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Turkey's Terror Problem Is Ours

By Michael Rubin

The State Department is counseling Turkey to make political concessions to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the terrorist organization that launched an attack in Turkey in October. Michael Rubin argues that this would be a mistake and urges the United States to stand by its long-time NATO ally in its fight against terrorism.

It has been nearly two months since the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) sparked an international crisis with a major attack inside Turkey, and it has been more than six weeks since President Bush promised Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that Washington would aid Turkey's fight against terrorism. Heady talk of intelligence sharing and cooperation followed and, indeed, may have been a factor in this weekend's Turkish air strikes on PKK targets in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Yet at the same time, the Bush administration—more precisely, its increasingly assertive State Department—has embraced an ill-advised diplomatic strategy toward the PKK that will likely backfire on our long-standing NATO ally and could serve to undermine what is left of Bush's global war on terrorism.

With one hundred thousand Turkish troops amassed alongside the Iraqi frontier, it is understandable that U.S. diplomats want to avert a military crisis. But rather than take a zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism, the State Department is counseling Turkey to offer political concessions. On December 13, for example, State Department coordinator for counterterrorism Dell Dailey said, "We have not looked at a military solution as the solution to the PKK. Our preference is a political solution," both inside Iraqi Kurdistan and inside Turkey.

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The desired political solution seems to be Iraqi Kurdish action to close down the safe haven on Iraqi soil in exchange for a general amnesty law in Turkey to forgive most PKK members and perhaps allow other Kurdish language broadcasting and constitutional reforms as well.

Such a deal at this time would be cockeyed. Turkey has a legitimate grievance against both the PKK and Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani. During its October 21 attack on Turkish troops, PKK tactics mirrored those taught by U.S. Special Forces to Barzani's *peshmerga* fighters, suggesting its complicity in training terrorists. A diplomatic solution should not reward such behavior.

This need not mean solely a military solution either. Rather, U.S. officials should threaten isolation and a cessation of all financial assistance until Barzani ceases his safe haven. Confronted with such demands since 2003, Barzani has always begged for more time, only to let his promises lag when the diplomatic spotlight passed.

It is trendy to seek root causes of terror and to discount terrorist ideology. For State Department officials who believe the PKK is just an outgrowth of inequality and discrimination in Turkey, a deal may seem logical. The group's ideology should negate such a compromise. The PKK has its roots in the revolutionary turmoil of the 1970s. Its leader, a university dropout named Abdullah Öcalan, immersed himself in the Marxism and Maoism fashionable among intellectuals of the day and became a committed revolutionary. Cloaking

himself in Kurdish nationalism, Öcalan's first target was not the Turkish military, but rather nonviolent Kurdish civil rights groups.

In August 1984, the PKK launched an insurgency in southeastern Turkey. Like Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, it targeted the educated and modern. PKK terrorists executed school teachers for being public servants. PKK gangs burned medical clinics and murdered their staff. Health care collapsed. As al Qaeda would do two decades later in Iraq, the PKK destroyed critical infrastructure to drive a wedge between the state and the local population. Before ending in 1997, the PKK campaign claimed thirty thousand lives—the majority ethnic Kurds killed by the PKK itself.

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The terror campaign ended not with political concession, but coercion: Turkey threatened to expand its military campaign to Syria, which sheltered the PKK. As the Turkish military mobilized along Syria's frontier, Syrian president Hafez al-Assad blinked and ordered the PKK out. Öcalan sought Greek protection. Rather than try to negotiate compromise with a terrorist, U.S. forces took a no-nonsense approach. U.S. (and Israeli) intelligence tipped Ankara off to Öcalan's whereabouts. On February 16, 1999, Turkish Special Forces captured the PKK leader outside the Greek Embassy in Nairobi. Today, Öcalan serves his life sentence on the prison island of Imrali, but he controls his organization through trusted lieutenants.

Every time the PKK finds a safe haven, it renews violence. Iran briefly sheltered PKK fighters after their expulsion from Syria. No sooner had the PKK established camps than it restarted its terrorism. Turkey responded by bombing both PKK targets and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps posts around the Iranian town of Piran-shahr. While Tehran seldom takes diplomatic demarches or deals seriously, faced with a military redline, the ayatollahs, too, backed down. No U.S. official, obviously, counseled that Turkey should compromise.

And yet, in the name of diplomacy, the Bush administration now does. The White House validates Barzani's decision to play the terror card. For the State Department to accept Barzani's excuse—that Kurdish solidarity

prohibits a crackdown upon the PKK—is naïve. Kurdish solidarity is an oxymoron. Throughout the 1990s, Barzani fought the group he now protects. His change of heart came after the Turkish parliament's 2003 decision not to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Overestimating the chill in U.S.-Turkish relations, he took a hard line against Ankara. As Turkey at the time offered amnesty to those rank-and-file PKK members without blood on their hands, Barzani welcomed the PKK leaders he once fought. Turkish authorities say they have photographs of senior PKK commanders receiving medical treatment in Erbil hospitals and meeting with Barzani associates in nearby restaurants. Last spring, Barzani threatened in an Al Arabiya television interview to unleash insurgency inside Turkey.

So as Barzani denies complicity in terrorism, he nevertheless seeks to leverage it into diplomatic gain. To link demands for Barzani to crack down with any Turkish political concession suggests that Bush has learned nothing from his predecessors' failures. The Bush administration's strategy today mirrors the Clinton administration's approach to late Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat, in which the State Department matched every empty Arafat promise with demands for good-faith concessions from Israel, the democracy he victimized.

While Kurdish officials tell credulous diplomats that the PKK threat would disappear if only Ankara offered greater concessions, the opposite is true: concessions fuel terror. Any Turkish compromise prior to a complete disarmament and expulsion of PKK terrorists from northern Iraq could encourage Syria and its Lebanese proxies to demand concessions in exchange for insincere promises to cease terror support. Pakistan, too, may once again leverage its support and safe haven for the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership into demands upon both Washington and Kabul.

Turkey has been a poor ally in recent years, but fighting terror requires alliances to trump politics. Every country has the right to defend its citizens from terrorism. Barzani may give silk carpets to diplomats, provide lavish spreads during their visits, and have his praises sung by high-powered Washington lobbyists, but so long as he provides the PKK a safe haven, he is a terror enabler. Forcing Turkey to negotiate with the PKK or its intermediaries would only justify its terrorism and would be no wiser than counseling compromise with Hezbollah, Hamas, or al Qaeda.