



PREVENTING CONFLICT OVER

# Kurdistan

**HENRI J. BARKEY**

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ■ MOSCOW ■ BEIJING ■ BEIRUT ■ BRUSSELS

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# ABBREVIATIONS

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AKP	Justice and Development Party
CBM	confidence-building measure
DTP	Democratic Society Party
EU	European Union
ICG	International Crisis Group
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ITF	Iraqi Turkmen Front
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDP-I	Kurdistan Democratic Party–Iran
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PJAK	Free Life Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UNAMI	UN Assistance Mission for Iraq





# SUMMARY

The consequences of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq will doubtless be debated for years to come. One result, however, is already clear: the long suppressed nationalist aspirations of the Kurdish people now dispersed across four states—Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria—have been aroused, perhaps irrevocably, by the war. Already in Iraq, Kurdish regions, which have benefited from Saddam Hussein's overthrow, have consolidated themselves into a federal region. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is a reality and a force for further Kurdish empowerment as it seeks to incorporate other Kurdish-majority areas and the oil-rich Kirkuk province in particular into its domain. The KRG's existence and demands have already alarmed all of Iraq's neighbors and the Baghdad government. The issues are far from being settled. If ignored or badly handled, Kurdish aspirations have the potential to cause considerable instability and violence in Iraq and beyond at a particularly delicate time.

For the United States, the Kurdish issue touches on many vital concerns—the future unity and stability of Iraq and the ability of U.S. combat forces to disengage responsibly; its relations with Turkey, a key North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally and aspirant for European Union (EU) membership; and more generally, the stability of an oil-rich region during a period of considerable uncertainty over energy security. This report argues that Washington must pay close attention to the many intertwined dimensions of the Kurdish question and, in particular, to the very real potential for conflict and outside intervention. Washington must

develop a comprehensive approach that recognizes and, where possible, leverages those linkages to help usher in a stable and prosperous future. This report does not suggest that the many facets of the Kurdish issue can only be solved simultaneously, but rather that Washington has to be sensitive to how potential progress—and setbacks—in one area can affect movement elsewhere. Of primary importance should be settling Kirkuk's future and consolidating the legitimacy of Iraq's federal structure. Closely related is the development of a working relationship between Ankara and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

# INTRODUCTION

The consequences of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq will doubtless be debated for years to come. One result, however, is already clear: the long suppressed nationalist aspirations of the Kurdish people now dispersed across four states—Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria—have been aroused, perhaps irrevocably, by the war. This is translating into demands for greater political and cultural rights and, for the Kurds of Iraq, autonomy from Baghdad’s control. If ignored or badly handled, Kurdish aspirations have the potential to cause considerable instability and violence at a particularly delicate time for the region.

For the United States, the Kurdish issue touches on many vital concerns—the future of Iraq and the ability of U.S. combat forces to disengage responsibly; its relations with Turkey, a key North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally and aspirant for European Union (EU) membership; and more generally, the stability of an oil-rich region during a period of considerable uncertainty over energy security. In short, Washington must pay close attention to the many dimensions of the Kurdish question and, in particular, to the very real potential for conflict and outside intervention.

There are three interconnected sources of potential violent conflict in the Kurdish region. The first concerns the role the Kurds and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will play in Iraq, namely the extent and size of the territory (including the oil-rich region and city of Kirkuk) they will control as part of a federal state. There is a real possibility of secession in the event that the central government and its allies fail to satisfy some of the basic requirements put forward by the Kurds.

Kurdish secession, resistance to Kurdish claims on Kirkuk, and other scenarios could plunge Iraq into an all-out civil war.

The second potential source involves the rising tensions in Turkey between the state and its Kurdish minority. Ankara perceives the KRG and the Kurdish successes in northern Iraq as potential threats to its territorial integrity. It fears greater political mobilization by its own Kurdish minority and a stronger Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a homegrown insurgent group with approximately half of its fighters based in northern Iraq. Turks were adamant in trying to prevent the emergence of a robust, autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq. This has already emerged as a major irritant in U.S. relations with Turkey, a NATO ally; last year, Washington, under tremendous pressure from Ankara, provided Turkey with a green light to engage in cross-border military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. Since December 2007, Turkish aircraft have been staging continuous, though contained, operations against the PKK, supplemented by one ground operation. Those operations risk escalating into a Turkish–Iraqi Kurdish conflict with a full-fledged Turkish intervention that could cause other neighbors to do the same.

The third source of conflict is the reaction of Iranian and Syrian Kurds to developments in their neighborhoods. Tehran and Damascus have long opposed Iraqi Kurdish aspirations and have cooperated with each other and with Turkey to stymie Kurdish advances in Iraq. Although Iranian and Syrian Kurds have not received as much attention as their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq, they too have been influenced by the regional events. Increased Kurdish mobilization and instances of violence in both Syria and Iran have alarmed these two regimes. They too may choose to intervene if Iraqi developments are perceived to threaten their territorial integrity.

For the United States, all three of these potential causes of conflict give rise to a slew of problems. Political instability, violence, or all-out civil war in Iraq would certainly interfere with the plans to withdraw U.S. forces, as would intervention from neighboring states. Civil war would have disastrous consequences for U.S. interests in the region as a whole. A Turkey that turns inward because of its inability to peacefully resolve this domestic challenge is unlikely to play either a constructive role in the Middle East or succeed in joining the EU, a goal that has had bipartisan support in Washington for more than two decades. For those reasons, the Obama administration should view the Kurdish question, writ large, as central to a successful and responsible disengagement from Iraq and, ultimately, to U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The challenges created by Kurdish aspirations and the realities on the ground in northern Iraq are daunting, but Washington must take the lead. Whatever its current constraints in the region, the United States still remains the only power with sufficient clout, resources, and influence over most of the parties to begin to resolve these conflicts. First and foremost, how it disengages from Iraq will influence developments in Kurdistan as a whole. This report suggests an approach for the new U.S. administration to prevent problems associated with the Kurdish question from undermining its policies in the region, especially in Iraq.

The report argues that Kurdish issues in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria are inexorably linked and that as a consequence, Washington must develop a comprehensive approach that recognizes and, where possible, leverages those linkages to achieve its policy goals. This is not to suggest that the many facets of the Kurdish issue can only be solved simultaneously in a “Big Bang” fashion, but rather that Washington has to be sensitive to how potential progress—and setbacks—in one area can affect movement elsewhere. Of primary importance should be settling Kirkuk’s future and consolidating the legitimacy of Iraq’s federal structure. Closely related is the development of a working relationship between Ankara and the KRG. Both sides have compelling reasons to cooperate, and such a relationship would go a long way toward mitigating Turkey’s internal Kurdish unrest. Iran and Syria play tertiary roles at this stage, though their own Kurdish problems could escalate in nature and content.

The report begins with an overview of the Kurdish question throughout the Middle East and an overview of the situation of Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. An analysis of U.S. stakes and objectives leads into recommendations for U.S. policy.

# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Kurds have been a distinct ethnic group in the Middle East for almost two millennia. They have been part of much larger empires serving as loyal, and occasionally rebellious, subjects. They have also led some of the most formidable military formations: every Kurd proudly recounts that Salah ad-Din, the conqueror of Jerusalem and Richard the Lion-Hearted's nemesis, was Kurdish.

The Kurds' primary concern in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire as wars exacted their toll was how to avoid the taxman and the sultan's insatiable need for fresh conscripts. Otherwise, content to be neglected by the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman court), the Kurds were just co-equal members of a Muslim community. It was only in response to nationalist stirrings in Europe, Istanbul, and elsewhere that the first attempts at building ethnic consciousness emerged. They were also distressed by the efforts of Young Turks to reconstitute the Empire's remnants as a Turkic-centered entity.<sup>1</sup>

The 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement and ensuing partition of the Ottoman Empire would spell disaster for the Kurds. Already divided by the Ottoman–Iran international border, the colonial powers imposed two more states, Iraq and Syria, over the Kurds. The Kurds' hope that President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points would confer on them recognition as a nation evaporated quickly as the Sèvres Treaty, which had promised them autonomy in eastern Anatolia, was rendered moot by Kemal Atatürk and Turkish nationalists, who went on to successfully wage a war that resulted in the new Turkish republic. Ironically, the Kurds had responded enthusiastically to Atatürk's appeal to their piety to defeat

KURDISH-INHABITED AREAS



Source: Central Intelligence Agency (1992).



the infidel Greeks and others who had tried to finish off the Ottoman Empire. They were soon to be doubly disappointed as the new Turkish regime decided to do away with two main constituents of their identity: ethnic distinctiveness and a strong attachment to religion.

From the end of World War I onward, Kurdish identity came under severe pressure in all four states. In almost all cases the Kurds tended to inhabit the periphery of the states; therefore, when they caused trouble in the form of political mobilization or violence, it tended to take place in relatively remote areas, far from important population centers and certainly from the respective capitals. For most of the twentieth century, the different nation states with troublesome Kurdish minorities on the peripheries managed to control them, for the most part, through a combination of repression (occasionally large-scale killings and deportations) and co-optation. In addition to the partitions imposed by international boundaries, for much of the twentieth century the Kurds were also divided among themselves, often unable to coalesce around single leaders or movements. This had much to do with the general backwardness of their respective regions as well as the powerful pull of regionalism that privileged localities over the larger group.<sup>2</sup> The 1980s and 1990s, by contrast, witnessed the slow emergence of a middle class leadership and a wider appreciation of its Kurdish identity—beyond tribal, sectarian, and regional ties.

What, then, have been individual countries' experiences in the twentieth century?

## ***Iraq***

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Iraqi Kurds proved to be the most rebellious when it came to resisting the central government. They felt betrayed by the mandatory powers, especially Great Britain, which regarded them as a nuisance that could be managed within the multisectarian and multiethnic Iraq. Compared to Turkey, the Iraqi regime proved to be far weaker and had to occasionally seek accommodation with the main Kurdish groups, even though it never fulfilled its promises. In 1970, for instance, an autonomy arrangement was signed with Baghdad but was never implemented. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq took enormous risks internationally, providing the Kurds with opportunities to further challenge the regime. Kurds took advantage of both the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war and later the first Gulf War in

1991 to resume their armed struggle for autonomy and perhaps even independence. Iran aided them, as it had done in the early 1970s, to undermine Saddam's regime. In both of these instances, reverses and horrific massacres followed initial Kurdish military successes. Saddam's murderous forays in Iraqi Kurdistan did, however, help the Kurds get noticed by the international community. In spring 1991 more than a million Kurdish refugees sought sanctuary from Iraqi troops on the Iranian and Turkish borders, forcing the United States and its coalition partners to establish a no-fly zone above the 36th parallel. Ironically, this humanitarian intervention enabled the Kurds to create the semblance of a quasi-independent state.

The 2003 Iraq war solidified the Kurds' international visibility. The United States, having failed to obtain the Turkish parliament's consent to open up a second front against Saddam Hussein, had to rely extensively on Kurdish paramilitaries to maintain order in the north. The Kurds were the only ones to regard the U.S. occupation of Iraq as liberation. The Kurdish-controlled areas became Iraq's most stable and prosperous regions. Kurds also took an active political role in Baghdad. In 2005, one of the two Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani, the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), assumed the presidency of Iraq and proved an able politician in building consensus in Baghdad. The other, Masoud Barzani, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), assumed the mantle of president of the KRG. Maneuvering in the post-Saddam political struggles, Iraqi Kurds won the argument with their rivals over redrawing provincial boundaries to reverse decades of ethnic cleansing and gerrymandering at their expense. Baghdad also agreed to their demand for a referendum on Kirkuk's fate, which, they have argued, represents the Kurds' Jerusalem.

