

A new climate for solving the Kurdish problem

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The Turkish military's operations aimed at the remote mountainous regions of northern Iraq, where the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has found safe haven for itself, have changed the psychological climate in Turkey. The fact that these operations have not been met with widespread international condemnation has also come as something of a shock for northern Iraqi Kurds.

Ankara's diplomacy on this score, marked by a prolonged period of patience and inaction - which the PKK no doubt took as a sign of weakness and tried to exploit - has been generally welcomed.

Increasing PKK attacks despite this patience have, on the other hand, shown the world that there is legitimacy in Turkey's desire to respond militarily. Neither are these strikes - generally marked by pinpoint accuracy with minimal collateral damage - futile as some are claiming.

It is clear that the initial targets were the communications and logistics infrastructure that the PKK has set up in the region, feeling safe in the notion that there is little Ankara can do about this.

These strikes have not only made it difficult for the PKK to rally in the spring with a view to staging new attacks on Turkey, but have also shown the operatives of this terrorist organization that their actions in the region are being followed on a daily basis from the sky, and by other means.

It was telling that the Chief of General Staff, General Yaşar Büyükanıt, should have used the "Big brother" imagery - referring to a TV show popular around the world - to describe what the PKK in northern Iraq can expect from now on.

The military operations have also put Turkish-American cooperation on a different footing and have laid the ground for overcoming the chill in ties since the Turkish Parliament refused passage to the U.S. military for invading Iraq from the North in 2003.

Clearly the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, which has openly expressed its disappointment over the help Washington is giving Ankara on this score, miscalculated the international mood, thinking that any Turkish incursion into northern Iraq would automatically cause international outrage.

A new international mood

It seems however that the international community is better attuned to what the PKK represents and is not in a position to support this group at a time when the fight against terrorism is the order of the day around the globe.

Gone are the days, after all, when one man's terrorist was another man's freedom fighter.

The manner, in which Spain has been going after ETA terrorists and their extensions in the political domain, is another reason why the EU has generally been quieter in the face of these strikes.

So the diplomatic-military side of the equation has in fact turned into something of a success in its own right. But this is only half of the equation and there is much that Turkey has to do to meet the needs of its citizens of Kurdish origins in order to really get to the bottom of this problem.

Especially now that there is a new understanding developing in the country about the whole essence of the problem, with even former ranking military officers openly admitting to the serious mistakes made in the past.

The fact that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) got more votes in the Southeast in the last election

than the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) (which many see as the PKK's political wing) goes to show that Turkey's Kurdish citizens also want an end to a quarter century of violence.

This is why it is incumbent on the AKP to honor these expectations and take bold steps in order to solve the Kurdish problem by introducing reforms that will meet the reasonable demands of Turkey's Kurds.

July 22 mandate

The strong mandate it got in the July 2007 elections also provides the necessary legitimacy for the government to take these steps, no matter what the nationalist opposition may say or do to try and stall the reform process.

Another important thing not to be missed here is the close cooperation that we now see the military and the government in. Gone seems to be the cold war between the sides that reached fever pitch prior to last year's elections.

It is clear that this atmosphere, in which the government authorized the military to do the necessary in northern Iraq against the PKK, will also rein in any resistance on the part of the military to reforms aimed at meeting the requirements of Turkey's Kurdish citizens.

None of this is to suggest that there are easy and quick solutions to a problem that is of such long standing. It is clear however that Turkey is moving in the right direction; even if the going may appear slow to some.

Put another way, the political and social aspect of the Kurdish problem will come more and more to the fore as PKK terrorism is rolled back. Positive as this trend may seem it is obvious that many ultranationalists on the Turkish as well as the Kurdish side will try and stymie it because it does not suit their interests.

It is funny how the interests of hardliners on both sides converge whenever there is movement that portends a solution to such long-standing problems. This is why the government must remain vigilant in the face of such attempts as it prepares to take reformist steps aimed at putting to rest this quarrel between Turks and Kurds to the benefit of both sides.

Sources

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