

Turkey's Concerns About the State-Building Efforts in Iraq

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Abstract: There are historical, political, economic and military dimensions of Turkey's longstanding interest in the developments taking place in Iraq. Close historical and cultural ties with the Turkomans, or Iraqi Turks, living mostly in northern Iraq; claims of Kurdish groups for independence; rich oil and gas reserves in the Mousul and Kirkuk districts; and instability due to insurgencies in the country are issues that make Iraq a case for serious concern for the Turkish security elite. This paper aims to highlight the reasons behind Turkey's interest in state-building efforts in Iraq and to discuss two scenarios, one pessimistic and one optimistic that may be applicable to Iraq in the aftermath of the January 30th elections.

Introduction

There is no consensus among the international relations experts that the much-publicized general elections of January 30, 2005 in Iraq will bring a safe and secure order to the country or to the region as a whole, let alone paving the way to a peaceful and democratic settlement of intra-ethnic disputes within the Iraqi society. It looks as though the claims of various groups making up the diverse fabric of the Iraqi population, such as

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the secular aspirations of the Kurds which contradict the aspirations of the Shia clerics for making the ultimate constitution be more reliant on the rule of Islam (i.e., Sheria), are hardly compatible. There is still much uncertainty about the future of Iraq, and its territorial as well as political integrity may be in jeopardy unless the factions within Iraq find ways to achieve consensus, a daunting task that is indeed made imperative with the results of the elections that are announced on February 13, 2005.¹

According to the election results, the Shia Coalition, which was presumed by international observers to represent some 65 percent of the Iraqi population, received slightly less than half of the roughly 8.5 million votes cast on the Election Day. This is a figure well below their share in the population. The Kurds, on the other hand, who barely make up some 20 percent of the population, are apparently rewarded with their significant turn out on the ballot boxes that they managed to achieve in the northern sectors of Iraq, and received a quarter of the votes, which is well above their population percentage.

Against this background, the picture put in front of the Iraqi people as well as the world community is yet open to speculative analyses. The exact composition of the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly must be seen for making an accurate assessment of the situation in Iraq. While mostly the pessimistic views do still linger on especially in Turkey, optimistic views about the future of Iraq hoping that wisdom may prevail on every side to the politics in the country are also being heard.² Bearing this in mind, this paper will aim at analyzing the pessimistic as well as optimistic scenarios from the perspective of Turkey. But, first the roots of Turkey's interest in the developments taking place in Iraq need to be analyzed to see as to why the Turks had so much concern about the territorial as well as political integrity of Iraq.

Turkey's Interest in Iraq: Gulf War of 1991 and the Creation of No-Fly-Zones

Turkey is one of the countries that closely monitor the developments in Iraq. However, Turkey's interest in these developments is not new. Since the first Gulf War of 1991, Turkey has found itself dragged into this rough neighborhood. The creation of the so-called "no-fly zones" by the United States and Britain, without referring specifically to any United Nations Resolutions, which denied the Iraqi military entering the large segments of the Iraqi territory both in the north and in the south, caused much political concern as well as serious security problems for Turkey in many respects.³

Especially, the Operation Northern Watch, which provided the Kurds of northern Iraq with a powerful shield against the armed forces of the Saddam Hussein regime for more than a decade since 1991, ended up with the creation of some sort of an autonomous political entity in that part of the country.⁴ Strangely enough, Turkey hosted the US and British air force units to keep up with the day-by-day operations from the Incirlik military base in Adana rather close to the Iraqi border.⁵

The creation of safe havens for the Iraqi Kurdish population turned out to become a serious security problem for Turkey for mainly two reasons. First, the northern sectors of the Iraqi territory that fell into the scope of the no-fly zone enforcement became a sanctuary for the PKK terrorists who used to wage guerilla warfare against the Turkish security forces since the mid 1980s with the objective of separating the southeastern parts of the country that was heavily populated with Kurdish citizens of Turkey. Saddam's forces had left a lot of light as well as heavy weaponry and their munitions behind them when they were forced to retreat from the region after the victory of the Coalition Forces led by the United States in 1991. The PKK terrorists not only seized these weapons and munitions but also benefited the lack of authority in northern Iraq to gain many more recruits. They also increased their revenues by controlling the arms and drug trafficking into and from the region.⁶

