

## Turkey's Invasion of Northern Iraq

*John Roberts*

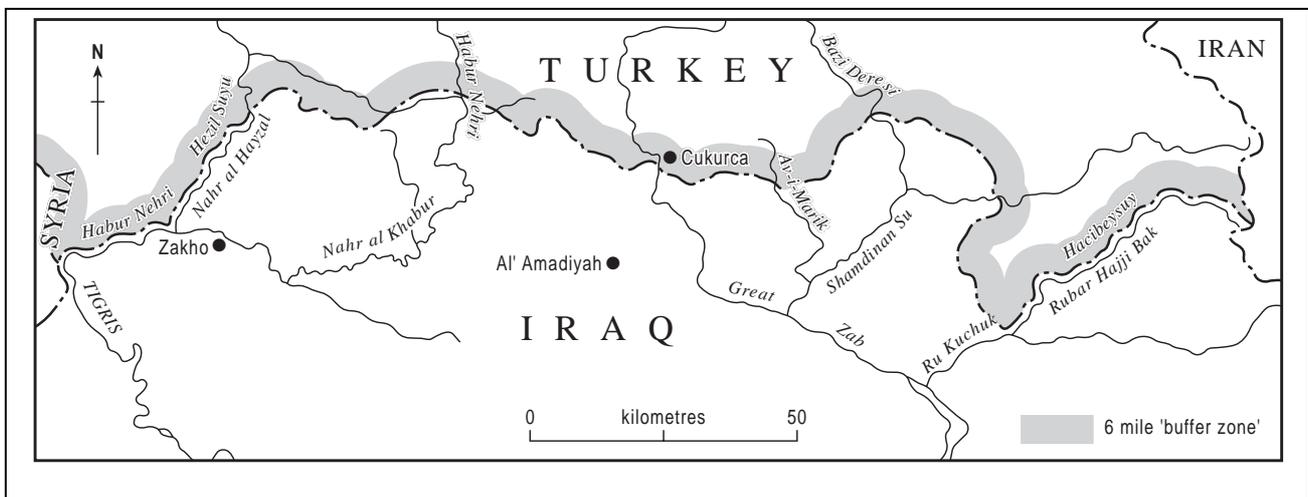
The Turkish army, on 20 March, mounted its biggest planned cross-border incursion of the year when it sent 35,000 troops into Northern Iraq to flush out guerrillas belonging to Turkey's rebel Kurdish group, the PKK, the Kurdish Workers Party. The operation was still continuing a month later, severely straining Turkey's relations with both the European Union and the United States. By that stage, Turkish forces had moved as deep as 30 kilometres into Iraq along the entire length of the Iraqi-Turkish border. In the process, they had secured control of the city of Zakho and its immediate environs, including the stretch between Zakho and the Syrian border, thus eliminating Iraqi Kurdish guerrilla control of a 12km stretch of the Iraq-Turkey oil pipeline.

In military terms it does not look as if the operation has been a major success. According to Turkish accounts, in turn attributed to leaked PKK documents, there were some 5,000 PKK guerrillas in Northern Iraq on the eve of the invasion. As of 8 April, however, the Turkish army was reporting that it had killed only 300 or so rebels. The majority of the PKK forces had managed to evade the Turkish forces operating in the extremely mountainous border region and had dispersed successfully, either to other parts of Kurdish controlled Northern Iraq or into Iran and Syria, or had even crossed back into Turkey itself.

The scale of the operation highlights the failure the Turkish armed forces have had in their 11-year campaign to eradicate the PKK. When the PKK first proclaimed war on the Turkish state in 1984, it was one of the most uncompromisingly militant Marxist movements in the world. Its policy of killing villagers and kidnapping children ensured that it was feared, not loved, by most Kurds in Turkey. However, the military's response was to adopt an equally tough line which focused more on outright suppression of anything that symbolised Kurdish nationalism, such as use of the Kurdish language than on winning hearts and minds.

Since then, some 15,000 people have died in one of the world's most bitter wars. Yet a combination of the PKK's own isolationism and the army's reluctance to permit public scrutiny of its actions have generally kept journalists and other prospective observers well at bay. The army has repeatedly stated its belief that the core of the problem has been overcome. Yet the scale of the March operation belies this. The result is that today nobody really knows what are the aspirations of Turkey's Kurdish communities, who account for between one fifth and one quarter of the republic's 60 million population.

