

Northern Iraq: From Deadlock to Dialogue

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Will October 17th 2007 - the date that the cross border operation authorization was issued to the Turkish Armed Forces in the Grand National Assembly- be a turning point for Turkish history? We can easily answer “yes” in retrospect of the developments that took place between then and now. However we have yet to see whether the decision will bring good luck or bad luck to Turkey. If the process culminates in the disarmament or liquidation of the PKK, historians will underline October 17th 2007 with a thick marker.

The bill made the headlines for weeks in Turkey, but there was another landscape where it created a huge stir. That landscape was of course Northern Iraq. The Kurdish regional government, overseeing a territory of 4 million people, did not hesitate to criticize the decision severely. When almost all newflashes from Turkey were signaling that the cross border operation was about to begin, the mood in Irbil, the center of the regional government, was volatile. In fact, it is possible to claim that this mood changed after the meeting of the Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with the President of the United States George W. Bush. If one were to use the word “tension”, which the Kurdish authorities use abundantly to summarize the general situation, the tension was less after the meeting.

The Kurdish regional government is convinced that Turkey will not engage in a comprehensive operation with tens of thousands of soldiers and tanks it stationed on the border. They believe that the operation will be limited in target and scope. They say with comfort that the USA will not allow Turkey to engage in a large scale operation. In fact one does not need to be an expert to understand that the US will not endorse any initiative that will cause

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instability in this region which is the most stable region in Iraq, untouched by terror, and where American soldiers can roam the streets freely, and are even respected.

MEASURES AGAINST THE PKK

What concerns the Kurdish regional government the most is the restlessness of public opinion in Turkey and the anticipation of an operation. In Irbil we frequently heard the observation that politicians and the military raised expectations so high that no decision maker would be able to resist to the reactions of a disappointed public. It was also very interesting to hear from Kurdish authorities that a “limited” operation could be allowed in order to vent the pressure in Turkey.

On the other hand it would be unfair to claim that the Kurdish regional government is not doing anything with regard to the PKK, thinking that the USA will nevertheless not allow an operation. On the contrary, the administration has even “dared” to infuriate the leadership of the PKK and faced threatening statements by Cemil Bayik in an interview he made with a news agency that is known to be close to the PKK.¹

There have been 5 types of measures that the Kurdish administration is taking against the PKK:

1 - They made attempts to negotiate the release of the 8 abducted soldiers. Kerim Sincari, a former minister and the person in charge of intelligence in the Kurdish region, played an active role in the process.

¹ http://www.firatnews.eu/modules.php?name=Stories_Archive&sa=show_all

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2 - PÇDK (Democratic Solution Party of Kurdistan) offices in the territories overseen by the Kurdish administration were shut down, but their offices in Mosul, Kirkuk and Baghdad are still active. PÇDK is the political arm of the PKK. (It is noteworthy that Turkey is raising uproar over the PÇDK offices in the Kurdish region, but does not mind the PÇDK activity in places under the control of the Iraqi central government.)

3 - They fortified the security on the roads to and from Mount Kandil. They tried to prevent the PKK from going down to the cities so that their logistics would be cut off.

4 - They increased security controls at Sulaimaniya and Irbil airports.

5 - The Prime Minister of the regional government, Nechirvan Barzani, met twice with the executives of regional newspapers. He asked the papers to publish news and editorials in opposition to the PKK and in support of Turkey. His words, "I cannot sacrifice 4 million people to 2 thousand" were conveyed to the author of this article by a journalist who attended one of the aforementioned meetings.

Having taken these precautions, the only thing that the Kurdish administration has declared themselves incapable of doing is "to throw the PKK out of Kandil". Another issue they state loud and clear is that they are not going to take part in a potential military operation against the PKK.

VIEWES ON TURKEY

One can summarize the attitude of the Kurdish Regional Government towards Turkey in one sentence: they would like to be recognized by Turkey. The official line of "we are open to dialogue", "we would like to initiate dialogue" becomes "why doesn't Turkey recognize us?" in off the record interviews. Kurdish politicians

state that various countries from South Korea to the Czech Republic have diplomatic representation in Irbil; and emphasize that even Iran has a consulate there. When the crisis between Ankara and Irbil was at its peak, Iran opened its consulate in the building where 5 Iranian diplomats were detained by US soldiers on January 11th 2007. The flag of Iran was hoisted by Nechirvan Barzani himself. On the other hand, the artillery branch of the Iran Armed Forces is bombing PJAK² positions, which are inside the territory of the Kurdish administration.

Kurdish politicians follow the political atmosphere and statements in Turkey very closely. Therefore the phrase "soldier-boot kissers" used by the spokesperson of the Turkish Government, Cemil Çiçek³, is still fresh in Iraqi memories. These kinds of statements are covered much more extensively in Northern Iraqi media than the news of the Turkish artillery bombing PKK elements in Haftanin.