Secondly, the consolidation of the Kurdish rule in the northern sectors of the Iraqi territory constituted another security problem for Turkey. Thanks to the incessant enforcement of the no-fly zone the Kurdish groups have flourished by establishing a "Parliament" after a series of locally held elections, full-fledged administrative units including "ministries", hospitals, schools, a central bank and money in circulation. All of these and other such developments have paved the way to raising their voice to claim for an independent Kurdish state with the help of the outside powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom.⁷

Whenever the United States was accused of using the zone to help create a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, U.S. officials and their representatives in Ankara dismissed Turkish concerns by saying that U.S. authorities had no such intentions, and that they were observing Iraq's territorial integrity. But Turkish military circles and many of their like-minded political followers were very suspicious. The military, in particular, witnessed the close coordination of U.S. Special Forces and other U.S. agents and the Iraqi Kurdish militia throughout the 1990s. For instance, thousands of Iraqi Kurds went through a special training program on Guam where they learned, among other things, the fundamentals of administering

a state bureaucracy, including the military. This caused deep resentment in the Turkish military. One former Chief of Military Staff, Dogan Gures, recalled in a live tv8 interview that he had sometimes given orders to check the engines of U.S. helicopters stationed on Turkish soil (and therefore subject to certain restrictions), to see if they were hot, an indication that they had been carrying out missions that did not have the approval of Turkish authorities. Similarly, former Prime Minister Bülend Ecevit told CNN Turk TV station that he had sincere doubts about the real intentions of the Americans with regard to the Kurds in Iraq.⁸

Turkey's Concerns With an Independent Kurdish State in Iraq

Turkey is seriously concerned with the possibility of declaration of independence by the Kurds in northern Iraq for basically three reasons. First, such an eventuality may set a bad precedent for the rest of the country as well as the entire region, which is indeed a mosaic of different ethnic and religious groups. Should the Kurds claim for their independent state, every other ethnically and religiously diverse group may very well follow the suit that may render the whole Middle East into a chaotic situation.⁹

Second, there is a significant Turkoman population in Iraq, around 2,5 millions, most of whom live in northern Iraq for centuries.¹⁰ Proclamation of independence by the Kurds whose population is barely above 4 millions will surely put the Turkomans in a very disadvantageous position due to reasons that should not take a genius to foresee. Should this happen, due to the very close relations between the Turks of Turkey and the Turkomans of Iraq, Turkey may be compelled to intervene to protect the rights and the lives of the Turkomans.¹¹

Third, from the standpoint of Turkey's historic rights and interests, just as the importance of the territorial integrity of Iraq, the political integrity of the country is essential. The northern Iraq of today is what was once the Mousul province of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Ottoman Turks have ruled the region until the end of the World War I, and then lost to the British when the League of Nations gave them its mandate to rule these lands.

Notwithstanding the decision of the League of Nations, the Mousul province was part of the National Oath of the young Turkish Parliament that was born out of the ashes of the collapsed empire. When Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) launched the War of Liberation against the occupying powers including the British, the French, Italians, Russian and the Greeks, the ultimate objective was to free the country and to restore the lands that

belonged to the Turks including the Mousul province.¹² However, regardless of the victory gained against the invaders, the Mousul province could not be annexed to Turkey during the Lausanne negotiations from November 1922 to July 1923 (with an intermission) because of the adamant opposition of the British.

Following the long deliberations under the auspices of the League of Nations, whose impartiality was so much in doubt, Turkey was in a sense forced to agree to sign a treaty with Iraq (literally ruled by the British) in 1926 that constituted the current frontier between the two countries.¹³ The treaty was indeed implicitly conditional upon the territorial as well as the political integrity of Iraq. Should one or more of the groups that constitute the highly diverse fabric of the Iraqi society attempt to break up with the rest of the country, Turkey may feel like having the right to intervene due to historically acquired rights, such as a guarantorship of the integrity of Iraq.

