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The Turkish-Kurdish-American Triangle: Between Engagement and Estrangement

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The crisis between Turkey, the Turkish Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq that flared up in the fall of 2007 brought to the surface the dramatic changes which have occurred within the Turkish-Kurdish-American triangle. The trigger for these changes were the two Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003.

Until the 1991 war, Turkey's main partner for fighting the PKK was the central government in Baghdad, with which it was on good terms and which agreed to its periodic hot pursuit of PKK armed units into Iraqi territory. In the war's aftermath, particularly the temporary flight of one-half million Iraqi Kurds to its territories and Baghdad's loss of control of Iraqi Kurdistan, Ankara's partner in containing the PKK became, de facto, the emerging Kurdish entity in Iraq, the KRG. For all of its suspicions, Turkey cooperated with the KRG as the emerging de facto sovereign in the region. Initially, this was necessary in order to insure the return of Kurdish refugees to Iraq from Turkey. Subsequently, Turkish-KRG cooperation was deemed vital in order to avoid the effects of possible chaos on Ankara's border, and in order to employ the Iraqi Kurdish card against the PKK. Indeed, Turkey became a partner of sorts to the Kurds of Iraq, as Iran had been during previous decades.

As for the Kurds of Iraq, they needed good relations with Turkey in order to stabilize their autonomy, as Ankara was their only lifeline to the outside world. The fact that the PKK trespassed on their territory also led the KRG to desire a

measure of cooperation with Turkey, to both limit the PKK and avoid massive Turkish reprisals. Thus, Iraqi Kurds substituted their traditional and problematic covert alliance with Iran with a no-less ambiguous one with Turkey.

The United States had backed away from the Iraqi Kurds in 1975, helping to bring about the collapse of their revolt. For the next 15 years, Washington remained aloof from them in order not to antagonize its ally, Turkey. However, with the onset of the 1990-91 crisis, Washington's main enemy became Baghdad, and Iraqi Kurds were transformed into an important American client. One result was that a tacit alliance emerged during the 1990s between Turkey, the US and the KRG vis-a-vis the PKK, as well as on a variety of regional issues.

The second dramatic change came in the aftermath of the 2003 war, whereby the dynamics of trilateral engagement gradually drifted toward estrangement. The formation of a quasi-Kurdish state in northern Iraq emboldened the PKK, which had lost its bases in Syria in 1998, to revive its anti-Turkish activities from that region. The Kurds of Iraq, in contrast to Turkey, unreservedly supported the Americans during the war, thus dislodging Ankara from its long-held position as the US's incontestably preferred partner in the region. Moreover, they began to don the mantle of Pan-Kurdism, which made it more difficult for them to fight the PKK. As for Turkey, not only did it not allow the Americans to use its territory as a launching pad for the war against Iraq, but it also became its major critic. Ankara came to regard that war as the main cause for the PKK's renewed activities, and the US as the address for combating the PKK. Hence, Turkey and the KRG were now pitted against one another as they sought to shape America's regional orientation and win the US's favor.

The latest Turkish-PKK crisis in the fall of 2007 posed further dilemmas for all three actors in the triangle - Turkey, the US and the Iraqi Kurds. The Turkish government faced domestic pressure - from the army, the nationalist parties and the public at large - to respond forcefully against PKK attacks by striking at its bases inside Iraq, and even to deal a military blow to the KRG. The fact that Turkey already had four military bases inside Iraqi territory could easily facilitate such a move. On the other hand, there were weighty considerations against a large-scale incursion. One set of considerations was the heavy pressure being applied by the US, the EU and regional countries, especially Iran. Another set of considerations was related to Turkey's domestic scene: the fear of re-empowering the military, thus bringing it back to the center stage of politics; the need to appease its own large Kurdish population, which had

provided considerable support for the governing AKP in the summer 2007 elections; and finally, concern over maintaining its far-reaching economic interests in Iraqi Kurdistan. There were also weighty military considerations against such a move: an unwillingness to repeat the American experience of becoming stuck in the Iraqi quagmire; the difficulty of the terrain and the weather at this time of the year; and a reluctance to confront the Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* on its own terrain

The KRG, for its part, having emerged as the champion of Kurdish nationalism, could hardly countenance fighting its own brethren. On the other hand, it too needed to accommodate Turkey, being well aware of the KRG's dependence on Turkey for its very existence. In addition, it did not want to antagonize its main ally, the US, by seemingly supporting the PKK against Turkey. The central government in Baghdad was exerting pressure in the same direction.

As for the US, it feared further antagonizing Turkey, an old, strategic and intimate ally, notwithstanding their recent disagreements. At the same time, however, it could hardly afford to abandon its closest ally within Iraq and stand idly by in the face of a large-scale Turkish attack, with all the attendant risk of destabilizing Iraq's only viable and prospering region. Finally, the US did not want to open another war front of its own against the PKK.

Accordingly, when push came to shove, all three players chose accommodation rather than confrontation. Having made its point, the Turkish government showed restraint and put the onus on the KRG and the US to contain the PKK. At the same time, even the ultra-rightists in Turkey sought to accommodate the KRG, in the name of divide and rule. For their part, when confronted with the choice between local interests and Pan-Kurdish ones, the Kurds of Iraq chose the former, exactly as they had done in past instances involving Iranian and Turkish Kurds, respectively. Seeking to buy time, the US pressured Turkey not to invade Iraq, and the KRG to do the hard work of containing the PKK.

To sum up:

1. The KRG will do everything in its power to protect its gains in Iraq, even if it has to fight the PKK.
2. Turkey considers its Kurdish question an existential issue, and will seek to crush the PKK wherever possible. However, the PKK, in whatever permutation that might emerge, will not disappear as long as the issue of the standing of the Kurdish minority in Turkey is not adequately addressed by the

authorities.

3. The US will continue to have to strike a fine balance between its old ally, Turkey, and its new client, the KRG.

4. Turkey will most probably continue surgical operations against the PKK, but under the current circumstances is unlikely to launch an all-out invasion of Northern Iraq.

5. Fundamental changes in the status quo in Turkish-Kurdish relations, in Turkey and/or in Iraq will also have profound repercussions on the Kurds of Iran and Syria.

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