdish policy in northern Iraq is not in our interests, yet we cannot disregard Turkey's legitimate concerns with regard to the PKK, nor ignore this dangerous conflict in such a critical area.**

**2. We must negotiate an end to PKK violence, by encouraging Turkey to meet legitimate Kurdish national demands, above all the lifting of all restrictions on the democratic expression of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey.**

**3. A fully democratic, unified, bilingual Turkey in which both Turkish and Kurdish are official languages, alongside a fully autonomous and multinational Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, would represent a favourable resolution of the Kurdish question to all concerned - Turkey, the Turkish Kurds and the Iraqi Kurds alike.**

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Turkey has launched a [large-scale military assault](#) against Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK) guerrilla bases in northern Iraq - the biggest Turkish attack on the region since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. This presents the democratic world with a dilemma.

In principle, every state has the right to defend itself from military attacks by neighbouring states, and this includes attacks by guerrillas based in neighbouring states. If a government allows its territory to be used by guerrillas to attack a neighbour, it becomes in practice an aggressor in relation to that neighbour, which then has the right to retaliate. Formally speaking, Turkey is acting within its rights when it carries out attacks on PKK bases in northern Iraq. In this case, however, there are three complicating factors.

The first is that this security problem is of Turkey's own making. Having subjected the Turkish Kurds to decades of national oppression and forced assimilation, while at the same time outlawing any peaceful and democratic expression of Kurdish national politics in Turkey, Ankara has [generated](#) the problem it now faces: the PKK insurgency is its Frankenstein's monster. There is ultimately no military solution to this problem, which will go away only when Ankara permits its Kurds the option of peacefully agitating for their national rights within the democratic system.

The second complicating factor is that Turkey's interest in Iraqi Kurdistan is far from purely defensive. Ankara wishes to prevent a powerful, effectively

sovereign Kurdistan entity from coming into being in northern Iraq, one that it fears might further catalyse the nationalism of its own Kurdish population. For this reason, Turkey is opposed to the inclusion of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Furthermore, Ankara is attempting to use the [Turkoman minority](#) in Iraqi Kurdistan as a catspaw with which to destabilise the region; its proxy political force, the Iraqi Turkoman Front, campaigns against the federalisation of Iraq and the incorporation of Kirkuk into the Kurdistan Region. Turkey has long [expressed an interest](#) in the territory and, in particular, the oil of northern Iraq, following claims that go back to the 1920s and the foundation of the Turkish Republic. In other words Turkey, which has not been a very good ally to the US and UK over Iraq, is pursuing an entirely selfish and destructive policy at the expense of the Iraqi Kurds, our best friends in the country.

The third complicating factor is that the impetus to attack the PKK in northern Iraq comes less from Turkey's democratically elected leaders, President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), who are more enlightened with regard to the Kurdish question, but from the Turkish military, which is itself hostile to the AKP regime and which is putting pressure on the latter to be more hardline. A Turkish victory in northern Iraq, in the unlikely event that one were to occur, would strengthen the most undemocratic and retrograde elements in the Turkish state.

In these circumstances, it is not in our interest to support Turkey's anti-Kurdish policy; nor are we under any obligation to do so. By collaborating with Turkey's war against the PKK and policy of destabilisation of Iraqi Kurdistan, we become collaborators in Turkey's oppression of the Kurdish people; participants in a nationalist conflict on the side of the party that is, quite frankly, more in the wrong. Yet we cannot ignore Turkey's legitimate concern at PKK attacks, nor can we afford to turn our backs on this potentially disastrous conflict that pits our allies against one another and threatens our vital interests in all-too-fragile Iraq. We need to address the legitimate fears of the Turkoman and other non-Kurdish minorities in Kirkuk and the Kurdistan Region, and to put pressure on the Kurdistan Regional

Government to ensure that all ethnic groups under its jurisdiction are properly protected and represented. But a solution to the Turkish-Kurdish question has to span both sides of the Turkey-Iraq border.

Britain and the US must engage with the PKK in an effort to bring its insurgency peacefully to an end, on the basis of a negotiated compromise, similar to that which has been successfully reached in Northern Ireland. Turkey's conflict with the PKK is scarcely more intractable than was our own conflict with the Irish Republican Army; coexistence between ethnic Turks and Kurds at the grass-roots level is rather better than that between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. There is absolutely no reason, therefore, why Ankara cannot pursue a similar negotiated settlement with the PKK, as we pursued it with the IRA. However comical the image of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness as partners at the helm of the new Northern Ireland might be, it is at the same time symbolic of how even the bitterest enemies can come to collaborate when given the right inducements. It might prove difficult to persuade the PKK to lay down its weapons, but our interests are sufficiently at stake for it to be worth the effort.

