

TURKEY AND IRAQI KURDS: CONFLICT OR COOPERATION?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a time when rising Arab-Kurdish tensions again threaten Iraq's stability, neighbouring Turkey has begun to cast a large shadow over Iraqi Kurdistan. It has been a study in contrasts: Turkish jets periodically bomb suspected hideouts of the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) in northern Iraq, and Ankara expresses alarm at the prospect of Kurdish independence, yet at the same time has significantly deepened its ties to the Iraqi Kurdish region. Both Turkey and Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG, a term Turkey studiously avoids) would be well served by keeping ultra-nationalism at bay and continuing to invest in a relationship that, though fragile and buffeted by the many uncertainties surrounding Iraq, has proved remarkably pragmatic and fruitful.

Ankara's policy toward Iraq is based on two core national interests: preserving that country's territorial integrity and fighting the PKK, whose rebels use remote mountain areas on the border as sanctuary and staging ground for attacks inside Turkey. From Turkey's perspective, Iraq's disintegration would remove a critical counterweight to Iranian influence and, more ominously, herald the birth of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, thus threatening to inflame Kurdish nationalist passions inside Turkey. As a result, it has sought to prevent the sectarian conflict in Iraq's centre from escalating, Iraqi Kurds from seceding and the PKK from prospering.

There is broad consensus in Turkey regarding these goals. However, opinions diverge on how best to achieve them. Members of the Kemalist-nationalist establishment – the Turkish armed forces, powerful parts of the bureaucracy, the Republican People's Party and the Nationalist Movement Party – view the KRG and the Kurdish national ideal it represents as an existential threat. They are convinced that a far more aggressive posture toward the KRG is required to force it to stop protecting the PKK. As a result, they advocate isolating it diplomatically, limiting its authority to the pre-2003 internal boundaries and keeping it economically weak.

Pro-European liberal circles, the ruling religious-conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and Kurdish elites take a different view. They see the landlocked Kurdistan federal region as vulnerable and having little choice but to rely on Turkey for protection (for example, from a resurgent central Iraqi state) and economic prosperity. They view the area as a potential buffer between Turkey and the rest of Iraq which, in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, could revert to civil war. They believe the best way to combat the PKK is to persuade the KRG to do so. For these reasons, they advocate stronger diplomatic, political and economic ties with the KRG in order to extend Turkish influence, cement the Kurdistan federal region more solidly within Iraq and ensure action is taken against the PKK.

Divisions have yielded a measure of confusion, but the end-result has been a strikingly pragmatic and largely effective compromise between the AKP and the more traditional establishment, combining military pressure, politics, diplomacy and economic incentives. On the issue of Iraq's political future, Turkey has come to accept that the question no longer is whether it will be a federation or a unitary state but rather what type of federation will arise and with what degree of decentralisation. It also has steered a middle course in the struggle over Kirkuk, disputed between Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans and others. In particular, it stopped relying on the Turkoman population for its main leverage points, instead insisting on preserving the city's multi-ethnic/religious fabric. In so doing, it can hinder the Kurds' exclusive claim to the oil-rich region without which the KRG would probably lack the economic autonomy necessary for genuine independence.

Turkey has proved adroit in other ways too. It has deepened economic ties with the Kurdish area while holding back on providing material aid to its energy sector or allowing the KRG to export oil and gas through its territory until Iraq has adopted a federal hydrocarbons law – a step which Ankara considers critical to that country's territorial integrity. Finally,

Turkey has mounted limited military cross-border operations against the PKK, designed more to pressure the KRG to take action and convince the U.S. to use its own leverage than to crush the Kurdish movement – overall, a far more effective way of dealing with this perennial challenge than serial Turkish bombing, whose military impact (as opposed to any temporary political benefits) is highly questionable. In short, Turkey has both pressured and reached out to Iraq's Kurdish authorities, concluding this is the optimal way to contain the PKK, encourage Iraqi national reconciliation and tie the Kurds more closely with the central state.

There have been real benefits for the KRG as well. The slowly warming relationship is based on its realisation that U.S. forces may draw down significantly in the next two years, leaving the Kurds increasingly dependent on the federal government and neighbouring states such as Turkey and Iran. Under this scenario, Turkey would be a more useful partner to the Kurds than either Baghdad or Tehran, because of the pros-

pect it offers of access to the European Union (which, even at Ankara's current customs union relationship to Brussels, would exceed as an economic magnet anything even an oil-rich Iraq would offer); its availability as a trans-shipment country for Kurdish oil and gas; its ability to invest in major infrastructure projects; and the better quality of the goods it sells to Iraq's Kurdistan federal region.

The result has been a (still fragile) victory for pragmatism over ultra-nationalism on both sides of the border. Rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG will not solve all problems, nor root out the unhelpful spasms of nationalist rhetoric that intermittently contaminate political discourse. More is required to lay the foundations of a lasting, stable relationship, including a peaceful, consensus-based solution to the Kirkuk question. But, amid the many uncertain prospects facing Iraq, this at least is one development to be welcomed and nurtured.

Istanbul/Brussels, 13 November 2008

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I. INTRODUCTION

For four centuries until 1926, the mountains and valleys of what is now officially known as Iraq's Kurdistan region were ruled by the Ottoman empire. For the most part, the area was part of the Vilayet (province) of Mosul, whose administrative boundaries frequently changed. By agreement between Turkey and Britain, victorious against the Ottomans in World War I, it became part of Iraq and its already weak links with Turkish rule were broken.

After 1926, Turkey addressed its concerns about Iraqi Kurds or the security of its Iraqi border through Baghdad alone. Common opposition to Kurdish separatism encouraged cooperation, if not collusion. In February 1983, Ankara and Baghdad signed a Frontier Security and Cooperation Agreement, which gave both states the right to carry out hot-pursuit operations against armed groups in the other's territory.¹

Turkish-Iraqi cooperation broke down during the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis, when Ankara backed the international coalition established to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait. When Kurds, sensing opportunity, rose up against Baghdad in the war's aftermath, the regime retaliated with a vengeance, and an estimated half-million refugees fled toward the mountainous border, where they remained stranded in harsh conditions. The U.S. and other Gulf War allies then established a safe haven in northern Iraq to end the refugee crisis. Iraqi Kurdish rebel groups, chiefly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), returned from exile and established control. Taking advantage of Western protection and Iraqi forces' withdrawal in October 1991, they extended their reach over most of the area of the 1974 Kurdish autonomous region.

Initially, the Turkish government embraced the Iraqi Kurdish parties, seeking influence and allies in its fight against its own rebel Kurdish group, the PKK. KDP and PUK leaders, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani

respectively, were granted diplomatic passports and allowed to open offices in Ankara, which still operate today.² However, the situation soon became a double-edged sword. While the establishment of the de facto region kept Kurdish refugees from Turkish territory, what was in effect a security vacuum in the border area provided the PKK with a safe haven, a source of cheap weapons and a launching pad for attacks on Turkish soil. As the PUK and KDP entrenched themselves, held elections and established a regional government, Turkey increasingly worried about their ambitions for independence.

The death in 1993 of President Turgut Özal, the architect of cordial ties with the Kurdish parties, coincided with a shift in strategy. Working closely with Iran and Syria, Turkey sought to contain Kurdish ambitions, a task made easier when, in 1994, the PUK and KDP started fighting each other over the spoils of border trade.³ The internal conflict both weakened the case for a Kurdish state and increased Ankara's influence.

The ground shifted again in 1995, when the PUK backed the PKK against the KDP, its main rival.⁴ In response, the KDP forged an alliance with Turkey, and fighting between the two Iraqi Kurdish parties escalated to a true civil war, with thousands of casualties.⁵ The U.S.

² Åsa Lundgren, *The Unwelcome Neighbour: Turkey's Kurdish Policy* (New York, 2007), pp. 85-86.

³ Turkey was first alarmed when the Kurds organised elections to the Kurdistan national assembly in May 1992 and announced the formation of the Kurdish federal region in October, the possible basis for an independent state. As a counter-measure, it organised a meeting with Iran and Syria in November to signal joint opposition. This turned into a tripartite cooperation mechanism, which functioned until the PUK and KDP started fighting each other in May 1994. The conflict in effect divided the region into two zones and the government into two parallel entities. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°10, *War in Iraq: What's Next For the Kurds?*, 19 March 2003.

⁴ The PUK is not known to have fought at the PKKs side, but a non-aggression pact between the two organisations allowed the PKK to move into PUK bases. Ümit Özdağ, *Türk Ordusunun Kuzey Irak Operasyonlari* (Istanbul, 2008).

⁵ Ümit Özdağ, *Türk Ordusunun Kuzey Irak Operasyonlari* (Istanbul, 2008). The KDP *peshmerga* served as guides for Turkish forces in operations against the PKK and at times even

¹ William Hale, *Turkey, the US and Iraq* (London, 2007), pp. 32-37.

brokered an end to the fighting in September 1998, and Turkey, asked to monitor the ceasefire, deployed a small contingent of troops deep inside the region. This allowed it to gather intelligence against the PKK and contain the Iraqi Kurds' political ambitions. Throughout the 1990s Turkish troops conducted cross-border operations against the PKK almost at will, including one involving more than 20,000 troops in May 1997.⁶ Today a residual Turkish force of about 2,000 remains at three locations in Dohuk governorate.⁷

Whatever influence Turkey gained in northern Iraq, however, it lost again in 2003, after its parliament denied transit rights to U.S. forces as they prepared to invade Iraq.⁸ As a result, it watched from the sidelines as Iraqi Kurdish parties streamed into Kirkuk ahead of the Americans in April. Two years later it could not prevent the crossing of another red line, the transformation of Iraq's state structure from unitary to federal. Iraqi Kurdistan became a federal region – the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – with significant autonomy from Baghdad. At the same time, the PKK gained greater freedom of manoeuvre, as Turkey's ability to pursue the group shrank: pursuing the PKK across the border now that the U.S. exercised de facto sovereignty in Iraq and maintained close relations with Iraqi Kurds could have caused a diplomatic incident. Turkey half-heartedly acquiesced in the Kurdistan region's federal status (as well as the second-rank status of the Turkoman community in Kirkuk). It was only in late 2007, as PKK attacks escalated, that it received a U.S. green light to cross the border after the group.

fought alongside Turkish troops in return for support against the PUK.

⁶Bill Park, "Turkey's Policy Towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives", International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper no. 374 (2005).

⁷Most Turkish troops are located at a base near Bamerni airfield in Dohuk governorate. Others are to the west of Bamerni, close to the town of Batufa, and to the east in Amadiya district, close to the town of Kani Masi. They include special forces and a tank battalion. See Gareth Jenkins, "Unwelcome Guests: The Turkish Military Bases in Northern Iraq", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 6 (24 March 2008).

⁸"In the 1990s, Turkey intervened 24 times in northern Iraq, which was a kind of Turkish protectorate. However, after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Turkey found itself relying on the U.S. and Iraqi Kurdish factions to act against the PKK". Comments by Bill Park, lecturer at King's College in London, at a conference on Turkey and the Middle East organised by the Istanbul Policy Center of Sabancı University, Istanbul, 2 May 2008.

II. CONTAINING THE PKK

Since the end of a unilateral PKK ceasefire in 2004,⁹ the question of how to respond to the insurgent group's attacks has preoccupied and divided Turkish policy-makers. Undoubtedly, the PKK was seriously impaired by the 1999 capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Still, it survived and continued to stage attacks in Turkey thanks in part to its ability to maintain a significant force and its leadership in the Kurdistan federal region, as well as to financial support from the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. The PKK retains a fighting force in the Qandil mountain range on Iraq's border with Iran, as well as forward bases and arms caches strewn along the mountainous border with Turkey. Its cadres roam relatively freely throughout the area, and unarmed fighters enter towns in the region apparently without hindrance.

A. DIVERGING PERSPECTIVES

In 2007 and 2008 Turkey has used a carrot-and-stick approach to pressure the KRG to act against the PKK. It has threatened economic embargo and even military intervention if the KRG continued to (as it saw it) shelter the PKK; conversely, it has held out the promise of rewards in the form of diplomatic, political and economic relations in exchange for cooperation against the group. This approach appears to reflect a compromise between competing currents: on the one hand, the

⁹The Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) was founded in the 1970s and launched a guerrilla campaign for an independent Kurdish state in 1984. While Marxist-Leninist in ideology, it was profoundly nationalist in orientation. Since the 1999 capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK has shifted its public rhetoric in favour of Kurdish autonomy within Turkey, although it retains a strong pan-Kurdish ideology as well as pan-Kurdish membership. The U.S. and EU both list the PKK as a terrorist organisation. The Iranian-Kurdish Party of Free Life for Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azadiya Kurdistanê, PJAK) appears to be a PKK affiliate based, likewise, in the Qandil mountain range in Iraq. It is unclear how close the PKK is to the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan, TAK), a group that has claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks on tourists and others in Turkey. See Crisis Group Europe Report N°184, *Turkey and Europe: The Way Ahead*, 17 August 2007, p. 12. The best accounts on the PKK include Ali Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (New York, 2006); Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York, 2007); Nihat Ali Özcan, *PKK (Kürdistan İşçi Partisi)* (Ankara, 1999); and Sabri Çiğirli and Didier Le Saout, *Öcalan et le PKK: Les Mutations de la Question Kurde en Turquie et le Moyen-Orient* (Paris, 2005).

