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Iraq: Allaying Turkey's Fears over Kurdish Ambitions

International Crisis Group

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While attention is focused on the insurgency against the interim Iraqi government and the occupation troops, another conflict is brewing in northern Iraq that could precipitate civil war, the break-up of the country and, in a worst-case scenario, Turkish intervention.

[Iraq: Allaying Turkey's Fears over Kurdish Ambitions](#), the latest report from the International Crisis Group, warns that tensions are at boiling-point in the oil-rich Kirkuk region. The U.S. and EU need to do more to resolve the Kirkuk question and help Ankara protect its vital interests without resort to destabilising threats of military intervention.

"As the U.S. is forced by a worsening insurgency to concentrate on instability in the rest of the country, things in Kirkuk might well get out of hand and the communities there find themselves in a violent stand-off", says Joost Hiltermann, Director of Crisis Group's Middle East Project.

The situation has been aggravated by the worsening state of affairs in Iraq and by political actors, especially Kurds, who are seeking to undo the grave injustices of the ousted regime's policy of Arabisation. Kurds are currently returning in large numbers and laying claim to multi-ethnic Kirkuk as the capital of a future Kurdish region, or state. Tensions have been contained somewhat by the presence of U.S. troops and a U.S.-engineered interim political arrangement -- a provincial council broadly representative of the four communities -- that, against all odds, has held, but only just.

From Ankara's perspective, chaos or civil war in Iraq, the creation of a Kurdish state in the north with Kirkuk as its capital that would serve as a magnet or model for Turkey's own Kurdish population, or a combination of these, are nightmare scenarios. Should Turkish national interests seem to be in jeopardy, there is no real insurance against the threat of military action.

For a qualitative improvement in relations, a number of steps will have to be taken by both Ankara and the Kurdish leadership in Iraq to change the atmosphere and establish mechanisms to head off emerging conflicts. First, both should halt inflammatory rhetoric. Secondly, Turkey should cease financial support of the Iraqi Turkoman Front to reduce the likelihood of using the Turkoman issue to justify military intervention.

Kurdish leaders should exercise greater restraint in Kirkuk, principally by handing control of local government to the governorate council to be elected at the end of January and by conditioning their people for an eventual compromise solution of Kurdish national issues within Iraq. The interests of both also would be served by appointment of a UN special rapporteur for Kirkuk.

"Turkey needs stability in Iraqi Kurdistan, whatever its eventual status", says Hiltermann. "The only way it can facilitate this is to work closely with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to promote trade and funnel investment to the region".

The U.S., which remains Turkey's strategic ally, and the EU both have an interest in dissuading the government from counter-productive actions in northern Iraq and encouraging it to play a constructive role in an increasingly volatile situation. They should work proactively to resolve the Kirkuk question, strengthening relations between the government in Ankara and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, and promoting investment in south eastern Turkey, so as to give the Kurdish population material evidence of the benefits it stands to gain from eventual Turkish accession to the EU.

International Crisis Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In northern Iraq, largely unnoticed, a conflict is brewing that, if allowed to boil over, could precipitate civil war, break-up of the country and in a worst-case scenario Turkish intervention. Tensions in the oil-rich Kirkuk region, where the political ambitions, historical claims and economic interests of the principal communities -- Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans and Chaldo-Assyrians -- clash, have been escalating since U.S. forces toppled the Baathist regime in April 2003. Violence is assuming a troubling pattern. Turkey, with its own large Kurdish population, is watching with growing anxiety. The U.S. and EU need to do more to resolve the Kirkuk question and help Ankara protect its vital interests without resort to increasingly hollow but destabilising threats of military intervention.

The situation has been aggravated by the worsening state of affairs in Iraq and by political actors, especially Kurds, who are seeking to undo the grave injustices that flowed from the ousted regime's policy of Arabisation, returning in numbers and laying

claim to Kirkuk as the capital of a future Kurdish region -- or state. Tensions have been contained somewhat by the presence of U.S. troops and a U.S.-engineered interim political arrangement -- a provincial council broadly representative of the four communities -- that, against all odds, has held. But as Washington's attention is increasingly drawn to the instability in the rest of the country, things in Kirkuk might well get out of hand and the communities there find themselves in a violent stand-off.