THE TURCOMANS

Although the numbers are not official, it is estimated that there are about 2 million Turcomans in Iraq.⁴ The only party that ran in the elections in January 2005 with the word "Turcoman" in its official name was the Iraqi Turcoman Front (ITF) that was also endorsed by Turkey. Surprisingly for Turkey, ITF got about 93.000 votes in the elections. The outcome was interpreted to be due to the Shiite Turcoman population voting for the Shiite alliance list. Thus policy-makers in Turkey, who have been paying attention to Turcomans since the mid 1990s, perceived Shi'ism as the new influential factor for the Turcomans. Therefore the bitter reality of sectarianism was accepted as the force that divides not only Iraq itself but also Iraqi Turcomans within themselves.

Another truth that surfaced in 2007 in Iraq is another divisive force for the Turcomans: how they perceive the Kurdish Regional Government. There are Turcoman organizations that recognize the Regional Government and there are those who do not. There are approximately

² "Party of Free Life of Kurdistan" is the Iran arm of the PKK.

³ <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/386244.asp>

⁴ Researcher Erşat Hürmüzlü estimates the number of Turcomans based on demographical data. He takes the 1957 census - which is relatively reliable - and projects that the 567 thousand Turcomans in a general population of 6.3 million has become at least 2 million today when the population of Iraq is allegedly 25 million.

250.000 Turcomans living in Irbil, and all Turcoman organizations in this area work closely with the Kurdish Government. There are two ministers of Turcoman descent in the administration. One of those ministers, Vedat Aslan, a former president of the ITF, is the Minister of Industry in the Kurdish Regional Government. However, ITF itself is blaming other Turcoman organizations for “serving others' agendas” and does not recognize the Kurdish Government.

REFERENDUM IN KIRKUK

The referendum foreseen in the Iraqi constitution, which was supposed to be held in November 2007 to determine the status of Kirkuk, is de facto postponed. It is obvious that the “normalization” requirement in order for the referendum to be held is not accomplished. Arabs and Turcomans, the “other” ethnic groups in Kirkuk, are frustrated at the transfer of a considerable number of Kurds to the city. The president of the Kurdistan Alliance list in the Iraqi parliament, Dr. Fuad Mahsum, said on 22 November 2007: “The postponement of the referendum in Kirkuk will contribute to the process”, which meant that Kurdish parties were also in favor of the rescheduling.⁵

The harshest statement about Kirkuk was made by the Bedir Brigade, the former armed fraction of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), which is one of the most influential Shiite groups in Iraq. According to the London-based Sark-ul Avsat (18 November 2007), the leader of the Bedir Brigade Hadi Amiri said that the “Kurds' attempt to annex Kirkuk by force to the Kurdistan federal territories” was “opening the doors to hell”. The referendum in Kirkuk is bound to be the hot topic of the days to come.

We also heard comments that linked the issue of Kirkuk with the stationing of Turkish troops on the border for a possible operation in Northern Iraq. It is worth noting that these commentators, who said that “the PKK is an excuse for Turkey to interfere with the referendum in Kirkuk”, were people that are

Turkey's Northern Iraq policy is going through a rather ambiguous phase due to the possibility of military intervention, various threats, putting forth all stakes from both sides, and the atmosphere of constant tension.

very close to Massoud Barzani.

CONCLUSION

If one were to summarize the situation from October 17th when the bill passed in the parliament until the present, one can say that all the regional actors, pursuing traditional policies and not being able to manage the situation, are “cornered”. Willingly or unwillingly Turkey has raised the stakes much too high in terms of its objectives in the region, and expectations of the public were also raised. The Kurdish Regional Government on the other hand realized that the PKK's presence on its territory was a threat to its own stability. If the Kurdish administration follows through with the measures against the PKK in a determined manner and takes further measures (such as handing over PKK leaders), Turkey may change its perspective on the region. Critical voices in Turkey are louder and clearer now, especially in their criticism that Turkey's stance is much too focused on the PKK. It would be too optimistic to anticipate that this process will culminate in the recognition of the Kurdish Regional Government in the short run; but still we may hear any day now that Jalal Talabani is invited to Ankara. This may be followed by a visit by Massoud Barzani, but one must never forget that the relationship is a very fragile one and one that is open to provocations. The Ankara-Irbil line managed to come through despite agitations by the media, but cannot endure another Dağlica incident.

Finally it is important to note that the “ruling force” in Iraq, that is to say the USA, has a significant role to play in all this. It is clear that the USA can do a lot more than solely provide intelligence to Turkey. Nobody is expecting the US to fight against the PKK like they fight against Ensar El Islam⁶, but they need to refute the question marks in so many heads and clarify at once the kind of relationship they have with

⁵ <http://www.kurdistantv.net/nivisek.asp?ser=130&cep=1&nimre=6298>

⁶ *Related to Al Qaeda, the radical Islamist Kurdish organization Ensar El Islam carried out attacks against the KDP and PUK on Kurdish Regional Administration territory. Their camps were dispersed as a result of the determined struggle of the US army.*