



## FOCUS IRAQ



### “The Man Outside?”

Turkey’s policy on Iraq - between efforts at dialogue  
and threatening gestures

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## “The Man Outside?”

### Turkey’s policy on Iraq – between efforts at dialogue and threatening gestures

Turkey cannot remain a spectator in Iraq  
Tayyip Erdoğan<sup>1</sup>

On 1st March 2003, in a vote that attracted a great deal of public attention, the Turkish parliament refused to allow Turkey to be used as a concentration area for US troops in the Iraq war. This refusal to participate in the “*Coalition of the Willing*”, which came as a surprise to US decision-makers, simultaneously marked a move away from the prevailing foreign policy course steered by Turkey, a policy whose roots lie to an extent in the assumption of office by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001. The refusal to participate in the war initially contributed significantly to improving Turkey’s status in the Arab world. At the same time this refusal sent Ankara’s traditionally close relationship with the USA into a profound crisis and fostered the emergence of entirely new coalitions of interests in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Current developments in Iraq now pose a tricky foreign policy dilemma for Turkey: the Republic can only secure its security interests internationally in conjunction with US-led NATO, yet at the same time can only be consistent in promoting its own interests in Iraq by a stance *opposed* to the USA’s pro-Kurdish policy. It has so far not been possible to resolve this dilemma. The current threatening gestures from Turkish Chief of Staff Büyükanıt add significance to this problem.

### Turkey and the region post-Saddam: new constellations of interests

In 2003 the Turkish refusal to participate in “*Operation Iraqi Freedom*” triggered a cooling down in the “harmonious triangle” that had existed till then between Turkey, Israel and the USA. This was exacerbated by statements criticising Israel, which were made by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan with reference to Israeli “state-sponsored terrorism”.<sup>3</sup> At the same time Turkey tried to foster relations to nearly all neighbouring states in the region.

This cooling down took on a more permanent status as a consequence of differing conceptions of the new order in Iraq after the US invasion.<sup>4</sup> Turkey’s traditional principal concern – understood as preventing an independent Kurdish state and maintaining Iraq’s

<sup>1</sup> Erdoğan, Tayyip quotation based on: <http://www.bbm.gov.tr/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1622,09.04.07>.

<sup>2</sup> This is not just with reference to official government contacts but also in terms of growing anti-American sentiment in the Turkish population – and indeed not just within the Islamic religious camp. Cagaptay, Soner: Where Goes the U.S.-Turkish Relationship? In: *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, Jonathan Eric: Replace Turkey as a Strategic Partner? In: *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Öztürk, Asiye: Das Entstehen eines Macht-Dreiecks. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* (B 33-34/2004).



territorial integrity – now broadly coincides with the interests of the countries neighbouring Iraq but at the same time is, to say the least, a position that causes friction with US policy, which, in a nutshell, consists in the formula “federalism and a strong Kurdistan”. Against the backdrop of this new constellation of interests, one can now talk of a certain rapprochement in terms of realpolitik between Turkey, Syria and Iran.

Although – in the light of Turkish-Syrian system rivalry too – it is too early to talk of any “alliance” of these forces, contacts between Iran, Syria and Turkey have grown more intensive over the last few months.<sup>5</sup> For example during a trip to Ankara recently, Ali Larijani, the influential chairman of the Iranian National Security Council, openly espoused joint military action by Syria, Iran and Turkey in northern Iraq to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. Although such comprehensive action appears rather unrealistic at present, these considerations nonetheless point to the spectrum of potential joint possibilities.<sup>6</sup> This shift in Ankara’s interests towards a partial convergence with those of Teheran poses a raft of fundamental foreign policy problems for Turkey – in no small part also in terms of relations with the USA.

### **Meagre influence but a lot to lose**

Although Turkey’s strategic interests mean developments in Iraq have a pronounced impact on Turkey, at present the country can draw on only a fairly limited number of options to genuinely shape events and policy. As the parliament refused in March 2003 to allow US troops to attack via Turkey, the USA at first refused Ankara virtually any right to have a say in post-war Iraq.