In recent years there are some signs that both the Turkish establishment and the PKK have begun to



question their own extreme attitudes towards the Kurdish question. Since the creation of the republic in 1923, it has been an axiom of Turkey's Atatürkist elite that all inhabitants of the Republic should be considered Turks. While this succeeded in bringing into the fold the vast numbers of refugees and displaced persons from the Ottoman Empire's former domains in Europe, it failed to take account of the fact that the Kurds were themselves indigenous to the new republic and regarded themselves very much as a separate people. Traditionally, the Kurds trace their descent from the Medes whose empire flourished in Mesopotamia and the mountainous borderlands to the north and east in the 8th and 7th centuries BC, whereas the Turks claim their descent from tribes who migrated from Central Asia in the 7-10th centuries AD.

In 1991 when he returned to office as Prime Minister, the veteran conservative politician Suleyman Demirel began to show some understanding of Kurdish linguistic and cultural aspirations. A similar train of thought could be found in comments made by the then President, Turgut Ozal. Although there was no indication whatsoever that there could be any relaxation of the constitutional ban on separatist movements, it did, at least, seem possible that Kurdish might become a fully recognised language and culture in the predominantly Kurdish populated regions of south-eastern Turkey.

There is still a distinct possibility today, with politicians openly acknowledging that Kurds should at least be allowed to receive some of their schooling in the Kurdish language. And there is also serious talk of general decentralisation of the highly centralised Turkish state as a way of finding a political solution to what has primarily been regarded for the last 11 years as a security problem.

### Çiller's Bilkent Programme

However, in a major speech at Ankara's Bilkent University on 14 March, just six days before the invasion, Prime Minister Tansu Çiller, chose not to include decentralisation as a specific objective when she called for a programme of reform in Turkish political life. What she did propose was a six point programme of what she called "*historic reforms to strengthen democratisation and further*

*safeguard freedom of expression*". The significance of the speech was that it clearly showed the government's intention to try to resolve the Kurdish issue by introducing reforms that would ease political conditions and improve human rights for Turkish citizens in general, not only for the republic's Kurdish inhabitants.

The reforms were:

- The orderly phasing out of the State of Emergency in the Southeastern provinces. Mme Çiller said this would constitute "*a major step toward a restoration of normal procedures and traditional rights*" in the region. She was referring to the Kurdish areas, but did not use the words 'Kurds' or 'Kurdish'.
- A package of constitutional amendments to allow broader participation in the political process. These would, she said, remove "*certain outmoded restrictions on unions and students, for example, while providing increased protection for expression and dissent.*"
- Amend the Anti-Terrorism Law to "*remove anomalies which unduly restrict certain forms of expression.*" This is as close as she has come to accepting the argument that dissidents should be allowed to argue for such causes as Kurdish autonomy, or even independence, so long as they base their arguments on peaceful persuasion and do not resort to violence. At present, even the advocacy of Kurdish autonomy is illegal.
- An amnesty for many types of prisoners "*including those serving sentences arising from statements and writings.*" This refers to a number of politicians and writers who have been jailed, or who face jail sentences, because of their advocacy of Kurdish rights. The most prominent of these is Yasar Kemal, perhaps the foremost contemporary writer in Turkish. The problem is that these writers and politicians have been sentenced under laws that currently prohibit even parliament from granting them a pardon, so that means the constitution will have to be changed.
- Take "*additional steps to protect citizens against torture and human rights abuses.*"

Mme Çiller in effect admitted that the security forces did sometimes resort to torture when she added: *"No doubt the PKK terrorist attacks have placed our security forces under heightened and understandable tension and apprehension. That can result in an unfortunate relaxation of safeguards, allowing ill-considered, reflexive actions to occur."*

- Press forward with the introduction of human rights courses in Turkish schools and colleges.

