Turkey’s Iraq Policy on the Brink of Civil War

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Abstract

The prospect of a sectarian war in Iraq that would destabilize the region has preoccupied the international community since the end of February 2006. Considering the inevitable consequences of a civil war for the region it is extremely important to resolve the communal conflict in Iraq. However, in the Iraq case reconciliation is not something solely dependent on the conflicting parties’ decisions, due to the internationalized character of Iraqi issue. In addition to the American and British policies, neighboring states’ policies may also be very effective in reconciliation efforts in Iraq.

With around a ninety-percent Sunni population and a long-lasting conflict with its Kurdish population, Turkey has always had an interest in developments in Iraq. In this article Turkey’s position and policy on the brink of a civil war in Iraq will be analyzed. Within this context, possible answers of following questions will be sought: What is Turkey’s position regarding the recent situation in Iraq? What is Turkish diplomacy doing to prevent a possible civil war in its eastern neighbor? What can Turkey do to prevent a possible civil war in Iraq?

Introduction

The bombing of al-Askari shrine (Golden Dome), which is considered as one of the most sacred shrines for Shiite Muslims, on 22 February 2006 triggered the sectarian violence in Iraq. The explosion which ruined al-Askari shrine and the following carnage left international society in fear of the eruption of civil war in Iraq. In spite of the Iraqi leaders’ denial since the bombing of al-Askari, the sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunnis has increased dramatically.

The eruption of sectarian violence was not unexpected. Since the removal of the Baathist regime, Iraq’s mosaic of communities has fragmented along ethnic and sectarian lines, which has brought instability and violence to the country. Prior to the outbreak of violence, dead bodies, mostly Sunni men, were found in and around Baghdad. Sunni politicians have blamed Shiite death squads operating within Iraqi police and security forces. On the other hand, Shiite politicians have pointed out that thousands of Shiites who have been killed in Sunni terrorist attacks after the fall of Saddam. Therefore the al-Askari incident triggered the events that are a result of long-simmering hostility between the two sects and the fragile institutions of authority in Iraq. The outbreak of sectarian conflict was the worst-case scenario that international society hoped would never happen. Consequently, the events following the Samara blast have raised the fears of a wider and more destabilizing war that would lead to the intervention of neighbors on behalf of the two
The prospect of a sectarian war in Iraq that would destabilize the region and the inability of Iraqi authorities to prevent the violence between Sunnis and Shiites have aroused Turkey’s anxieties. With a ninety-percent Sunni population and a long-lasting conflict with its Kurdish population, Turkey has always had an interest in developments in Iraq. As a reflection of its foreign policy, Turkey felt obliged to offer arbitration between Sunni and Shiite leaderships after the carnage even though Turkey has always followed a non-intervention policy regarding sectarian affairs in Iraq.

Developments in Iraq continue to preoccupy the international community along with Turkey. Considering the inevitable consequences of a civil war for the region in general, and for Turkey in particular, it is extremely important to resolve the communal conflict in Iraq. However, in the Iraq case reconciliation is not something what solely depending on the conflicting parties’ decisions, as a result of the internationalized character of the Iraqi issue. In addition to the American and British policies, neighboring states’ policies may also be very effective in reconciliation efforts in Iraq. In this article, Turkey’s Iraqi policy and actions vis-à-vis Iraqi reactions to Turkish policies will be analyzed. Within this context, possible answers to the following questions will be sought: What is Turkey’s position regarding the recent situation in Iraq? What is Turkish diplomacy doing to prevent a possible civil war in its eastern neighbor? What can Turkey do to prevent a possible civil war in Iraq?

In order to answer these questions, the first section will present a brief summary of the background to the sectarian violence in Iraq. In the second section, Turkey’s Iraq strategies and major concerns will be reviewed. The last section consists of an analysis of Turkey’s Iraq strategy on the brink of civil war in Iraq and its capability to provide arbitration among the conflicting groups. Conclusions will be presented in the final section.

Civil War in Iraq?

Even though the violence between Shiites and Sunnis seems to have been sparked by a single attack, the Sunni Shiite enmity in Iraq has an historical context which lies in a clash between two Muslim groups just after the death of Prophet Mohammad. Shiites, who compose around sixty-percent of the Iraqi population, were ruled by Sunni elite for a long time. Sunnis has always been suspicious about Shiite loyalty to Iraq, since Shiites are identified with Iranians or Persians. On the other hand, particularly for radical Shiites, Sunnis are descendants of the murderers of their spiritual leaders.