In tactical terms Turkey is currently confronted with the problem that – unlike other regional players – it does not have any significant powerbase in Iraq through which to intervene and steer the outcome of the conflict, with the exception of the Turkoman minority. Whilst Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia act as advocates for the largely marginalised Iraqi Sunnites, the USA de facto has a Kurdish power base and Iran is a decisive factor in shaping developments via the primarily Shi’ite-based parties, Turkey lacks comparable scope to bring its influence to bear.

In the light of this fact, Ankara has recently been stepping up efforts to attain greater political heft. In this respect Turkish involvement aims above all to strengthen the power of the central state in Iraq. For this reason Turkey has become involved in state and government-building efforts in Iraq, as this is viewed as the only option to preserve the country’s unity. Both the development of the constitution and the groundwork for the Iraqi elections were supported by Turkey.<sup>7</sup> In the run-up to the elections, Prime Minister Erdoğan invited Sunni Iraqi leaders to Istanbul to convince them of the need to participate in the electoral process and to avoid the country collapsing into sectarian factions.<sup>8</sup> Relations with the central government in Baghdad were cemented by state visits and ministerial meetings, such as on 17th November 2006 between Erdoğan and Al

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Taspınar, Omer: Turkey Eyes the Shia Crescent. In: *Newsweek International*, 12th February 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Kirişçi, Kemal: Turkey’s Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times. In: *Chailot Paper*, No. 92, September 2006, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Elsercani, Halid: Türkiye ve Irak’ta rol arayışı. In: [www.ntvmsnbc.com](http://www.ntvmsnbc.com), 21.02.07.



Maliki in Ankara, as well as through economic and security cooperation.<sup>9</sup> Meetings of Iraq's neighbours initiated by Turkey served as a further forum for Turkish-Iraqi cooperation.

### **Turkey's traditional interest: preventing Kurdistan**

In the light of the extremely sensitive domestic conflict over the Kurdish population in Turkey and the persistent dominance of the Republic's "Kurd syndrome"<sup>10</sup>, it is no surprise that analyses of Turkish Iraq policy need to differentiate between the stance adopted vis-à-vis the central state and in respect of Iraqi Kurdistan. With reference specifically to Kurdistan, Turkey is currently pursuing a thoroughly contradictory policy.

In essence the strategic interest of the Turkish state amounts primarily to preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state. On this issue the ideas of the ruling AKP broadly – however not completely – coincide with the military's convictions and those of the presidency and the opposition. However, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has a more pronounced interest than other players in developments in Iraq taking a positive turn, for as the party in government the AKP has to date refrained from adopting a sharper tone in Iraq, also in the light of EU accession negotiations. It becomes clear in this context that the Erdoğan government is more inclined to conduct an open dialogue with representatives from Iraqi Kurdistan than is the case for decision-makers in the Turkish general staff. The latter are currently exerting considerable pressure to hinder a substantive dialogue with Iraqi Kurdish leaders. They are supported in this stance by opposition forces, such as the Republican People's Party (CHP). Differences between the ruling AKP and the military in their assessment of the "Kurdish Question" also became obvious in the recent dismissal of anti-terrorism coordinator Edip Başer. It is therefore debatable whether Erdoğan, who has come under pressure anyway from the military establishment and the public recently in the context of the presidential elections and the recent terror attacks in Ankara and Izmir, will be able to continue with the rather moderate course he has pursued to date.<sup>11</sup>

The differing interests of and power struggles between the ruling party, AKP, the National Security Council and the President, which have been exacerbated still further by the precocious electoral campaign, give rise to a thoroughly contradictory policy in northern Iraq. It is common knowledge that Turkey's prime interest continues to be preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq and preventing an independent Kurdistan, which Turkey fears would have devastating ramifications for Kurdish efforts to attain independence within Turkey.