Kemalist-nationalist establishment, which controls the military and security apparatus and is well-ensconced in the bureaucracy, and, on the other, the AKP government, which can draw upon support of both liberal elites and Kurdish political forces.

Exponents of the Kemalist-nationalist establishment¹⁰ wish to reduce the PKK's capability by denying it safe haven in northern Iraq. In the words of a retired general: "You cannot successfully fight the PKK's subordinates in Turkey when its command and control is being run from northern Iraq".¹¹ They view any support for Kurdish rights in Turkey as concessions to terrorism and hold that political reform aimed at granting domestic cultural and linguistic rights to Kurds can come only after the PKK's destruction. A parliament member for the Kemalist Republican People's Party said:

Finding a political solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey before eradicating the PKK means giving one-sided concessions to the terrorist organisation. If you try to find ways to placate terrorists, you end up exacerbating terrorism. If this were the correct way to follow, the U.S. would have used the same strategy in its fight against al-Qaeda. Radical Kurds in Turkey are demanding a political solution in order to prepare the ground for secession. The PKK did not launch a fight against Turkey to improve Kurds' socio-economic and cultural situation. If we

fail to understand their real plan, we will pay a huge price: the territorial integrity of Turkey.¹²

To get the PKK out of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kemalist-nationalist establishment favours a combination of diplomatic pressure and military might vis-à-vis the KRG, which it accuses of supporting the Kurdish movement as a means of pressing Turkey to acquiesce in Kurdish self-determination in Iraq. A Turkish analyst commented:

If the PKK can establish its bases, get logistical support, move freely and make politics through PKK-affiliated political parties in northern Iraq, it is a very big mistake to argue that all of this is because of the presence of around 3,500 armed militants in the region. The PKK cannot have influence in northern Iraq without the support of the regional government. It is a bargaining chip that can be offered to Turkey in exchange for Ankara removing its reservations concerning Kirkuk and Kurdish independence [from Iraq].¹³

Seen from this perspective, the KRG can afford to use the PKK in this fashion because it has U.S. backing. General Edip Başer, Turkey's former special envoy at the Trilateral Commission for Countering Terrorism (a U.S.-Iraqi-Turkish forum created to combat the PKK in Iraq) blamed U.S. support of the KRG for the PKK's durability:

Thanks to the presence of the U.S., [KRG President Masoud] Barzani is in a position to turn to Turkey and say that he is not going to do anything against this terrorist organisation, and he is going to resist any power that plans to come to his territory to do the job. Contrary to the past, Barzani can now make such declarations. Does he have a more powerful army? Does he have more technologically advanced weapons? The answer is "no". What he has is strong backing from the U.S.¹⁴

Some go further. They claim not only that the KRG is using the PKK as leverage but also that some Iraqi Kurdish leaders, notably Masoud Barzani, harbour pan-Kurdish ambitions within which the PKK plays an important part. As a security analyst put it:

¹⁰The definition and quantification of Kemalists is difficult, since the great majority of Turks have been educated on Kemalist tenets and view themselves as supporters of Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish nation. Nevertheless, in July 2007, only one fifth of voters backed the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), which claims the Kemalist banner and was founded by Atatürk himself. The newspaper *Cumhuriyet (The Republic)* reflects the most orthodox Kemalist viewpoint but has only a small circulation. Kemalist ideas also are defended by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) led by former military officers, like the Atatürk Thought Association. Top jobs in the judiciary have traditionally been the preserve of Kemalists. The most powerful, prestigious and disciplined Kemalists, however, are the officer corps of the armed forces. Taken together, this elite is referred to in Turkey as the Kemalist establishment. Kemalists usually subscribe to strong nationalist ideas; many nationalists are grouped around the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), which takes a more traditional, religiously observant line. See Crisis Group Report, *Turkey and Europe*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹¹Crisis Group interview, General (rtd.) Armağan Kuloğlu, chief adviser at the Global Strategy Institute, Ankara, 6 February 2008.

¹²Crisis Group interview, Onur Öymen, parliament member for the Republican People's Party (CHP) and a former under-secretary at the ministry of foreign affairs, Ankara, 4 February 2008.

¹³Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007.

¹⁴Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 30 October 2007.

Barzani is following a pan-Kurdist policy to become the leader not only of Iraqi Kurds but of all Kurds living in neighbouring countries. It is not logical to expect him to act against the PKK, which emphasises Kurdish identity and Kurdish nationalism and executes a military struggle against Turkey on those grounds.¹⁵

At the other end of the spectrum, Turkey's Kurdish elites, politically divided between secular ethno-nationalists and religious-conservatives,¹⁶ view the PKK as a symptom and consequence of Turkey's unresolved Kurdish question. A Kurdish parliamentarian from the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP) said:

The Kurdish question did not start with the PKK. The PKK represents the 29th Kurdish uprising since the Ottoman empire. If we leave this problem unresolved, the PKK may be suppressed through military means, but other uprisings will occur in the future.¹⁷

This perspective, which is shared by parts of the liberal Turkish intelligentsia, has produced an altogether different view of how the PKK should be tackled. Rather than focusing narrowly on the movement, it proposes a broader democratic solution to the Kurdish

question in Turkey. A Kurdish parliamentarian from AKP argued:

The problem is not in Iraqi Kurdistan, it is here in Turkey. It is only because we have not been able to solve our Kurdish problem that we view Iraqi Kurdistan as a threat. Turkey fears that Kurdish independence in Iraq will exacerbate separatist feelings inside Turkey, and this in turn provides a pretext for suppressing democratic openings in Turkey.¹⁸

Those who share this perspective favour strengthening relations with the KRG. A DTP parliamentarian proposed that the KRG mediate between Turkey and the PKK:

The KRG could play a positive role in solving the PKK problem in Turkey. During Saddam Hussein's regime, Turkey labelled the KDP and the PUK resistance movements, never terrorist organisations. The government which these two parties established has legitimacy in Iraq. This will enable it to play a positive role. During the 1990s, Barzani and Talabani carried red [diplomatic] Turkish passports. Turkey accepted them as legitimate partners and could do so again. By going via the KRG, talks could aim to bring about the PKK's disarmament. Eliminating the PKK [by force] will not bring a long-term solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey.¹⁹

Some Kurdish intellectuals allege that the military has used the PKK's presence in Iraqi Kurdistan both to preserve its own privileged position in Turkey and to justify "hot pursuit" operations in northern Iraq that, whatever they may do to neutralise the PKK, also appear designed to curb the KRG's rising influence. In the words of a Kurdish writer, "The military turned the PKK into its own effective instrument – both to obstruct the democratisation and civilianisation process and thus retain its patronage-based regime and to block the KRG's achievements in Iraqi Kurdistan".²⁰

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007. Some contend that the KRG's supposed pan-Kurdish aims are exaggerated and interpret its perceived inaction vis-à-vis the PKK differently. A retired security official said, "some people exaggerate and view pan-Kurdism as the number one threat. Such exaggerations affect our policy toward the KRG, but perceptions should not be allowed to drive policy". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 29 November 2007. A Turkish journalist highlighted the flip side of this approach: "The Iraqi Kurdish leadership is obsessed by the fear that Turkey's real intention is not to go after the PKK but to put the KRG out of business. This is why the KRG is sceptical of Turkey's constant demands concerning the PKK's presence inside its territory and is unmotivated to act against the PKK in cooperation with Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Cengiz Çandar, columnist in the daily *Radikal*, Istanbul, 23 January 2008.

¹⁶ Secular ethno-nationalist Kurds tend to associate themselves with the PKK and its political outlet, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), whereas religious-conservative Kurds have voted overwhelmingly for the ruling AKP in the last two elections. There are many independents as well. For detailed information about Turkey's Kurdish landscape, see M. Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan, "The Kurdish Question and Turkey's Justice and Development Party", *Middle East Policy*, no.1 (2006), pp. 106-107.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sırrı Sakık, a Kurdish member of parliament from the DTP, Ankara, 14 February 2008.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, İhsan Arslan, Kurdish member of parliament for the AKP, Ankara, 14 February 2008.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Selahattin Demirtaş, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ümit Fırat, Kurdish writer affiliated with the Kurdish political magazine, *Serbesti*, which is published in Turkish, Istanbul, 17 April 2008.

The AKP government²¹ has steered a middle course between these two views. It has sought a balance between fighting the PKK – whose aims and methods are abhorrent to a vast majority of Turks – and retaining support among Turkey's Kurds, many of whom voted for the party²² and who, even if they do not support the PKK, oppose using force against it. In Turkey, the government advocates socio-economic development in the south eastern provinces, as well as cultural and linguistic rights for the Kurds in line with EU norms; in Iraq, it favours diplomacy to end (what it sees as) KRG support of the PKK.²³

B. A DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY

As the AKP government saw it, the sudden increase in PKK attacks between 2006 and late 2007 had less to do with a PKK revival than with KRG efforts to strengthen its hand ahead of the constitutionally mandated Kirkuk referendum. According to this view, by backing PKK attacks in Turkey, the KRG hoped to provoke a large-scale, indiscriminate Turkish military response in northern Iraq, thereby bringing Turkey into confrontation with the international community and isolating it diplomatically. This, in turn, would give the KRG a freer hand in Kirkuk.²⁴

Turkish officials claim that they forestalled such a scenario by responding to the PKK's provocations with restraint, launching instead a diplomatic effort to gain broad international support for military action against the PKK before resorting to force.²⁵ Such sup-

port ranged from Iraq to key regional states, the Arab League and, in a coup that clinched its strategy, the U.S.

Turkey had long pressed Iraq to sign a counter-terrorism agreement largely aimed at fighting the PKK, and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's 7 August 2007 visit to Ankara was a breakthrough. He and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed a memorandum of understanding, strong on principle, weak on operational detail, to end the PKK presence in Iraq. Then, on 28 September, Iraq's interior minister, Jawad al-Boulani, and his Turkish counterpart, Beşir Atalay, signed a counter-terrorism agreement in which the two countries pledged to prevent the use of their territories by the PKK for shelter and recruitment; prohibit financial as well as both direct and indirect logistical support for the PKK; bar the media from encouraging terrorist activities; and either try the PKK leadership in Iraq or deport it to Turkey.²⁶ To Ankara's dissatisfaction, however, they failed to reach agreement over a clause that would have allowed its military to engage in hot-pursuit operations against the PKK inside Iraq. This was due to strong objections from the KRG, which denounced it as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.²⁷

Turkey also sought and received diplomatic support from key regional countries. On 17 October, during an official visit, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad publicly backed Turkey's right to stage cross-border offensives against Iraqi-based Kurdish rebels.²⁸ Six days later, Erdoğan and his UK counterpart, Gordon Brown, signed a strategic partnership on cooperation covering a number of issues, including joint action against what was referred to as the PKK's terrorist activities.²⁹ That same month, Foreign Minister Ali Babacan received statements of support from the Palestinian, Israeli, Jordanian and Saudi heads of state for the fight against the PKK. On a 27 October visit to Tehran, he met with senior Iranian officials, following which President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad declared: "Iran understands Turkey's struggle against terrorism and is ready to cooperate with Turkey".³⁰ Finally, on 3 November, Ali Babacan signed an agreement with Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa to cement cooperation in security, political and economic spheres.³¹

The biggest prize, however, was the U.S. endorsement. Prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Turkey had sought to contain the PKK in northern Iraq through cross-

²¹ The AKP, a centre-right party of mainly religiously observant conservatives grouped around the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, can be classified under the category of Sunni Muslim political movements. These generally accept the nation-state, operate within its constitutional framework, eschew violence, articulate a reformist rather than revolutionary vision and invoke universal democratic norms. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

²² In the July 2007 parliamentary elections, the AKP received 41 per cent of the vote in twelve majority-Kurdish provinces, while the pro-PKK DTP received only 33 per cent. See Kemal Kirişçi, "The Kurdish Question and Turkey: Future Challenges and Prospects for a Solution", Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), December 2007.

²³ Ertan Efeğil, "Turkey's New Approaches toward the PKK, Iraqi Kurds and the Kurdish Question", *Insight Turkey*, no. 3 (2008), pp. 55-56.

²⁴ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, no.1 (2008), pp. 84-88.

²⁵ Unilateral military action in northern Iraq by Turkey could set back its efforts to join the EU. See Aylin Ş. Görener, "Turkey and Northern Iraq on the Course of Rapprochement", SETA Policy Brief, no.17 (2008), p. 5.

²⁶ *Milliyet*, 28 September 2007.

²⁷ *Turkish Daily News*, 29 September 2007.

²⁸ Reuters, 17 October 2007.

²⁹ *Today's Zaman*, 24 October 2007.

³⁰ Anadolu Agency, 28 October 2007.