Article 140 of Iraq's constitution, enacted in 2005, provided that a referendum on Kirkuk would be held no later than December 31, 2007. However, the referendum has been delayed for lack of necessary preparations. The KRG faces opposition from Arabs and Turkish-speaking Turkmen and from neighboring countries, especially Turkey. The dispute centers on the potential for Kurdish independence and also on who will control the oil. Many Iraqis, as well as neighboring states, do not want the city of Kirkuk and its adjacent oil fields, the second largest oil-producing region of Iraq, to be incorporated into the KRG. They worry that oil wealth and autonomy would create further momentum for independence. Despite the United Nations (UN) mediation effort led by Special Representative for Iraq Staffan de Mistura, who heads UNAMI,

the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, tensions are simmering in Kirkuk. Turkey has often stated that Kurdish control of Kirkuk constitutes a redline that may trigger its intervention.

## **Turkey**

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Since the early years of the republic, Turkey's overall aim has been to assimilate the Kurds and generally eradicate Kurdish cultural identity. This included forcible population relocations, draconian laws forbidding the use of the Kurdish language, and a campaign to deny the Kurds' very existence by arguing that they are nothing more than errant Turks. After an initial burst of violent uprisings that were finally suppressed in the late 1930s, Kurds began to seek alternative means to advance their interests. Some were co-opted by the Turkish state, while others, especially in the period of relative quiet that followed the late 1930s, opted for slow but continuous political mobilization. Kurds threw their support behind anyone who challenged the military-dominated established order; in the 1950s, this meant the new Democrat Party, and in the 1960s, some sought refuge in left-wing movements. The PKK's violent insurrection emerged from these movements in 1984. It bedeviled Turkish authorities until its leader was captured in Kenya in 1999 with U.S. help.

Ankara now faces a conundrum: how to deal with rising nationalist feelings among Kurds while also trying to make progress on its entry into the EU, which requires major reforms on democratization, human rights, and political liberalization. To date the struggle against the PKK has been defined in purely military terms, and political reforms have been limited to meaningless and cosmetic measures involving language and broadcasting rights. This situation has polarized Turkish Kurds and their representatives. Meantime, the authorities have banned one pro-Kurdish party after another for alleged PKK sympathies.

The current ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has seen its EU-inspired reform agenda sidetracked by the PKK's post-2004 resurgence, which resulted in part from frustration with the lack of movement on the Kurdish issue. The PKK's presence in remote areas on both sides of the Iraq–Turkey border has contributed to a sharp increase in U.S.–Turkish tensions. The Turks have argued that as the occupying power in Iraq, it was incumbent on the United States to eliminate the PKK presence—especially since the State Department had long designated the PKK as a terrorist organization. U.S. reluctance to upset Iraqi

Kurds and northern Iraq's fragile stability came to the fore in late 2007, following a series of spectacular PKK ambushes of Turkish military units. Washington reversed itself and permitted first Turkish airstrikes and later a limited ground operation against suspected PKK encampments. The military operations reduced U.S.–Turkish tensions; however, they are a palliative; the PKK problem and the larger Kurdish issue remain.

## *Iran*

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It is in Iran that the Kurds achieved their first, albeit short-lived, independent republic. The Mahabad Republic was created under the protection of the Soviet Union in early 1946 and led by Molla Mustapha Barzani, the father of the current KRG president. But Soviet troops withdrew and by year's end, Iran had reoccupied the region. The Shah implemented draconian measures, hanging nationalist leaders and subjugating the region to the central government.<sup>3</sup> Barzani escaped and his exploits in Mahabad transformed him into a genuine pan-Kurdish hero. Unlike Turkey, the Shah permitted selected forms of cultural expression. So long as the Kurds stayed away from overt forms of nationalism, they could publish in Kurdish. The Iranian intelligence organization SAVAK even sponsored a Kurdish radio station.<sup>4</sup> Still, this did not prevent Iranian Kurds from developing their own clandestine organizations.

After the 1979 Islamic revolution, tensions flared again. The new regime was no more tolerant than its predecessor of Kurdish nationalist demands. The Islamic regime also tried to co-opt the Kurds by emphasizing the common ancestral and ethnic roots of Persians and Kurds. Despite the sectarian and ethnic differences among Sunni Kurds and Shi'i Iranians, Iran has been more accepting of Kurdish culture. Its imperial past could allow Iran to project a supra-ethnic image of the convergence of all.<sup>5</sup>

Two Iranian Kurdish parties, KDPI (Kurdistan Democratic Party–Iran) and Komala, have found refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan; in exchange, Iraqi Kurds have barred them from engaging in anti-Iranian military activities. Instead a new group, an offshoot of the PKK, the Free Life Party (PJAK), has emerged in recent years to challenge the Iranian regime. PJAK, while not constituting a real threat to Iran, has nonetheless succeeded in harassing the Iranian military and inflicting casualties. PJAK's presence in Iraq's remote mountains has allowed Iran to engage in military strikes and intelligence cooperation with Turkey against the

PKK and PJAK and to score political points in Turkey at the expense of the United States.

## **Syria**

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Syrian Kurds have toiled under constant state repression and denial of rights, even though they have been the least politically active of all four populations. One researcher has characterized their behavior as one of “dissimulation.”<sup>6</sup> Defining Syrian identity as Arab and Islamic has excluded the Kurds from mainstream Syrian society. In 1962, just before the advent of the Baathist regime, some 200,000 Kurds lost their Syrian nationality, disenfranchising them from access to state services, employment, education, and political participation.

Syria also emulated Saddam Hussein’s policies by moving thousands of Arabs into the Kurdish regions of Syria to create a buffer between them and the Kurdish communities in neighboring states.<sup>7</sup> The Syrian government also played the Kurdish card against its neighbors. The PKK and its leader found refuge in Damascus and the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley in Lebanon for the better part of almost two decades, from 1980 to 1998.

Syrian Kurds, however, have been profoundly affected by the post-2003 developments in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Spontaneous antigovernment disturbances by Kurds and acts of civil disobedience, such as the 2004 Qamishli demonstrations, sufficiently alarmed the Assad regime so that it severely clamped down on dissent. The detention, torture, and death of a charismatic sheikh in 2005 led to further protests.<sup>9</sup> The Kurdish notables, fearing a popular uprising they could not control, sought to make peace with the Assad regime.<sup>10</sup> Unrest, however, continues; the Newruz, or New Year, celebrations in March 2008 were once again marred by violence. KRG President Massoud Barzani strongly criticized the deaths of Kurdish demonstrators at the hands of Syrian security forces.<sup>11</sup>

The United States has five major stakes and policy objectives with regard to the Kurdish issues: 1) constructing a federal, democratic, stable, and legitimate Kurdish entity in northern Iraq; 2) peacefully resolving the status of Kirkuk; 3) developing a working relationship between Turkey and the KRG; 4) peacefully resolving the domestic Turkish–Kurdish question; and 5) developing approaches to the Kurdish issue in Iran and Syria.

# U.S. STAKES AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

## ***Constructing a Federal, Legitimate Kurdish Entity in Northern Iraq***

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A paramount U.S. objective is to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity within the confines of a federal and democratic state. Iraqi territorial integrity is dependent on Iraq's ability to integrate its Kurdish population into a successful federal framework. New rules and old modes of settling disputes have proven to be inadequate in Iraq; witness the difficulties concluding oil and provincial election laws. Achieving a successful federal structure for Iraq will require a great deal more effort by Iraqis as well as attention by the United States.

The Kurds have had a head start at institutionalizing their region. They have, in effect, been governing themselves since the end of the 1991 Gulf War. The current stability has been contingent on the smooth functioning of the KRG, the minimization of conflicts between the two primary Kurdish parties, cooperation with the central government in Baghdad, improved economic conditions, and minimal foreign interference. Another critical contribution to stability has been the perspective that Kurds have a future in Iraq as a distinct ethnic group. This is enshrined in Article 117 of the 2005 constitution, which recognizes the

KRG as a principal component of a federal Iraqi state with two official languages, Arabic and Kurdish.

Recognizing perhaps that this moment in history is their best chance at achieving a consolidated and robust autonomous region, Iraqi Kurds have been busy at cooperative state building, with increased investment in infrastructure and attraction of foreign capital strengthening this process.

Federalism, however, is an alien concept in the Middle East, where regimes are ruled by a strong and almost always authoritarian center. During the 2005 constitutional debate, the Arab League and its leader were sharply critical of the federalist concept, arguing that it denuded Iraq of its Arab identity. No other member of the Arab League embraces any form of federalism. For the Arab world, the emergence of another non-Arab, though Muslim, state in its midst is tantamount to another Israel and, therefore, one more attempt at diminishing the Arab homeland.

In Iraq, much of the debate has centered on who in a federal Iraq decides the modes of oil exploitation and distribution, not to mention the division of oil rents. Federalism also remains controversial, because many Iraqis, primarily Sunna, perceive it as an undeserved reward for Kurds who have historically been disloyal to the state.

Similarly, Iraq's non-Arab neighbors, Turkey and Iran, have been adamantly opposed to a federal Iraq, fearing similar demands from their own Kurdish minorities.

Still, federalism has enabled the Iraqi Kurds to engage and cooperate with the government in Baghdad and in many ways play a constructive part, and at times an indispensable balancing role, in its functioning. As Jost Hilterman argues, "Because so much of Iraq's parliamentary politics since 2005 has concerned constitutionally mandated legislation, the Kurds have left their imprint repeatedly and decisively. They have been helped by their internal discipline and meticulous preparation (especially compared to everybody else), as well as the unity of their strategic vision."<sup>12</sup>

The three high-ranking Kurds serving in Baghdad—President Jalal Talabani, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih, and Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari—have successfully promoted Iraq's interests and mediated internal disputes between the myriad of Shi'i and Sunni factions. It would be unrealistic, however, to expect that even this contribution would suffice to dispel perceptions of disloyalty among other Iraqis. Nonetheless, their activism ensures that the KRG gets its fair shake. And the *peshmerga*, unlike other militias, has not fought against the central government and has evolved in its role within Iraq to the point that it

## DISPUTED TERRITORIES CLAIMED BY THE KRG



*Turkey and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict or Cooperation?* International Crisis Group, Middle East Report no. 81, November 13, 2008, Appendix B, p. 24.

can be seen as a possible National Guard–like model for transforming other militias. While Prime Minister Maliki called on the Mahdi Army to disarm and for Muqtada al-Sadr to abandon politics, he has formalized the *peshmerga's* special character and existence.

The north's stability has come at some significant costs. After seventeen years of autonomous rule in an indeterminate Iraq, Kurds are detached from the rest of Iraqi society. The two rival Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, have used oil revenues from Baghdad, first set in



motion with the oil-for-food agreements in 1996, to consolidate their rule in the north through a network of clientelistic relationships, the distribution of funds and contracts to entrusted aides and friends, and the stifling of dissent. Both parties have encouraged the emergence of subservient and loyal subparties and press. The KRG, for all its positive attributes, is not fully democratic. As a result, there is always the danger—and some will argue that the signs are already evident—that dissent in northern Iraq risks assuming an Islamist or a more nationalistic and separatist form.

Iraqi Kurds' insistence on federalism, however, has also provided an impetus for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the main Shi'i faction in the government, to seek the creation of a large, nine-province federal region in the south that includes the city of Basra. ISCI's proposal, however, is a poisoned chalice of sorts. ISCI, which has lost a great deal of its popularity, is attempting to assume control of a region that has Iraq's largest share of oil reserves. ISCI faces a formidable local opposition from the Fadilla Party, which controls Basra, in addition to the Mahdi Army, elements of Da'wa, and Turkmen and Sunna.<sup>13</sup> ISCI's proposal may be tainting federalism and, by implication, Kurdish desires as well.

