

## **Vision, trust and leadership required**

**by Murat Somer**

Looking at the rhetoric of Turkish political and military leaders on Turkey's redlines in Iraq, an outside observer may conclude that Turkey and Iraqi Kurds are on a course of inevitable collision caused by irreconcilable interests. Turkey strongly opposes many Kurdish aspirations such as the control of Kirkuk within an ethnic federation and eventual independence. Moreover, its policies seem to be primarily shaped by these concerns.

Is there any room for flexibility and compromise? Given time, perhaps, because within Turkey both the official and societal views on Kurds are changing and diversifying in response to internal and external developments. Beneath the defensive-nationalist perspective that continues to dominate the official discourse, one can also discern a growing liberal-nationalist perspective, which allows ample room for cooperative relations with Iraqi Kurds. Over time, this second perspective may become more influential in shaping Turkey's policies and developing a more multidimensional approach toward Iraq.

On Turkey's part, this requires continuing efforts to resolve its domestic Kurdish conflict democratically; politicians must exercise leadership, rather than focusing on satisfying an often weakly informed public opinion. On the Kurds' part, this requires restraint from any fiery rhetoric that hardens Turkish public opinion, the abandonment or postponement of some of their aspirations, and explaining to younger generations the reasons for these concessions. Both sides need to find ways to make credible commitments to respecting each other's fundamental interests and to allow open and critical political discussion in order to find out what these fundamental interests really are.

The defensive-nationalist perspective in Turkey draws on the ideological example of French nation-building and on history: the Ottoman Empire's ethnic disintegration and early Kurdish rebellions that threatened both the secular and unitary aspects of modern Turkey following its foundation in 1923. The resulting model of nation-building and citizenship was based on the promotion of cultural-linguistic homogeneity and the suppression of ethnic differentiation, especially that of the Kurds.

More recently, the country underwent a traumatic period of violence and terrorism whereby tens of thousands of people lost their lives as a result of the conflict between the security forces and the Kurdish-separatist PKK (now also called Kongra-Gel), mainly in the country's southeast. According to the Turkish authorities, the creation of de facto Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq following the first Gulf War significantly contributed to the escalation of violence in the early 1990s by providing a safe haven for the PKK. Overall, these experiences produce a reflexive suspicion of Kurdish (both cultural and political) nationalism and superpower meddling in the region.

The ideology that actual and enforced cultural-linguistic homogeneity is the insurance of state survival and political unity has been under question in Turkish society since the 1980s. However, open search for less diversity-phobic models of national identity and citizenship, by civil actors as well as within the state, really began only after the PKK leader Ocalan's capture and Turkey's gaining EU-member candidacy in 1999. It gained serious momentum recently in expectation of the start of the actual membership negotiations in October 2005.

These discussions give rise to the liberal-nationalist perspective on Iraq. From this perspective, cultural forms of Kurdish nationalism may not threaten Turkey's unity and there is no reason that Turkey and Iraqi Kurds should not be mutually supportive neighbors over time, perhaps in a way similar to how Britain and the Irish of Ireland are today. About half of Turkey's sizeable Kurdish population, which one may perhaps call a silent majority comprising fully or partially ethnic Kurds scattered across the country, is well integrated with the rest of Turkish society. In addition, Turkey's EU prospects and the fact that Turkish Kurds enjoy full citizenship, and more recently and yet incompletely the actual ability to express their ethnic-cultural identity on an individual level, make it unlikely that they will support separatism.

Thus, Turkey could value the well-being of Iraqi Kurds, who are not only its neighbors but also the ethnic-linguistic relatives of a significant portion of its citizens, as much as it values the well-being of Iraqi Turkmens--that is to say, if one accepts the dubious premise that ethnic affinity should be a major guide in shaping state policy. Turkey would benefit economically from a stable and thriving neighbor bordering its poor southeast.

Turkey also fears that Iraq will turn into an undemocratic, theocratic state. Among the various groups in Iraq, Kurds probably share Turkey's secular and western-looking agenda the most. Similarly, Iraqi Kurds have everything to gain from building cooperative relations with their major northern neighbor for their security as well as economic and political interests. At the same time, conflict is costly for both sides: it could put an end to Iraqi Kurds' hopes for prosperity and self-governance, while undermining Turkey's democratization and integration with the EU and derailing its hopes to find a peaceful solution for its domestic Kurdish conflict. Thus, Turkey and Iraqi Kurds can move toward a mutually beneficial, cooperative relationship if they manage to form their policies on a more rational and forward-looking basis.

It will take time and a lot of work to build mutual trust in order to reach this stage. For the time being, Turkey's expectations from Iraq's reconfiguration include: the protection of Iraq's territorial integrity, opposition to Kurds' controlling Kirkuk (which would weaken Iraq's unity and give the Kurds the economic power to seek independence and/or pursue pan-Kurdish foreign policies), provincial federation (which weakens the political role of ethnic identity), security and cultural-political rights for the Iraqi Turkmens (reflecting suspicion over Kurdish intentions and in order to counterweigh Kurds), and a crack-down on the PKK in northern Iraq. In order to make any compromise between Turkey and Kurds possible, one needs to understand that the primary Turkish concerns underlying these expectations are first, civil war and unrest in Iraq that could draw Turkey in, and second, the emergence of a "hostile" southeastern neighbor with pan-Kurdish aspirations. The Turkish, Iraqi, and

American sides should work together to find creative ways in which they can credibly address these concerns.

Several examples come to mind. First, de facto elimination of the PKK military threat to Turkish state security from northern Iraq would probably go a long way in establishing trust and making Turkish positions more flexible. Second, in order to meet Turkey's security concerns, Turks and Iraqis may find ways to make the mountainous Turkish-Iraqi border safer against terrorist infiltration. Third, granting a hefty share of oil revenues to Iraqi Kurds in return for their acquiescing to an autonomous status for Kirkuk would create a credible commitment to Iraq's unity on the part of Kurds; this would probably make Turkey less wary of an ethnic federation or semi-ethnic federation (Kurdish regional autonomy in the north plus the rest) provided that Iraqi Turkmen minority rights are ensured. Fourth, major economic projects that would create further economic interdependence between Turkey and Iraq would contribute to the development of trust over time. Fifth, Iraqi Kurdish leaders should abstain from making conflicting statements regarding any pan-Kurdish aspirations.

In return, Turkey can find ways to reassure Kurds that it does not intend to be a hegemonic neighbor: internal democratization vis-a-vis the Kurds and the EU anchor can be utilized for this purpose. As the actor that undertook the restructuring of Iraq by force, the US has significant responsibility to help in this process. By doing so it would also eliminate some of the suspicions over its own intentions in the region, which are widely shared by regional actors but may at least partly be undeserved. The EU can also contribute to peace-building and developmental efforts.

However, the major initiatives for lasting credibility and trust, and thus peace and cooperation, should come from the regional actors themselves. Ten or 15 years from now, the US may not be actively present in the region, but Turks, Kurds and Arabs will continue to be neighbors.- *Published 24/2/2005 © bitterlemons-international.org*

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