Turkish policy appears to be contradictory at least *nolens volens*, in as much as the Kurdish Region has been significantly supported *de facto* by the establishment of economic links, whilst at the same time Turkish decision-makers and the military are threatening military intervention, referring to the presence of the PKK in the border region of northern Iraq

<sup>9</sup> "Türkiye-Irak Arasında PKK İşbirliği", in: [www.haberler.com](http://www.haberler.com), 17.02.07.

<sup>10</sup> Kramer, Heinz: Die Interessen der Türkei. In: Muriel Asseburg (ed.): Regionale (Neu)Ordnung im Nahen und Mittleren Osten und die Rolle externer Akteure. SWP-Studie 7, March 2007, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Larrabee, Stephen: Turkey's war of nerves. In: *Jordan Times*, 16. May 2007.



and to the Turkoman minority. This ambiguity is also reflected at the political level: whilst Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Talabani made joint statements at the *Arab League Summit* at the end of March in Riyadh, stressing they are prepared to cooperate in combating “terrorism”<sup>12</sup>, Sezer, the Turkish President, refused to arrange a meeting with his Kurdish Iraqi counterpart, Talabani.<sup>13</sup>

The long-term strategic interests of the AKP government in Iraq comprise the following points:

- Maintaining Iraq’s territorial and political integrity.
- Preserving a balance between the various ethnic and religious groups among the population.
- Establishing a strong central government in Baghdad.
- Control of the borders and border areas by the central government.
- Maintaining the rights of the Turkomans and constitutional guarantees of these rights in Kurdistan.
- Promoting a “territorial” as opposed to an “ethnic” federalism.
- Expelling the PKK from northern Iraq (Qandil Mountains).<sup>14</sup>

These long-term interests result in the following rather short-term tactical concerns:

- Deletion of separatist elements from the Iraqi constitution.
- Postponing the referendum on whether oil-rich Kirkuk is part of the Kurdistan region.
- Control of oil and other natural resources by the central government.
- No immediate withdrawal, but instead medium-term withdrawal of coalition forces in Iraq.

Given these concerns, it is clear that this catalogue of interests comprises a number of points in contradiction to the USA’s current policy on Iraq. This is first and foremost the case with reference to the de facto US alliance with the Kurdish Autonomous Region, which *also* came into being partly in response to Turkey’s refusal to join the US campaign.<sup>15</sup> On a more factual political level, Turkish and American interests diverge over and above this in terms of the USA’s preference for proportional distribution of oil revenue, as well as in the pronounced federal cast of the Iraqi state as a whole that is advocated by Washington.

These conflicts of interest with American policy on Iraq give rise to a fundamental dilemma in current Turkish foreign policy, which explains certain ambiguities: Turkey is only able to secure its own security interests internationally in conjunction with US-led NATO, yet at the same time can only be consistent in promoting its own interests in Iraq by a stance *opposed* to the USA’s pro-Kurdish policy. This dilemma is reflected in a two-

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<sup>12</sup> “Talabani Erdoğan’ı Aradı: Üzgünüz”, in: *Zaman*, 10.04.07.

<sup>13</sup> Akyol, Mustafa: Kürdofobik Dış Politikanın Türkiye’ye Zararı. In: [www.mustafaakyol.org](http://www.mustafaakyol.org), 26.11.06.

<sup>14</sup> Nureddin, Muhammed: Türkiye Irak’a Seyirci Kalmayacak. In: *NTV/MSNBC.com*, 19.01.07.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, Michael: A Comedy of Errors: American-Turkish Diplomacy and the Iraq War. In: *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2005.



pronged thrust to Turkish policy in Iraq, oscillating between the poles of military intervention and dialogue.