³¹ *TurkishPress.com*, 4 November 2007.

border operations. Yet, its parliament's 1 March 2003 decision to bar the U.S. military from transiting Turkey³² in effect gave the PKK additional freedom of manoeuvre. A Turkish official who dealt with the U.S. at the time said:

If the Turkish parliament had approved the 1 March parliamentary bill, the PKK would have had no opportunity to return to armed struggle. Turkish troops would have entered northern Iraq under the [Turkish] national command up to the Internally Displaced People (IDP) line, along which all the PKK's forward bases were located, with a mandate to militarily engage against terrorists, including the PKK.³³

The U.S. was stung by the parliament's rejection, and bilateral relations deteriorated.³⁴ Among the after-

shocks was an embarrassing July 2003 incident in the northern Iraqi (Kurdish) town of Suleimaniya involving the capture of Turkish special forces,³⁵ perceived U.S. inaction regarding the PKK³⁶ and allegations that the U.S. had supplied the PKK with weapons.³⁷ From 2003 on, Turkey spent considerable energy putting its relations with Washington back on track, largely in order to better contain its PKK problem. Fearing unilateral Turkish military action against the PKK, which could disrupt Iraqi Kurdistan's relative stability, the U.S. agreed to establish a U.S./Iraqi/Turkish trilateral counter-terrorism mechanism. In August 2006 it appointed retired Air Force General Joseph Ralston, a former vice chairman of its joint chiefs of staff, as its special envoy to coordinate joint action against the PKK.³⁸

³² At that time around 90 per cent of the Turkish people opposed U.S. military intervention in Iraq. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer declared that the war would be illegitimate and unjustifiable. The Turkish armed forces refrained from making comments that could have affected the parliament's decision. The main opposition party, the CHP, came out against the bill that was drafted to permit the transit, saying that it would drag Turkey into the war and put it in a position of front-line military outpost. The ruling AKP was divided, and its leadership found it hard to maintain party discipline. Eventually, on 1 March 2003, 264 members of parliament in favour of the bill, 250 voted against, while nineteen abstained. The bill required an absolute majority of those present for passage, which it fell short of by three votes. For more detailed information on the 1 March 2003 events, see Deniz Bölükbaşı, *1 Mart Vakası: Irak Tezkeresi ve Sonrası* (Istanbul, 2008); Turan Yavuz, *Çıvıllayan İttifak* (Ankara, 2008); Fikret Bila, *Ankara'da Irak Savaşları* (Istanbul, 2007); and Murat Yetkin, *Tezkere* (Istanbul, 2004).

³³ Comments by Ambassador (ret.) Deniz Bölükbaşı, who headed the Turkish team negotiating the military memorandum on Turkish-U.S. cooperation in Iraq and currently is a parliament member for the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Haber Türk Television, 27 May 2007. The plan was for Turkish armed forces to enter northern Iraq with 31,000 soldiers grouped in four brigades (an armoured brigade, a mechanised brigade, a commando brigade and a mountain commando brigade) and special forces (the Scorpion Task Force), reinforced by tank battalions and artillery. Under the command of General Erdal Suphi, gendarmerie deputy chief for public order in Silopi, these forces would proceed to what is known in Turkey as the Internally Displaced People Line, or the "Rain Line", which runs about 40km inside Iraq along the Turkish border from Faysh Khabur on the Syrian border, south of Khabur, past the Zakho pass, east of Dohuk, south of Atrush and Barzan to reach the Turkish-Iraqi-Iranian border at the Hayat Valley. See Deniz Bölükbaşı, op. cit.

³⁴ For a recent history of U.S.-Turkish relations, see Ian O. Lesser, "Beyond Suspicion: Rethinking U.S.-Turkish Relations", Woodrow Wilson Center, October 2007; John C. K.

Daly, "U.S.-Turkish Relations: A Strategic Relationship Under Stress", Jamestown Foundation, February 2008; Stephen J. Flanagan and Samuel J. Brannen, "Turkey's Shifting Dynamics: Implications for U.S.-Turkey Relations", Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2008; and F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey as a U.S. Security Partner", RAND Corporation, 2008.

³⁵ On 4 July 2003, U.S. forces arrested a Turkish special forces unit in Suleimaniya on suspicion it was planning to assassinate the governor of Kirkuk. Its members were led away with hoods over their heads, interrogated by the U.S. military and released after 60 hours.

³⁶ The U.S. was preoccupied with instability in Iraq's centre and south. Its forces were stressed and overstretched, and it could ill afford to send troops to the north. A Turkish security analyst identified an additional reason for perceived U.S. inaction: "The U.S. does not want to act against the PKK. The Kurdish region is the only area that the U.S. could hold on to if the situation in Iraq were to get worse. This is why the U.S. would never allow a situation to arise putting it at odds with the Iraqi Kurds. If the U.S. were to open fire [on the PKK], this would be perceived as an action not against a terrorist organisation but against the [Iraqi] Kurds. The U.S. could lose its influence over [KRG President Masoud] Barzani and [Iraqi President Jalal] Talabani as a result. Moreover, the U.S. is using [the Iranian Kurdish rebel group] PJAK against Iran. PJAK is operating under the PKK's security umbrella, has adopted many of the PKK's political ideas and military strategies and is sharing many of the same facilities and resources in Qandil mountain. It is not reasonable to think that the U.S. will abandon its only card to destabilise Iran in order to please the Turks". Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007.

³⁷ Turkey claimed to have seized quantities of U.S.-supplied arms from the PKK. An internal investigation by the U.S. department of defence indicated that corrupt U.S. troops were involved in selling arms to the PKK. For more information, see Andrew McGregor, "PKK Arms Scandal Fuels Turkish Suspensions", *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 4, no. 27 (14 August 2007).

³⁸ *Turkish Daily News*, 30 August 2006.

Turkey and Iraq followed suit, naming their own envoys: retired General Edip Başer, a former Turkish land forces commander, and Sirwan al-Wa'ili, Iraq's state minister for national security. Turkey's strategy was to take advantage of U.S. rhetoric about the universality of its war on terror to help it convince the Bush administration that the PKK threatened not only Turkey, but also the U.S. and the region as a whole.³⁹ Ankara's primary goal was to bring U.S. pressure to bear on the Iraqi government and the KRG so that they, rather than Turkey, would take steps to remove the PKK from Iraqi territory.

But for Turkey, the experience was utterly dissatisfying. After he retired, Edip Başer asserted that his country had made clear from the outset that the commission should have taken several immediate steps:

First of all, we called on the Iraqi central government to designate the PKK as a terrorist organisation and ban all its activities inside Iraqi territory. Secondly, we wanted them to sign an agreement on the fight against terrorism. Finally, we requested that [Iraqi President Jalal] Talabani send a letter to the UN asking for the closure of the Makhmour camp [housing Kurdish refugees from Turkey].⁴⁰

³⁹“We considered the U.S. a close ally that stood for the same cause and values. If you call yourself my friend, then if there is a threat to my vital interest you should be with us – or you effectively place yourself on the side of the terrorists. If you can do something and are not doing it, this means you are supporting the PKK. The U.S. is reluctant to take even a single step to help us to stop this bloodshed. The U.S. asks us to sit down, negotiate with the terrorist organisation and come to an agreement. Then why is it that Bush does not sit down and come to an agreement with Osama Bin Laden?” Crisis Group interview, General (rt.d.) Edip Başer, Turkey's former special envoy at the Trilateral Commission for Countering Terrorism, Istanbul, 30 October 2007. The interview preceded by a month U.S. endorsement of Turkish military action against the PKK in northern Iraq.

⁴⁰General Başer told Crisis Group: “Makhmour camp has been used by the PKK as a training, recruiting and recreational centre. The camp is under the auspices of the UNHCR. What the trilateral commission achieved was that we forced the PKK to withdraw from the camp. Subsequently, an Iraqi military unit from Baghdad was assigned to the camp to prevent the PKK from coming back, and a U.S. detachment was sent to the camp to observe the Iraqi forces. A mini survey was conducted. All the people in this camp were registered and then identification cards were distributed. However, after having left the commission, I started to hear that the PKK returned to the camp due to a shortage of Iraqi forces, whose numbers were around 50”. Ibid. Makhmour camp was established in the early 1990s to house Kurds fleeing violence in Turkey's south eastern region. See Crisis Group Middle East

According to General Başer, it soon became clear that the Iraqis were not going to take steps against the PKK because they were weak, while the U.S. was reluctant to push the KRG hard and risk a crisis. A Turkish politician, reflecting a widely held view, offered this explanation: “The U.S. does not put pressure on the KRG because it would like to have an option in northern Iraq. The U.S. wants to use the Kurdish region as a protectorate. If everything goes wrong [in Iraq], it plans to deploy to northern Iraq”.⁴¹

Frustrated by this lack of progress, General Başer began publicly questioning the commission's utility, which led the AKP government to dismiss him on 21 May 2007.⁴² Foreign Ministry Deputy Undersecretary Rafet Akgünay replaced him but never met fellow commission member Ralston.⁴³ A senior Turkish official subsequently complained:

None of the commission's objectives were realised. These were to shut down PKK offices in northern Iraq, put an end to the political and media activities of the PKK-affiliated Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (KDSP), close down the PKK's refugee and military camps, cut the PKK's logistical support lines and capture and extract PKK leaders.⁴⁴

Ralston announced his resignation during a reception at the Turkish Embassy in Washington on the occasion of Republic Day, 29 October 2007,⁴⁵ and the commission in effect disbanded.⁴⁶ While the U.S. agreed with

Report N°64, *Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, 19 April 2007, p. 18.

⁴¹Crisis Group interview, Şükrü Elekdağ, a former undersecretary at the ministry of foreign affairs and currently a member of parliament for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Ankara, 4 December 2007.

⁴²*Today's Zaman*, 22 May 2007.

⁴³“Only after the media reported their non-contact did General Ralston make a call to Ambassador Akgünay to congratulate him for taking this post. Then when the Iraqi prime minister visited Turkey in August 2007, Ambassador Akgünay had the opportunity to meet his Iraqi counterpart, and he reported this meeting to General Ralston in another telephone call. Later, on a visit to New York, he wanted to meet General Ralston, but the latter was at home in Alaska at the time”. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵*Turkish Daily News*, 11 October 2007.

⁴⁶“The Trilateral Commission is now dead. In the new situation, Deputy Chief of Staff General Saygun, his counterpart U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chairman General James E. Cartwright and U.S. Coalition Commander General David Petraeus will come together to discuss joint actions against the PKK. From now on, it will be the Turkish military that is going to coordinate the fight against the PKK. Nobody is talking about the Trilateral Commission any longer. There is

Turkey's views on the PKK, it was not inclined to take military action, as it was preoccupied with stabilising Iraq in the centre and could not spare the required units. Neither did it want to put pressure on the KRG to act, as doing so would risk alienating its most reliable Iraqi allies.

The trilateral commission's collapse and a sudden spike in PKK attacks in October 2007⁴⁷ brought Turkey and the U.S. to the verge of a major crisis. Internal pressure escalated to such a degree that Turkey threatened to conduct a unilateral cross-border operation.⁴⁸ To placate it and improve relations, President Bush invited Prime Minister Erdoğan to Washington on 5 November. The meeting marked the first significant warming of relations since the 1 March 2003 political debacle. The two agreed on joint action against the PKK to, in the words of one observer, "neutralise and cripple" but "not liquidate" it.⁴⁹

Cooperation was defined in four fields: the U.S. would share operational intelligence,⁵⁰ assist in capturing

no American representative, and through diplomatic channels we talk to the Iraqi side, so there is no need for the Trilateral Commission". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

⁴⁷Public outrage was triggered when a group of 45-50 PKK fighters ambushed a Turkish commando unit in the Gabar mountains in south eastern Turkey on 7 October 2007; thirteen soldiers were killed and three wounded. This forced the government to seek parliamentary approval for cross-border operations. Gareth Jenkins, "Turkey Prepares For Cross-Border Military Operation", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10 October 2007. The Gabar ambush was followed on 21 October by an attack on a military outpost near Dağlica village by a group of about 150-200 PKK militants; twelve soldiers were killed and sixteen injured. Gareth Jenkins, "PKK Trying to Draw Turkish Military Into Northern Iraq", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 22 October 2007.

⁴⁸"The PKK attacks have brought Turkey and the U.S. to the threshold of a major crisis. We were ready to conduct a unilateral military intervention". Crisis Group interview, Suat Kınıkloğlu, parliament member from the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Ankara, 6 February 2008.

⁴⁹"The U.S. will not allow operations based on deep penetration into northern Iraq. This means that PKK forces deployed far from the border will be safe. The agreement does not foresee the PKK's liquidation". Crisis Group interview, Şükrü Elekdağ, parliament member for the Republican People's Party (CHP) and a former undersecretary at the ministry of foreign affairs, Ankara, 4 December 2007.

⁵⁰Intelligence sharing applies only to PKK operations close to the border: "In case PKK troops are deployed deep inside Iraq, the U.S. did not promise to do anything. The idea was to prevent PKK incursions into Turkey. The U.S. is sending a message to the PKK that it will not destroy the organisation, but it should not attempt to cross the border to attack Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Şükrü Elekdağ, Ankara, 4 December 2007.

PKK leaders and returning them to Turkey;⁵¹ seek to close PKK camps to cut its logistics support; and coordinate on Turkey's military operations in northern Iraq. The two countries set up a bilateral mechanism to oversee these activities, comprising Turkish Deputy Chief of Staff General Ergin Saygun⁵², his U.S. counterpart Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James E. Cartwright and U.S. Commanding General of the Multinational Forces in Iraq David Petraeus.