Federalism results from either an attempt to hold together disparate groups that involuntarily constitute a unitary state or from political units that voluntarily come together.<sup>14</sup> The Kurdish case clearly fits into the first, or "holding," category. The current three-province Kurdistan region, even excluding the disputed territories of Kirkuk province, is not homogeneous and contains significant numbers of Turkmen and Christian Assyrians. In response, Iraqi Kurds have attempted to develop a more encompassing Kurdistan identity, as opposed to an ethnically more confining Kurdish one.

The presence of strong secessionist feelings in a holding-type federal arrangement is likely to produce a greater degree of acrimony between the center and the regions. Sentiment for separation in Iraqi Kurdistan has been strong; some 95 percent of its population in 2005 supported independence.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, a federal region is likely to assume a more aggressive approach against the political center's more accommodating—at least in the short run and within limits—stance.

Evidence of such initial accommodation can be found in the constitutional negotiations over Article 140 and the Kirkuk question and, most recently, oil. Subsequent disagreements between Baghdad and the KRG over the proposed law to regulate the exploration and distribution of oil also illustrate a degree of confusion over federal powers. History—Saddam's deliberate underfunding of oil exploration in Kurdistan—and

the lack of trust between the central government and the Kurdish authority affect approaches to the oil law. Despite agreement on oil export revenues accruing to the central government, Kurds insist on the right to award exploration contracts to prevent a repetition of the past injustice. The central government, by contrast, insists on having one national oil policy to prevent the prospect of uncontrolled production. This has not stopped the KRG from courting international oil companies, ranging from Turkish to Norwegian and South Korean ones, to begin exploration.

The devolution of power to the regions does not always extinguish centrifugal forces; witness Spain, where Basque and Catalan autonomous regions have continued their see-saw struggle to maximize their powers at the expense of the center. The construction of a federation in Iraq, a region so different from Europe, will be far more difficult; the prospect of an estrangement between the Arab population and the Kurds, who are viewed as having “betrayed Iraq” and “collaborated” with the United States remains real.<sup>16</sup>

The possibility of Kurdish secession is also real. Baghdad and its neighbors can prevent this either by coercing Kurdistan back into Iraq through threats of economic sanctions and even military intervention, or by coaxing the Kurds into a federal Iraq through incentives. Even if cajoling is the more desirable option, it will be fraught with its own dangers: “[T]he very same conditions that make federalism necessary in Iraq will make federalism a risk to Iraqi territorial integrity.”<sup>17</sup>

The United States, despite any withdrawal timetable, would be helping itself if it were to assist the Kurds and the rest of Iraq in working on the modalities of federalism. It has taken Iraqi Kurdistan’s stability for granted and has woefully underfunded programs of institution building there. Extending the rule of law in the north is one of the most immediate needs. Despite the advances the two Kurdish parties have made in governing, many of their differences that have simply been papered over could resurface in periods of extreme stress.

## ***Peacefully Resolving the Kirkuk Issue***

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Unless a legitimate solution is formulated by the Iraqi government, together with the United States and the UN, Kirkuk stands ready to explode

into interethnic conflict. Such violence could spread to other parts of Iraq, where territorial disputes abound.<sup>18</sup> Kirkuk then is central to U.S. interests in Iraq. What makes the Kirkuk issue difficult to resolve is the mix of long-standing animosities (deliberately accentuated by Saddam's brutal rule), ethnic divisions, large oil reserves, and outside interference.

In opposing Kirkuk's absorption by the KRG, the principal argument Turkey, Iran, and Syria have advanced is that Kirkuk's oil resources would give the KRG the wherewithal to become independent. With 12 percent of Iraq's oil reserves, the city and province of Kirkuk together represent the second-largest oil producing region of Iraq; therefore, much of the contention over the city and province relates to what the control over this resource will mean down the road.<sup>19</sup>

The Kurds claim Kirkuk province based on their majority status in the province before Saddam's campaign of deportations and his alteration of provincial boundaries to emphasize Kirkuk's "Arab" character. Both Kurds and Turkmen rely on census results to bolster their respective claims. The Turkmen, supported by Turkey, argue that Kirkuk is historically a Turkmen city. For instance, Turkmen point to the 1957 census that gave them a slight plurality in the city of Kirkuk. Province-wide results in the same census, however, showed the Kurds with a considerable lead over Arabs and Turkmen with 48, 28, and 21 percent, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

Since the U.S. invasion, Kirkuk has been contested. The two Kurdish parties spearheaded a military push toward Kirkuk and encouraged residents expelled by Saddam's Arabization policies to return. Turkmen and Arabs have interpreted the Kurds' behavior as a land grab at their expense. Kurds' demand for the "normalization" (the redrawing of boundaries and resettlement of previous residents) of Kirkuk province, as stipulated by Article 140, to be followed by a census and a referendum on the city's future, constitutes the core of the conflict today. Helped by Sunni and Shi'i Arab nationalists and Turkey, the Turkmen have strongly resisted the Kurds' ambitions. Iraqi Kurdish leaders are also under pressure from their own constituents and nationalists clamoring for more progress on Kirkuk. Despite all the accusations levied against the Kurds, an International Crisis Group (ICG) report found that, by and large, the Kurds had "acted with restraint since returning in April 2003."<sup>21</sup>

In the end, Kirkuk's "normalization" was delayed by a Baghdad government dragging its feet and by the volatile conditions in Iraq, which prevented an extensive redrawing of provincial boundaries. Baghdad's reluctance to act was not just due to its weakness but also, as the Kurds suspected, to its unwillingness to comply with Article 140.<sup>22</sup> A potential clash was postponed with UN special representative Staffan

de Mistura's proposal to defer the process by six months. In reality, this has been postponed indefinitely.<sup>23</sup>

External opposition to Kurdish aims to normalize Kirkuk has primarily been centered in Turkey. Iran and Syria have not been as vocal; they have preferred to let Ankara do the heavy lifting. Ankara carries more weight on this issue, primarily because of its close relationship with the United States, and has its own ethnic card to play in northern Iraq. In 1995 the Turks helped start the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) as a counterweight to burgeoning Iraqi Kurdish ambitions. Turkish leaders have threatened to intervene to protect the Turkmen in the event Kirkuk is incorporated into the KRG. A military intervention against the KRG would have untold international repercussions and come at a military cost with little chance of success. Turkey can also blockade the KRG economy by impeding Kurdish access to the most important trade routes in and out of northern Iraq.

How significant is the Turkmen card? The ITF has, under the Turkish military's tutelage and support, emerged as an influential actor in Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policy calculations.<sup>24</sup> However, the picture in Iraq is mixed at best. ITF's support in Iraq has proven to be limited; it received only 0.87 percent of the total vote in the 2005 elections, returning only three members to the Iraqi parliament. More Turkmen were elected under the Shi'i or Kurdish lists than under the ITF's. The reason for this is that some 50 percent of Turkmen are Shi'a and have tended to follow the Shi'i parties, and many Turkmen who live in Kurdish areas traditionally have had good relations with the Kurds.<sup>25</sup> The ITF's effectiveness is limited largely to the city of Kirkuk, where it has forged an alliance with local Arabs, including the Sadrists.<sup>26</sup>

The Turkish government distanced itself from the ITF because of its poor electoral showing; the Turkish military, on the other hand, which has exercised the most influence on Turkey's northern Iraq policy, has been reluctant to jettison the ITF. Some 1,200 to 1,500 Turkish soldiers have been stationed in Kurdish controlled areas of northern Iraq since the late 1990s with U.S. and Kurdish acquiescence<sup>27</sup> to watch the PKK and, perhaps more importantly, serve as a backbone to the ITF. The Turkish military and the government have been at odds over domestic and Iraqi Kurdish policy.<sup>28</sup> This said, the ITF is still capable of mischief and of engaging in provocative acts to draw its protectors into the fray, however unwilling they may be.<sup>29</sup> A heavy-handed approach to Kirkuk or the Turkmen poses problems of its own for Ankara; it exposes Turkey to recriminations for interfering in the affairs of another country on behalf of a minority (would Turkey allow Iraq to do the same on behalf

of Turkish Kurds?) and to unrealistic expectations about its abilities to intervene in Kirkuk.

The specter of a referendum over Kirkuk risks provoking interethnic clashes that could easily spread beyond Kirkuk<sup>30</sup> and almost certainly erupt in Mosul, a city that is rife with interethnic conflict and where a sizable Kurdish minority population is under pressure from its neighbors. An eruption of such acrimonious conflict would deal a severe blow to both the U.S. military and the Iraqi government. The Kurds have agreed to give UN representative de Mistura's three-stage plan a chance to work, provided it results in incremental change that convinces the broader Iraqi Kurdish public that progress is being made.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, border alterations will start with the least controversial ones, where the local populations have an interest in changing their status in the first place.<sup>32</sup> These border adjustments are not designed to bolster the Kurds' demands—as they also result in the reassignment of traditionally Arab localities away from Kurdish control. The border alterations are to be accompanied by confidence-building measures intended to facilitate future, admittedly more difficult, changes.<sup>33</sup> In addition to its incremental approach, de Mistura's proposal has the added benefit of buying time for all parties concerned to begin negotiations.

The Kurds' dilemma mirrors Iraq's with respect to the Kurds. That is, Kurds can either try to impose their will on Kirkuk or coax it into the KRG through persuasion, guarantees, and incentives. The latter is not a far-fetched proposition, given that the Kurdish region has done remarkably well under very difficult conditions. Despite the nepotism in its leadership, the KRG offers its citizens far more political coherence and stability than what exists in the rest of Iraq. The Kurds, however, have yet to approve the final version of the KRG constitution, which articulates a clear set of guarantees for all minorities residing in their territory.

The United States faces a quandary of its own with Kirkuk. In the short term, the primary objective is to prevent violence from breaking out. In the longer run, what matters is the legitimate resolution of the issue. If Iraq were to break up, would it then be preferable for the Kurds, who are natural allies of both the United States and, ultimately, of Turkey, to control the oil? What contingencies should Washington prepare itself for?

The answers are not immediately obvious. The United States should help ensure that the three-step process in Kirkuk is fair by deploying its officials to offer discrete but sustained support for the UN plan by engaging the parties on the ground directly and arbitrating between them. It must also avoid new mistakes, such as making secret or side deals with any of the parties under the pressure of current exigencies.

It can help apprehensive Iraqis and neighbors accept the outcomes or push for more ambitious UN plans like the one in Brčko in the former Yugoslavia, where a separate administrative district was carved out when competing Croat and Serb demands proved impossible to mediate.

In the current climate, however, Washington has to tread carefully; it cannot afford to be compelled by disputes over Kirkuk to choose sides. Some Kurds understand that the U.S. position does not necessarily favor them in Kirkuk and that compromises are required on all sides.<sup>34</sup> De Mistura's suggestions, while controversial, have few alternatives other than referendum or the continuation of a policy that seeks to maintain the status quo and avoid making decisions that are likely to be controversial. There still remains the issue of provincial elections. The Turks, in collaboration with the Turkmen, have proposed an equal division of representation in Kirkuk between the three major communities, Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds; each would receive 32 percent of the seats, with smaller minorities receiving the remaining 4 percent.<sup>35</sup> The Kurds are unwilling to agree to such a distribution because they clearly have a plurality in the province; indeed, their plurality is likely to become a majority if provincial boundaries are redrawn. In fact, when a minority of Iraqi lawmakers, as most of them had boycotted the parliamentary session, voted for a provincial elections law and imposed the 32–32–32–4 division, the Kurds and their allies got the presidential council to veto this legislation, ultimately delaying the vote to January 2009.

Another option put forward by the International Crisis Group is what it calls an oil-for-soil bargain, whereby the Kurds would agree to cede control of Kirkuk to a temporary power-sharing arrangement in exchange for greater autonomy on economic issues, principally, the development and exploitation of oil resources.<sup>36</sup> The ICG proposal is driven by UNAMI's relatively slowed-paced work and the assumption that time is running out on a peaceful compromise on Kirkuk. The Kurdish response to this proposal has been negative, in large measure because it is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as circumventing the territorial claims and the referendum issue.