Whilst speculation about Turkish military intervention has hit the headlines over the last few weeks, this tense relationship has so far brought about something of a wait-and-see policy on the part of Turkey. Nonetheless Turkish foreign policy has abandoned its rigid course on certain points over the last four years. After a period in which the objectives listed above were initially defined as “red lines”, which, if crossed, would as a logical consequence trigger military intervention, since 2004 a more pragmatic approach, oriented more closely to the realities of the situation in Iraq, has gained ground. Commentators interpreted this as an attempt by Turkey to establish the Kurdish Iraq region as a buffer zone between Turkey and the rest of conflict-ridden Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

### **“Economic reconciliation” in northern Iraq? The economic level**

Although political reservations about an independent Kurdistan continue to form a Kemalist basic consensus in the Republic, economic relations between Turkey and northern Iraq have become ever closer, and not just since the fall of Saddam’s regime. Estimates put the current trade volume between the Kurdistan region and Turkey in the construction sector alone at c. two billion US dollars per annum. Turkish firms are now driving forward the development of modern infrastructure in northern Iraq: Turkish investors are promoting the construction of roads, waste water systems, public buildings, as well as the construction of Erbil airport.

The aggregate volume of Turkish-Kurdish economic relations currently amounts to 7 billion US dollars per annum, as the Turkish State Ministry for Foreign Trade announced in April this year. That makes Turkey the most important trading partner of the Kurdistan Region nowadays. The Kurdish regional government has even estimated that around 70 per cent of all public and private contracts in the autonomous region have been awarded to Turkish firms over the past few years. The most visible signs of these close economic relations are to be found not merely in the endless queues of Turkish lorries at the Iraqi-Turkish border, but also on the shelves of Kurdish supermarkets, for example in Erbil, sometimes stocked with up to 40 per cent Turkish goods.<sup>17</sup> Whilst a current report from the *International Crisis Group* assumes there to be approximately 300 Turkish businesses in Kurdistan, estimates of up to 1,200 businesses are to be found in the Turkish press – as well as a slogan summing up this development: “economic reconciliation”.<sup>18</sup>

Today it seems as though this boom may well stabilise in the coming months. To all intents and purposes, the perspectives for profit-yielding economic relations are at least potentially positive – particularly when one considers that in future Turkish pipelines will offer the best option for realising the value of Kurdish oil-fields. Therefore, the oil sector may emerge as a field for cooperation that should prove profitable for both parties.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann, Rainer: Kürt Korkusu Azalıyor. In: *Radikal*, 29.12.2005.

<sup>17</sup> Serpil Yilmaz: Turks are reconstructing northern Iraq – Part 5. In: *Turkish Weekly*, 24th April 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Serpil Yilmaz: Turks are reconstructing northern Iraq – Part 3. In: *Turkish Weekly*, 24th April 2007; International Crisis Group: Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis. Middle East Report No. 64, April 2007, p. 16.



## Dialogue as a means to an end? The political level

One strand of Turkish foreign policy is taking pains to achieve a policy of influence by means of dialogue, while retaining the baselines of foreign policy as a whole. Regarding Iraq, this approach is currently being supported above all by the AKP. The Turkish government was and is aware that a democratic Near and Middle East with a liberal market economy would surely be in Turkey's interests.<sup>19</sup> However, the Turkish government believes that this goal can hardly be reached within the framework of the US government's *Greater Middle East Initiative*.

Turkey sees democratisation as a long-term transition process and questions the wisdom of attempting to achieve that transition at the expense of current regimes, let alone by force or unilateral intervention. The chaos in Iraq and the challenges that this presents to Turkey is a constant and daily reminder of the dangers of military intervention and imposed transitions.<sup>20</sup>

In the light of this conviction, Turkey attempted to initiate an Iraq dialogue with the countries of the region even back in early 2003, just before the US intervention. The first of the meetings within this framework took place in Istanbul in January 2003 at ministerial level, and the Turkish government declared it a purely Turkish initiative, which gave neighbouring countries the opportunity to meet and have a level playing field for dialogue.<sup>21</sup> Since the beginning of the war, ten regional conferences have taken place within the framework of this initiative. The success of these meetings, however, is questionable.<sup>22</sup>