Under Saddam Hussein’s regime important Shiite observances were outlawed, top Shiite clerics were murdered. After the Gulf War, a massive campaign of repression of Shiites was initiated. It was only after the fall of Saddam that Shiites translated their majority position into political power through democratic elections. Elections have made just make the division between the Sunnis and Shiites starker. Sunnis are terrified by this new political picture, which diminishes their political status. On the other hand, Shiites have started to use the authority to take revenge for their long-endured sufferings. As stated in the International Crisis Group’s latest report in 2005, latent sectarianism in Iraq has become more and more visible. The major developments which triggered the sectarian violence are the ratification of the constitution in October 2005, a sectarian document that alienated the Sunnis, and the elections in January 2005 that resulted with the victory of
2005 will be remembered as the year Iraq's latent sectarianism took wings, permeating the political discourse and precipitating incidents of appalling violence and sectarian “cleansing”...Insurgents have exploited the post-war free-for-all, regrettably, their brutal efforts to jumpstart civil war have been met imprudently with ill-tempered acts of revenge.¹

The Samara blast led to provocations of Shiite media and radicals. For example the front page editorial of a Shiite newspaper openly declared war against Sunnis with these words: 'It's time to declare war against anyone who tries to conspire against us, who slaughters us every day. It is time to go to the streets and fight those outlaws.'²

Many Iraqis blamed the militia, the fighters known as the Mahdi Army, loyal to the Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, for the attacks on Sunni mosques and businesses. Even though many of the Shiites condemned the attacks, they were well aware that ‘all the pain and anger of the past three years seemed to burst to the surface in the bombing of the Samara shrine.'³

As far as the political situation is concerned, almost five months after parliamentary elections disagreement over the choice of a prime minister continues to hamper the formation of a new Iraqi Government. Kurdish and Sunni politicians reaffirmed their opposition to the continuation of interim Prime Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari as prime minister in Iraq's new government. For Kurds and Sunnis, Al-Jaafari is responsible for the current rise in tensions. The United Iraqi Alliance, the parliamentary bloc that has the majority of seats, has resisted demands to withdraw Al-Jaafari as candidate. Given the urgent need for a resolution, the parliament is scheduled to meet on April 17 to discuss the formation of a new government. Furthermore it has been decided that an Iraqi Islamic Reconciliation Summit will be held in Jordan on 22 April 2006 in order to put an end to conflict between sectarian groups. It is planned that Iraq's top religious leaders will attempt at this summit to defuse the volatile situation in Iraq.⁴

The major question is what can still be done to stop Iraq's downward slide towards civil war. Besides the United States and international donors, neighbors of Iraq have a great responsibility to stabilize the country. In its latest report, the International Crisis Group recommended Iraq's neighbors to help Iraq by (1) reiterating their strategic interest in Iraq's territorial integrity, (2) encouraging the winners of the December 2005 elections to form a government of national unity, (3) strengthening efforts to prevent funds and insurgents from crossing their borders into Iraq and (4) promoting reconciliation efforts in Iraq.⁵

In the following section, Turkey's position towards the situation and capabilities to help Iraq to prevent disintegration will be assessed.

Turkey’s Iraq Policy and Major Concerns

As a result of the geographical proximity and certain historical/cultural ties with Middle Eastern states and societies, Turkey has always been negatively affected by the instability in the region. In general Turkey has a strong interest in the resolution of regional problems. As far as Iraq is concerned, the preservation of Iraq’s unity and territorial
integrity as well as the restoration of security and stability in the country has been the main objectives for Turkey. Turkey considers these objectives vital not only for Iraq, but also for stability and peace in the neighborhood.

Since the end of the 1990s, Turkey's ruling elite has developed the confidence that it can play a constructive role in the region, including in Iraq. Turkey did not join the US-led military intervention in 2003, but it has put enormous effort into mobilizing regional support for a stable Iraqi state.