Holding provincial elections, however, is in Washington's interest, even if its allies are bound to lose seats and control of districts. Hence the current compromise passed by the Iraqi parliament that envisages the holding of such elections by January, except in the KRG and Kirkuk, is a welcome development.<sup>37</sup> While there is still likely to be some violence in mixed areas, the United States could not afford to have the process drag on indefinitely. Those that had the most to gain from provincial elections—that is, the combination of Sunni and some Shi'i parties—ironically were the ones who provoked the stalemate.<sup>38</sup>

## ***Developing a Working Relationship Between Turkey and the KRG***

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Helping Turkey and the KRG cooperate with each other is critical to U.S. success. These are close allies of the United States, share real geopolitical interests, and have more in common than they are willing to admit.

Washington and Ankara share similar goals in Iraq: they both want to see a unified country that is prosperous, as democratic as possible, and able to stand up to the Iranian regime. In the long run, an Ankara–Baghdad axis can serve as a counterweight to Tehran to stabilize the Persian Gulf region. To create such an axis, however, Turks have to travel through the Kurdish capital Erbil; the KRG has the ability to facilitate this approach as much as it can disrupt it. Similarly, Washington should want a constructive Turkish role in Iraq, because it would soothe Gulf countries' anxieties over Iran's regional role and the possibility of Kurdish secession. What Turkey can provide the Iraqi Kurds is a convincing protective bond that goes a long way to assuaging Kurdish insecurities regarding their neighbors.

Ever since its invasion of Iraq, the United States has had to contend with Turkish disapproval of its policies and Turkish–KRG tensions. These issues have often interfered with the day-to-day work of the coalition forces, created discord between Ankara and Washington, and contributed to the low esteem and lack of trust for the United States among the Turkish public and policy makers.<sup>39</sup> Simply put, Turkey fears the demonstration effect on its own Kurdish minority. Turkey's new chief of the general staff, Ilker Basbug, in his review of Turkey's threat environment, has assessed the most salient threats in order of importance to be the potential for an independent Kurdish state, followed by the future disposition of Kirkuk, and then the PKK.<sup>40</sup> Turks tend to overstate the potential for Kurdish independence: "Even if a Kurdish state becomes an actuality, the threat to Turkey's territorial integrity is limited because successful irredentist movements are rare."<sup>41</sup> Hence, at the root of the malaise in the Turkish–KRG–U.S. triangle is Turkey's own domestic Kurdish question and its manifest fear of the Iraqi Kurdish federal state becoming independent.

The United States and the Iraqi Kurds were slow in appreciating the deleterious impact the PKK presence in northern Iraq would have on

relations with Turkey; however, the PKK has long ceased to be a serious threat to Turkish security. It is now just a salient reminder of Ankara's failure to defeat a two-decade-long insurgency despite its investment of tremendous resources. The PKK, with roughly 2,000 to 2,500 fighters on each side of the Turkish–Iraqi border, no longer controls any territory in Turkey but continues to harass Turkish troops and inflict casualties. These casualties—as they would in every society—cause a backlash against state institutions and politicians and undermine the social fabric by inciting Turkish–Kurdish animosities. For the public and its leadership, armed attacks emanating from a neighboring territory add another layer of political complexity.

The PKK has managed to embed itself along the Turkish border and in the more remote Qandil mountain range near Iran, where much of its leadership is thought to reside. Ever since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Ankara has called on U.S. forces in Iraq and the KRG *peshmerga* to dislodge the PKK. From 2003 onwards, the United States sought to downplay the PKK issue. The KRG, in turn, also hoped that the problem would somehow go away. It was reluctant to do Ankara's bidding because of Turkey's relentless opposition to a Kurdish state in a federal Iraq and its own domestic political opinion's hostility to a war with the PKK. In the 1990s, the KDP and PUK fought the PKK at Turkey's behest, suffering heavy casualties at the hands of the battle-hardened PKK, which the Turkish army, with its vastly superior resources, had failed to eradicate in Turkey proper. The KDP and the PUK are also reluctant to return to the Kurd-on-Kurd violence that characterized much of the 1990s, when they also fought each other remorselessly. Iraqi Kurdish parties, not surprisingly, have little appetite to sacrifice more men to battle the PKK.

The Turkish public and leadership view the PKK presence in KRG territory as an act of ingratitude for Turkey's support for the no-fly zones and a deceitful strategy of keeping the PKK as a source of leverage over Ankara. Ankara's rhetoric against Kurds has been harsh, often denigrating. For Iraqi Kurds this is nothing more than an attempt to force them to once again submit to Baghdad's centralized rule. Fall 2007 was a turning point; tensions came to a boil after Turkish troops suffered numerous casualties in clashes with the PKK and the Turkish government came under intense pressure to launch cross-border operations. Alarmed at the prospect that an unguided Turkish invasion could embroil Iraqi Kurds and Turkish forces in a destructive conflict that would spread to Turkey, the United States shared intelligence with Ankara to direct Turkish raids onto known PKK encampments. Iraqi Kurds limited their criticisms of Turkish raids, cognizant that the Turkish government needed to fend



off pressure from its military and public and aware of the quandary its American ally faced. American intelligence sharing also kept collateral damage to a minimum.

The PKK is a potentially destabilizing element for Iraqi Kurds, because it invites Turkish acrimony and military raids. Its fanatical attachment to its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan renders it unpredictable; it can on a whim turn its guns on fellow Kurds. Its armed presence undermines the KRG's claim that it deserves to be treated as an autonomous entity with a monopoly of force in its territory. The PKK's attacks brought about a U.S.–Turkish rapprochement, somewhat at the KRG's expense. As a result, Iraqi Kurdish leaders have become more vocal in their opposition to the PKK; Iraqi President Talabani publicly criticized the PKK and demanded it leave Iraqi territory.<sup>42</sup>

Paradoxically, the Turks and Iraqi Kurds find themselves in need of each other. Iraqi Kurdistan cannot survive without Turkish economic and political support. Turkey, unlike Iraq's other neighbors, is far more democratic, notwithstanding its treatment of its Kurdish minority; prosperous; allied with the West; and offers direct trading opportunities with Europe and beyond. Currently, two pipelines from Kirkuk transport oil to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. KRG authorities are interested in feeding gas into the Nabucco or any other pipeline currently being conceived as an East–West energy corridor.

Iraqi Kurds have assiduously courted Turkish companies to invest in their region. In 2007, Turkey's annual trade with northern Iraq reached \$5 billion; Turks completed \$2 billion worth of construction work between 2003 and 2007, and 1,200 Turkish companies, including 900 construction firms, were involved in building facilities, ranging from airports and cultural centers to universities and road networks.<sup>43</sup> The resulting commercial traffic through the Habur border gate has provided much-needed employment for the impoverished Turkish southeast. At the height of Turkish–KRG tensions, Ankara found that it could not afford to impede this cross-border trade.<sup>44</sup>

Turkey has an interest in the KRG's continued stability, not only because of the trade potential but also because instability in the north will necessarily spread elsewhere in Iraq, preventing the consolidation of Iraq and improvement of Turkish–Iraqi ties. For their part, Iraqi Kurds, like Turks, see their future in the West. They too are secular and have resisted the fundamentalist pressures emanating from Iraq's Sunni and Shi'i communities. Moreover, after decades of central government repression, the Kurds do not trust their Iraqi compatriots. Within a unified Iraq, the KRG has an important role to play; it is a balancer and a bulwark

against fundamentalist strains in that country. The stronger the KRG is and the stronger Turkish–KRG relations are, the more influence Ankara will have over Baghdad.

Finally, another benefit that Turkey can derive from northern Iraq is one that may seem counterintuitive for many in Turkey: improved relations with the KRG would go a long way toward diminishing tensions in Turkey's Kurdish-populated regions.<sup>45</sup> The Turkish raids into northern Iraq caused a backlash among Turkish Kurds, demonstrating once again the linkage between the two Kurdish regions. Kurds in Turkey are increasingly proud of the KRG's accomplishments and react strongly to Ankara's pressure on Erbil. Still, this linkage is more of an opportunity for the Turkish government than a liability; it can significantly improve its standing among Kurds by improving relations with the KRG, just as former president Turgut Özal attempted to do in the early 1990s.

Washington has done little since 2003 to press for a Turkish–KRG rapprochement. In 2007, it appointed a special envoy, retired general Joseph Ralston, who was given the unenviable task, with his Turkish counterpart, of devising a joint action program directed at the PKK, intended to preclude the Turks from attacking PKK camps in northern Iraq. It was an exercise in buying time and proved to be a frustrating experience for all concerned, especially to Ralston and the Iraqi Kurds, who had hoped to tackle broader issues in KRG–Ankara relations.

Preoccupied with the violence in Baghdad and in the primarily Sunni provinces, the Bush administration missed signs that some on the Turkish side and almost all Iraqi Kurds were interested in pursuing alternative policy options to avert a further deterioration in relations. The director of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, Emre Taner, on numerous occasions undertook, with the approval of the prime minister, secret contacts with the KRG leadership. They were both willing to move ahead with direct negotiations but were blocked by the Turkish military and increased PKK activity.<sup>46</sup> The KRG has also indicated that under the right circumstances, it could be persuaded to make life extremely difficult for the PKK in Iraq.<sup>47</sup>

The alternative to a Turkey–KRG deal is chaos: a confrontation between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds, resulting either from Ankara's decision to unilaterally intervene in northern Iraq against the PKK, or a move to forestall the rise of an independent Kurdish state on its doorstep, would be tantamount to inviting all the neighbors to intervene in favor of their own proxies or interests. Another impetus for U.S. action is the Kurdish question's impact on the civil-military divide in Turkey, which has never been more severe than now. While the AKP government has been more

forthcoming on domestic reforms and foreign policy than in the past, it has encountered stiff resistance from civilian and military hardliners, who tend to interpret the Kurdish issue as threatening the regime's integrity.

In recent weeks, the Turkish government appears to have initiated a course correction on contacts with the KRG. Its special Iraq negotiator, Murat Özçelik, has met a number of times with KRG President Barzani (as well as its prime minister, Nechriwan Barzani). This contrasts sharply with previous pronouncements by government officials and military commanders, who vowed never to talk to KRG officials as long as the PKK remained active in northern Iraq. These tentative first steps were made possible by the upcoming municipal elections in Turkey, where the AKP government has targeted the Kurdish southeast and its most important cities where Kurdish activism has grown lately. KRG President Barzani has also changed tack and decided to tone down his criticisms of Ankara and seek the latter's cooperation, especially with the changing political climate in Washington and the election of Barack Obama. Finally, the indications are that Turkish military, which has suffered a number of high-casualty encounters with the PKK, is reconsidering some of its tactics.<sup>48</sup>

These steps remain tentative and can easily be stopped if not reversed by events on the ground. The United States is the only power to have clout with both the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey. Paradoxically, the United States contributed to the recent opening between the Turks and the KRG by providing a green light for limited Turkish cross-border operations that, in turn, provided the Ankara government with the self-confidence it needed to begin a careful policy of engagement with Iraqi Kurds. This is an opportunity for Washington. The new administration should focus intensively on encouraging a rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG. There is always the danger that PKK attacks and tensions within Turkey or in Kirkuk could derail such efforts. Direct contacts between the two, facilitated by the United States, would go a long way in diffusing potential conflicts and initiating confidence-building mechanisms. Neither the Kurds nor the Turks trust each other sufficiently to initiate work on conflict avoidance or resolution.