From the perspective of the Turkish government, the international conference held in Baghdad in mid-March of this year is also to be placed within the context of this initiative. However, the difference was that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki and delegates of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council participated, in addition to Iraq's six neighbouring countries. The Turkish Foreign Ministry expected that the conference would *inter alia* produce "the declaration of a common will to build an Iraq which protects its political and territorial unity, secures its borders and contributes to peace and stability in the region".<sup>23</sup> Parallel to such statements, this pursuit of Iraq's territorial and political unity was reinforced in the Turkish media: Edip Başer, the Turkish special envoy for counter-terrorism, confirmed on CNN Türk that a federally organised Iraq would result in independence for Kurdish northern Iraq. That would be diametrically opposed to Turkish interests.<sup>24</sup>

During the run-up to the Baghdad conference, Turkish media attributed a key role to the Republic in this context, and presented the conference process as a *Turkish* initiative to breathe new life into the process of cooperation between Iraq's neighbouring countries,

<sup>19</sup> Kırışçı, Kemal: Turkey's Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times. In: *Chaillot Paper*, No. 92, September 2006, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Irak'taki Şiddet Yangını Geri Dönülemez Bir Noktaya Ulaşmadan Söndürülmeli". In: *T.C. Başbakanlık Basın Merkezi*, 28.02.06 (<http://www.bbm.gov.tr/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1430>)

<sup>22</sup> Çandar, Cengiz: Bağdat'tan İstanbul'a Yol Gider mi?. In: *Hürriyet*, 13.03.07.

<sup>23</sup> Bağdat Toplantısında Ağırlık Güvenlikte. In: *Hürriyet*, 09.03.07.

<sup>24</sup> Türkiye'nin Önceliği Kürdistan'ın Kurulmasını Engellemek. In: *Hürriyet*, 09.04.07.



offering an enlightening insight into the way that Turkish politics perceives itself.<sup>25</sup> However, other opinions were also to be heard in the press, considering Ankara's role to be more modest. For example, *Hürriyet* emphasised the importance of the conference for the Turkish government and took a critical tack on the reasons for participation, which it dubbed “Turkish propaganda for the Turks”, an attempt to underline Turkey’s role in Iraq and scope for action.<sup>26</sup>

As indicated above, Turkey is actually often much less able to influence developments in Iraq than it claims, as can ultimately also be observed in the fact that the May 2007 follow-up meeting to the Baghdad conference was not in Istanbul, but rather in Sharm al-Sheikh in Egypt, even though the Turkish government had campaigned vigorously for the meeting to be held in Istanbul.<sup>27</sup>

## The military option

Extreme actions might well trigger extreme reactions, even some that, on their face, would not appear rational and could harm Turkey’s long-term interests.<sup>28</sup>

Since April of this year, Turkey seems to be deviating from its policy of peaceful dialogue, at least rhetorically. This was triggered by a speech in Diyarbakır by General Ilker Başbuğ, Commander of the Turkish Ground Forces. Referring to Turkey’s sovereignty, Başbuğ declared that Ankara could adopt “appropriate measures at any time” against “the separatist terrorist organisations in northern Iraq”, if “military necessities” so required.<sup>29</sup> Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdish Region in northern Iraq, immediately responded to Turkey’s threatening gestures by speculating about a Kurdish intervention in Turkey. At the end of May, Turkish Chief of Staff Büyükanıt again declared the army’s readiness to enter Iraq and even speculated about not only fighting the PKK but also Barzani.

These verbal escalations took place against the background of comments by decision-makers within the Turkish military hierarchy, who have repeatedly pointed over the last few months to the presence of approximately 4,000 PKK fighters in the Turkish-Iraqi border region (Qandil Mountains), and hold these forces responsible for increasing violence in Turkey. Today, these acts of violence are perceived in public discourse in Turkey as a direct result of Washington’s Iraq policy.<sup>30</sup> Against this background, an increasing number of reports over the last few weeks about concentrations of Turkish

<sup>25</sup> Türkiye'den Irak için Yeni İnisiyatif. In: *CNN Türk.com*, 26.02.07.