### The PKK's Attitude

The PKK's current attitude to the crisis is more difficult to define. Under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalan (commonly known as Apo), the PKK remains an extremely hard-line Marxist organisation. In terms of its willingness to use terror to secure control of villages, it is akin to the Khmer Rouge or Shining Path. Initially it was bitterly against any form of autonomy, such as might prove possible under any decentralisation programme, arguing that this would be used by reactionary capitalism to prevent real independence. However, Turkish analysts of the PKK are no longer quite so sure that the PKK is completely committed to independence, and independence only. They believe it might just be possible to consider some kind of political solution based on autonomy, although they admit they are far from sure that any such agreement could likely be reached between the PKK and the government.

The secretive nature of the PKK and the rigidity of the Turkish military's position are two reasons why a solution to Turkey's Kurdish problem still seems very distant. Other reasons include the political geography of the area and the Turkish military's *de facto* autonomy from civilian control on security matters.

### Political Geography

For both the Kurds themselves and the Turkish state, one of the key issues is the presence of large Kurdish communities over a contiguous area of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and north-eastern Syria. The goal of the PKK is not the division of the Turkish republic into separate Turkish and Kurdish states,

but the creation of a revolutionary Kurdish state embracing all the 25 million or so Kurds living in south-eastern Turkey and the Kurdish districts of Turkey's neighbours.

In the past the central governments in Ankara, Tehran and Baghdad, while tending to differ on most policies, have sought to cooperate in suppressing Kurdish separatism, even if it focused on autonomy rather than outright independence. Such implicit cooperation, or collusion, has been interspersed with policies aimed at subverting neighbouring states. In the early 1970s, Iran funnelled arms to Iraqi Kurds in order to weaken the Baghdad government, while Baghdad, likewise, assisted Kurdish separatists in Iran. But this was the era of unchallenged authority in terms of formal international attitudes and such subversion of central state authority was essentially covert. Neither the US nor Israel would openly acknowledge providing military assistance to Kurdish guerrilla forces combating the Baathist regime in Baghdad.

But all this changed in the spring of 1991. The immediate aftermath of the second Gulf War saw Saddam Hussein turn Iraqi forces north against the Kurds to suppress an uprising which broke out in the wake of the allied liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi forces. The flight of millions of Kurds into Turkey, Iran, and the most remote regions of Northern Iraq, coupled with memories of the way in which Saddam had three years earlier used poison gas to wipe out the insurgent village of Halabja, prompted extraordinary popular concern in Western Europe and the US. That concern, fuelled in particular by dramatic television reportage, forces the West to intervene in Northern Iraq.

Under Western diplomatic and military pressure, although there were no significant military clashes, Saddam's forces evacuated the bulk of Iraq's Kurdish areas. Six months later, Saddam ordered all Iraqi central government officials to quit the Kurdish areas as he imposed his own economic sanctions on the bulk of Iraq's three to four million Kurds. Since then, the Kurds of Iraq have enjoyed *de facto* independence. However, although fairly democratic elections were held and an autonomous government was set up in the city of Arbil, internal Kurdish feuding, coupled with the continued application of both UN and Iraqi

sanctions against the Kurds, has led to growing instability.

The two major political/guerrilla forces in Northern Iraq, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), were engaged in virtual civil war on the eve of the Turkish incursion. Their feuding primarily relates to the determination of each of the two leaders to dominate Kurdish politics. But there is a specific element that involves the PKK and Turkey. In the late 1980s, Turkish drives against the PKK prompted Ocalan's men to seize control of some 300 villages in the extreme north of Iraq. The local inhabitants were generally evicted and the villages became bases for cross-border incursions into Turkey. The bulk of the displaced villagers were loyal to Barzani and in recent years Barzani's KDP has been more inclined to cooperate with Turkey than Talabani's PUK. This was particularly demonstrated in October 1992 when KDP guerrillas were prominent in a combined Turkish army and Iraqi Kurdish guerrilla move to suppress PKK forces in Northern Iraq, (although some of Talabani's men were also involved.)

For Turkey, in terms of trying to ensure the integrity of its borders from external PKK assault, the existence of a strong authority in Northern Iraq is vital. There are four obvious sources of such an authority: the Turkish army itself; the Western coalition providing aerial protection for the Iraqi Kurds; the Iraqi Kurds themselves; or Saddam Hussein's own forces.