According to a former senior Turkish intelligence official, this change in U.S. policy should be attributed to rising public anger in Turkey with strong anti-American overtones and U.S. realisation that its strategic interests could not be preserved without active Turkish support.⁵³ As a quid pro quo for its assistance on the PKK, however, the U.S. reportedly demanded normalisation of Turkey's relations with the KRG.⁵⁴ Turkish officials were buoyant following the Bush-Erdoğan meeting. One official went so far as to say, "it will turn out to have been the final phase in Turkey's fight against the PKK".⁵⁵

C. MILITARY INTERVENTION

Just one week after concluding the counter-terrorism agreement with the Iraqi government, Erdoğan said he would ask parliament to permit a military incursion in Iraq. Both dissatisfaction with the agreement's terms, which did not authorise hot pursuit, and a sudden rise in PKK attacks account for this decision.⁵⁶ Ankara also may have hoped to put additional pressure on the U.S., the KRG and the Iraqi government to move against the PKK.⁵⁷ On 17 October, parliament voted 507 to 19 to authorise cross-border operations against PKK bases along the Turkish-Iraqi border as well as in the Qandil mountain range.⁵⁸

⁵¹The following top PKK leaders were mentioned: Murat Karayılan, Cemil Bayık and Süleyman Hüseyin. Crisis Group interview, Şükrü Elekdağ, Ankara, 4 December 2007.

⁵²General Ergin Saygun was promoted and named commander of Turkey's 1st Army. General Hasan Iğsız replaced him as the new deputy chief of staff.

⁵³Crisis Group interview, former senior official at the National Intelligence Agency (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, MIT), Ankara, 5 February 2008.

⁵⁴Crisis Group interview, General (rtd.) Armağan Kuloğlu, chief advisor at the Global Strategy Institute, Ankara, 6 February 2008.

⁵⁵Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

⁵⁶*Eurasia Insight*, 11 October 2007.

⁵⁷*The New York Times*, 18 October 2007.

⁵⁸*International Herald Tribune*, 17 October 2007. With the exception of the pro-PKK Democratic Society Party (DTP)

The turning point was the 5 November agreement with the U.S. From that time on, the U.S. actively assisted Turkey by opening Iraqi air space to its jets and supplying its military with satellite intelligence on PKK locations and movements – two critical elements for a successful attack. A senior official observed:

The added value of the U.S. is that they are in possession of better technology. When PKK terrorists move toward the border, they use certain areas as a jumping board, and for this reason it is very important to receive timely information. Human intelligence is difficult to obtain due to the area's geographical character. It therefore needs to be supported by other means, such as timely and actionable [satellite] intelligence.⁵⁹

On 16 December, Turkish jets carried out a first series of bombing raids on suspected PKK hideouts across the border, while officials called on the KRG to take concrete steps against the PKK, whose fighters, they claimed, continued to move around in Iraqi Kurdistan at will. According to one official:

The KRG is not doing its job concerning the PKK's presence in territory under its control. We are seeing media coverage of [PKK] checkpoints. Although some of the offices of the pro-PKK Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (KDSP) were closed, they were reopened next door. Some of the people affiliated with the PKK were put into custody, only to be released shortly afterwards. These measures are just window dressing. It's all too little, too late!⁶⁰

and the social-democrat Freedom and Solidarity Party (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP), all of Turkey's parliamentary parties, including the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Democratic Left Party (DSP), backed the government's motion seeking parliamentary authorisation.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007. A KDSP official maintained that the KRG had indeed shut down party offices in Suleimaniya and Erbil and that meetings now took place at members' homes. The party also has offices outside the Kurdistan federal region, in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk. The party's current leader, Diar Gharib, is based in Kirkuk. The official also claimed that the KRG arrested party officials in Zakho, Dohuk and Rania only to release them after a few days; allegedly, they then moved to Kirkuk, outside the KRG's direct control. The KDSP held its fourth annual congress in Kirkuk on 1-3 May 2008. Crisis Group interview, Faiq Golpy, KDSP political bureau member and its former leader, Suleimaniya, 26 June 2008.

Officials threatened further military action that could undo the region's economic progress, for which they took credit. In the words of a retired official,

A miracle has happened in northern Iraq. This is due to Turkey: we contributed a lot to the economic situation in northern Iraq. However, this could change. Turkey could become a destructive force as well. The presence of the PKK in northern Iraq could change Turkey's attitude toward Iraqi Kurdish leaders.⁶¹

The initial air strikes were followed by four more in January 2008. Their primary goal was to put pressure on the KRG to, essentially, act on Turkey's behalf:

Barzani fought against the PKK in the past [in the 1990s]. He has to come to the same position again. Talabani declared the PKK a terrorist organisation. We are expecting Barzani to do the same thing and start to truly cooperate in our fight against the PKK. This means they can do the fighting themselves, fight together with us, or let us do the fighting.⁶²

But these attacks also aimed at undermining PKK morale. A retired general who was part of the struggle against the PKK for a decade argued that their psychological impact was much more significant than any material damage they might cause:

These are not the type of operations that can get you concrete results. They are part of a policy to break the rebels' will to fight. They send a message to the PKK that northern Iraq is not a safe haven and that the Turkish state can reach them wherever they are at any time. They aim to force PKK militants to stay constantly on the alert. Standing guard for long periods wears them down and makes them vulnerable to a subsequent ground assault.⁶³

Whether the air strikes had the intended psychological impact on the PKK remains unclear. Regardless, on

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, retired senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 13 February 2008. The circumstances in which Masoud Barzani fought the PKK in the 1990s differed dramatically from the situation since 2003. In the 1990s, Barzani's KDP was engaged in internecine conflict with the PUK, which solicited the PKK's military support; today the KDP and PUK have a common vision vis-à-vis Iraq. And in the 1990s the Kurdish parties were weak, vulnerable to manipulation by a strong Turkey; today the Kurds constitute the strongest political alliance in Iraq and enjoy U.S. support.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, General (rtd.) Haldun Solmaztürk, Istanbul, 7 July 2008.

21 February 2008, Turkish forces launched a ground attack against its forward bases along the border, Operation Güneş (Sun). Focused on the Zab region, a common PKK jumping-off point as well as the site of the group's military operations headquarters in northern Iraq,⁶⁴ it took place in mid-winter, a time when snow makes the mountainous area particularly inhospitable.⁶⁵ While the military declared the one-week operation a success, citing the destruction of PKK bases and caches and the killing of 240 fighters, the claims could not be verified.⁶⁶ Moreover, a high number of Turkish troops may have been killed as well.⁶⁷

The operation's limited size, scope and length, and thus perhaps its limited effectiveness, reflected the compromise reached between the AKP government, the military and the Bush administration. The government was less than eager for the military to engage in cross-border attacks, lest these alienate its Kurdish constituents.⁶⁸ Public expectations had been raised so high,

⁶⁴The Zab region refers to the area through which the Greater Zab flows, a major river that runs from its source in Turkey through Iraqi Kurdistan into the Tigris south of Mosul. A Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party official asserted that the area is home to the PKK's military operations department, under its principal commander, Fahman Husein (aka Bahoz Erdal), a Syrian Kurd who is a former medical student. Crisis Group interview, Faiq Golpy, Suleimaniya, 26 June 2008. For a journalist's eyewitness account, see Joshua Partlow, "A Kurdish Society of Soldiers", *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2008.

⁶⁵A retired general explained the logic behind the timing: "If a military operation is going to be conducted, it has to have an element of surprise. This is the only way to get results, according to military doctrine". Crisis Group interview, General (rtd.) Haldun Solmaztürk, Istanbul, 7 July 2008.

⁶⁶The Turkish armed forces claim they destroyed 126 caves, 290 shelters, twelve command centres, six training centres, 23 logistics facilities, eighteen signals and communications facilities and thirteen anti-aircraft emplacements during the ground operation, and killed 240 PKK fighters. Available at www.tsk.mil.tr and follow link to 29 February press statement. That the PKK was shaken can be deduced from its vitriolic attacks against the KRG for in effect siding with Turkey. *Kurdish Globe*, 31 May 2008. While the KRG angrily denounced Turkish military actions, it took no counter-steps and instead curbed PKK activities.

⁶⁷The Turkish army reported that 24 of its own soldiers and three allied Kurdish "village guards" were killed during the ground operation. See www.tsk.mil.tr, op. cit. The PKK claimed it killed 127 Turkish soldiers while losing nine of its fighters. France 24 (TV), 28 March 2008.

⁶⁸Prime Minister Erdoğan asked rhetorically: "Has the fight with terrorism inside Turkey ended so that we can think about the luxury of dealing with 500 people in northern Iraq?" He later said that the figure of 500 was random. *Today's Zaman*, 13 June 2007. Turkish military sources usually use the approximate figure of 3,000 for PKK fighters in northern Iraq. In June 2007, Turkish land forces commander İlker Başbuğ

however,⁶⁹ that it would have appeared weak had it not given the military the green light. It justified the operation in national security terms, while simultaneously seeking to mollify its Kurdish supporters by stressing its limited nature.⁷⁰ For the Turkish military the ground assault was an opportunity to put the PKK on the defensive by showing the vulnerability of its camps and bases to both air and ground attack and to forestall an expected PKK spring offensive by killing its operatives and degrading its infrastructure.⁷¹

For its part, the U.S. opposed a unilateral Turkish operation that could destabilise the Kurdistan federal region; at the same time, the operation sent a signal to the KRG that it did not have *carte blanche*, for example on Kirkuk, and should seek accommodation with Turkey by cooperating against the PKK and lowering its inflammatory rhetoric on Kirkuk.⁷² On 29 February, a week after the start of the operation and only a day after a visit to Ankara by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Turkish troops began withdrawing from Iraq in a move that was roundly criticised domestically – despite vociferous government denials – as a cave-in to U.S. dictation.⁷³

said there were 2,800 to 3,100 PKK fighters in northern Iraq. *Radikal*, 28 June 2007.

⁶⁹"The media wanted us to go to northern Iraq, and we did, being well aware of the fact that this operation was not going to solve anything". Crisis Group interview, Kurdish member of parliament for the AKP, Ankara, 14 February 2008.

⁷⁰"Turkey's national interests necessitated the conduct of a military operation in northern Iraq. We prepared the international community for a military intervention and we made clear to our concerned Kurdish citizens that we are only targeting terrorists, not Iraqi Kurds". Crisis Group interview, Suat Kınıklioğlu, parliament member for the AKP, Ankara, 6 February 2008.

⁷¹For analyses of the operation's military effectiveness, see Gareth Jenkins, "A Military Analysis of Turkey's Incursion into Northern Iraq", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 5 (7 March 2008); and Andrew McGregor, "Turkey's Operation Güneş Attempts to Eliminate the PKK Threat", *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, no. 8 (27 February 2008). For a discussion from inside the PKK's Zab headquarters, suggesting limited military impact, see Partlow, "A Kurdish Society of Soldiers", op. cit.

⁷²Crisis Group interview, İlnur Çevik, journalist, Ankara, 4 June 2008. A member of parliament for the AKP said, "we succeeded in conducting these operations with the consent and close cooperation of the U.S. This shattered the perception of the KDP and PKK leaderships that northern Iraq was untouchable due to the U.S. presence in Iraq. We also attach importance to the suitable international environment, which was the culmination of a long and intensive diplomatic campaign". Crisis Group interview, Suat Kınıklioğlu, Ankara, 6 February 2008.

⁷³Opposition political parties suggested U.S. interference was behind Turkey's early withdrawal and the concentration of

III. ENGAGING THE KRG

Turkish airstrikes and the ground offensive against the PKK from December 2007 through February 2008 and beyond opened a new page in relations between Ankara and the Iraqi Kurds. An important component was detaching the PKK's role in Iraqi Kurdistan from the Kirkuk question, as the KRG was pushed to take actions against the PKK without Turkish concessions on Kirkuk (see below). Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's special adviser on foreign policy, called the entire sequence of events "a miscalculation on their [the PKK's and Barzani's] part. They wanted to marginalise Turkey but were themselves marginalised".⁷⁴

In turn, reports that the KRG took steps to restrict the PKK's latitude⁷⁵ gave the government the political space necessary to initiate high-level talks with the Kurdish authorities, something it had long been eager to do.⁷⁶ But it made clear that a further opening would be contingent on cooperation regarding the PKK: "We believe in direct relations with the KRG, but they will need to prove themselves. We have a checklist. We are open to dialogue if they cooperate. They have to come to us clean. We are testing the waters. As long as they cooperate, the level of our exchanges will develop".⁷⁷

its troops in the Zab region rather than in the Qandil mountain range, site of the PKK headquarters. The Turkish chief of staff defended the choice of target, characterising the Zab area as a planning centre for PKK attacks in Turkey, and justified the timing of the withdrawal by saying the desired goals had been achieved, and a prolonged military operation in tough weather conditions presented risks. See Frank Hyland, "Turkey's Generals and Government Deny U.S. Interference in Operation Güneş", *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, no. 10 (11 March 2008).

⁷⁴ Davutoğlu made this statement more than a month before Turkey launched the ground operation. Interview on CNN TURK Television, 2 January 2008.

⁷⁵ David Romano, "Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish Rapprochement Ominous for the PKK", *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, no. 19 (13 May 2008).

