

Erdogan Talks Turkey in Washington

By Andrew Purvis
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The visit by Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the White House on November 5 marks an important test of the relationship between America and its best ally in the Muslim world. In Erdogan, the U.S. has a friend who is that rarest of rarities: a democratically elected, democratically minded, economically liberal Islamist — an important bridge between the Muslim world and the secular West. The U.S. needs Erdogan as much as Erdogan needs Washington's cooperation in a recent slew of crises.

A lot is at stake. In the short term, Turkey wants a firm commitment from Washington to help rein in a Kurdish guerrilla group that has stepped up attacks on Turkish security forces, apparently from bases in Iraq, leaving more than 40 dead in October alone. Turkey believes the group, known as the PKK, or Kurdistan Worker's Party, represents as serious a threat to Turkey's existence as Washington says al-Qaeda does to America's. The group has bases in northern Iraq, and Turkey has been urging the U.S. in vain to help clean out those bases since U.S. troops arrived in 2003. In Washington, Erdogan will be seeking U.S. commitments, including military options, to address the PKK threat.

He also wants Washington to use its influence with Iraqi Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq, who nominally control the region from which the PKK is operating, to crack down on the guerrillas. A failure to do so could lead Turkey to send its own troops across the border in pursuit of the PKK, an outcome that the U.S. wants to avoid not only because Iraq is ostensibly America's ally as well but because the Iraqi Kurds are that war-torn nation's only economic success story. Any large-scale movement of Turkish troops into Iraq raises the chances of a clash not just with the PKK but with Iraqi Kurdish soldiers.

For its part, Washington wants to avoid being compelled to intervene between two friends. And, on Sunday, a U.S. diplomatic push led to the release of eight Turkish soldiers held captive by the PKK in Iraq. Iraqi Kurdish leaders said they had played a role in the release.

That kind of action is crucial because Washington wants to be sure of Turkey's ongoing assistance as a staging point for oil and military supplies headed to Iraq. Turkey is also one of the few countries that can mediate between Washington and countries such as Iran and Syria. With war drums beating, Ankara may be a necessary mediator between Washington and Tehran.

In practical terms, Turkey is expected to seek either joint air strikes against PKK bases in the Qandil mountains, near the Iranian border, or American permission for Turkish planes to carry out strikes on their own. The Turkish public has been clamoring for action against the PKK in recent days. On Monday, celebrations of the 84th anniversary of modern Turkey's founding turned into massive nationwide demonstrations against the Kurdish group. The red and white Turkish flag hung across streets and from balconies; cars sported flags on their trunks. This militancy has put Erdogan and his political allies in a difficult spot. His Islamist roots have earned him the distrust of the Turkish military, the old power brokers in the country and the fortress of the nation's secular traditions. America's alliance was as much with the Turkish military as it was with the civilian government, perhaps more so. Indeed, Erdogan's government strongly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq and did not allow Coalition forces to operate out of Turkish bases for the invasion.

Now, however, the U.S. needs to help Erdogan's government by enunciating policies that assuage Turkey's nationalist military and the voice it has found in the popular street demonstrations. Thus, in recent days, the U.S. has sounded more accommodating of Turkey's military proposals after earlier criticizing plans to send troops into northern Iraq. This week, U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said that while Washington still opposes Turkish military operations inside the country "because obviously there are troubles enough in Iraq" Washington understands Turkey's concerns. "It is absolutely imperative that steps be taken to prevent such PKK attacks in the future," he said.

Furthermore, on Nov. 2, after speaking with Erdogan and her counterpart Ali Babacan in Ankara, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that the U.S. and Turkey are now determined to work together against the "common enemy." "I affirmed to the Prime Minister as well as to the foreign minister that the United States considers the PKK a terrorist organization and indeed that we have a common enemy, that we must find ways to take effective action so that Turkey will not suffer

from terrorist attacks," she told reporters after the meetings. "Such attacks are destabilizing for Iraq [and] a problem therefore of security for the United States and Turkey."

Turkey for its part has stressed that any incursion would seek only to attack the PKK and that Turkey had no designs on Iraqi territory, as some Iraqi Kurdish leaders have claimed. Foreign Minister Babacan said that if Turkey does dispatch troops "it would not be an invasion" but instead would consist more of commando raids on PKK positions.

Still, Turkey's PKK troubles are part of a larger set of problems with Kurds in the region. Turkey has accused the Iraqi Kurdish administration in northern Iraq of failing to do enough to clamp down on the PKK. This week, Turkey raised the possibility of economic sanctions against northern Iraq, including restrictions on the flow of traffic and goods at a key border crossing from Turkey into Iraq, as well as cutting off electricity that Turkey supplies to the region. Turkey's biggest fear is that Iraqi Kurds are intent on establishing a separate Kurdish state on their border, which might encourage Turkey's Kurdish minority to attempt to secede. That concern is growing ahead of a planned referendum in Iraq on control over the oil rich region of Kirkuk, a region that Iraqi Kurds claim as their own and control over which would sharply increase their economic and political clout.

In this contest, Turkey needs U.S. support to weigh in with Iraqi Kurds. Ridding the region of the PKK may sound like a difficult task, but starting a dialogue between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish leaders that would lead to peaceful cohabitation in the region will prove more difficult still. *With reporting by Pelin Turgut/Istanbul*