## ***Pressing for a Peaceful Resolution of the Domestic Turkish–Kurdish Question***

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Turkey's long-term stability is an enduring U.S. interest. Turkey has been an ally for 50 years and is a pivotal state strategically, lying as it does at the crossroads of several regions. No issue has alienated Turkey from the United States more than the future of Iraqi Kurdistan. The United States is caught between its Iraq policy requirements and its allegiance to Turkey. Turkish fears of a potential independent Kurdistan have colored Turkish perceptions of the United States and its mission in Iraq. This has been buttressed by the PKK's presence in an area of Iraq nominally under U.S. control. Turkish incursions into northern Iraq cannot eliminate the PKK, so the problem will persist for as long as a way is not found to disarm the organization.

The U.S. policy community has to recognize that the Kurdish problem in Turkey has undermined Turkish security and shackled Turkish domestic and foreign policy for decades. The problem is not about to go away anytime soon. On the contrary, its persistence could provoke more violence, spawn other terrorist groups,<sup>49</sup> continue to mar Turkish–European relations, and induce Ankara to play the role of spoiler in Iraq. Much of Turkey's domestic turmoil can also be attributed to its doggedness; Turks claim that some 40,000 people have lost their lives as a result of the struggle against the PKK insurgency. The endurance of the Kurdish issue has also caused the Turkish government to institute undemocratic measures such as the arbitrary use of legal powers to harass and persecute Kurdish activists, curtail free speech, and engage in illegal activities, such as assassinations of opponents in the 1990s, that undermine its own institutions, most importantly the rule of law. Turkish Kurds strongly desire that Turkey improve relations with the KRG. For them, the Turkish state's recognition of the KRG would be an acknowledgment of their distinctiveness. This issue is not about to disappear: in an era of globalization, it is unlikely that any minority will readily abandon its identity and cultural requisites, especially under duress.

With the probable exception of Turgut Özal's brief tenure as president (as opposed to as prime minister) when he decided on his own

to undertake far more ambitious reform proposals,<sup>50</sup> many of Turkey's steps toward democratization have come about in response to either a transformation in the international system or direct pressure from greater powers. But realistically speaking, Washington's ability to directly influence Turkish domestic politics is limited. The Turkish body politic is extremely wary of foreign interference and views the United States with suspicion.

Nevertheless, the United States has not been an idle observer of the Turkish–Kurdish saga. On the PKK, it has sided quite ardently with Turkey. It has lobbied Europeans to take action against PKK operatives and financial networks and has pushed that the PKK be included in the list of European terrorist organizations. Most importantly, in 1999, Washington delivered PKK leader Öcalan to the Turks from his hiding place in Kenya, dealing a significant blow to the organization. Concurrently, it has nudged Turkish authorities to ease up on the repression of the Kurds and, especially in the 1990s, criticized Ankara's heavy-handed response to the insurrection.

Two important side effects of the Turkish–Kurdish issue of concern to the United States are its impact on civil-military relations in Turkey and the EU membership process. As self-declared custodians of the Turkish republic, the military has been traditionally extremely reticent to concede the existence of Kurdish ethnicity<sup>51</sup> and support reforms that permit use of the Kurdish language at schools or in the media. It has been the single most influential actor on the Kurdish issue, both at home and abroad. At times, it contemplated draconian measures. A military junta in the 1960s considered massive population relocation to negate the Kurdish attachment to a definite geographical area.<sup>52</sup> To date, the Turkish Kemalist establishment, which is centered on the military, the judiciary, parts of the civilian bureaucracy, and media, has managed to maintain the status quo in the country vis-à-vis the Kurdish question. However, the advent of Kurdish political parties and of the AKP has challenged this state of affairs. In the July 2007 elections, the AKP, though perceived as a party with Islamist leanings, performed extremely well in the predominantly Kurdish provinces, outpolling the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). (Still, the DTP, by running independent candidates, managed to get twenty of its followers elected, enough to constitute a “group” in the parliament.) The civil-military establishment does not trust the AKP on the Kurdish question. Although the party and its leadership espouse strong Turkish nationalistic rhetoric, the AKP has a large number of Kurdish members of parliament, some of whom are quite attached to their Kurdish identity; moreover, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sought to address, at least rhetorically,

some of the Kurds' complaints. Although not the direct cause for the 2008 indictment brought about by the judiciary against the AKP aimed at dissolving and banning it, the unease with which the AKP's forays into Kurdish politics are perceived by the Kemalist establishment was a contributing factor. The case, though ultimately won by the AKP, has nonetheless served as a warning to the party.

The United States has much to gain from encouraging the AKP to make bolder moves vis-à-vis the KRG and Turkey's Kurdish citizens. The AKP can, as part of confidence-building measures, order a review of those who have been incarcerated by state security courts—courts that were abolished as a result of European Court of Human Rights decisions. The United States can simultaneously work with Iraqi Kurds to apply ever-increasing pressure on PKK cadres in Iraq to demilitarize them. Constant Turkish air raids have put the PKK on the defensive in northern Iraq, and the implementation of a full-scale political strategy, including an amnesty that creates incentives for individual PKK members to give themselves up to Iraqi Kurdish authorities under U.S. supervision and facilitation, may be an important first step.

The other cause for concern involves Turkey's European accession process. The United States has enthusiastically backed Turkey's quest to join the EU, lobbying European governments at every possible turn to make sure Turkey gets a fair shake. When Turkey–EU relations were in dire straits, Washington used its considerable influence to convince the Europeans to give Ankara another chance. These efforts, together with the AKP's ambitious reforms on the domestic front regarding individual liberties and in foreign policy on such issues as the Cyprus problem, led the EU finally to open accession negotiations with Ankara in 2005. The remaining obstacles for Turkey are quite daunting, but none loom larger than the military's overwhelming influence in Turkish politics and the unresolved issue of the Kurdish minority. With the presence of large Turkish and Turkish–Kurdish populations in EU member countries, especially Germany, the Kurdish problem has effectively been exported to Europe. Hence, Europe cannot escape it. Therefore, it is hard to see how the EU—no matter what skeptics think of the chances of a 75 million- or 80 million-strong Muslim country getting in—will consent to Turkey becoming a member without a resolution to this problem. The strategic consequences for the United States of a pivotal country such as Turkey becoming insular and unstable are serious. Its problems will find their way to other states in the region.

Many Turkish nationalist elements, ranging from the xenophobic Nationalist Action Party followers on the right to members of the

military and extreme leftist nationalists, would not grieve if Turkey's EU aspirations were defeated due to the Kurdish issue. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the recent indictments against a shadowy gang composed of retired generals, journalists, politicians, and academics intent on triggering a military coup through assassinations and violence. Arguably, developments within the Kurdish community in Turkey also point to a new strategy that is bolder, more politicized, and, influenced by events in Iraq, far more confident. Recent interviews<sup>53</sup> with a number of Kurds of very different political persuasions point to a coalescing of demands along three dimensions: recognition by the Turkish state that Turkey is a multiethnic state (without directly acknowledging the Kurds as a separate entity); insistence on cultural rights, especially freedom to use the Kurdish language; and some devolution of power to all of Turkey's provinces. Although these demands can be addressed through a substantial revision of the 1982 constitution, railroaded through by the military junta of the time, the whole reform package is a tall order and unlikely to come to fruition anytime soon.

Turkish Kurds are tired of the conflict and want, most of all, the return of their children from the mountains, that is, from PKK camps and from prisons. This would first require the disarmament and dissolution of that organization. Yet support for the PKK and Öcalan, in particular, is still high. Rightly or wrongly, many of them perceive the PKK as the only real agent of pressure on the Turkish state. These divisions are reflected not just in the DTP,<sup>54</sup> but also in the Kurds' embrace of the AKP in the last elections, because the latter promised, though not too overtly, both improved relations with the KRG and movement on domestic reforms. Voters correctly perceived that, unlike the DTP, the AKP as a governing party had a real chance of delivering on such promises.

The changes in Kurdish political dynamics represented subtle, albeit not easily realizable, opportunities. There was a risk that, without a new engagement by the Turkish government, the Kurdish issue would become more polarized and confrontational. In such an atmosphere, it would be much harder to combat nationalist rhetoric and the unavoidable interethnic frictions simmering below the surface. There are signs that this is already happening; since the 2007 national polls, the AKP government has been unable to deliver on the subtle promises it made to the Kurds, especially on domestic matters. Tensions have escalated in the predominantly Kurdish southeast, spreading to the major cities in the developed West, where gangs of Kurdish youth routinely take to the streets in spontaneous acts of violence and intimidation. The government has set its sights on the March 2009 municipal elections, which

will be widely perceived as a referendum on the AKP's policies, hence its reluctance to incur any domestic risks while initiating steps abroad with the KRG.

## ***Developing Approaches to Kurdish Issues in Iran and Syria***

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How do Iranian and Syrian Kurds factor into U.S. interests? Their plight ought to be of humanitarian concern for the United States. In view of its poor relations with both, however, the United States faces severe limitations on its influence.

U.S. influence is greatest in Turkey and Iraq; in these countries the United States can play a positive role in the pursuit of a stable and equitable resolution of the problems posed by Kurdish minorities. These cases are as different from each other as they are from Syria and Iran. U.S. support for a better deal for Kurds in Iraq and Turkey (and, by extension, for their counterparts in Iran and Syria) should not translate into Washington encouraging a pan-Kurdish ethnic revival or separate state(s). It is far better for the United States to isolate the issue in Turkey and Iraq, while being cognizant of the linkages, influences, and opportunities presented by working on both sides of the border.

From the onset of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, both Iran and Syria have feared that they would be subjected to U.S. "regime change" policies. Their citizens of Kurdish origin would perhaps have been an obvious instrument of destabilization had the United States been more successful in Iraq. The difficulties Washington has encountered in Iraq has reduced, if not eliminated, the likelihood of a U.S. strategy to undermine these regimes. Nonetheless, this fact has not stopped either country from becoming highly defensive and fearful and actively intervening in domestic Iraqi affairs, slowing down the process of reconciliation.

Iran perceives the emergence of the PKK's offshoot PJAK as proof that the United States is using the Kurds against it. Iran has made much of the U.S.–Turkish discord over American inaction against the PKK bases in Iraq to ingratiate itself with the Turkish public. In contrast to the United States, which has counseled Ankara patience, Tehran often conducts artillery strikes against PKK and PJAK positions in the



remote Qandil mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Turkish Land Forces Commander and new Chief of the General Staff Basbug publicly called attention to Turkish–Iranian military coordination during artillery strikes and to intelligence exchanges.<sup>55</sup> On a recent visit to Turkey, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad played up Iran's support for Turkey as Iranian artillery pounded the Qandil mountain range. Moreover, he kept emphasizing the importance of a Syrian–Iranian–Turkish and even Iraqi concord to handle such regional problems.<sup>56</sup>

Iraqi Kurdistan is not Iran's first priority in Iraq. Tehran is far more focused on the Shi'i politics of Baghdad, where it has multiple clients and balances to maintain. Yet it continues to exert influence on Kurdistan and has many cards to play there. In the past, it intervened in northern Iraq, backing the PUK against the KDP during the Kurdish civil war in the mid 1990s. Like Turkey, it provides Iraqi Kurds with a window to the rest of the world, but it cannot compete with Turkey's far more developed and sophisticated economy in either volume or destination of trade.

Though concerned as any other neighbor with the evolution of the Kurdish region, Iran much prefers Turkey to take the lead in opposing Kurdish aims in Iraq. Should Iran one day face a growth of Kurdish nationalist sentiment—well beyond anything experienced so far—it too may seek ways of making life very difficult for Iraqi Kurds. It may be that this is an unavoidable outcome of the Iraq war's impact on northern Iraq.