⁷⁶ Aylin Ş. Görener, "Turkey and Northern Iraq on the Course of Rapprochement", SETA Policy Brief, no. 17 (2008), p. 4.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 June 2008. Another senior official said, "we saw that the Kurdish authorities began to take some measures against the PKK. That's why we changed the tone of our statements. We are not satisfied yet, but as long as they take steps against the PKK, we will cooperate". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 4 July 2008.

A. WARMING POLITICAL RELATIONS

Turkey now accepts that constitutional discussions in Iraq no longer revolve around whether it will be a federation or a unitary state but rather around the type of federation and degree of decentralisation.⁷⁸ In October 2006, the council of representatives passed a law creating a mechanism for establishing federal regions, which came into force in April 2008. A Turkish academic said, "Ankara reluctantly agreed that Iraq's state structure is a strictly domestic affair and that it was going to respect a federal structure if that decision reflected the will of all Iraqis, not just Iraqi Kurds".⁷⁹ Turkey's current concern, which it shares with many Iraqi groups, is the prospect that the country may become a loose confederation based on sect and ethnicity, with a weak central government ill equipped to resist strong centrifugal forces.⁸⁰ A senior official expressed Turkey's unease:

The fact that the Kurds guaranteed their federal region via the Iraqi constitution with U.S. backing does not mean that this is the end. They are inclined to see it merely as a step toward their independence. Many groups in Iraq are worried that federalism is paving the way for Iraq's disintegration.⁸¹

Such an outcome worries Turkey for several reasons. First, Iraq's de facto partition and the establishment of a nine-governorate Shiite "super" region in the south would be likely to increase Iranian influence. Secondly, the Kurds' push to expand the Kurdistan federal region and in particular to incorporate oil-rich Kirkuk could pave the way toward formal secession, which might inflame Kurdish nationalist passions inside Turkey. The same official expressed Ankara's sensitivities concerning the federalism law:

Time will show which shape federalism will take. It is essential for us that the federal system evolves in a way that preserves and strengthens Iraq's national unity. This overlaps with our strategic interest in preserving Iraq's territorial integrity. The implementation of the federalism law should be a win-win for all parties in Iraq.⁸²

Despite its concerns, Turkey reached out to Iraq's Kurdish authorities, ultimately concluding it was the optimal way to contain the PKK, encourage Iraqi

⁷⁸ Åsa Lundgren, op. cit., pp. 108-112.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kemal Kirişçi, professor at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 13 September 2007.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group email communication, senior Turkish official, 14 February 2008.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

national reconciliation and tie the Kurds more closely with the central state. Shortly after the Turkish army's February 2008 ground operation in northern Iraq, Ankara invited Iraqi president and PUK leader Jalal Talabani. The March visit marked the first official interaction with a Kurdish leader since 2003, even though Talabani represented the Baghdad federal government rather than the KRG.⁸³ On 2 May and pursuant to an April National Security Council decision which emphasised the need to "open dialogue with all elements of Iraqi politics",⁸⁴ Murat Özçelik, Turkey's special envoy for Iraq, and Davutoğlu, the prime minister's special foreign policy adviser, travelled to Baghdad to meet Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG prime minister. Shortly afterwards, Özçelik again met Barzani in London.⁸⁵

The outreach has its limits. Neither the Turkish president nor prime minister has met with KRG President Masoud Barzani; nor have officials met the Kurds publicly at presidential or prime ministerial level in Erbil.⁸⁶ Nor have they used the term "Kurdistan Regional Government" to denote the Kurdish authorities, preferring "local administration in the north" until and unless the KRG declares the PKK a terrorist organisation and puts an end to its operations in northern Iraq.⁸⁷ Moreover, in an unpublicised policy,

Turkey continues to block domestic access to the KRG's website, www.krg.org.⁸⁸ In the end, as an academic said:

Turkey-KRG rapprochement is not immune from the dynamics of domestic politics. Close ties with Iraqi Kurdistan will always be perceived by some people as a threat to Turkey's security and stability, and these people will always be ready to use this as a tool in domestic politics. Economic growth, consolidation of plural democracy and better prospects for full EU membership will help moderates to manage this process.⁸⁹

A senior Turkish official cautioned, "When we look at the domestic situation in Turkey, the path we have opened with Iraqi Kurds is a success. Failure of this path would be bad for all of us. But there are counter-movements [ie, anti-KRG nationalists] that want to undermine this channel".⁹⁰ As long as the PKK continues to launch attacks on Turkish soil from bases in northern Iraq, the anti-KRG nationalists in Ankara may be able to upset this positive trend. The 3 October 2008 PKK attack on a military outpost in the village of Aktütün, on the border with Iraq, in which seventeen soldiers died,⁹¹ bolstered those in Turkey who advocate targeting the KRG for its tolerance of the PKK. For the moment, however, cooler minds still prevail. On 14 October, a delegation headed by Murat Özçelik met Masoud Barzani in Baghdad to discuss how to enhance cooperation between Turkey and the KRG.⁹² According to a journalist close to the KRG leadership, the Kurds considered the meeting "more touchy-feely than brass tacks discussion".⁹³

B. DEEPENING ECONOMIC RELATIONS

In the 1980s, when Turkey stayed on the sidelines of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq turned into a major market for its goods and services, while the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline became the main export channel for Baghdad's oil.⁹⁴ By contrast, between the 1991 Gulf war and the

⁸³ *Turkish Daily News*, 7 March 2008.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 June 2008.

⁸⁵ Further such meetings are said to be likely. When Erdoğan visited Baghdad on 10 July 2008 – the first visit by a Turkish prime minister to Iraq since 1990 – to sign a strategic cooperation treaty, he was meant to also meet Nechirvan Barzani. However, due to security requirements, Turkish officials announced the proposed event only a day or so in advance, at which point Barzani, who was travelling, was unable to reach Baghdad in time. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, 21 July 2008.

⁸⁶ Erdoğan's visit to Baghdad in July 2008 could have been an opportunity to meet Masoud Barzani. However, on the eve of the visit, Barzani told an Italian newspaper, *Il Tempo*, that "the PKK is not a terrorist organisation. If the PKK refuses Turkey's attempts to talk, then it can be classified as a terrorist organisation". *Turkish Daily News*, 25 June 2008. This angered Turkish officials and apparently precluded the meeting. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Istanbul, 21 July 2008. Such meetings may have taken place outside public view, however. Crisis Group interviews, Erbil, October 2008.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group email communication, senior Turkish official, 14 February 2008. Reluctance in the Turkish media to use the terms "Kurdistan federal region" and "Kurdistan Regional Government" is also striking. For example, Mehmet Ali Birand, an influential liberal columnist who favours engagement with Iraqi Kurds, has even invented a title and abbreviation, "The Northern Iraq Regional Administration (NIRA)", for

use when referring to the KRG. See, for instance, his "Barzani missed an opportunity with Erdoğan", *Turkish Daily News*, 12 July 2008.

⁸⁸ Access to other Kurdish sites, for example those belonging to the KDP or PUK, is freely available. The ban on access to the KRG's website therefore appears directed at the name: "Kurdistan Regional Government".

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kemal Kirişçi, professor at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, 13 September 2007.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 3 June 2008.

⁹¹ *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 7 October 2008.

⁹² *Today's Zaman*, 15 October 2008.

⁹³ Crisis Group email communication, 7 November 2008.

⁹⁴ In 1980, Turkish exports to Iraq were \$135 million (4.6 per cent of total exports). By 1985 they had reached \$961 mil-

2003 U.S. invasion, Turkey sustained major economic losses as a result of UN sanctions against Iraq. Until the 1995 oil-for-food deal, which provided significant relief, it suffered economically, especially the impoverished Kurdish-populated south east, due to the interruption of border trade.⁹⁵ Following the U.S. invasion, Ankara redoubled its efforts under the AKP government to strengthen economic relations with its southern neighbour. The result has been an average trade volume of \$5 billion per year.⁹⁶ The Kurdistan federal region is the main beneficiary of the growing economic relations. \$1.5 billion of this trade consists of construction and contracting services in the Kurdistan federal region. In addition, around \$1 billion worth of goods are consumed by Iraqi Kurds.⁹⁷

Among Turks, controversy has raged over whether to deepen economic ties with the Kurdistan federal region. Nationalist circles have long advocated isolating the KRG economically; in their view, encouraging the region's economic development would, be tantamount to helping the Kurds build the foundations of an inde-

lion (12 per cent). See, Henri J. Barkey, "Hemmed in by Circumstances: Turkey and Iraq Since the Gulf War", *Middle East Policy*, no. 4 (2000), p. 111.

⁹⁵In the early 1990s the PKK recruited mostly in areas that suffered from high unemployment as a result of the UN embargo: "To take just one example, about one third of Turkey's 300,000-strong trucking fleet used to work on the Baghdad route to Iraq and the Gulf, with about 5,000 trucks a day passing through the border to Iraq. This stopped as the world clamped sanctions on Saddam Hussein. The disappearance of this source of wealth on the 'old Silk Road' through south-eastern Turkey was one reason why disgruntled Kurdish youth began to join the well-funded and well-organised PKK rebels after the Gulf War. The hard-bitten truck-stop towns of Silopi, Nusaybin and especially Cizre became the scene of the hottest opposition to the Turkish security forces". See Nicole Pope and Hugh Pope, *Turkey Unveiled: A History of Modern Turkey* (New York, 2000), pp. 240-241.

⁹⁶A significant problem affecting post-2003 economic relations between Turkey and Iraq is what Ankara refers to as the "illegal levy" the KRG takes from Turkish trucks at the Ibrahim al-Khalil border crossing (known as Habur in Turkish). It is the only open border between Turkey and Iraq, which in effect is a border between Turkey and the Kurdistan federal region. This levy amounts to around \$200 million-\$250 million per year. A second constraint is the difficulty Turkish companies face in obtaining contracts in Baghdad. A final one is the Iraqi government's request for a letter of guarantee, called a "bid bond", for government contracts: "In Iraq, a contract is not finalised in one day. It is highly likely that a contract is postponed several times, and a company may not even get its bid bond for years". Crisis Group interview, Ercüment Aksoy, chairman of the Turkish-Iraqi Business Council, Istanbul, 10 January 2008.

⁹⁷Crisis Group interview, Ercüment Aksoy, Istanbul, 10 January 2008.

pendent state. They have called for a halt to all Turkish trade and investment in Iraqi Kurdistan. A nationalist politician argued:

Turkey has no right to complain about the way the KRG is turning into a state, because it is Turkey that has supported northern Iraq, especially economically, through the Habur border gate [Turkey's sole border with Iraq]. What Turkey should do is stop completely the export of Turkish goods that make up 80 per cent of the northern Iraqi market.⁹⁸

Others suggest that Turkey should use its economic leverage by slowing the passage of some vital goods as long as the KRG refrains from taking steps against the PKK. An analyst sympathetic to this view said:

Since life in northern Iraq is greatly dependent on Turkey, I think that slowing down the export of vital goods could be a way to push the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq to act against the PKK. But this policy has to be supported with a psychological operation toward Iraqi Kurds. Turkey has to make clear to them that they are short of vital goods not because the roads are damaged or there are delays caused by exporting companies, but because Turkey is closing the tap. We need to provoke a reaction by Iraqi Kurds toward their own [regional] government.⁹⁹

Because the Habur border gate is the Kurdistan federal region's lifeline, some have floated the idea of closing it and opening a new border crossing into Iraq through Syria that would bypass the Kurdistan region.¹⁰⁰

So far, however, those arguing in favour of increasing the Kurdistan region's economic dependence on Turkey appear to be winning the debate. According to a senior official:

Turkish companies are investing in the Kurdish region. This makes sense. Historically, Erbil used to trade northward (with Van, Diyarbakır, Urfa) and westward (with Aleppo), not southward (with Basra). Northern Mesopotamia is one entity. So it is only natural for the Kurds to, for example, export their oil and gas through Turkey. Plus Turkey offers

⁹⁸Crisis Group interview, Ümit Özdağ, an aspiring politician formerly with the nationalist MHP and founder of the Turkish Institute of the 21st Century, Istanbul, 1 November 2007.

⁹⁹Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007.

¹⁰⁰Crisis Group interview, Ümit Özdağ, Istanbul, 1 November 2007.

the most stable route compared with Syria and [central and southern] Iraq.¹⁰¹

The idea has strong backing from Turkish entrepreneurs, who argue that diverting trade to a new crossing would fail to yield the intended result. Said one:

When you cross into Iraq from Turkey, you notice advertisements of high-quality Turkish products everywhere you go. It is true that Iraqi Kurds got used to these products. However, economic measures such as closing down Habur border gate will have only a very minor effect on them, like changing their consumption habits. You cannot starve them into submission.¹⁰²

Possibly worse for Turkey, replacing the existing crossing with a new one through Syria could discourage trade with Iraq. The same businessman commented: "Could you name one country in the world that is starving when it has money? Suppose you closed the border. The Kurds would then buy the same products from Iran, Syria or Jordan".¹⁰³ There might also be political blowback from an effort to isolate Iraqi Kurdistan. As an academic argued, "an economic embargo against northern Iraq will not bring Barzani to his knees. It could only create more problems for Turkey. The mainly Kurdish-populated south east could be adversely affected, and this could increase the PKK's support base".¹⁰⁴

Advocates of deeper engagement with the KRG make the further point that northern Iraq could be a useful buffer zone between Turkey and the rest of the country if Iraq were to descend anew into civil war after a U.S. withdrawal. The more economically dependent the Kurdistan federal region is on Turkey, the more leverage Ankara would enjoy.¹⁰⁵ As additional benefits, the AKP government sees the prospect of greater income and, possibly, greater prosperity for south eastern Turkey. It therefore supports increased public and private investment in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in the energy sector, which would boost Turkey's role as a strategic hydrocarbons hub between Central Asia and Europe.