From Ankara's perspective, chaos or civil war in Iraq, the creation of a Kurdish state in the north with Kirkuk as its capital that would serve as a magnet or model for Turkey's own Kurdish population, or a combination of the above, are nightmare scenarios. At the mercy of forces beyond its control, Turkey is anchoring its strategy in commitment to the political process in Baghdad and, as part of that, a peaceful solution to the Kirkuk question. It also is banking on progress in accession talks with the European Union to reduce any appetite for secession its Kurdish population might still harbour.

But it would be imprudent to rely on these as insurance against the threat of military actions should Turkish national interests seem to be in jeopardy. EU accession is, at best, years away. Public pressures resulting from Ankara's manipulation of the Iraqi Turkoman question and the continued deployment of Turkish troops on Iraqi soil could create a dynamic of their own, possibly precipitating military intervention in Kirkuk. Prospects for success in Iraq's political process are receding in the face of growing Sunni Arab alienation and a spreading insurgency. All in all, heightened threat perceptions could in themselves create an interventionist dynamic that more sober minds in Ankara might be unable to control.

Further improvement of relations between Turkey and Iraq's Kurdish leadership is the best hedge against the risks. Indeed, Turkey has already come a long way, accepting today a federal arrangement for Iraq's Kurds that even two years ago it considered an anathema. Economic ties and trade also have increased. But more steps should be taken, based on mutual interests: Turkey needs good relations with the Kurds to prevent chaos in the north, and the landlocked, vulnerable Kurdish entity, in turn, may have little choice but to rely on Turkey for protection.

Confidence-building measures are required to change the atmosphere, establish mechanisms to head off emerging conflicts and enable Turkey to play a more constructive role in the peaceful solution of the Kirkuk question. These include a mutual halt to inflammatory rhetoric, a lowering of tensions in Kirkuk, in particular through proactive international monitoring, and resolution of the nagging problem of the insurgent Kurdish Workers Party, the PKK (now called Kongra-Gel), remnants of whose forces remain holed up in northern Iraq.

The U.S., which remains Turkey's strategic ally, and the EU have a common interest in encouraging Turkey to play a constructive role. They should work proactively to resolve the Kirkuk question, strengthening relations between Ankara and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, and promoting investments that would give the Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey evidence of the benefits it would gain from Turkish accession to the EU. Ultimately, the challenge is, through such measures, to give Turkey the means to exert a positive influence over the course of events in northern Iraq generally and Kirkuk in particular.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Turkey:

1. Halt rhetoric that inflames passions over Kirkuk, the Kurds and Iraq's Turkomans.
2. Cease financial support to the Iraqi Turkoman Front.
3. Commit to the peaceful resolution of the Kirkuk question and respect whatever settlement Iraqis agree upon among themselves.
4. Keep open the border crossings with Iraq and the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline.
5. Encourage trade and investment in northern Iraq, working directly with the Kurdish parties where possible.
6. Consider issuing a broader amnesty for the PKK/Kongra-Gel, which would cover the leadership in northern Iraq and not require returnees to inform on their colleagues.

To the Kurdish Leadership in Iraq:

7. Halt inflammatory rhetoric over Kirkuk.
8. Start conditioning the Kurdish public for a compromise solution on Kurdish national aspirations, including an advanced degree of autonomy within a decentralised Iraq and a special status for the city and governorate of Kirkuk.
9. Relinquish the directorates in Kirkuk over which the Kurdish parties took control at the war's end, and cooperate in an equitable redistribution of power in Kirkuk under the leadership of the governorate council to be elected on 30 January 2005.
10. Support trade and investment with neighbouring countries.

To the United States and European Union:

11. Strengthen relations between the Turkish government and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership.

12. Promote investment in southeastern Turkey.

13. Make the case to the Security Council to:

- (a) appoint a U.N. Special Rapporteur to monitor the situation in Kirkuk (city as well as governorate) and report quarterly to the Secretary-General on developments and actions that threaten to destabilise the situation;
- (b) consider, in consultation with the elected Iraqi authorities, appointing a UN Supervisor in Kirkuk with power to impose regulations, introduce multi-ethnic police and courts, and establish other services; and
- (c) solicit funding from donors to facilitate the Supervisor's task.

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