Recent developments taking place in Iraq since the fall of the Saddam regime do not at all convince the Turks that Iraq may stay politically or territorially integrated. The *de facto* partition of the country among the Kurds in the north, Sunnis in the middle, and the Shiite in the south may turn out to be a *de jure* situation unless a powerful political authority comes to the office and carry out the necessary legal, political and constitutional reforms and the related arrangements rather quickly and completely.

Turkey's Concerns With the Election Process in Iraq

Although the elections of January 30, 2005 were presented as advancement toward democracy, there were, and still are, strong reasons for the Turks to be highly concerned about the possible outcomes.¹⁴ First of all, it was not certain if the elections would be truly representative of the Iraqi people's will. It was anticipated that the mounting insurgencies would most possibly adversely affect the turn out as well as the composition of the Transitional National Assembly that would be elected.

Secondly, there were more than 200 political parties and some dozens of coalitions that are registered to enter the elections. In such a situation, it would be totally unrealistic to expect that a powerful governing body may emerge that may claim authority in the entire country. Every single political party or group would claim legitimacy based on the votes that they would get from their electorates most of whom would be their tribal constituents.

Third, it was not yet certain as to whether the United States would acknowledge or recognize the decision of the Iraqi population, especially

those of the Shiite majority who might bring the Shia figures to power in many provinces. Many in the US feared paving the way to the rise of Shia clerics who might turn the country into another Islamic republic in the region, which would make that country potentially hostile to the US and Israel. Even though the Iraqi Shia underscore the fact that they are “different from the Iranian Shia in many respects”, Americans are yet to put their minds at rest on that issue.¹⁵

Fourth, the Kurds who were in the process of Kurdification of the entire northern Iraq by destabilizing the Turkomans, forcing them to leave the region or to accept a minority status, might have a much stronger argument for proclaiming their separation from the rest of the Arab Iraqis (Sunni or Shia) where insurgencies would probably continue due to the fact that the Sunnis would possibly not be happy with the election results and would have to acknowledge the supremacy of the Shia and the autonomy of the Kurds.

Two Scenarios for Iraq for the Post-Election Period

The elections of January 30, 2005 will not be the last step. Elections will indeed be the first step in the so-called democratization of Iraq. The Transitional National Assembly that will be elected will be responsible for electing a President and two deputies from its members, by two-thirds majority vote. The Presidency Council will in turn unanimously appoint a Prime Minister, also a member of the Assembly who must also be approved by the Assembly by a simple majority vote. The Assembly must also draw up a Constitution by August 15, 2005, to be submitted for a referendum on October 15, 2005. The plan is to hold the elections under that Constitution on December 15, 2005, and a fully constitutional government to take power by December 31, 2005. If the Constitution is rejected then there will be new Assembly elections by December 15, 2005, and the process of drafting a new constitution is restarted.

There is also provision for a delay of six months if not enough progress is made on the Constitution by August 15, 2005. For a country like Iraq, highly volatile and destabilized, this is indeed a long time open to provocations during which many things may change and seriously interrupt the whole process.

Pessimistic Scenario and Turkey's Concerns With the Post-Election Period

There will still be problems with the Transitional Constitution even if everything goes to plan. First, the current Transitional Administrative Law will probably be made into the Transitional Constitution that will be voted by the Iraqi people in a referendum. It is well known that the Shia clerical leader Ayatollah Al Sistani has only reluctantly agreed to signed up for it with the condition that it would be improved (according to his views) over time and be brought before the Iraqi people for a vote.¹⁶ Ayatollah Al Sistani insists that the ultimate Constitution be based on the teaching of Holy Koran and thus Islamic rule. Should this happen, the process of democratization of Iraq may not conform to the expectations of the Western countries. Thus, it may challenge their interpretation of democracy in Iraq.