So far, two Turkish oil exploration companies, Pet Oil¹⁰⁶ and Genel Enerji,¹⁰⁷ have signed contracts with the KRG to develop fields inside the Kurdistan federal region. Pet Oil's general manager justified its decision in political and economic terms:

It is politically good for Turkey and good for Turkish-Kurdish relations. When you invest in northern Iraq, this means that you will stay there for years. Turkish companies will earn money, and Turkey will benefit from pipeline revenues. And if you have so many companies there for years, you will have a say in that country's politics.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 21 July 2008.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Ercüment Aksoy, chairman of the Turkish-Iraqi Business Council, Istanbul, 10 January 2008.

¹⁰³ Ercüment Aksoy cites two main problems involved in bypassing the existing border crossing: "First of all, during 2003 and 2004, more than 150 Turkish truck drivers were killed on Iraqi roads while transporting goods into the country, and they now refuse to go south of Mosul. The current situation is that Turkish trucks come to the interchange station at Zakho, where either the driver or the cab of the truck is changed. If Turkey were to open another border crossing through Syria, it may be true that Turkish trucks will bypass the Kurdistan federal region and not pay a levy crossing the Syrian-Iraqi border on their way to Mosul. But as Turkish truck drivers will continue to object to travel further into Iraq, Turkey will have to establish an interchange station near the Syrian-Iraqi border like the one in Zakho. Secondly, Iraqi Kurds will object vigorously to this new border crossing. Taking into consideration the leverage they have in Iraq's post-war domestic politics, it is unrealistic to expect from the Iraqis that they will continue trading with Turkey through a border crossing bypassing the Kurdish region". Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Soli Özel, professor at Bilgi University and a columnist in the daily *Sabah*, Istanbul, 6 September 2007. Turkish nationalists disagree: "If the establishment of a Kurdish state is a question of survival for Turkey, then

the negative effects in south eastern Turkey of an economic embargo against northern Iraq may not be that important. You can sacrifice the part for the whole. It is also an exaggeration to argue that the economy in south eastern Turkey is totally dependent on Turkey's economic activities in northern Iraq". Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ercüment Aksoy, chairman of the Turkish-Iraqi Business Council, Istanbul, 10 January 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Under the terms of a production-sharing contract (PSC) signed in 2002, Pet Oil, a member of Pet Holding group, has been allocated the Shakal bloc between Kifri and Kalar in Suleimaniya governorate. Crisis Group telephone interview, Ali Ak, Pet Oil general manager, 14 April 2008. Later, Pet Oil was also allocated the Bina-Bawi bloc, 50km north east of Erbil.

¹⁰⁷ Genel Enerji is a member of the Çukurova holding group. It signed a production-sharing contract with the KRG in 2003 to develop oil fields in the Taq Taq license area, consisting of the Taq Taq development bloc and the Kewa Chirmila exploration bloc, which are located approximately 60km north east of Kirkuk, inside the Kurdistan federal region. Crisis Group telephone interview, Orhan Duran, Genel Enerji general manager, 14 April 2008.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ali Ak, Pet Oil general manager, Ankara, 3 June 2008. Again, Turkish nationalists reject such arguments: "By investing in the energy sector in northern Iraq

The main complication faced by oil companies is the Iraqi government's failure to produce a comprehensive hydrocarbons law. In response, and because it found a draft presented by the ministry of oil unacceptable, the KRG passed its own oil and gas law in August 2007.¹⁰⁹ Iraq's oil minister, Hussain al-Shahristani, has declared all contracts signed by the Kurds null and void, a move denounced by both the KRG and the foreign companies with which it has signed production-sharing contracts.¹¹⁰

Turkey considers a federal hydrocarbons law vital for another reason. By enshrining the principle of equitable revenue sharing, it would help cement the Kurdistan federal region into Iraq. As a result, Ankara has resisted providing any material aid to the Kurdistan federal region's energy sector or, even more critically, allowing the KRG to export its oil and gas through Turkey until such a law is in place. A senior Turkish official said:

Turkey is not against the Kurds developing their own oil fields as long as there is an agreement between them and the central government. We would like to be involved in the development of these oil fields. We do not want to be only a transit country. Bigger Turkish companies [ie, bigger than Pet Oil

and Genel Enerji] are waiting for a green light. The Kurds know that their oil export route is through Turkey.¹¹¹

prior to an agreement on a comprehensive hydrocarbons law, Turkish oil companies are legitimising the regional administration's illegal legislation to further their own economic interests, thereby indirectly facilitating the region's future secession". Crisis Group interview, Necdet Pamir, energy expert, Ankara, 7 February 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Pet Oil and Genel Enerji were subsequently compelled to amend their contracts to bring them into conformity with the new law. Crisis Group interview, Ali Ak, general manager of Pet Oil, Ankara, 3 June 2008. See also, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°80, *Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds*, 28 October 2008.

¹¹⁰ Their claim has three parts. First, Pet Oil and Genel Enerji negotiated and signed PSCs with the KRG in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Upon KRG's request, these PSCs were revised in 2004. Minutes of a meeting signed between Iraqi oil ministry representatives and Pet Oil and Genel Enerji in 2004 explicitly refer to the 2004 PSCs and their validity. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Orhan Duran of Genel Enerji and Ali Ak of Pet Oil, 14 April 2008. According to Article 141 of the Iraqi constitution, which was ratified in 2005, all legislation enacted and contracts signed in the Kurdistan region since 1992 remain in force. Secondly, Article 112(1) envisions joint management between the federal government and regional governments of current fields only, meaning fields that are actually producing. Partially developed and undeveloped fields inside the Kurdistan federal region, therefore, fall under the KRG's exclusive management. Finally, Article 115 says that in case of contradiction between regional and federal legislation, regional law will prevail.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 June 2008. The initial exclusion of the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) from a list of 35 companies that received the Iraqi oil ministry's approval to bid for oil and gas contracts reminded Ankara that its more accessible economic interests may lie in the Kurdistan federal region. During a visit by Erdoğan to Baghdad in July 2008, however, the Iraqi government gave Turkey the right to join a contract awarded to one of the companies on the list once it had made a successful bid. Crisis Group telephone interview, Cengiz Çandar, a Turkish journalist who joined Erdoğan on his trip, 13 July 2008. Premier Oil, the UK exploration and production company, has been replaced by state-owned Türkiye Petroleri AO on the list of prequalified companies bidding for oil contracts in Iraq. *Turkish Daily News*, 29 September 2008.

IV. THE STRUGGLE OVER KIRKUK

A major issue standing in the way of cooperation between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds remains the controversy over the status of Kirkuk, a mixed-population governorate that is home to an oil field holding 13 per cent of Iraq's proven reserves. All Iraqi Kurdish parties view Kirkuk as an integral part of their heritage and future. As Turkish officials see it, full Kurdish control over Kirkuk and its oil would be an important step toward Kurdish independence, an outcome they wish to avoid at all cost.¹¹² Turkey's diplomatic efforts since April 2003 have centred on reinforcing the Iraqi state and cementing Kirkuk and the Kurdistan federal region as separate entities within Iraq's state structure.

A. CULTURAL DIVERSITY: THE TURKOMAN FACTOR

In the 1990s, Turkey used Kirkuk's Turkoman population as one of its main leverage points against Iraqi Kurdish ambitions. Turkomans are descendants of Ottoman Empire-era soldiers, traders and civil servants.¹¹³ A predominantly urban population, they are distributed over a number of former garrison towns situated along prominent trade arteries in northern Iraq stretching from the Syrian to the Iranian border, including such major ones as Tel Afar, Mosul, Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Kifri, Khanaqin and Mandali. In Kirkuk, Turkomans constituted a plurality in the city, ahead of Kurds and Arabs, at the time of the 1957 census.¹¹⁴

¹¹² "Iraqi Kurds see the existing federal structure in Iraq as a stepping stone for their independence. They are planning to be one step closer to it by incorporating Kirkuk into their territories. We find it unacceptable because of our main principle which is the preservation of the territorial integrity of Iraqi state". Crisis Group email communication, senior Turkish official, 14 February 2008.

¹¹³ The 1957 census, Iraq's last reliable count before the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, put the country's population at 6,300,000 and the Turkoman population at 567,000, about 9 per cent. Tarık Oğuzlu, "The Turkomans of Iraq as a Factor in Turkish Foreign Policy: Socio-Political and Demographic Perspectives", Foreign Policy Institute, Ankara, 2001.

¹¹⁴ The 1957 census indicated that the Turkomans predominated in Kirkuk town (45,306 Turkomans versus 40,047 Kurds and 27,127 Arabs) but lagged behind both Kurds and Arabs in the rural districts (38,065 Turkomans versus 147,546 Kurds and 82,493 Arabs). In Kirkuk governorate overall, the Kurds were the largest group (187,593), with the Arabs second (109,620) and the Turkomans third (83,371). Republic of Iraq, interior ministry, *Aggregate Census Figures for 1957* (in Arabic) (Baghdad, 1958), p. 243. Subsequent censuses, in 1967, 1977, 1987 and 1997, are all considered highly problematic, due to suspicions of regime manipulation. Moreover, the last

After the Baath regime came to power in 1968 and until the 1991 Gulf War, Ankara displayed no particular interest in Iraq's Turkomans, even if they, like the Kurds, were victims of the regime's Arabisation in Kirkuk.¹¹⁵ This changed once the war ended and the U.S. and its Gulf War allies established a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel that paved the way for a de facto Kurdish autonomous region run by the KDP and the PUK. For these parties, incorporating Kirkuk into the Kurdish region was a priority not only because, in their view, it belongs to historical (albeit historically undefined) Kurdistan, but also because they saw this as a critical stepping stone toward independence. Although their chances to prevail in Kirkuk were non-existent as long as the Baathist regime remained in place, Western animosity and UN sanctions gave the Kurds hope that this reality might change.

Fearing that Baghdad no longer could rein in the Kurds, Ankara started promoting its interest in the Turkomans as one plank in a new strategy to deal with Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War. Beginning in the mid-1990s, it tried to gather them under a single umbrella, the Iraqi Turkoman Front (ITF).¹¹⁶ The ITF became Turkey's principal instrument for raising the Turkoman question and its main entry point into local politics. The extent of its support for the ITF depended on its success in fighting the PKK: as long as the PKK was strong, Ankara paid little attention to the group, turning instead to the KDP and the PUK for help in subduing the insurgents and participating in the U.S.-led Operation Provide Comfort and its successor Opera-

three reflect the changes wrought by Arabisation, when Iraqis could indicate belonging to one of two ethnicities only: Arab or Kurd. This meant that many Turkomans identified themselves as Arabs (the Kurds not being a desirable ethnic group in Saddam Hussein's Iraq), thereby skewing the numbers. Although there are no reliable data about their numbers today, Turkomans are generally considered Iraq's largest minority after the Kurds. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°56, *Iraq and the Kurds: The Brewing Battle over Kirkuk*, 18 July 2006, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Åsa Lundgren cites two reasons for Turkey's lack of interest in Iraq's Turkoman community: Turkey officially espoused non-ethnic identity, and its traditional foreign policy was based on preserving the territorial status quo. Lundgren, op. cit., pp. 89-93. That said, many dispute Turkey's assertions of a non-ethnic identity. See, for instance, Bakın Oran, *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Teori, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama* (Istanbul, 2008).

¹¹⁶ The ITF was established by Turkey's security services in 1995 and has since received significant funding from the Turkish government. It is an umbrella organisation that originally comprised 26 Turkoman organisations and political groups, but it never gained the unanimous support of the Turkoman community due to the perception that it was a Turkish proxy party. See Crisis Group Report, *War in Iraq*, op. cit.

tion Northern Watch, which enforced the northern no-fly zone.¹¹⁷ Once the PKK dwindled as a fighting force following the 1999 arrest of its leader, Öcalan, Turkey enjoyed a freer hand. Signalling its intent to use the Turkomans as a lever to preserve its interests in northern Iraq, it deepened its relations with them, claiming it had to protect the rights of its “endangered” kin.¹¹⁸

Turkey’s Turkoman policy suffered from several shortcomings. First, it ignored the Turkoman community’s political and confessional diversity. A Turkish academic explained:

This policy hit the wall of reality. A homogenous, unified Turkoman community is a myth. They are very small in number and deeply divided. For most of them, sectarian identity is more important than ethnic identity. Shiite Turkomans see themselves first and foremost as part of the Shiite community and do not support a Sunni Iraqi Turkoman Front established and supported by Turkey. Even among Sunni Turkomans, there is a divide between Islamists and secularists. Besides, many Turkomans have been Kurdified and are not in conflict with the Kurds.¹¹⁹

A Turkish security analyst added: “Turkey failed to embrace all Iraqi Turkomans and hence it can neither lay claim to them nor protect them from others’ actions against them. Turkey is therefore not in a position to use the Turkoman card”.¹²⁰

Secondly, by supporting the Turkomans, Turkey suggested it retained a claim on northern Iraq, raising fears that it questioned the post-Ottoman territorial resolution.¹²¹ A declaration by former Defence Minister

Sabahattin Çakmakoglu appeared to validate this view, which indeed finds favour in ultra-nationalist circles:

Northern Iraq is entrusted to our care by those who drew the borders of the National Pact. It has been forcibly separated from Turkey by the Western powers that partitioned the Ottoman Empire. The presence of Turkomans in Kirkuk and Mosul means that these two cities constitute Turkish soil. We won’t sacrifice northern Iraq to anybody else’s fancy.¹²²

Such sentiments, frequently and publicly expressed, strengthen the perception in both Iraq and the international community that Turkey harbours expansionist ambitions. It has thus been less than persuasive in objecting to Kurdish claims to Kirkuk on grounds it is concerned about the well-being of Iraq and Iraqis.

