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Iraqi Kurds and the Turkish-Iraqi Memorandum against the PKK

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On August 7, Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in Ankara against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Although the PKK, based in northern Iraq, is on the U.S. State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, lack of action against the group by Washington and Baghdad is poisoning Turkey's relations with both. Moreover, because the group operates from an area of Iraq controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the PKK issue affects Turkey's ties with Iraqi Kurds as well. Does the MOU represent a breakthrough on any of these fronts?

Background

Turkey had been insisting on al-Maliki's agreement to an MOU that applied to both current and future Iraqi administrations. At first, Baghdad refused to sign any document that referred to the PKK as a terrorist organization. Eventually, however, Iraqi officials agreed to the following language: "[The] two Prime Ministers have agreed upon engaging in cooperative efforts against PKK/KONGRA-GEL terror organization and to end the presence of all terrorist organizations operating in Iraq. . . . [The] two Prime Ministers have given instructions to finalize the 'Agreement on Cooperation Against Terrorism' within two months." (Note: Since 2003, the PKK has used the name Kongra-Gel, or Kurdistan Society Congress.)

Importance of the Memorandum

The MOU serves two purposes. For the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein, an Iraqi official has signed a document declaring the PKK a terrorist organization. In this regard, the memorandum defines the PKK as a terrorist group for all Iraqi factions, including the KDP and PUK, which together compose the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Second, the MOU will likely build legitimacy for Turkey's efforts to tackle the PKK presence in northern Iraq through military means. Predictably, Ankara was pleased by the MOU, given that the PKK has killed more than a hundred Turks in 2007 alone. Washington welcomed the document as well: on August 8, the State Department called the MOU a positive step, since it indicated that Iraq and Turkey were discussing the matter at the highest level.

Iraqi Kurds, however, have responded more ambivalently. To Turks, this seems perplexing. The KDP and PUK benefit from stable relations with Turkey, a vital business partner for both parties. Approximately 80 percent of the nearly \$6 billion investment in the reconstruction of northern Iraq has been made by Turkish companies. Similarly, 380 out of 500 foreign companies in Irbil, the KDP capital, are Turkish. The brand new airports in Irbil and PUK capital Sulaymaniya -- worth \$350 million and \$300 million, respectively -- are Turkish products. Another Turkish company won a \$260 million bid to build a new university campus in Sulaymaniya.

Nevertheless, the KRG has opposed the MOU. On August 12, Qadir Aziz, secretary to KDP leader Massoud Barzani, stated, "The way Turkey defines [the] PKK is not binding for us. As the Kurds are an integral part of the federal Iraqi government, Maliki should have consulted us before signing a treaty on our behalf."

Al-Maliki responded: "We will not let [the] PKK launch terrorist attacks [on] Turkey from Iraqi territory." On August 13, Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari -- a KDP member -- confirmed al-Maliki's position, stating that the KDP and PUK support the memorandum and that their initial reactions should not be taken seriously.

KDP-PUK Relations with the PKK

Ties between the KDP-PUK and PKK have varied over the past two decades. Relations were good when the PKK entered northern Iraq in the late 1980s. At that time, Saddam had launched a campaign against the KDP and PUK, pushing them to the northern fringes of Iraq. The PKK established itself in the political vacuum of the battle zone, moving some of its assets there from Syrian-controlled Lebanon, where it had been based since the 1970s. As the PKK's main target was Turkey, the two Iraqi parties, along with Saddam, turned a blind eye to the group's presence in the north.

Relations between the three groups deteriorated after the 1991 Gulf War. The no-fly zone established by the United States and Turkey to protect Iraqi Kurds from Saddam also provided the PKK with a safe haven. Between 1994 and 1997, the PKK's relative authority in northern Iraq increased during the civil war between the KDP and PUK, forcing Iraqi Kurds to counter the group's influence. In a 1997 U.S.-backed ceasefire agreement signed by the KDP and PUK in Ankara, the two parties agreed to permit crossborder Turkish operations to contain the PKK. They also fought the PKK themselves on occasion.

In light of this background, the two parties' recent inaction should not be viewed as the product of a long-term friendship with the PKK. After all, as far back as 1991, PUK leader and current Iraqi president Jalal Talabani referred to the PKK as "terrorists" during a speech in Austria. Instead, the current Iraqi Kurdish stance can be seen as a strategic gambit.

Today, Iraqi Kurds have a number of pressing strategic concerns vis-a-vis Turkey. The first issue is the status of Kirkuk, an oil-rich city that the Kurds want to integrate into the KRG. Kirkuk is home to a large Turkmen community, and Turkey has taken an interest in the city's political outlook. A second Kurdish concern is the redeployment of U.S. troops to northern Iraq as part of a likely plan to decrease the overall U.S. military presence in Iraq. Third, Iraqi Kurds are concerned about Turkey's position on the KRG's political future should Iraq fall apart. On all of these issues, the KDP and the PUK would seem to believe that the PKK issue gives them leverage in Ankara.

The U.S. Role

The United States has not been forthcoming in addressing the PKK problem in northern Iraq. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has argued that it is too busy to take action against the PKK. At this stage, though, Turkey seems willing to deal with the issue on its own. From Ankara's perspective, the most important U.S. contributions to the struggle against the PKK would be political support and intelligence sharing.

Some American observers have expressed concern that combating the PKK would destabilize northern Iraq. In fact, the region's stability is ensured (at least financially) by Turkish investments. And it is the PKK's presence that keeps the chances of a massive Turkish intervention in northern Iraq alive -- a development that would destabilize the region beyond recognition.

The MOU's statement that an "Agreement on Cooperation Against Terrorism" will be finalized "within two months" indicates that neither Baghdad nor the Iraqi Kurds have come to internal agreements on action against the PKK. Still, the fact that the MOU was signed shows that the Iraqi government is closer to taking such action than it has been since the 1990s. And Washington can play a central mediatory role in facilitating Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish agreement on this key issue. The PKK remains the most significant wedge issue between Turkey and the United States. It also poisons an otherwise potentially good relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds, America's best allies in Iraq. In addition to addressing both of these issues, joint Turkish-KRG action against the PKK could establish stability in northern Iraq without the need to reposition

U.S. troops.

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