Second, the Kurds, who are mostly known as being secular, are likely to object to the drafts of the Transitional Constitution should it become heavily relied upon Islamic rule. Such an eventuality may then accelerate their desire to break away with the rest of the Iraqi society and to go their own separate way by vetoing the Constitution at the referendum. According to the Transitional Administrative Law, if in any three of the 18 sectors in Iraq in each of which the Transitional Constitution will be voted, the will of the population turns out to be "No", then the Constitution will not be able to enter into force. The result will probably not be different in a second voting that may take place soon after. The Kurds have almost absolute majority in three sectors in northern Iraq, which suggests that Kurds, if united (which is a highly likely scenario) may indeed use their *de facto* veto power. Ultimately, Turkey may be forced to intervene in some fashion (politically and/or militarily). In such case, chaos may spread throughout the region with the involvement of more actors.

Optimistic Scenario That May Mitigate the Concerns of Turkey

On the other hand, the results of the elections which were to too many people's surprise provide the Iraqis with a golden opportunity to find ways to their multifaceted and highly complicated problems in a peaceful manner through building consensus. To see what is likely to come out of the election results, first the percentages that various groups got must be analyzed carefully. The overall turn out is approximately 60 percent.¹⁷ Considering the fact that over the last half a century the Iraqi population did not experience free and democratic elections, and also the fact that

insurgents have not only threatened their own people not to cast their votes but also carried out deadly attacks incessantly everyday, the courage of those who cast their votes must be commended, while those who just feared to go to the ballot boxes should not be criticized. Those, on the other hand, who chose not to vote just because they protested the US occupation, have had their understandable reasons to do so. However, there are signs that some of them are regretting having done so, and that they may vote in the next elections, which is scheduled for the time being to take place on December 2005.¹⁸

The varying percentages in the rate of participation in the elections all over Iraq play a particular role on the outcome and also on the future of Iraq. The mere fact that the Shiites received 48 percent of the votes which is well below their population percentage naturally mitigated the fears that they would have an overwhelming majority in the assembly whereby they would have the power to shape the future of the country almost unilaterally. With less than half of the votes, this is not going to happen. On the other hand, the Kurds who were the most outspoken people among the Iraqis about scenarios of breaking away with the authority in Baghdad in case Shiites have the power to turn the country into an Islamic republic, did tremendously well in the elections by going to the ballot boxes and received a quarter of the votes and almost as many representative seats in the Assembly.

The disproportionate outcome of the elections in terms of percentages of population and the votes received may seem at the first instance as an unhealthy development. Nevertheless, thanks to these results that the Shiites in Iraq will be compelled to give in and come to a compromise solution with other groups, while the Kurds will be encouraged, if not compelled, to stay in Iraq rather than to break away. It will almost be an unavoidable development for the Kurds to have confrontation with all their neighbors such as Turkey, Iran and Syria, should they wish to proclaim independence. However, the Kurdish leaders will have much political power, more clout and prestige if they choose to become part of ruling elite of a democratic Iraq. Hence, the election of Jalal Talabani, the leader of Kurdistan Patriotic Union, as the first President of Iraq is a remarkable achievement in that respect that confirms the above-stated expectations and also strengthens the feasibility of optimistic scenarios. Talabani's becoming the first democratically elected President of Iraq comes as no surprise, indeed. It was possibly the only way "to integrate the Kurds, who had *de facto* independence in the northern sectors of the country, back to the Iraqi society so as to keep the territorial as well as political integrity of Iraq".¹⁹

The situation with the Sunni Arabs and the fears that they may be isolated from the rest of the country in terms of shaping the future of Iraq just because they did not cast their votes in large amounts as others should not be exaggerated. First, because many international analysts suggest the Iraqis, be they Shia or Kurd that the making of the new Constitution should be all-encompassing. Secondly, the clause in the Transitional Law of Administration which suggests that if in any three of the 18 sectors in Iraq the votes turn out to be "No" the Constitution will not enter into force, will require both the Shiite and the Kurdish law-makers to take the claims as well as the needs of the Sunni Arabs into consideration so as to please them and to have their affirmative vote on the day of Referendum which is scheduled to take place on October 15, 2005.²⁰ Sunnis Arab are said to have absolute majority in at least three of the 18 sectors that Iraq is divided in. hence, any Constitution which may not respond to their long term needs is highly unlikely to be voted for. Such an eventuality will compel the parties that are heavily represented in the Assembly to simply not count on the number of their seats but to pay attention to what may be claimed by the Sunnis.