As noted, Turkey’s predicament deepened when its parliament on 1 March 2003 denied transit to U.S. troops. This not only complicated U.S. military plans, but also prevented Turkey’s participation in the invasion of Iraq, thus sharply reducing its influence over subsequent developments across the border. The Kurds were the main beneficiaries: It made them the U.S.’s most crucial and reliable ally in Iraq. As a result, Ankara had to watch as Kurdish parties rushed into Kirkuk unrestrained, ahead even of U.S. forces.

From then on, Turkey has had to acquiesce in the Turkomans’ second-rank status in Kirkuk. It suffered a further setback in the January and December 2005 elections, when the Turkomans garnered far fewer votes than they, or Turkey, had imagined.¹²³ While the election results are difficult to interpret strictly by ethnicity,¹²⁴

¹¹⁷For a detailed account, see Baskin Oran, *Kalkık Horoz: Çekiç Güç ve Kürt Devleti* (Ankara, 1998).

¹¹⁸See Tarık Oğuzlu, “Endangered Community: The Turkoman Identity in Iraq”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, no. 2 (2004).

¹¹⁹Crisis Group interview, Soli Özel, professor at Bilgi University and columnist in the daily *Sabah*, Istanbul, 6 September 2007. The Turkomans appear evenly divided between Sunnis and Shiites and have produced a number of parties, some (Iraqi) nationalist in outlook, others following a religious line (either Sunni Islamist or Shiite Islamist). The Iraqi Turkoman Front appears to have a fairly narrow base, essentially among secular nationalist Turkomans.

¹²⁰Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007.

¹²¹In 1926, Turkey and the UK signed a treaty accepting a League of Nations decision that accorded Vilayet Mosul (the former Ottoman province of Mosul), including Kirkuk, to Iraq, even though it lay within what were known in Turkey as the *Misak-ı Milli* (National Pact) borders. According to the

National Pact – a set of six decisions taken in Istanbul on 12 February 1920 as one of the last acts of the Ottoman parliament – the territories that were not occupied by Allied forces at the time the Armistice of Mudros was signed in 1918 and which were inhabited by a non-Arab Muslim majority were accepted as the homeland of the Turkish nation. Hence Vilayet Mosul was part of Turkey. But the UK rejected this, and the issue was left to the League of Nations International Commission of Inquiry to investigate. In a 1925 judgment, the commission awarded Mosul to Iraq, then under a British mandate. See Bill Park, “Turkey’s Policy Towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives”, op. cit., pp. 13-16.

¹²²*Milliyet* (Turkish daily), 22 August 2002.

¹²³Turkey and its allies assumed the number of Turkomans to be far higher; according to some estimates, Iraq has three million Turkomans, or about 12 per cent of the overall population. Crisis Group Report, *The Brewing Battle over Kirkuk*, op. cit., pp. 19-21. After the elections, Turkish officials started to make the first serious overtures to Kurdish leaders such as Jalal Talabani.

¹²⁴Many Shiite Turkomans voted for the main Shiite list, the United Iraqi Alliance, which comprises Arab, Kurd and Turko-

senior officials concluded that Turkomans were not sufficient in numbers or unity to warrant Turkey's putting all its eggs in their basket.¹²⁵

Learning from its mistakes, Turkey has since developed a policy linking Kirkuk's status and the Turkomans' position to its overall goal of preserving its neighbour's stability and territorial integrity. A senior official asserted:

There is a misperception about Turkey's true intentions related to Kirkuk. Turkish diplomacy is anti-revisionist. Turkey chose to solve the problem of Vilayet Mosul with the West through diplomatic means, and the issue was left to the League of Nations' judgment. We left Vilayet Mosul to become part of a unitary state. Iraqi Kurds' claim to Kirkuk contradicts this understanding. Today, Turkey is worried that attempts to incorporate Kirkuk, which is considered Arab land, may pave the way for an Arab radicalism like in Palestine. We are talking not only about land but also important resources.¹²⁶

More specifically, the AKP government advocates what it calls pluralism – the peaceful coexistence of different communities – for Iraq's major cities as a prerequisite for its unity and stability.¹²⁷ Accordingly, Turkey supports the preservation of Kirkuk's multi-

ethnic and multi-religious fabric. One of the prime minister's senior aides explained the policy as follows:

We are not acting with any imperial ambitions in mind. To keep Iraq on its feet, cities like Basra, Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul have to maintain their mixed composition in one way or another. Historically, none of these Iraqi cities has had a homogeneous ethnic or sectarian fabric.¹²⁸

This approach serves Turkey's interests in several ways. A heterogeneous Kirkuk complicates the Kurds' exclusive claim to the oil-rich governorate and thus undermines their bid to incorporate it into the Kurdistan federal region; without Kirkuk, the region would probably lack the necessary economic resources to attain independence.¹²⁹ Turkomans will preserve their rights and interests in the city, which they consider historically theirs. Turkey's approach consists mainly of protesting alleged Kurdish manipulation of the city's demography through a process that the Kurds, and the Iraqi constitution, refer to as "normalisation".¹³⁰ Ultimately, however, the Turkoman factor has become a minor part in Turkey's overall strategy toward Kirkuk and the Kurdistan federal region.

man Shiites. Moreover, it is not clear that all Sunni or secular Turkomans voted for the Iraqi Turkoman Front, the only Turkoman list that passed the electoral threshold. Many may have abstained or voted for secular lists, such as the Iraqi Communist Party or Iyad Allawi's National Iraqi List. Turkoman politicians have disputed the January 2005 elections in particular as riddled with fraud and demographic manipulation, especially in Kirkuk. Crisis Group interview, Murad Abd-al-Wahed of the Turkoman Justice Party, Kirkuk, 21 March 2007.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior Turkish official, Ankara, June 2005 and Cengiz Çandar, Turkish journalist, Istanbul, 14 June 2005.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, 12 February 2008.

¹²⁷ In a communiqué engineered by the Turkish foreign ministry, Iraq's neighbours and other members of the international community agreed to "highlight the richness of the multicultural, multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic structure of Iraq and the importance of securing and respecting peaceful coexistence of all communities, as well as the Iraqi identity, for the future of Iraq". Final Communiqué of the Ministerial Conference of the Neighbouring Countries of Iraq, Bahrain and the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and the G-8, Istanbul, 3 November 2007, available at www.mfa.gov.tr and follow link to joint declarations. Turkey places this notion within its broader vision for the Middle East, and its own role in it, which is based on four principles: security for all, political dialogue, economic interdependence and the multicultural character of cities. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Istanbul, 11 February 2008.

¹²⁸ Statement by Ahmet Davutoğlu, special adviser on foreign policy to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, CNN TURK Television, 2 January 2008.

¹²⁹ "If an independent Kurdish state is established, Kirkuk is incorporated into it and living standards increase thanks to oil revenues, then this state could become a point of attraction for Kurds in Turkey. In order to cope with this problem, you could either raise the standard of living in south eastern Turkey or prevent northern Iraq from becoming a point of attraction. As Turkey does not have the resources to make the south east a point of attraction for Iraqi Kurds, the only option is the latter. The way to do it is to prevent Kirkuk's incorporation into the Kurdish region. An independent Kurdish state with Kirkuk would not be dependent on Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Ercan Çitlioğlu, president of the Strategic Research Center at Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul, 17 December 2007.

¹³⁰ With "normalisation" is meant the methodical reversal of the former regime's Arabisation policy. It foresees the removal of *Wafidin* (newcomers), the return of displaced Kirkukis, the majority of whom are Kurds and restoration of property rights, a measure that affects in particular the Turkomans. See Crisis Group Report, *The Brewing Battle over Kirkuk*, op. cit., pp. 11-16.

B. CEMENTING KIRKUK INTO IRAQ

Turkey initially expressed grave concern over Iraq's 2005 constitution, fearing that its extreme form of federalisation would trigger the country's break-up.¹³¹ It saw some of its fears confirmed in the spiralling civil war in 2006 and 2007. It breathed a sigh of relief only once violence receded, and a relative peace took hold in Baghdad and other areas as a result of the U.S. military surge and other factors. At that point, Ankara embraced the constitution, out of both necessity and greater confidence that Washington supported Iraq's territorial integrity. Officials also realised that to curry favour with Iraqi leaders, they had to accept the constitution and government as givens.¹³² As they saw it, they would do better to support an Iraq with serious deficiencies than an Iraq over which they exerted no influence.

Over the past year, the AKP government, supported by the security establishment, has made strenuous efforts to improve relations with the Iraqi government. This culminated in the July 2008 signing of the strategic partnership agreement. The first principle of the joint political declaration memorialising that agreement commits the two countries to "supporting the efforts of the Iraqi government in fighting terrorism and preserving Iraq's independence, full sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity against threats".¹³³

¹³¹ "To keep Iraq united, certain powers must be given to the central government. Asking more concessions will not be beneficial for the future of Iraq. Time has come for each group to consider their achievements and work to reach Iraqi national reconciliation". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

¹³² "As Turkey, we recognise Iraq and its existing constitution. We are aware of the geographic realities. We have to live with them [Iraqi Kurds]". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 13 February 2008. A Turkish journalist added: "Turkey, especially the Turkish military, has changed its position. The new formula is the KRG minus Kirkuk minus the PKK. In other words, Turkey now accepts a federal structure (not confederation) with respect to the Kurdish region as long as the KRG does not allow a PKK presence in its territory and does not attempt to incorporate Kirkuk into its territory. In that case, Barzani will receive recognition". Crisis Group interview, Murat Yetkin, Ankara correspondent of the daily *Radikal*, Ankara, 4 December 2007.

¹³³ Moreover, according to the fifth principle, the two countries committed themselves to "Respecting the richness of the multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic structure of Iraq and the importance of securing and respecting peaceful coexistence of all communities, as well as the Iraqi identity, for the future of Iraq". The Iraqi government, in other words, implicitly embraced Turkey's bid to keep Kirkuk outside the

However, support of the constitution meant support of its Article 140, which lays out a process for determining the status of Kirkuk and other "disputed territories". Turkish officials understood full well that, if fully and fairly implemented, the process likely would lead to Kirkuk's incorporation into the Kurdistan federal region and hence to conflict between the governorate's various communities.¹³⁴ Turkey therefore welcomed the non-implementation in effect of Article 140 (including a referendum) by the 31 December 2007 constitutional deadline.¹³⁵ It expressed similar satisfaction when senior Iraqi leaders agreed that month to postpone the deadline by six months, to 30 June 2008.¹³⁶ And it again was pleased when that deadline too passed, despite continued concern over what it sees as demographic changes at the expense of Kirkuk's Turkomans and Arabs.¹³⁷

Kurdistan federal region. See *Kurdistan Digest*, Washington Kurdish Institute, 14 July 2008.

¹³⁴ "A referendum would not be in their [Iraqi Kurds'] favour, even if they won it. Even if they get 60 per cent, you'll have 40 per cent who will be categorically against the outcome and will attack them everywhere. It would be better to have a compromise solution and then get 90 per cent of the vote. Any group could unleash violence in Kirkuk, including the Kurds, but also Arab insurgents. There would be chaos. In such a context, a referendum would lack legitimacy". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, 11 February 2008.

¹³⁵ The Kurdish drive to annex Kirkuk by legal means is based on implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which lays out a three-step sequential process: normalisation, census and referendum. See Crisis Group Report, *Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, op. cit., pp. 2-4. In December 2007, the Iraqi government and the Kurdish leadership jointly agreed to postpone the referendum for six months. "Implementation of Article 140: Deadline of 31 December 2007", 15 December 2007, available at www.uniraq.org and follow link to press releases. In June 2008, the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) issued a proposal for initial steps toward settling the question of the Kurdistan federal region's boundaries which made no reference to a referendum. "UNAMI presents first analysis to GOI to help resolve on disputed internal boundaries", 5 June 2008, *ibid*. The new referendum deadline passed without action on 30 June 2008.

¹³⁶ "Postponement is important because parties are gaining time. The window of opportunity for Kurds has already closed with the postponement. Kurdish leaders are very well aware of this reality, but they promised so many things to their people that they are not in a position to deliver. It is very clear that neither the rest of Iraq nor Turkomans and Arabs living in Kirkuk want a *fait accompli* in Kirkuk". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007.