The feuding between Barzani and Talabani, epitomised by gunfights to determine physical control of the Kurdish capital and government at Arbil, is one reason why Ankara does not believe that Iraqi Kurdish forces can effectively police their side of the Iraqi Kurdish border. A more principled objection is that Turkey remains extremely nervous that the continued autonomous regime in Northern Iraq might somehow secure not only *de facto*, but *de jure* independence, and thus become the potential nucleus of a larger Kurdish state. To the Turkish military, it is one thing to have a Kurdish statelet in Northern Iraq that is fundamentally dependent on the outside world, especially Turkey, for its continued existence; it is quite another to have it thriving and on the way to real independence.

Control by the US, British and French forces that initially entered Northern Iraq in 1991, and whose Turkish-based aerial operation, known as *Provide Comfort*, continues to help keep Saddam's forces at bay, is no longer a realistic option. There is no inclination in any of the three capitals for the return of their ground troops to police such geographically and politically dangerous terrain. As for cooperating with Saddam's forces, there is at least a substantial body of opinion in Ankara that this may be the lesser of a multitude of evils.

In the last year there has been a striking level of cooperation between Baghdad and Ankara on relatively mundane issues. Whilst insisting that it does not seek to breach sanctions, Turkey has been pressing for official UN approval for a project to flush the disused Iraqi-Turkish oil pipeline, ostensibly for maintenance purposes. However, this would have the consequence of earning hard cash for Baghdad, and it has widely been seen as a preliminary move by Ankara to ensure that whenever UN sanctions on Iraq are lifted, either in whole or in part, Turkey is again the favoured route for Iraqi oil exports. In this context it should be noted that earlier this year Turkish technicians reported that a damaged Iraqi pumping station on the pipeline had now been repaired, with a new pump being supplied by Turkey in what appears to be a gross breach of UN sanctions. On 9 April the London *Sunday Times* reported that Baghdad secretly approved the Turkish invasion of Northern Iraq during "high level contacts between the two capitals." Although such contacts have been a regular feature of Iraqi-Turkish relations in the last year or two, there was no confirmation by the time the *Bulletin* went to press, of this particular assertion.

Indeed, from interviews carried out by the *Bulletin* itself in Ankara in the immediate wake of the invasion, it seems clear that the Turkish military's original aim was the creation, for at least a temporary period, of a buffer zone in Northern Iraq, controlled by the Turkish army itself. Turkish political leaders appear to hope that this might be given some kind of international sanction, perhaps with the Turkish army staying on in Northern Iraq as the ground component for an enlarged *Operation Provide Comfort*.

If so, then Turkey's military and civilian authorities have miscalculated badly. The bulk of the republic's Turkish ethnic majority remain

overwhelmingly nationalist and scarcely question the operation. But the scale of the operation has caused both consternation and dismay in Western capitals. For the last four years the West has chosen to muddle over the paradoxical implications of its own interventions in Northern Iraq. It has argued that the need to observe humanitarian principles, and thus come to the aid of Kurdish refugees, has had to supersede respect for national boundaries and sovereignty. Yet it has continued to insist that it is not aiming for the partition of Iraq and has sought to impress upon the Iraqi Kurds that although they may currently possess *de facto* independence from Baghdad's authority, what they should be seeking in the long run is autonomy in a post-Saddam Iraq.

The Turkish invasion, from a Western perspective, lacks the humanitarian dimension by which Britain, France and the United States justified their own violation of Iraqi sovereignty in April 1991. And for their partners in Europe, particularly Germany, the invasion indeed appears to run counter to humanitarian requirements since the bulk of the European Union states consider that there can be no military solution to Turkey's Kurdish problem and, indeed, that efforts to achieve a military solution actually exacerbate an already complex problem.

In much of Europe, the Turkish army is seen as the suppressor of human rights in general and Kurdish aspirations in particular. The invasion therefore prompted serious discussion in the European Parliament, which could result, later this year, in a vote to reject the agreement concluded on 6 March whereby Turkey is due to enter a Customs Union with the European Union on 1 January 1996. By mid-April Turkey was thus under very strong pressure from Europe to pull its forces out of Northern Iraq as quickly as possible. It was also under similar pressure from the United States. In both cases domestic lobbying was playing an important role.