Conclusion

The results of the elections in Iraq display the fact that years of second-class citizenship for most Iraqis will be over, and they will have in their hands the capability of building a country where the Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Turkomans, Assyrians and others may indeed live in peace and harmony if they may put aside their short term and limited objectives and look at the big picture ahead of them. The Kurds in particular may have more than they may expect to have in an independent but landlocked country.

To accelerate the pace of democratization and harmonization of diverging interests, the Kurdish leaders, especially the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), namely Mesoud Barzani should prefer to lower the tone his bitter statements addressing Turkey and touching the nerves of Turkish population when he undermines the legal and historical rights of his compatriots, namely the Turkomans. There is nothing to gain out of hostility with the neighboring states, which may be further aggravated by putting forward unacceptable and historically unsubstantiated arguments. The future of Iraq should be seen as lying in having peaceful relations with all the countries in the region.

Notes

¹ According to the formal statements made by the officials of the Iraqi Election Commission, the Shia Coalition received 4,075,295 votes out of the 8,456,266 votes cast on the day of the elections, which makes 48.2 percent of the total. The Kurdish Coalition received, on the other hand, 2,175,551 votes, which constitutes 25.4 percent of all. The interim Prime Minister Eyad Allawis's list received 1,116,943 votes, which gives him a share of 13.8 percent of all the votes. See: (various news and broadcasting agencies and websites, for instance, www.milliyet.com.tr).

² A quick look at the daily papers and internet news portals published in Turkey especially by the conservative circles in the immediate aftermath of the press release of the election results may suggest that the dominant view among the Turks concerning the election results is one which contends that the great achievement of the Kurds in the election will boost their ambition to do away with the rest of the Iraqi society and to go their own separate way by proclaiming independence. See: (Turkish newspapers issued on February 14, 2005).

³ Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds had fled their country and sought refuge in Turkey and Iran. The Kurds feared being gassed by Saddam's air force, in a repeat of the massacre at Halabja in March 1988, in which 5,000 men, women, and children were killed. The so-called no-fly zones, established by the United States—one above the 36th parallel in the Iraqi north, the other below the 32nd (later the 33rd) parallel in the Shiite south—were considered by many Turks as a first step in a long-term U.S. plan to create an independent Kurdish state. See: (Kibaroglu, 2003, pp. 22-25).

⁴ See: (Kirisici, 1996, pp. 21-39).

⁵ In 1991 the Turkish Grand National Assembly granted permission for U.S. aircraft to use the Incirlik Air Base to enforce the no-fly zone, and that permission had been renewed every six months since.

⁶ Although it is difficult to make an exact assessment, figures varying between 5 to 7 billion dollars a year were mentioned among the Turkish intelligence sources, who wished to remain anonymous, as being the revenues of the PKK earned from their control over the drug as well as arms trafficking between Central Asia and Europe during the first half of the 1990s.

⁷ In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Saddam regime Tony Blair, British Premier, said in a Parliamentary gathering in Britain that he would carefully pursue the aim providing the Kurds with no less than they used to have over the last decade in terms of democratic rights and privileges and that he would do his best to take the cause of the Kurds to the platform of the United Nations. See: (various news reports and broadcasts in April 2003). The words of Tony Blair concerning his desire to take the Kurdish issue to the UN platforms reminds one the history of creation of the State of Israel.

⁸ See: (Kibaroglu, 2003, pp. 22-25).