In general, Turkey has undergone a serious internal reform process that has changed the framework of its foreign policy. According to Aras, ‘(t)his development … has created more room for maneuver in Ankara's Iraq policy. Turkey's new orientation seems more flexible and adaptive to the challenges in Iraq. It aims to develop initiatives regarding the emergence of an Iraqi state while also planning to provide security for Kurds and Turcoman in northern Iraq.’

Turkey's new policy aims at developing relations with different segments of Iraqi society regardless of ethnic and sectarian differences. Within this context, before the elections major Sunni opposition figures and envoys from the United States were invited to Ankara to ensure Sunni participation in the Iraqi national elections. Through proactive communication with different Iraqi groups, Turkish diplomats aim at preventing conflicts in Iraq. This policy is called a ‘proactive peace policy’ by Turkish diplomats.

Turkey has suffered in terms of humanitarian, economic and security problems as a result of the conflict and instability in Iraq since the end of the 1980s. Thus, the deteriorating security environment is a matter of serious concern for Turkey. Consequently, Iraq’s return to normalcy is in Turkey’s vital interest.

Turkey thus naturally continues to support the political process and remains firmly committed to assisting Iraq in its search for security, peace and stability. Aware of the vital importance of rebuilding Iraq’s national security network and capabilities, Turkey has been contributing to NATO’s Training Mission in Iraq. Turkey’s contributions as a transit hub for humanitarian assistance, essential goods and services to Iraq are crucial for its reconstruction.

Considering the economic and humanitarian crisis Iraq’s neighbors faced during and after the Gulf War, Turkey launched a neighborhood initiative prior to the US-led military intervention in Iraq. Through the ‘Neighbors Forum’ Turkey has attempted to promote consultations between Iraq and the neighboring countries. Moreover, a Special Envoy was appointed to coordinate Turkey’s national and international endeavors vis-à-vis Iraq. Turkey has also designated a high level Special Coordinator for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in order to mobilize Turkey’s assistance to Iraq.

As stated by the Turkish Government and the ruling elite several times, the worst post-Saddam scenario for Turkey is the partition of Iraq into three states: an Arab state, a Shiite dominated state in southern Iraq and a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. A Kurdish state that would politicize Kurds in Turkey is Turkey’s nightmare scenario. Furthermore, another concern of nationalist circles is that Turkey's own Kurdish-populated areas might join with the newly emerging Kurdish state. Consequently, continued violence in Iraq
has aroused Turkey’s fears that violence could encourage Kurds to build a separate state in northern Iraq which might provoke separatist feelings among Turkey’s Kurd population.

Ankara has several concerns regarding Iraq: the status of Kirkuk and the security of Turcoman in Northern Iraq; and the PKK/KONGRA-GEL activities in Iraq. Given the special attention that is paid to the Turcoman population and their rights in northern Iraq, the status of Kirkuk with its Turcoman population and rich oil reserves is one of the major concerns of Turkey. According to Aras, ‘the idea of Kurds ruling Kirkuk and controlling its oil reserves touches a nerve with Turkish nationalist circles.’ Consequently, Turkey has raised concerns regarding developments in Kirkuk and closely followed the ongoing debate on the future status of Kirkuk. Currently, Iraqis who have no familial ties with Kirkuk are being moved there with the goal of changing its ethnic composition. These efforts are aimed at manipulating a probable referendum that will decide whether the city joins Iraq’s Kurdish region or remains with the rest of the country. Turkey finds these developments extremely dangerous. According to a Turkish Diplomat, ‘Kirkuk is Iraq’s lynchpin; if the city is attached to a specific region of the country, it will be difficult to hold Iraq together.’ However, given the internal characteristics of the issue, until now the Turkish Government has followed a non-intervention policy regarding Kirkuk. During his visit to Ankara, Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim Al-Jaafari pointed out that the constitution requires a referendum in Kirkuk for the final status of the province.