<sup>26</sup> Çandar, Cengiz: Bağdat'tan İstanbul'a Yol Gider mi?. In: *Hürriyet*, 13.03.07.

<sup>27</sup> Irak Konferansı için İstanbul hala Belirsiz. In: *Zaman*, 11.03.07.

<sup>28</sup> “Iraq. Allaying Turkey’s Fears over Kurdish Ambitions“. In: International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report* No. 35, January 2005, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> “Komutan Diyarbakır’da sert konuştu“. In: *Hürriyet*, 10.03.07.

<sup>30</sup> Cagaptay, Soner: Can the PKK Renounce Violence? In: *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2007.





troops in the border region are of particular concern, for this development makes military intervention in Iraq in early summer at least a practicable option.<sup>31</sup>

These most recent comments once again triggered a discussion that has been smouldering in Turkey ever since the beginning of the war in Iraq. Even before the US intervention, the Turkish government had intended to participate in the form of a military contingent in northern Iraq. These troops were to prevent streams of Iraqi refugees into Turkey and hinder establishment of an independent Kurdish state with Kurdish control of the oil-fields. “Joint Headquarters” with the Americans were to be established in northern Iraq, where a Turkish and an American general were to cooperate.

These plans became obsolete when the Turkish parliament declined to permit Turkish participation in this campaign. Turkey was now to a large extent isolated. While the parliament did vote in October 2003 to provide 10,000 troops for northern Iraq within the framework of the stabilisation forces for Iraq demanded by the US, the Kurdish leadership prevented implementation of this plan.<sup>32</sup>

It is nonetheless clear that even today it would not be accurate to state that Turkey has no military involvement whatsoever in northern Iraq. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, Turkish soldiers and *Special Forces*, whose mandate and activities cannot be determined precisely, have been deployed in the border region with northern Iraq. It is estimated that they comprise approximately 1,200 to 1,500 men.<sup>33</sup>

The Turkish side justifies this presence *inter alia* with the protection of the Turkoman minority. But it is obvious that this commitment seeks above all to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state. In addition, the presence of PKK forces in northern Iraq is a decisive factor for Turkey. Time and again, Turkey demands US action against the PKK combatants in northern Iraq. According to official Turkish statements, the US government has responded to these demands in a positive manner, but has never undertaken concrete steps. Turkey feels both the US and the international community fail to provide adequate support in response to this PKK presence. For instance, Minister of Justice Çiçek emphasised in March of this year that Turkey has so far had to conduct its “war on terror” all by itself.<sup>34</sup>

In the current situation, relations between Turkey and the US, which are overall somewhat strained, as well as the markedly cooled-off relations between the EU and Turkey against the background of Turkey’s EU accession negotiations, mean that Turkey might pursue its interests in Iraq with less restraint in future. Prime Minister Erdoğan’s comment on this issue in January 2007 was telling: “Iraq is more important to us than the EU”. Although speculations and threats of military intervention must in principle be understood against the backdrop of the Turkish election campaign, it is nonetheless clear that in making the specific threat of intervening militarily in northern Iraq Turkey is now less swayed by US and European objections than is often assumed. Against this

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<sup>31</sup> Lando, Ben: Turkey-Kurdish Conflict Threatens Stability of Iraq. In: *World Politics Review*, 26th April 2007.