In Germany there is the fear of further Kurd/Turkish violence among the country's immigrants, while in the United States the powerful Greek and Israeli lobbies were both engaged in putting pressure on the US administration to condemn the invasion and to cut US economic aid. Germany, for its part, blocked the provision of DM150m (US\$107m) in funding for Turkey's purchase of two frigates.

The sheer scale of the Turkish invasion overshadowed, and may have gravely damaged, moves to secure significant political reform in Turkey that were in part aimed at developing a political, as well as a military approach, to the Kurdish problem. Turkey is still run under a constitution laid down under military supervision. In practice, the government of Prime Minister Tansu Çiller has given the army a free hand to tackle the Kurdish issue in order to secure for itself a free hand to introduce much needed economic reforms. However, senior officials now acknowledge that this is not sufficient. Dr Emre Gönensay, Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister, told the *Bulletin* that Turkey now required greater democratisation.

In particular, Dr Gönensay highlighted decentralisation as the way forward. "*There is a consensus that we should move towards cultural expression and decentralise our centralised governmental system and give more authority to regions throughout Turkey.*" But when asked whether this meant Turkey was ready to accept the formation of legally established parties advocating separatism through peaceful means, he replied "*We are not in that debate yet.*"

However, so long as the army's autonomy remains intact, there is little likelihood that significant progress will be made in securing a political solution to the Kurdish crisis. But there are some signs that the Government now understands the dilemma it is in. Although Turkish officials cannot yet contemplate direct talks with Apo, the PKK leader, Dr Gönensay says "*there is a dialogue*" taking place with moderate Kurds in the form of exchanges in newspapers and on television. As for resolving the Kurdish problem, he acknowledges "*it needs constitutional change, legal change*", although he still considers that what the Kurds themselves actually wish is cultural and linguistic freedom, rather than political autonomy.

As for the situation in Northern Iraq itself, senior Turkish diplomats on 7 April called on both Barzani and Talabani to come to Ankara to settle their differences and establish a viable regime in the area that would safeguard both the Kurds themselves from Iraqi pressure and Turkey from PKK cross-border operations. In sum, Turkish policy appears to have changed considerably as a result of the incursion, which, although apparently

a failure in military terms, could yet be termed a political success were it to result in the establishment of a more effective authority within the Kurdish areas of Northern Iraq.

However, until there is substantial constitutional reform in Turkey itself, the Turkish Republic's problems with its Kurdish population, do not seem likely to be resolved. Two weeks before the invasion, Mme Çiller, briefing a group of journalists, including the author, said that when she came to office in 1993 it was not possible to embark on major economic reform and the revival of the economy until the Kurdish problem was resolved. She then immediately added that the Government was, indeed, now in the middle of

embarking on that very economic revival; thus asserting, at least by implication, that she regarded the Kurdish problem as resolved. The invasion of Northern Iraq shows that the problem is certainly not resolved. It also shows the weakness, and perhaps the ignorance, of the Turkish Prime Minister in the face of an army that can conduct operations without being subject to civilian supervision, whilst leaving the politicians to pick up the pieces of its failure.

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John Roberts is editor of *Middle East Monitor* as well as being Middle East editor for the *Boundary and Security Bulletin*. His new book *Visions and Mirages: The Middle East in a New Era* is reviewed in this issue of the *Bulletin*. Also see below.

## VISIONS AND MIRAGES

*The Middle East in a New Era*

*John Roberts*

*Visions and Mirages: The Middle East in a New Era* is intended as an easily-read guide to both the problems and prospects confronting one of the most diverse regions of the world. Its scope is unrivalled, its detail fascinating. The book - truly, the one book a traveller to the Middle East should read on his journey - tackles many of the most searching questions confronting the region today and tomorrow.

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- What comes after the oil boom and the revenue crash?

John Roberts is a journalist who patrols a unique beat. He writes for the specialist press on the Middle East and the interrelationship between politics, energy, defence and economics. He edits *Middle East Monitor*, a monthly newsletter on the political economy of the region and is as likely to be quoted by the *Washington Post* or the *Independent* as to write for them.

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