As far as the PKK-KONGRA-GEL presence in Iraq is concerned, Turkey has serious concerns because of the continuing presence of PKK/KONGRA-GEL terrorists and their affiliates in northern Iraq. It is considered as ‘a constant irritant in relations…’ by Turkish foreign affairs. As a result of the substantial increase in the presence, mobility and threat posed by PKK related terrorist elements operating out of northern Iraq, Turkey has put pressure on the Government of Iraq and the United States. Turkey has repeatedly underlined the need for urgent attention and effective measures to be taken against PKK/KONGRA-GEL guerillas in northern Iraq. The Turkish Government has urged the United States and Iraq to conduct a tripartite dialogue in order to devise means of cooperation in the fight against PKK terrorism. In their visit to Ankara, the Turkish delegation repeated their sensibility towards PKK issue and wanted to see Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Jaafari take action to end PKK activities in northern Iraq. Moreover, Turkey’s Special Envoy to Iraq, Ambassador Oguz Celikkol, declared the possibility of collaboration with Kurdish Regional Administration against PKK elements in Iraq.

Ankara’s Strategy and Capabilities for Arbitration on the Brink of Civil War in Iraq

With the rise of sectarian violence in Iraq Turkey’s worries about the dissolution of Iraq have doubled. Furthermore the outbreak of communal conflict means the failure of Turkey’s proactive policy. Turkish proactive diplomacy cannot prevent a major crisis in Iraq.

In spite of the initial failure of Turkish diplomacy to prevent communal conflict in Iraq Turkish diplomats do not seem to want to change their policy line. As was repeatedly underlined by Turkey’s Special Envoy to Iraq Turkey after the outbreak of sectarian violence in Iraq Turkey is proud of its continued dialogue with all political leaders of Iraq. However, as a result of the rumors about Turkey’s military intervention plans to northern Iraq Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gul’s arbitration offer between conflicting groups was fiercely declined by Prime Minister Al-Jaafari by saying that “our
major concern is the unity of Iraq. We won’t allow any external intervention. Our relations with neighbors based on the respect for internal affairs…Nobody could freely enter Iraqi soil.”

In the ministerial meeting that was held just after the outbreak of violence in Iraq, Ankara set up further diplomatic attacks. First of all, Ankara wants to ensure that the international community will not recognize any separate state establishment which would emerge from Iraq. Secondly, Turkey wants to keep the neighborhood forum working effectively. As a result of its fears of a wider and more destabilizing war that would lead the intervention of neighbors on behalf of the sides, Turkey has declared its objection to any kind of neighbor intervention in Iraq. Finally, Turkey wants to keep all communication channels open with moderate segments of Iraqi politics open.

For Turkey the major concern with regard to a possible civil war in Iraq is the spillover impact of violence which would harm the security of Kurds and Turcoman in the north. The Turkish security elite believe that probable Lebanisation of Iraq would affect northern Iraq. It is assumed that violence will be extremely harmful especially for ethnically mixed cities like Kirkuk and Mosoul. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, chaos or civil war in Iraq which could lead the creation of a Kurdish state in the north with Kirkuk as its capital that would serve as a magnet or model for Turkey’s own Kurdish population, and this is Turkey’s nightmare.

Until now Turkey’s strategy has emphasized its commitment to the political process in Baghdad and a peaceful solution to the Kirkuk question. However, the realization has come that the worst case scenarios could change Turkey’s soft proactive approach. Heightened threat perceptions could create an interventionist dynamic that Ankara might be unable to resist. In spite of its objection to intervention of neighbors into Iraq the possible violence wave through northern Iraq may require Turkey’s military intervention.

In the International Crisis Group’s report, Turkey’s position vis-à-vis developments in northern Iraq was interpreted as follows:

Tensions in the oil-rich Kirkuk region, where the political ambitions, historical claims and economic interests of the principal communities -- Kurds, Arabs, Turcoman and Chaldo-Assyrians -- clash, have been escalating since U.S. forces toppled the Baathist regime in April 2003. Violence is assuming a troubling pattern. Turkey, with its own large Kurdish population, is watching with growing anxiety.

According to the International Crisis Group’s report, improvement in relations between Turkey and Iraq’s Kurdish leadership is the best solution against the risks. In this regard Turkey has come a long way. However Turkey has to overcome her Kurdistan-phobia for healthy relations with Kurds. As stated by Turkey’s Special Envoy to Iraq in his latest meeting with journalists, Kurds are one of the important realities of Iraq. Turkey has to respect the political picture drawn by the Iraqi constitution. Thus, sooner or later Turkey will have to recognize Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northern Iraq. Within this context, Turkey’s Special Envoy to Iraq met with Massoud Barzani, and expressed Turkey’s intention to recognize their existence as an autonomous administration. After the meeting Ambassador Celikkol felt obliged to underline the nuance that he met with Mr.
Barzani as the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party not as the leader of the Autonomous Kurdish Administration, in order to ease irritations among the Turkish public. However the official pronunciation of the possibility of the recognition of the Autonomous Kurdish Administration caused irritation among Turkish nationalist circles. It is obvious that Turkey’s Kurdistan-phobia would blur its impartiality strategy in Iraq.