<sup>32</sup> ICG *Middle East Report* No. 35, January 2005, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Barkey, Henri J.: Turkey and Iraq: The Perils (and Prospects) of Proximity. In: United States Institute of Peace (ed.): *Iraq and Its Neighbors Series*. July 2005, Special Report No. 141, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> “ABD’den Beklentimiz Sürüyor”, in: *CNN Türk Com*, 11.03.07.



background, the visit to Ankara in mid-April of this year by David Satterfield, Senior Iraq Advisor at the US State Department, apparently served to prevent Turkey from intervening militarily.<sup>35</sup> This is not the only time that the US has made such an attempt: the country has repeatedly spoken out against Turkey taking action on its own in northern Iraq.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, recent reports, especially in the Turkish media, have indicated that the US recently implicitly accepted a limited military strike against PKK bases in northern Iraq.<sup>37</sup> Such action, however, would contradict the Turkish self-perception as a “soft power” which has become increasingly significant in the last couple of years.

### **The powder keg of Kirkuk: the focal point of the controversy**

The future of Iraq’s federal system will be decided as a function of the status to be accorded to the city of Kirkuk. Kurdish demands that Kirkuk be integrated into the autonomous Kurdish Region are met with fierce Turkish resistance, as Kirkuk’s oil deposits would guarantee the economic viability of an independent Kurdish state.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the *International Crisis Group* is right in speaking of Kirkuk as Kurdistan’s “ticket to independence.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, Turkey traditionally views itself as the guardian of Iraq’s Turkomans, many of whom live in this region.<sup>40</sup> At the centre of the Kirkuk question is Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which provides for a referendum before the end of 2007 on Kirkuk belonging to the Kurdistan Region. The Turkish government has stated repeatedly in recent months that it considers it absolutely essential to postpone the referendum.

For this reason, the Turkish government is likely to approve of the fact that, despite the constitutional provisions, it is becoming less and less likely that the referendum will be held this year, even though that scenario cannot be ruled out entirely. Although technical problems (conducting a census) suggest that the referendum should be postponed, it appears above all to be political decisions that are responsible for obstructing it. For Kurdish decision-makers, a referendum would make sense only if the international community considers the result to be legitimate. However in the current situation – and in the face of international resistance – precisely that outcome is unlikely. Kurdish decision-makers therefore now seem to be restricting themselves to controlling Kirkuk *de facto*, a policy they are pursuing by expelling and resettling Arabs and Turkomans and replacing them with Kurds, which would also seem to serve their ends in the light of a subsequent referendum.

Understandably, this policy of ethnic *Kurdification* of Kirkuk has met with decisive Turkish resistance, even without the referendum hanging over the process like a sword

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<sup>35</sup> “US blames Kurds for Turkey-Iraq tension”. In: *Zaman*, 23.4.2007.

<sup>36</sup> Kramer, Heinz: Unruhen im türkischen Kurdengebiet. In: SWP-Aktuell 20, April 2006, p. 3; Laciner, Sedat: ABD ve Kürt Sorunu. In: *USAK Stratejik Gündem*, 09.04.07.

<sup>37</sup> *Ortadoğu*, 23rd April 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Around 40 per cent of Iraqi oil reserves are in Kirkuk. Güçlü, Yücel: Who Owns Kirkuk? The Turkoman Case. In: *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2007.

<sup>39</sup> ICG: Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis. *Middle East Report* No. 64, April 2007, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Kizilyaprak, Zeynel Abidin: Die Neukonstruktion des Irak und die kurdische Frage im Mittleren Osten. In: *DOI Focus*, No. 20, March 2005, pp. 16/17.



of Damocles. In this vein, Prime Minister Erdoğan emphasised at an AKP rally in January 2007 that one could not simply stand on the side-lines and watch “games being played with the demographic composition of Kirkuk”.<sup>41</sup>