¹³⁷ A Turkish official, who preferred an alternative way of settling the Kirkuk question, claimed: "Postponing the Kirkuk referendum is not a solution for us because it will lead to nothing but the continuation of demographic changes". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 June 2008.

That said, the Kurds' setbacks have hardly dampened their ambitions. Nor have they diminished their insistence on the constitution as the sole basis for resolving Kirkuk's status. But they have allowed Turkey, as well as other members of the international community, including the UN, to press for a negotiated solution. Ankara's preferred outcome is an agreement that would turn Kirkuk into a stand-alone federal region,¹³⁸ such an agreement could then be ratified by popular referendum, consistent with the (vague) requirements of Article 140.¹³⁹ In the words of a senior Turkish official:

The Kirkuk referendum, which was initially planned for 2007, cannot lead to a settlement. On the contrary, it will lead to conflict. The alternative is a negotiated solution between all the parties: Kurds, Turkomans, Shiite Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Chaldeans/Assyrians. They should sit and discuss the modalities of a special status, and then they can put the negotiated solution to a referendum. In this way, Article 140 will be implemented and nobody will object if the referendum is on a special status. Otherwise, it will be boycotted and never implemented.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Such a solution is permitted by the Iraqi constitution and subsequent legislation. Turkey would prefer to keep Kirkuk directly under Baghdad, but this option has become increasingly unrealistic after the Kurds took effective control of the city and governorate in April 2003 and subsequently created political and constitutional mechanisms to bring Kirkuk into the Kurdistan federal region.

¹³⁹ While Article 140 stipulates a referendum, it does not specify the referendum question. It could, therefore, be a question concerning Kirkuk's possible status, or a yes/no question about a negotiated settlement reached by concerned parties, or something else.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 December 2007. A Turkish opposition politician, who referred to Kirkuk as "an Iraqi city", went further by suggesting that, "if there is going to be a referendum, it should involve all of Iraq, not only the people living in Kirkuk". Crisis Group interview, Şükrü Elekdağ, a former undersecretary at the foreign ministry and currently a member of parliament for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Ankara, 4 December 2007. (Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution stipulates a referendum "in Kirkuk and other disputed territories", not in all of Iraq.) By contrast, Kurds in Turkey tend to see Kirkuk as geographically part of Iraqi Kurdistan and favour the city's incorporation into the Kurdistan federal region. A member of the Turkish parliament for the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), however, stressed that he accepted such a move only on condition that the Kurdistan regional government agreed to share revenues derived from Kirkuk's oil field with the federal government. Crisis Group interview, Selahattin Demirtaş, Ankara, 3 December 2007. The KRG has already embraced the principle of revenue sharing, which awaits codification in a comprehensive hydrocarbons

Because a settlement on Kirkuk's final status may not come soon, Turkey has proposed an interim power-sharing arrangement to prevent conflict and lay the groundwork for a possible compromise. The senior official said:

We need to leave the final status to a later date. In the interim, Turkomans and Arabs should start to work more closely with the Kurds in Kirkuk. There should be cooperation rather than conflict. Cooperation between Turkey and the KRG and various groups in the city will dictate the end result.¹⁴¹

To accomplish this, Ankara pressed Turkomans in the Iraqi council of representatives to insert a provision in the draft law on provincial elections during negotiations in July 2008. According to this provision (Article 24), Kirkuk would be exempt from this round of provincial council elections; instead, a power-sharing arrangement would be established for an interim period based on an even split of its provincial council seats between Kurds, Arabs and Turkomans (32 per cent each), with smaller minorities (Chaldo-Assyrians, Armenians, Mandaean-Sabians) getting the rest (4 per cent).¹⁴² A Turkish official told Crisis Group: "The 32-32-32-4 per cent formula is preferable, because it prevents any one community from imposing its position on the others".¹⁴³

law. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°75, *Iraq After the Surge II: The Need for a New Political Strategy*, 30 April 2008, pp. 4-10. A retired Turkish general has made another proposal: Kirkuk should be divided into ethnically based cantons, each with its own parliament to manage its internal affairs but dependent on the Iraqi federal government when it comes to defence, foreign relations and the treasury. Moreover, oil revenues should be shared. Crisis Group interview, General (rtd.) Armağan Kuloğlu, chief adviser of the Global Strategy Institute, Ankara, 6 February 2008. This proposal is nourished by some Iraqi Kurds as a back-up plan should the KRG fail in its bid to incorporate Kirkuk into the Kurdistan federal region. Crisis Group interview, officials at the Kurdistan Centre for Strategic Studies, Suleimaniya, 22 January 2008.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, 3 June 2008.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ In response to a question about Kurdish fears that Arabs and Turkomans would gang up on them in case of a 32-32-32-4 per cent formula, he said, "this will force the Kurds to work with either the Turkomans or the Arabs. They should be encouraged to act as rational actors. Perhaps then coalitions will form that are not based on ethnicity. Moreover, if the Kurds fear a Turkoman-Arab coalition, they should realise that the Turkomans and Arabs fear Kurdish domination of Kirkuk". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Istanbul, 21 July 2008.

Rather than resolving the Kirkuk issue, the proposal deadlocked the council of representatives, which recessed for the summer in August without passing the law,¹⁴⁴ thereby putting in doubt the prospect of provincial elections being held before 2009 (by law they were supposed to take place by 1 October 2008). The conflict was resolved in September, when parties agreed to a compromise text (which became Article 23) by which Kirkuk's elections were postponed until a parliamentary committee makes recommendations about local power sharing.¹⁴⁵ The council of representatives then passed the provincial elections law, allowing for votes in fourteen governorates outside the Kurdistan federal region and Kirkuk by 31 January 2009.

For Turkey, the move contained risks. Loath to concede ground on Kirkuk, Ankara did not want to see Kurdish-controlled elections in the city. Yet, electoral postponement in the rest of Iraq meant putting off the possibility of Sunni Arab gains in mixed-population governorates, another important Turkish objective which, if realised, would complicate Kurdish aspirations to incorporate parts of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Diyala governorates into the Kurdistan federal region.¹⁴⁶ Aware of this dilemma, Turkish officials nonetheless saw Kirkuk as their top priority and pressed forward.¹⁴⁷ Once the law had passed, Turkey saw its interests served by the indefinite postponement of Kirkuk's elections; yet it faced the reality, under the terms of Article 23, of the current Kurd-dominated council continuing to function until such elections are held.

Determined to thwart Kurdish ambitions, and knowing it is unlikely to obtain its preferred outcome – Kirkuk directly under Baghdad's rule – Ankara will continue to use threats, persuasion and pacts with non-Kurdish Iraqi actors to avoid Kirkuk's absorption into Iraqi Kurdistan. It simultaneously will back any consensual solution on a special status for Kirkuk, which it views as the best chance for all to avoid new conflicts.

V. CONCLUSION

Responding to the perceived threat of increased Kurdish strength in Iraq, Turkey adopted a succession of diplomatic, military and economic strategies to promote its interests. By and large, these have proved successful, as Ankara adapted to shifting Iraqi realities over which it had little influence.

Turkey's policy emerged amid divisions between the ruling party and the country's traditional establishment, particularly over how to deal with the PKK insurgency. Factions in the Kemalist-nationalist establishment judge the KRG to be responsible for the PKK's operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and thus believe it must be pressured far more forcefully. More pragmatic factions, including the ruling AKP, seek to fight the PKK by cooperating with the KRG and increasing Ankara's leverage by deepening the Kurdistan federal region's economic dependence on Turkey. The difference in approach is largely based on diverging attitudes to the Kurdish problem inside Turkey itself, which the AKP government believes must be tackled through political means, by granting greater political, cultural and linguistic freedoms. The resulting policy has mostly been a pragmatic and, by and large, effective compromise between the government and the more traditional establishment.

The current AKP government believes that a stable Kurdish buffer on its border with Arab Iraq would be a good investment, given uncertainties over the neighbouring country's future, so long as such a region were dependent on Turkey. It also banks on the fact that a landlocked Kurdistan federal region needs Turkey as a channel to the outside world. Moreover, Turkey not only covets the income from the trans-shipment of Kurdish crude to its Mediterranean port facility at Ceyhan, it also seeks Kurdish oil and gas to satisfy its own pressing energy needs.

To further its aims, the government, with the support of the Kemalist-nationalist establishment, has forged a new relationship with Iraq's central government, both to curb Iranian influence and to cement the Kurdistan federal region more firmly into Iraq; mounted limited military cross-border operations against the PKK, designed more to mobilise Washington and Baghdad than to crush the Kurdish movement; and staged fresh overtures toward the KRG, which have been reciprocated. Crucially, if Turkey can make this relationship attractive to the Kurds, the KRG might be more responsive to its demands to crack down on the PKK, a far more effective way of dealing with the problem than Turkish military might.

¹⁴⁴ The council of representatives initially passed the law, over a Kurdish walkout, on 22 July, but two of the presidency council's three members refused to sign, denouncing it as "against the principle of national accord". *International Herald Tribune*, 23 July 2008.

¹⁴⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Oil for Soil*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

¹⁴⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq After the Surge II*, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, national security council and foreign ministry officials, Ankara, 3 and 4 June 2008.

Amid considerable uncertainty, both inside Iraq and at its borders, a burgeoning Turkish-KRG relationship is an important tool to minimise risks of instability or, should the civil war reignite, containing its regional repercussions. That is reason enough to maintain and deepen it.

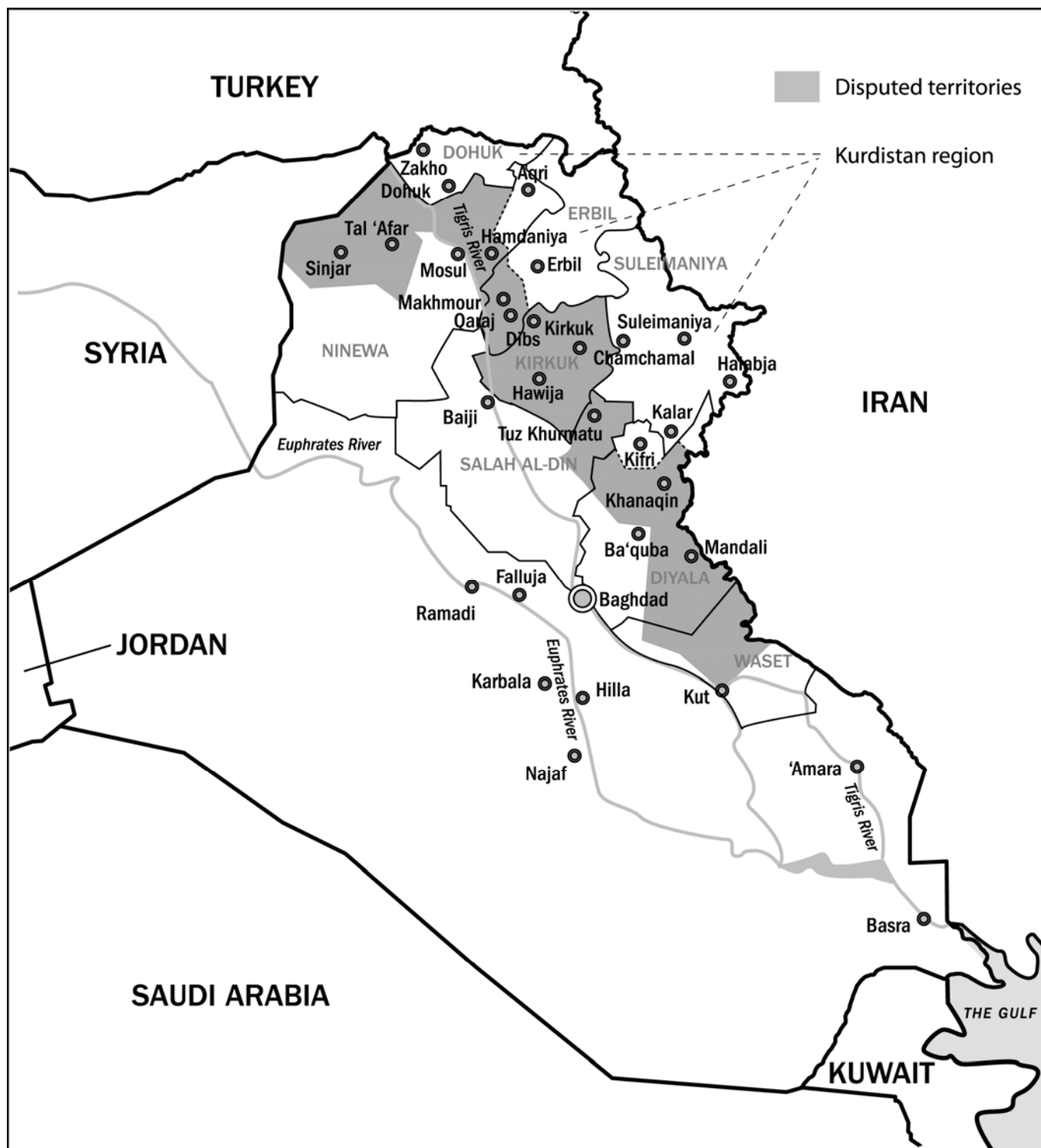
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APPENDIX A MAP OF IRAQ



APPENDIX B

DISPUTED TERRITORIES CLAIMED BY THE KRG



APPENDIX C

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