In order to develop relations between Turkey and the Autonomous Kurdish Administration in northern Iraq more steps should be taken. Obviously Turkey needs good relations with the Kurds to prevent chaos in northern Iraq and to end PKK activities there. In turn, Iraqi Kurds may find themselves relying on Turkey for protection if violence continues to heighten in Iraq. For Turkey to play a more constructive role in the peaceful solution in Kirkuk, confidence-building measures are required. These include initiating desecuritisation process to lower the tensions in Kirkuk and a proactive international monitoring and resolution of the irritating problem of PKK/KONGRA-GEL guerillas remaining holed up in northern Iraq.

Overall Turkey’s best interests rely on the stability and security of Iraq with a preservation of the country’s unity. In order to help to extinguish the fire next door. Turkey has to insist on its impartiality. Within this context, Turkey’s diplomatic relations with both Shiite and Sunni leaders are extremely important. If Turkey can build trust with Shiites and Sunnis it could be a very respectful mediator between conflicting groups delivering demands and interests of both side. In this regard, the international community’s support is very important. If Turkey can feel support from the United States, European Union and the United Nations it can successfully play the role as mediator. However, throughout these hard times Turkey should not lose its calm and follow its ‘proactive peace policy’ in spite of sensitive issues like Kirkuk, PKK and the Turcoman population. As long as Turkey can remain calm and consistent in its new policy line, it is highly probable that Iraqi groups would consider Turkey as mediator.

Conclusion

In Iraq, the tension between Shiites, who are enjoying the power after lengthy suppression, and Sunnis, who are trying to overcome their new politically deprived status, has transformed into sectarian violence. On the other hand Kurds have isolated themselves from other Iraqi communities and enjoyed their economically and politically secure position in northern Iraq. If the violence continues, Kurds could be encouraged to build a separate state in northern Iraq.

As far as Iraq is concerned until now Turkey has aimed at a reasonable policy in favor of the United States, the region and Turkey. Turkey’s policy is based on preserving Iraqi territorial unity in order to minimize the risks that may emerge out of instability. To achieve this goal, Turkey has collaborated with regional countries to strengthen the unity in Iraq, and tried to avoid problems with the United States.

Especially after American military intervention to Iraq, Turkey has followed an impartiality policy towards Iraq. It has not acted with Sunni sensibility. It has developed relations with the different segments of Iraqi society regardless of ethnic and sectarian differences. In spite of its special ties with the four million Turcoman population of Iraq and PKK/KONGRA-GEL guerillas who received logistical help from Northern Iraq, military intervention was not considered as a feasible option by Turkey. Instead, the Turkish
Government employed soft policy tools such as offering arbitration among conflicting groups, and initiating a neighborhood forum. Turkey’s turn to soft European approach from the force-based American approach has made Turkey more respectable in its Muslim Arab neighbors’ eyes. Moreover, by playing the "Democratic Muslim State" card Turkey has provided a role-model for Iraq and other states in the Middle East. However, sensitive issues like PKK terrorism, Kirkuk and security of Turcoman in Iraq will be the main determinants of Turkish policy towards Iraq.

Becoming one of the great powers in the region and having the strongest army, Turkey cannot remain an onlooker to a civil war which may change the map of the region. On the brink of civil war in Iraq it is believed that Turkey’s new opening in Iraq policy is very positive and should continue. Inviting Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr and holding contacts with Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani were appropriate moves. Beyond these Turkey should prove that it is a trustworthy actor for all sides.

Moreover, by initiating a "Neighborhood Platform" Turkey proved that it could play a very significant role in arbitration efforts in Iraq. It is a crucial period for Turkey as well as Iraq. If Turkey loses its influence in the new era in Iraq, and if it cannot help to extinguish the fire in Iraq, Turkey will find itself in a process that both Turkey and Iraq cannot recover from.

Footnotes

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