### **New voices in Turkey: movement on the Kurdistan issue?**

Turkey’s strategic interest traditionally amounts – as sketched out above – primarily to preventing an independent Kurdish state. Against this backdrop however, it appears revealing that parallel to this standard course other voices have also been heard recently in the media and civil society, criticising Turkey’s “Kurdophobic foreign policy” and seeking alternatives.<sup>42</sup> At the start of this year, 50 writers, academics and political decision-makers met for a two-day conference, which was covered extensively in *Radikal*.<sup>43</sup> The aim of the conference was – to cite *Radikal* – “to find out about the problems of our Kurdish fellow citizens and seek solutions to the problems”.<sup>44</sup> One striking aspect here was the decision to print the full text of the conference’s inaugural speech, in which the writer Yaşar Kemal presented the Turkish fear of the independence of the Kurds in northern Iraq as being unfounded, characterising as mere speculation concerns that Turkey would be divided by an independent Kurdistan:

What do the Kurds in Iraq have to do with you? [...] The Iraqi Kurds do not want northern Iraq to be independent. For independence would not do them any good. They want federalism from the bottom of their hearts. It rather suits them to be within a federal state.<sup>45</sup>

However, in the same newspaper Yaşar Kemal’s speech was also discussed with disappointment. Whilst he was not reproached for being “pro-Kurdish”, he was accused of proposing a sweeping generalisation in his appraisal of the situation, a view considered to be just as untenable as that of the “Kurdophobic” camp.<sup>46</sup> Although these types of opinion cannot gather a consensus in Turkey yet, they do nonetheless trace out interesting newer developments, which reveal possible options for a constructive Turkish policy vis-à-vis Iraq. Even though these opinions have been rather widespread in intellectual circles in Turkey for a while, they now seem to reach out to influence public discourse.

<sup>41</sup> “Kerkük Türkiye’yle Irak Kürtlerini Karşı Karşıya Getiriyor”. In: *Inter Press Service Haber Ajansı*, 02.02.07.

<sup>42</sup> C.f. inter alia. Akyol, Mustafa: Kürdofobik Dış Politikanın Türkiye’ye Zararı. In: <http://www.mustafaakyol.org/archives>, 26.11.06; Özel, Soli: Kendini Aldatmak. In: *Sabah*, 26.11.2006. Işık, Murat: Kürt Sorununa ‘Seçilmiş Travmalar’ı Asarak Bakabilmek. In: Liberal Düşünce Topluluğu (<http://www.liberal-dt.org.tr/modules/printer.php?art=322>; 09.04.07); “Yeni Bir Yılın Başında Dünya, Ortadoğu ve Türkiye”. In: *Ekim. Türkiye Komünist İşçi Partisi Merkez Yayın Organı*, No. 246, February 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Türkiye Information. In: *FES*, Newsletter, No. 06 Feb. 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Erdem, Tarnhan: Türkiye Barışını Arıyor. In: *Radikal*, 18.01.07.

<sup>45</sup> Kemal, Yaşar: Türk’ün Türk’ten Başka Dostu Var!. In: *Radikal*, 14.01.07.

<sup>46</sup> Mert, Nuray: Bir Büyük Yazarın Küçük Hesapları. In: *Radikal*, 16.01.07.



### What remains?

In the light of the contradictions in their current policy on Iraq, one of the key recommendations to the Turkish government would be to continue dialogue with the Kurdish regional government, which could ultimately also have a positive impact on relations between the Turkish state and the Kurdish population in Turkey.<sup>47</sup> In addition, it seems to be of paramount importance that Turkey exercise military restraint in northern Iraq – in no small part for economic reasons too. For ultimately, even more pronounced economic cooperation between Ankara and the Kurdistan region could trigger economic dynamism, which could take at least some of the sting out of the zero-sum dilemma of Turkish foreign policy as described above.

Military interventions indicated by recent troop movements along the Turkish-Iraqi border, however, would not be helpful in any case. Military experts doubt the effectiveness of any such incursion – be it a limited action or the creation of a buffer-zone – last but not least by referring to the lessons of the recent asymmetric war in Lebanon. Thus, while chances of military success are doubtful, there is no doubt at all that a military intervention would transform the Turkish political *dilemma* described here into nothing less than a political *disaster*.

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<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless the situation of Kurds in Iraq should be analysed separately from the situation of Kurds in Turkey.