



U.S.-Turkish Relations and the Challenges Ahead

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Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Europe
Washington, DC
March 15, 2007

As prepared

Chairman Wexler, Congressman Gallegly, Members of the Sub-Committee, it is an honor to speak to you today about my efforts during the past six months to address the significant threat posed to our long-standing ally Turkey by the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers Party), including its impact on Turkey's relations with Iraq and the potential for Turkish cross-border action. This conflict has endured for more than twenty years and the resulting violence led in the last year alone to the deaths of 600 Turkish citizens. The continued ability of this terrorist group to operate from Iraqi territory is a threat to regional security and an impediment to improvements in the lives of people on both sides of the border.

A Word on the PKK

The PKK or Kurdistan Workers Party, also known as the KGK, is a militant group composed of ethnic Kurds who have carried out a campaign of terror against Turkey since their foundation in the 1970s. The PKK was founded on Marxist principles with the aim of carving out through violence an independent Kurdish state in south-eastern Turkey and neighboring states. Recently, the PKK has sought to hide its terrorist roots by cloaking its political demands in terms of local cultural and linguistic rights. PKK attacks on Turkish authorities turned south-eastern Turkey into a war zone in the late 1980s and 1990s. The group revolved around the cult-like leadership of Abdullah calan until 1999, when he was captured. He remains in Turkish custody.

The PKK suspended military action following Ocalan's capture and was forced to regroup between 1999 and 2004. Turkish government attempts to address outstanding cultural and political demands, as discussed in the annual State Department Human Rights Reports, were unsuccessful at addressing ethnic aspirations. In 2004 the PKK resumed terrorist attacks against Turkish security forces, innocent civilians and foreign tourists. Its actions have been criticized by human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The conflict with the PKK has diverted Turkey's effort to join the EU and has fostered instead a permanent state of alarm throughout the country. Badly needed outside investment cannot be productively used to shore up underdeveloped south-eastern Turkey until the threat of terrorism recedes. Ironically, the continued existence of a terrorist group that cloaks itself in the mantle of Kurdish rights has impeded the progress for which Turkish Kurds aspire through economic development and the cooperation facilitated by EU human rights law.

The PKK in Iraq

Several thousand PKK terrorists are based just over the Turkish border inside Iraq. The PKK has used Iraq as a base to pursue operations, train terrorists, and direct attacks against Turkey. Iraqi and U.S. forces have lacked the resources to root out this pocket of terrorist camps despite the continued insistence of Turkish authorities. We have reached a critical point in which the pressure of continued attacks has placed immense public pressure upon the Government of Turkey to take some military action. Ankara understands that military action, even within this small pocket of Iraq, could be potentially destabilizing and counter-productive to our joint goal of achieving a stable and strong Iraqi government. Unfortunately, the PKK terrorist threat is a reality and the Turks justly take it very seriously.

In August 2006, Secretary Rice asked me to undertake the mission of Special Envoy for Countering the PKK. My appointment followed a period of two weeks in which the Turks seemed poised to cross the Iraq border on a mission to root out PKK fighters and destroy their camps. I was given responsibility for coordinating U.S. engagement with the Government of Turkey and the Government of Iraq to eliminate the terrorist threat of the PKK operating in northern Iraq and across the Turkey-Iraq border.

Turkey is a sovereign state with a responsibility to defend its people. Ultimately, the Turkish government will have to take the steps it thinks are necessary to protect its citizens. Over the past six months we have explored what options are available with the Iraqis and Turks to remove the threat posed by this terrorist organization and restore peace to the border zone. Maintaining a peaceful border between Turkey and Iraq is important to our efforts to continue the reconstruction and development of Iraq. My goal was to come up with a set of actions that the U.S. Government, the Turkish government and the Iraqi government could take to eliminate the PKK threat.

I have made half-dozen trips to Turkey and also met with Turkish officials in Europe and the United States. I met not only with Prime Minister Erdogan, Foreign Minister Gul, and the chief of the Turkish General Staff, but also with the Interior Minister of the Turkish National Police and intelligence organizations. Since last September, I have been to Iraq three times and again had meetings with President Talabani, the Vice President, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the Defense Minister, as well as with President Barzani of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil.

I have stressed with all of these governmental officials the unacceptability of Iraqi territory being used as a safe haven for the PKK. I have repeatedly pointed out that the continued existence of the PKK as a terrorist organization works against Iraq's best interests. Turkey is the best possible friend that Iraq could have in that neighborhood. There is no question that the economic interests between Iraq and Turkey are critical for both countries. If the quality of life and economic situation of people on both sides of the border are to improve, then we need to stop the violence. Northern Iraq is full of Turkish construction companies building new infrastructure, its shelves are full of Turkish products, and its roads are full of trucks carrying fuel refined in Turkey.

In conjunction with counterparts, General Edip Baser and Iraqi Minister of State for Security al-Waiii, we have tried to achieve movement on a series of steps that have to be taken by all three governments to be more effective in countering the PKK. These steps include, but are not limited to:

The Iraqi government's public condemnation of the presence of armed PKK militias in Iraq, the order to close PKK offices in the Iraqi Kurdish region, and the facilitation of a PKK declaration of a cessation of hostilities that has lasted for almost six months.

Movement toward closure of the Makhmour refugee camp, which had become a refuge for PKK fighters in the safety of northern Iraq. An agreement structuring the voluntary return of Makhmour camp residents to Turkey and on the camp's disposition is being worked out between Turkey, Iraq, and the UNHCR. Practical steps have had to be dealt with. The camp needed to be cleared of any PKK personnel, all the arms needed to be removed from the camp, UNHCR needed to register every person in the camp -- man, woman, and child -- and everyone in the camp needed to be interviewed to determine their intention to return to Turkey or to remain in Iraq. All of this, except the survey of intentions, has been accomplished. We will continue to work with UNHCR, the Turks and the Iraqis on how to close the camp and what sort of assistance will be needed to encourage the residents to either repatriate or resettle.

On March 5, the three parties held their most recent trilateral meeting to discuss the closure of the camp. Although the discussion did not finalize the agreement, they made substantive progress.

In general, we have successfully increased the amount of communication between the Turks and Iraqis. It is essential to the improvement of the situation that more and better channels of communication can be developed.

Conclusion

I took this position because I believe Turkey is a very important ally of the United States. As the former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, I can testify to the superb performance of the Turkish Armed Forces and I hope the Turks will continue to stand by us. I have no doubt that if we can significantly reduce the PKK threat to Turkey that it will do much to improve the state of relations between the United States and Turkey. Diplomatic progress on this issue has come grudgingly and with great effort, but there has been progress. As the snows melt in the mountain passes along the Turkish-Iraqi border in several weeks, we will see if the PKK renews its attacks and how the Turkish government chooses to respond.



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