The United States cannot inflame Kurdish separatist sentiments in Syria and Iran without raising suspicions in Iraq, Turkey, and elsewhere in the region. It is one thing for the United States to engage its allies, Iraq and Turkey, on the Kurdish question; it is another to whip up nationalist sentiments among their neighbors. Nationalist feelings, once aroused, are difficult to contain; playing this card in Iran and Syria is likely to backfire. It may be that the countries in the region will always suspect the United States of harboring such intentions; nevertheless, it should not provide them with the evidence. The temptation to undermine hostile regimes through their disgruntled minorities is undeniable. Kurds have too often been used in this manner by a variety of countries, including the United States. In every instance, innocent civilian Kurds have paid a terrible price. The United States has to stop repeating past mistakes, especially when it is unwilling to put its full weight behind such endeavors. This does not mean that the United States has to remain silent in the face of severe human rights violations against Kurds, or anyone else, in those two countries. It should apply as much multilateral pressure as possible, especially in cases like the execution in Iran of Kurdish journalists without due process.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

**A** new administration has to manage the Kurdish questions as a critical element of its Iraq disengagement policy and as such deserves immediate attention. The United States needs a comprehensive policy approach that will contain elements of both simultaneous and sequential implementation. The recommendations below will be difficult and will require careful orchestration. The Obama administration should start the process as soon as possible. Although U.S. leverage will contract as the drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq proceeds, for a while the new administration will still have the sway that comes with its honeymoon. It will need to move smartly to conduct its own analysis of the situation, but not lose time in putting its policy into place.

Some issues are less challenging than others. There is no question that the most difficult goal is effecting a change in Turkey's domestic dispute with its Kurdish citizens. It also happens that this is not the most immediate issue. Building upon the improvement in Turkey–KRG relations may represent the easiest issue, whereas Kirkuk is the most urgent. The consequences of violence in Kirkuk will reverberate south toward Baghdad and north toward Turkey. Resolving the future status of Kirkuk, therefore, is vital to any U.S. withdrawal policy.

The United States has to take the lead, because it remains, despite its mistakes, the only power with the requisite capacities to cajole, convince, and pressure governments and groups to act. Left to their own devices, none of the parties has shown much ability to move forward, even if the right ideas and solutions are apparent, or sustain progress once achieved. The United States can approach matters with a broader

outlook and vision concerning the linkages among the issues, attributes often missing in local parties.

The new administration will also want to seek the cooperation of actors beyond the regional states. Implementing this ambitious policy will require the active engagement by the UN, the EU, and the Arab League, among others. From Kirkuk to the dismantling of the PKK, from the oil industry to the educational system, these actors can provide a great deal of help to the United States.

This will be an incremental and iterative process; there will be no dramatic breakthrough. Care has to be given to crafting mutually reinforcing policy steps. Kirkuk is the first priority. Almost simultaneously, the United States should work on developing an Ankara–KRG deal, because the two reinforce each other and the feedback loop is perhaps most visible here. The United States is not in a position to impose solutions; all of the actors have domestic constituencies. Washington will have to adapt to the political redlines of other actors and make full use of its diplomatic prowess.

### ***First Priority: Preventing Kirkuk From Becoming a Flashpoint***

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The longer discussions on a timeframe for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq go on, the more American influence will wane. Therefore, time is of the essence and the process of reconciliation in Kirkuk (and disputed areas around Kirkuk) must be speeded up to prevent a major conflagration that would engender bitter fighting between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq that could bring in Iraq's neighbors. Washington has already enlisted the UN Special Representative for Iraq, Staffan de Mistura, to work with the parties. This is not enough at this stage. Whereas continued open U.S. support for the de Mistura process is absolutely necessary, the new U.S. administration must become more engaged in Kirkuk, primarily because Washington must not appear to be totally abandoning its responsibility, and secondarily, it increasingly appears that UN clout without U.S. involvement would be limited. U.S. engagement also signals the various parties, including the Kurds, of Washington's commitment to the de Mistura process as well as to a future UN role. In turn, this will compel different Iraqi parties and allies in the region to engage with this process and accept the need to compromise.

With a high-level coordinator to be appointed at the State Department (see the implementation section below), Washington should help draft new proposals designed to break the deadlock and share them with de Mistura. In conjunction with these, the United States should initiate a thorough and comprehensive accounting of Saddam-era population displacement to help guide the settlement process. Although a thorough and impartial accounting is critical to resolving the issues and the U.S. government lacks all the data, it must proceed, since the Iraqis have been slow in making progress on their own.

The lack of trust and heightened tensions among parties in the region will worsen as U.S. plans for withdrawal become more concrete. In order to improve their bargaining power down the road, all parties on the ground have an incentive to game the U.S. withdrawal by ratcheting up the pressure on Baghdad, the UN, neighboring states, and, of course, Washington. To prevent such headwinds, the United States should establish two parallel tracks of confidence-building measures. The first track would be a working group with the KRG and the Iraqi government beyond the services the U.S. embassy in Baghdad already provides. This group would include the senior members of the intelligence community, the Department of Defense, and the State Department. Designed to respond quickly and cut through the bureaucratic maze, this group would work to quickly carry out any confidence-building measures (CBM) that the parties agree to. Beside Kirkuk, the oil and gas law, which has become hostage to the internal politics of the Iraqi parliament and the oil ministry is another area where a quick compromise is needed, so as to facilitate investments in exploration and the building of new transport infrastructure. An important component of the CBMs is an assurance to the KRG that the U.S. government will continue to support it, provided the KRG reaches a legitimate settlement of the Kirkuk issue and puts into practice a democratic form of government.

The second CBM track should be an approach to the members of the different and conflicting communities in the contested areas. Unlike the other CBM initiative, Washington should enlist the help of the Europeans. Since America's presence in Iraq is controversial, the more neutral Europeans are more likely to obtain results. The Europeans could be of particular help in finalizing the KRG constitution; the more democratic and inclusive of minority rights the constitution is, the easier it will be to institute the de Mistura suggestions on border adjustments.

For the most part, Kirkuk has been ignored by the central government in Baghdad; neither has it benefited from the economic boom in the Kurdish north. The United States should put more pressure on the

Iraqi government to begin investing money in the city's infrastructure and its public services, including paying the salaries of public employees.

Additional steps to facilitate a resolution of the Kirkuk problem should include the provision of funding for housing and technical assistance for the speedy resettlement of refugees. The longer legitimate refugees seeking to resettle in Kirkuk and elsewhere are kept in makeshift camps, the harder it will be to prevent violence down the road. Already, much time has been lost without significant movement on this issue.

## ***Improve Turkish–KRG Relations***

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Recent weeks have seen some tangible improvements in the relations between Ankara and the KRG. The Turkish Special Iraq Coordinator, Murat Özçelik, met in Baghdad for the first time with KRG President Barzani. Although both sides are promising to continue this dialogue, such efforts are fragile and prone to be upstaged and disrupted by external events, especially violence. A multi-pronged U.S. initiative to improve Turkish–KRG relations would pay dividends in the medium term, not just by improving conditions on the ground for an ultimate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq but also in stabilizing the totality of the Kurdish region and beyond.

A first prong in this U.S. initiative to sustain and deepen the budding new dialogue between the KRG and the Turkish foreign ministry would be to organize a tripartite (Turkey–KRG–United States) channel for dialogue. While Iraqi government sensitivities have to be taken into account, this tripartite mechanism should pave the way for the normalization of relations between the KRG and Ankara. Specific goals should include toning down the negative rhetoric from both sides, from Barzani's nationalist and often anti-Turkish pronouncements to Turkish officials' demeaning words about the Kurdish leadership and the status of Turkish forces in northern Iraq. In addition, this mechanism could be employed to help the parties draw up plans for future economic ties, including oil and gas exports, transportation infrastructure, and trade routes through Turkey to Europe. Turkish interest in northern Iraqi oil and gas exports is very real, primarily because Turkey is expected to have unmet domestic energy needs beginning in 2011. Deepening commercial links by investing in infrastructure, such as pipelines, would solidify the relationship.

U.S. participation would have numerous benefits: it would keep the

parties on track, speed up the process of reconciliation, make it more difficult for either party to opt out, provide support for the Turkish government in the face of determined domestic opposition to these efforts, and facilitate dispute resolution by instituting CBMs and preventing disputes from reaching the higher echelons of the respective political establishments and, in particular, the media.

This mechanism could also help with the demobilization of the PKK (see following section), an absolutely critical step for success in this area. The goal should be to prevail on Ankara to recognize the KRG. Get Ankara to open a consulate in Erbil (as Tehran has already done) to establish a direct and uninterrupted channel of communication between Turkey and the KRG. A consulate would formalize the Turkish presence in northern Iraq, help deepen Turkish–Iraqi–Kurdish business ties, and act as a barrier to potential Iranian intervention.

At the same time these efforts are undertaken, the United States should launch a second prong in the form of a Track II initiative to raise Turks' comfort level with the Iraqi federal model and what will be closer relations between the KRG and Ankara. This step would help consolidate diplomatic gains. One should not underestimate the fragility of the current Turkish opening in northern Iraq and its slow acceptance of a federal Iraq. Opposition to improved relations with the KRG and Kurds in general is entrenched within the nationalist right and nationalist left as well as the military establishment. They all are far too sensitive to escalating Turkish Kurdish demands. This said, General Basbug's recent search for alternative approaches may not last long; his term will end in August 2010 and his successor may decide to return to the status quo ante.

Ironically, such a Track II initiative is important not just to improve Turkish–KRG relations, but also U.S.–Turkish ones, because large segments of the Turkish populace, media, and policy establishment are convinced that the United States is intent on creating an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq with unbridled irredentist ambitions. Longstanding U.S.–Turkish military relations can help assuage some of these anxieties, but the Turkish public has become an important factor in foreign policy decision making.

Washington should enlist European support for improved KRG–Turkish relations. The Europeans can contribute to improved trade and other economic relations, including integration of private banking, telephone, and other communication systems, and to greater counternarcotics and smuggling cooperation. Raising border controls to EU standards would improve Turkey's relations with the EU.

## **Demobilize the PKK**

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This is a critical component that will ultimately solidify KRG–Turkish rapprochement. Progress on this topic, however, is contingent on improvements in Turkish–KRG dialogue. The aim here is to increase pressure on the PKK from as many different directions as possible, resulting in as many defections from PKK ranks in northern Iraq as possible. A combined and coordinated political and military approach by all three parties—the United States, the KRG, and Turkey—is necessary. Assuming there is progress in Turkish–KRG relations, then Washington will find it much easier to press both KRG President Barzani and Iraqi President Talabani to condemn the PKK and make life harder for its militants. Talabani is already on record arguing that the time for the PKK-led armed struggle is over, and Barzani and the KRG vociferously condemned PKK actions in October 2008 that resulted in large number of casualties among Turkish troops.

The process of forced demobilization of the PKK requires careful planning and coordination among the Iraqi Kurds, the Turks, and the United States. Improved Ankara–KRG relations (discussed above) is the first step. Next, the Turks have to reissue an amnesty law that would offer a road map for most of the PKK fighters to return to Turkey without fear of prosecution or to remain in northern Iraq and get integrated into the *peshmerga*. Amnesty would have an immediate impact as far as increasing dissension within PKK ranks. Third, the Iraqi Kurds and U.S. military authorities need to provide assurances to the demobilized PKK rank and file about their future. The U.S. authorities in Iraq should step forward to create a mechanism to supervise the demobilization process; namely, PKK militants would abandon their positions and hand over their equipment to U.S. officers, watched by their Turkish counterparts (the PKK would be more willing to give up its arms if it knew the United States were part of the process). The more public (i.e., televised) the process, the better it would be as far as convincing the Turkish public that this is for real. However, because the Turkish amnesty is likely to be limited, that is, to exclude the PKK leadership, some kind of offer of safe conduct for them away from the region may be necessary to further strengthen the set of incentives.