⁹ Some scholars use the term “Balkanization of the Middle East” to point at the possibilities that may follow once one of the ethnic groups within a multi-ethnic society claims independence from the rest of the country. The tragic events in the Balkans started when Croatia and Slovenia, strongly supported by Germany, proclaimed their independence from Yugoslavia, and others, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo desired to follow suit. Interview with Prof. Huseyin Bagci, September 2004, Middle East Technical University, Ankara.

¹⁰ The population of the Turkomans within the entire Iraqi society has long been a point of controversy among the concerned body of intellectuals. The figure which is mostly referred to by the Kurdish groups as well as the western scholars in their statements is 500 thousand whereas the Turkomans claim to have a population over 3 millions constituting slightly more than 10 percent of the society. Considering the fact that the last population census was carried out back in 1957, and no reliable database has since been established to make accurate inferences into the demographic structure of Iraq, there is equal likelihood for both parties to have their claims to be substantially wrong. Some academic studies have attempted to be conducted, yet with imperfect and incomplete information, referring to some historical records as well as scholarly studies that survived the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein, suggest that a meaningful figure for the Turkmen population could be somewhere in between 1.5 millions to 2 millions. For a comprehensive study on this subject See: (Oguzlu, 2001).

¹¹ Turkomans or the Turkmen people of Iraq have a long history in the regions where they live. While some of them prefer to be called simply “the Turks of Iraq” some others wish to preserve their “Turkmen” identity which has deep-rooted kinship with the Turks but yet *sui generis*. Countless interviews with leading Turkoman people during the short-term leadership seminars hosted at Bilkent University in Ankara between 1998 and 2004.

¹² See: (Shaw, 2001) and (Zurcher, 2001).

¹³ See: (Fromkin, 1989).

¹⁴ The concerns of the Turks from various segments of the society including academics, diplomats and politicians were delegated to the leading representatives of Iraq during a two-day symposium entitled “*Iraq on the Way to its New Constitution*” organized Jointly by the Foreign Policy Institute, Bilkent University, and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 22-23, 2004 at Bilkent Hotel in the premises of Bilkent University in Ankara. Apart from the Shia and Sunni Arabs, as well as the Kurds and the Turkomans of Iraq, a good number of renowned lawyers from the United States and the United Kingdom have also contributed to the intensive discussions on the future of Iraq. The proceedings of the Symposium are published by the Foreign Policy Institute in a book, and they are also available on the Internet, which can be seen at www.foreignpolicy.org.tr. The symposium has also served as a useful platform for a comprehensive exchange of views among those who have admitted that they had a certain degree of lack of knowledge and lots of prejudices about the others.

¹⁵ Interviews with Dr. Hussein El Shahrstani, spokesperson of Ayatollah Al Sistani, Amman, Jordan, March 2004 and Rome, Italy, July 2004.

¹⁶ The Transitional Law of Administration, which was drafted by a group of people who were appointed by the Provisional Authority chaired by the US Ambassador Paul Bremer, was scheduled to be signed on March 8, 2004 by all the representatives of religious and ethnic factions in Iraq. At the last minute, the leader of the Shia groups in Iraq Ayatollah Al Sistani declared that he would not sign the Law unless more references were made to Islam in the code of conduct to be drafted for public life. A solution was soon found, albeit a little painstakingly, and the Law of Administration was signed with a delay of a couple of days.

¹⁷ Of out some 14 million registered voters in Iraq, roughly 8.5 millions of them cast their votes on January 30, 2005.

¹⁸ Iraqi Sunni Arab leader Adnan Pachaci expressed this view in a live interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN International, "Late Edition" on February 13, 2005.

¹⁹ These views were presented by Ambassador Feisal Istrabadi, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations, during his lecture on "The Iraqi Constitution: Domestic Processes and Political Challenges" at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, April 6, 2005.

²⁰ Article 61, paragraph C of the Transitional Law of Administration reads as follows: "The general referendum will be successful and the draft constitution ratified if a majority of the voters in Iraq approve and if two-thirds of the voters in three or more governorates do not reject it." See: (Conference proceedings, 2004, p. 126).

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