The concession that Ankara would have to give in exchange for a cession of PKK violence would be the lifting of all restrictions on the peaceful expression of Kurdish nationalist politics in Turkey. Kurdish parties in Turkey should be free to organise and to campaign for Kurdish national rights - for language and cultural rights, autonomy and even secession and independence, just as in the UK we permit Sinn Fein, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru to campaign for a united Ireland, independent Scotland and independent Wales respectively. Ankara has to realise that the territorial integrity of a democratic nation-state ultimately rests upon the consent of its citizenry, for which repression and coercion cannot substitute.

Turkey should, however, be reassured in the belief that ending the repression of its Kurdish population and permitting it full political freedom would be highly unlikely to lead to the emergence of an independent Turkish Kurdish state, for the simple reason that such a state would not be in the interests of the Kurdish people of Anatolia. Ethnic Kurds and Turks in Anatolia are too

intermingled to make a bloodless drawing of a border between them feasible, even if the Turkish state were incomparably more enlightened and well intentioned than it is - more likely would be something similar to the intercommunal massacres that beset fledgling India and Pakistan in the 1940s. A particularly high price would be paid by the Kurds who would remain behind in a rump Turkey; they would be transformed at a stroke from 'Turks' into foreigners. Independence would cut the Turkish Kurds off from the prosperous cities of western Anatolia, the natural destination of their economic migration, and confine them to an impoverished and landlocked state wedged between unstable Iraq and hostile Turkey. As citizens of Turkey, by contrast, they are only a step or two away from Europe.

Self-determination does not mean simply drawing lines on a map as though it were a blank slate; one cannot disregard decades of history. However unjust the division of the Kurdish people following World War I between Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria may have been at the time, the clock cannot simply be turned back. The transformation of Turkey into a bilingual state with Kurdish as an official language - as Swedish is an official language in bilingual Finland - while Iraqi Kurdistan enjoys widespread autonomy, might represent the best possible solution to the Kurdish question. Europe's German-speakers are, after all, divided between the states of Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy's South Tyrol, and the arrangement is entirely satisfactory to all concerned.

A bilingual Turkish national state in which both Turkish and Kurdish are official languages would not be some arbitrary Western imposition; Turkish nationalists have traditionally viewed Kurds as Turks, while Kurds for their part were ready to fight in large numbers in defence of the common Anatolian homeland in Turkey's War of Independence in the 1920s, against the European invaders and their local Greek and Armenian allies; [Ismet Inonu](#), the most important of the founders of the Turkish Republic after Kemal Ataturk, was himself of partly Kurdish background. So too was the former Turkish prime minister and president [Turgut Ozal](#), a pioneer in the lifting of restrictions on the Kurds.

In attempting to suppress all manifestations of the Kurdish language and identity, Ataturk, Inonu and their successors may have been doing what they saw as necessary in their endeavour to create a homogenous Turkish nation-state in place of the ruined Ottoman Empire. But today's Turkish leaders have to realise that with the Turkish Republic a securely established fact, it is time for them to moderate a policy that has been too rigid for too long and that has come to threaten the very national unity it is supposed to uphold. Indeed, the ruling AKP has already taken major steps towards improving the rights of the Turkish Kurds, and it is imperative that Western leaders further encourage them in this direction, and help them to overcome the resistance of hardline nationalist elements in the army and elsewhere.

While the danger of radical Islam in Turkey is not to be neglected, yet it is ultra-nationalism that has proven to be the most dangerous force in contemporary Turkish politics, as witnessed by the assassination at the start of this year of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, and by the attempt to prosecute the great Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, in both cases for the 'error', in nationalist eyes, of raising the question of Turkey's historic crimes against the Armenians. This ultra-nationalism is ruinous to Turkey's own interests. A Turkey that allows Kurdish political parties freely to operate and the Armenian Genocide to be freely discussed would be much more attractive as a member of the European Union, which is where Turkey rightfully belongs. So much is at stake in an untangling of the Turkey-Iraqi Kurdistan-PKK triangle that we cannot afford not to attempt it, difficult though it will be.

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