Once these steps are taken, Iraqi Kurds should declare that they will not tolerate any remnants of an armed PKK in their territory. This would mean that the KRG and its military forces would establish checkpoints

throughout the Hakurk, Zap, and Qandil regions of northern Iraq to prevent PKK movements and supplies. The U.S. military could assist by providing the KRG forces with requisite intelligence, as it has done for the Turks, which would enable them to prevent armed PKK elements from roaming the Kurdish countryside. A tripartite military coordination committee working under U.S. supervision would go a long way toward facilitating such efforts. Once the bulk of the PKK is demobilized, the United States might reconsider using its own air force against any die-hard remnants. The United States should also help the KRG authorities launch a public relations campaign to convince the Kurdish population of northern Iraq that is sympathetic to the PKK to dissociate itself from that organization. In this vein, it would also be desirable to get the PKK to disband PJAK, which is very much its subsidiary organization. Its continued presence, even if aimed at Iran, is likely to seem threatening to both Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds.

The United States should also engage European help for this process. Once a demobilization process has begun, European governments could introduce more stringent regulations on the PKK's well-developed support infrastructure in Europe in the form of associations and affiliated businesses. They could also use their influence, especially in the context of the EU accession process, to persuade Turkey to review the cases of those PKK sympathizers incarcerated under laws that were found illegal by the European Court of Human Rights. Europe might also become a final destination for the PKK leadership; in that event, care would have to be taken by the host country that these individuals not engage in any future political activity.

## ***Strengthen Federalism in Iraq***

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The Obama administration should elaborate on its vision for Iraq's future. It should reiterate its unequivocal support for and belief in the territorial integrity of a federal Iraq, its confidence in Iraqis' ability to demarcate their internal boundaries through democratic and consensual means, and its position that not only does it have no interest in establishing military bases anywhere in Iraq but also would only consider such an option if the Iraqi government were to specifically ask it to do so. Iraq's territorial integrity and federal structure should be underscored as an explicit



long-term concern for the United States, irrespective of the status of U.S. forces in Iraq. This said, it should refrain from any suggestion that Iraq should be soft partitioned into three distinct regions and instead focus on Iraq's constitutional provisions that outline the method for provinces to amalgamate into separate federal entities within Iraq.

The new administration should also state its complete opposition to redrawing the boundaries in that region of the world. It should also forcefully make the point that the United States would not tolerate any attempt by neighbors to interfere in the KRG or Iraq's internal affairs. The United States should also broaden its approach to include members of the Arab League reluctant to see the emergence of a federal Iraq for fear of increased Iranian influence in southern Iraq and an independent Kurdish state in the north. These concerns are real and deserve to be aired. However, Arab states, just like the United States, have limited influence in Iraq and trying to prevent a federal Iraq is likely to create more problems down the road for them and for Iraq. Bringing the Saudis and the Egyptians, in particular, to support a federal Iraq would also signal the Sunna in Iraq, many of whom still harbor unrealistic expectations of a return to a pre-2003 Iraq, that the time has come for an accommodation at home.

A U.S. withdrawal is quite likely to increase internal tensions and render some groups, especially the Kurds, apprehensive about their own future. Assuaging Kurdish anxieties within a federal Iraq is perhaps the single most important guarantee of Iraq's territorial integrity and stability. Therefore, the new Obama administration should quickly open a U.S. consulate in the KRG capital of Erbil and shift significant resources there from the embassy in Baghdad as a sign of Washington's commitment to the Kurdish federal north. This is a long overdue step. A fully functional U.S. consulate in Erbil would help the KRG improve its governance structures, civil society organizations, as well as its education system through collaboration with U.S. agencies, such as the Agency for International Development, and U.S. and international nongovernmental organizations.

## ***Help Turkey Resolve its Kurdish Question***

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In the long run, Turkey's own Kurdish question is the hardest, the most intractable, and yet the most important, if not potentially the most destabilizing, of all the dimensions of this problem. This is because it is lodged in a NATO country whose stability and role in the region is critical to U.S. and Western interests. It is a problem that dates back to the construction of the Turkish state at the beginning of the previous century, and while it may be too ambitious for the United States to contemplate getting involved, the fact remains that all the steps proposed above would prove insufficient if some progress is not also achieved on this front.

Progress along the priorities outlined above is likely to have a positive impact on Turkey's Kurdish problem. Nonetheless, the Turkish Kurds' aspirations are not going to be satisfied with improvements in Iraq alone. Neglected, the problem would continue to fester and would almost certainly resurrect itself in northern Iraq. The U.S. contribution can come in different ways: for one thing, the new administration can set forth certain principles. It should continue supporting Ankara's counterterrorism efforts and desire to join the EU. It should stress that a resolution to the Kurdish problem ought to come through democratic means. Since European acceptance of Turkey is, in the long run, contingent on how Turkey resolves its domestic Kurdish problem, the United States could also condition its own support for Turkish membership in the EU on a genuine effort to accommodate its Kurdish minority without endangering the territorial integrity of Turkey.

The Obama administration should also join the Europeans and offer development incentives to the Kurdish regions, so as to dissuade the local population from supporting violence against the Turkish state. Ankara's promised economic packages for the Kurdish regions have never materialized and have made the local populations cynical.

The United States, unlike its European partners, has historically avoided engaging with Turkish Kurdish leaders for fear of earning Ankara's opprobrium. This has to change, because to date Ankara has proven ineffectual in dealing with the political aspects of this problem. Turkish Kurds have, as a result, given up on the Turkish establishment's ability to meet some of their demands. Combined U.S.–European involvement could introduce an element of hope and patience into the equation until such time as Turkish governments feel secure and strong enough

to overcome nationalist opposition at home. Washington and European capitals could directly engage those Turkish Kurdish leaders who are opposed to violence by inviting them to the United States, giving them access to U.S. civil society and helping train them in nonviolent community action. Washington can also enlist Iraqi Kurdish leaders to discourage Turkish Kurds from continuing the armed struggle, because it will not only fail to bring about results but will also endanger the success of the Iraqi Kurdish experiment.

Finally, the Turkish political system is in need of reform not just to ensure better governance but also to improve its chances of EU membership. U.S. support for constitutional reforms that improve human rights and expand democratic rights and governance could make a difference by weakening opponents of such change. Taking care not to alienate Turkey, the Obama administration should express its willingness to help in any way it can; Washington has time and time again demonstrated its commitment to Turkey's prosperity, democracy, and stability and has nothing to shy away from in view of the stakes involved.

## ***Signal Syria and Iran***

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U.S. relations with Syria and Iran are not conducive at the moment to engaging them directly on the Kurdish issue. Both countries fear that the United States may want to encourage their respective Kurdish citizenry to rebel or foment instability in order to pressure the regimes or, worse, overthrow them. The emergence of a region-wide Kurdish nationalist movement would not be welcomed by Washington, precisely because it would endanger any improvements that could be achieved with the proposals suggested above. The new administration should signal that it would not overtly or covertly encourage Syrian and Iranian Kurds to rebel.

The new administration could support KRG efforts to act as a liaison with Iran and Syria to help them improve conditions for their own Kurdish minority, while attempting to defuse the expectations of Iranian and Syrian Kurds. On another front, Washington should get Ankara to let Damascus and Tehran know that it intends to drop its support for coordinated action with these two countries against northern Iraq.

Finally, if engagement with Iran and Syria becomes the policy of the administration, it should make the Kurdish question an early agenda item.

## ***Implementation***

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Preventing policy confusion requires that the interagency and intradepartmental processes work as coherently as possible. Responsibility for all the policy issues raised by this report undoubtedly fall to different and often conflicting or competing bureaus and agencies dealing with national security. While U.S. Central Command runs the Iraq war, it is U.S. European Command that deals with Turkey. Similar divides occur across the U.S. national security system, in the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the intelligence community.

Appointing a high-level coordinator would be an important early measure. There are four important reasons why this is a necessary step. First, the task is large and complex. If assigned to deputies with insufficient clout at a time when the main focus of the administration will be on relations with Baghdad, this important issue would be lost in the shuffle. Second, this is a labor-intensive task that would require on-site handholding, troubleshooting, and much travel. Secretaries of state, their immediate deputies, or even undersecretaries, are often distracted by other challenges. Third, the appointment of a coordinator would convey a clear message to all parties that the issue is important and the United States is intent on following through. It would be much harder for the parties to vacillate or delay with someone looking over their shoulders. Fourth, if this endeavor is to succeed, the process has to be open and transparent. What has been most lacking to date in the region is confidence and trust. While all of the parties in the region associated with the Kurdish question lack confidence in each other, they also do not trust the United States. With one person in charge, there also would be one address for the parties to go to with their qualms, suggestions, and objections.

Unlike the earlier Ralston mission, what is proposed here is a far more structured office. President Obama should appoint the envoy, although he/she should be located at the State Department and report to the secretary of state and be integrated into the interagency process at the level of the deputies committee. The envoy would need clear and high access in Washington. The tricky issue would be how this person would work with the massive Iraq bureaucracy that has sprung up at the State Department and elsewhere. Unlike most special envoys to date, who have had little in the form of support, it would be imperative for this coordinator to have a large enough staff, because time would

be of the essence; the new administration would not have the luxury of spending endless months studying and engaging in fact-finding tours. Staff would have to come from different parts of the national security bureaucracy, so that linkages to other agencies could be established and exploited with ease.

# CONCLUSION

Not every problem has a clean, distinct solution. Avoiding a major conflagration over Kirkuk that leads to civil war or worse is clearly the most important goal for the United States. This report has tried to argue that how to get there requires a great deal more than just working on Kirkuk itself. The Kurdish question is first and foremost a remnant of empires that disappeared long ago. Where empires have ruled, the geographical and geopolitical confusion left in their wake has yet to be resolved in many parts of the world.

For most of the twentieth century, Kurdish issues in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria were, for the most part, isolated from each other. A snapshot of today is remarkably different from one in the late 1980s and early 1990s; links between the different Kurdish societies and their diaspora extensions have thickened. The diaspora has acted as a catalyst for the development of intersocietal bonds. It matters little that you are an Iraqi or Iranian Kurd when you join Turkish–Kurdish organizations in Germany and mobilize to demonstrate against the Turkish government. Similarly, the most potent weapon the PKK has deployed is not its “fighters” but its satellite television network, which broadcasts from Europe and is picked up just about everywhere in Kurdistan and in Turkey.

Iraqi Kurds will tell you that they dream of independence but understand that this is not realizable, hence their strategy of remaining part of a federal Iraq. Turkish Kurds, it is said, have no inclination for independence. Why should they try to become independent or join northern Iraq when Ankara is on the pathway to EU membership? But who is to say where these links and convictions will be fifteen or 25 years from now?

What seems to be clear, however, is that states can forcibly obstruct their evolution only at a tremendous cost. What they can do is manage them so as not to make the developing linkages a threat. In the absence of a process that promises improvements for all concerned, the United States and the regional states may find themselves worse off than they had ever envisioned.

# APPENDIX

## ***Kurd Statistics***

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### **Turkey**

*CIA World Factbook* (updated August 7, 2008; retrieved August 14)

- Population: 71,892,807 (July 2008 est.)
- Ethnic groups: Turkish 80%, Kurdish 20% (estimated)
- →14,378,561 Kurds

*DOS Background Notes* (retrieved September 26, 2008)

- Population (2007): 70.5 million
- Ethnic groups (no percentages given): Turkish, Kurdish, other
- Later in report: "Turkish citizens who assert a Kurdish identity constitute an ethnic and linguistic group that is estimated approximately 12 million in number."

### **Syria**

*CIA World Factbook* (updated August 7, 2008; retrieved August 14)

- Population: 19,747,586 (note: in addition, about 40,000 people live in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights—20,000 Arabs [18,000 Druze and 2,000 Alawites] and about 20,000 Israeli settlers) (July 2008 est.)
- Ethnic groups: Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%
- →1,777,282 Kurds

*DOS Background Notes* (updated May 2007)

- Population (2005 est.): 18.6 million
- Major ethnic groups: Arabs (90%), Kurds (9%), Armenians, Circassians, Turkomans
- →1,674,000 Kurds



A March 2008 *Jerusalem Post* article says that between 8-10% of Syria's population is Kurdish,

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1206446115815&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FPrinter>.

A VOA report in April 2008 says that Kurds comprise 9% of Syria's population, <http://www.voanews.com/uspolicy/Ontheline/2008-04-03-voa3.cfm>.

### Iran

*CIA World Factbook* (updated August 7, 2008; retrieved August 14)

- Population: 65,875,223 (July 2008 est.)
- Ethnic groups: Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%
- →4,611,265 Kurds

*DOS Background Notes* (retrieved September 26)

- Population (2007 est.): 70.5 million
- Ethnic groups: Persians 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1%
- →4,935,000 Kurds

### Iraq

*CIA World Factbook* (updated August 7, 2008; retrieved August 14)

- Population: 28,221,181 (July 2008 est.)
- Ethnic groups: Arab 75%-80%, Kurdish 15%-20%, Turcoman, Assyrian, or other 5%
- →4,233,177–5,644,236 Kurds

*DOS Background Notes* (retrieved September 26, 2008)

- Population (July 2007 est.): 27,499,638
- Ethnic groups: Arab 75%-80%, Kurd 15%-20%, Turcoman, Chaldean, Assyrian, or others less than 5%
- →4,124,945–5,499,927 Kurds

*USA Today* article (8/14/08) "Religious and ethnic groups in Kirkuk," states that Kurds represent 15-20% of Iraq's total population.

# NOTES

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3. Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), p. 130.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
5. Hamit Bozarslan, *La Question Kurde* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), p. 188.
6. Jordi Tejel Gorgas, "Les Kurdes de Syrie, de la 'dissimulation' à la 'visibilité,'" *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, vol. 115–116, 2007, pp. 117–119.
7. Hassan Fattah, "Kurds, Emboldened by Lebanon, Rise Up in Tense Syria," *New York Times*, July 2, 2005.
8. As Bozarslan points out, Syrian Kurds (as well as Lebanese Kurds) had similarly been influenced earlier by Barzani's 1961 rebellion in Iraq. *La Question Kurde*, p. 310.
9. The killing of the popular sheikh has hardened attitudes among Syrian Kurds, according to some reports. Fattah, *op. cit.*
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14. Alfred Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1999) and Lawrence M. Anderson, "Theorizing Federalism in Iraq," *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (June 2007).
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16. Ofra Bengio, "Autonomy in Kurdistan in Historical Perspective," in Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih, eds., *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 183.
17. Anderson, p. 169.
18. Tensions have flared up in localities such as Khanaqin in the northeast, where majority Kurds have resisted central government efforts at evicting *peshmerga* units. Amit R. Paley, "Strip of Iraq 'On the Verge of Exploding'" *Washington Post*, September 13, 2008, p. A01.
19. The current three-province Kurdish region has "five oil fields, including the Khurmala dome, which is the northern extension of Kirkuk field. These fields contain about 3.1 billion barrels, with daily production capacity estimated at 375,000 barrels a day . . . Kurdistan's currently known oil reserves represent about 3 percent of [Iraq's] total," Kamil al-Mehaidi, Iraq Revenue Watch, <http://www.iraqrevenuewatch.org/reports/052706.pdf>, p. 4.
20. Martin van Bruinessen, "Iraq: Kurdish Challenges," in Walter Posch, ed., *Looking into Iraq*, Chaillot Paper no. 79 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, European Union, 2005), pp. 45–72.
21. International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, Middle East Report no. 64, April 19, 2007, p. 3.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–7.
23. The necessity to postpone a referendum and the difficulties associated with implementing one were sufficiently obvious that even President Talabani, during his first visit to Ankara, indicated that the referendum was not his top priority. Cengiz Çandar, "Talabani'yle Asilan Esik," *Referans*, March 10, 2008.
24. Gareth Jenkins argues, "[T]he Turkish rediscovery of the Turkmen accelerated as the U.S. invasion of Iraq—and thus the probable end of the Saddam regime—moved closer. A growing number of academic studies and newspaper articles began to appear which stressed not only that the Turkmen were an inseparable part of the Turkish nation but that they formed what appeared to be an ever increasing proportion of the Iraqi population." "Turkey and Northern

- Iraq: An Overview,” Occasional Paper, Jamestown Foundation, February, 2008, pp. 14–15.
25. For a dispassionate analysis of Turkmen–Kurdish relations, see Semih Idiz’s series of reports from the region for the Turkish daily, *Milliyet*, February 2007.
  26. Moqtada al-Sadr, however, has the facility of assuming a bewildering array of positions. As an opponent of federalism, he has supported the Turkmen against the Kurds; he then aligned himself with the Kurds against Turkey following Ankara’s incursion into northern Iraq. By June 2008, a Sadrist delegation visiting Ankara assured Turkish parliamentarians that they fully supported Turkey on Kirkuk. Private communication, Ankara, July 13, 2008.
  27. The presence of Turkish troops in Kurdish areas remains a controversial issue among Kurds, but Kurdish leaders have understood that unilaterally requesting their departure would severely undermine their relations with the Turks, especially the military. Still, there were reports at the end of 2007 and early 2008 of Iraqi Kurdish civilians surrounding Turkish armored columns that attempted to leave their emplacements in support of Turkish military actions.
  28. The Turkish military and the foreign ministry are currently locked in a struggle over the control of the ITF and Iraq policy in general interviews, Ankara, July 7–13, 2008. Only last spring did the government succeed in getting the National Security Council, a military-civilian coordinating committee, to give its approval to “talk to all Iraqi groups.” *Radikal*, April 25, 2008.
  29. In July 2003, U.S. forces detained a number of ITF personnel with Turkish Special Forces members suspected of plotting to assassinate a leading member of the Kirkuk governorate. The incident caused a major crisis in U.S.–Turkish relations, because the Turkish soldiers were arrested, bundled, and hooded in the manner that al-Qaeda detainees are handled. The Turkish press and public have were indignant over this treatment, while downplaying the reason for their detainment in the first place.
  30. Kirkuk experienced some of these tensions recently when a suicide bomber caused mass casualties during a Kurdish demonstration. Rumors that the Turkmen had a hand in this bombing caused demonstrators to march on ITF buildings where Turkmen guards responded with a barrage of fire, often at point blank range, resulting in more fatalities. *New York Times*, July 29, 2008.
  31. Private conversation with a senior KRG official, May 18, 2008.
  32. “A Kurdish conundrum,” *Economist*, April 17, 2008.
  33. For details see, “UNAMI [UN Assistance Mission in Iraq] presents first analysis to GOI [Government of Iraq] to help resolve disputed internal territories,” <http://www.uniraq.org/newsroom/getarticle.asp?ArticleID=702>.
  34. Barham Salih, the Iraqi vice premier, articulated the Kurds’ quandary: “the U.S. stance regarding the Kirkuk issue is not the same as that of the Kurds, because they take into consideration the concerns and interests of Arab countries and

Turkey as well as their own and the whole of Iraq's interests. The USA believes that all the sides must compromise on the status of Kirkuk. . . . However, as regards whether the official U.S. stance is the same as that of the Kurdish leadership; the answer is negative." "Iraqi Deputy Premier Discusses Kurdish-U.S. Ties," BBC Monitoring Middle East, July 31, 2008.

35. This is an idea that had been proposed earlier by the different communities in Kirkuk to the Kurdish leadership. See International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, p. 14. What is different this time is that Turkey has told both the Kurds and the United States that in the event of an agreement on the 32-32-32-4 distribution, Ankara would guarantee the Turkmen minority would vote with the Kurds (interview, Ankara, July 7, 2008). The offer itself is problematic; at one level it confirms Turkish influence in that region, and on another, it raises the fear that separate deals with the Turkmen would need to be cleared with Ankara.
36. International Crisis Group, *Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds*, Middle East Report no. 80, October 2008.
37. The ICG points out that this compromise on delaying the provincial elections in Kirkuk and the KRG was a Turkish proposal indicating the level of involvement of Turkey and the internationalization of the Kirkuk issues, *ibid*.
38. Reider Visser, "The Kirkuk Issue Exposes Weaknesses in Iraq's Ruling Coalition," August 7, 2008, <http://historiae.org/kirkuk.asp>.
39. An emblematic depiction of this deep unease with the United States is articulated by the former commander of the Turkish Land Forces, Aytaç Yalman, who argued that when in 1998, the United States summoned the leaders of the two Kurdish factions to sign a peace agreement, it was to prepare the 2003 Iraq invasion. See Fikret Bila, "Emekli Orgeneral Aytaç Yalman Anlatıyor: Kürt Sorunu Sosyal Asamada Çözölmeliydi," *Milliyet*, November 3, 2007.
40. Fikret Bila, "Yöker Pasa'nin Tehdit Algılaması," *Milliyet*, August 6, 2008. Basbug, in a speech a year earlier, outlined his worries that by providing Kurds with unprecedented sway, the Kurdish state in northern Iraq was influencing Turkey's Kurdish citizens.
41. Murat Somer, "Turkey's Kurdish Conflict: Changing Context, and Domestic and Regional Implications," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 2 (Spring 2004), p. 252.
42. "Türkiye'de Kandil'den daha çok dağ var," *Milliyet*, July 17, 2008. However, Iraqi Kurdish messages are not always coherent. KRG President Barzani often offends Turkey with comments on the PKK that are designed to be retorts to slights against him or the KRG. Such statements make it impossible for Turkish officials to contemplate talking to Barzani; interviews, Ankara, July 7 and 8, 2008.
43. See series on northern Iraq by Serpil Yılmaz in the *Turkish Daily News*, April 12–19, 2007. (Originally appeared in *Milliyet*, April 5–11, 2007.)
44. Interview with a high-ranking AKP member, Ankara, July 10, 2008.

45. For a more detailed exposition of this argument, see, Henri Barkey, "Kurdistanstandoff," *National Interest*, no. 90 (July/August 2007).
46. On at least one occasion, then chief of the Turkish General Staff Yasar Büyükanit prevented a meeting between then Foreign Minister Gül and KRG prime minister Nechrivan Barzani in Istanbul by publicly admonishing the government against it. See Barkey, "Kurdistanstandoff."
47. Iraqi Kurdish leaders were also signaling that, provided Ankara offered them some positive and real incentives, they would even engage the PKK militarily. Interview with a senior Iraqi government official, May 7, 2007.
48. Interview with a Turkish journalist, Washington D.C., October 31, 2008.
49. Anecdotal and journalistic reporting already indicates that the makings of a virulent Islamic Kurdish movement, entitled Hezbollah (no relation to the Lebanese group), is reemerging in Turkey's southeast.
50. Ömer Taspınar, *Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Middle East Center Paper, no. 10 (September 2008), p. 11.
51. Even among the senior military leadership, there are signs that some, including many retired four-star generals, recognize that existing Kurdish policy has made matters worse and that a new approach is necessary, Kemal Kirişçi, "Revisiting Turkey's Kurdish Problem," Discussion Paper (Istanbul: Center for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies), February, 2008.
52. Belma Akçura, *Devletin Kürt Filmi* (Ankara: Ayraç Kitabevi Yayınları, 2008), pp. 79–83.
53. I conducted these interviews in Turkey in summer 2008.
54. DTP has not been immune to power struggles between hard-liners and more accommodationist elements. Ahmet Turk, its president, admitted that the PKK was hurting the Kurdish cause, *Taraf*, May 15, 2008. A new political party created to replace DTP in the event it is banned, the Peace and Democracy Party, has so far sought to distance itself from the hard-line PKK sympathizers. It remains to be seen whether it will succeed. Interview, Ankara, July 13, 2008.
55. CNN-Turk, June 5, 2008. Basbug's public admission was intended to be a message to the United States in view of the low regard the Turkish military has for Iran.
56. *Taraf*, August 16, 2008 and CNN-Turk interview with President Ahmadinejad, August 14, 2008.

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