

Hot pursuits in bordering American outpost

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Since US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Turkish foreign policy and security advisors face one of its most serious regional challenges ever. It required Turkey to formulate new conceptual approach to its regional and international position and to make an adjustment to actual capabilities on the ground. The main Challenge was the need of Turkish policy makers, civilians and generals, to take into account that the world's reigning power, the United States, was no longer on the other side of the Atlantic, but just over the border in Iraq. This new reality in addition to the proximity of Turkey to the world's greatest energy game made military solutions anachronistic and harmful. Occasional raids in pursuit of Kurdish guerillas were left as face saving, internally, for public consumption and as a tool to prevent internal military dismay among young and militant officers.

The American invasion took place only a few months after the AKP and Tayyip Erdogan had been elected. Based on a new petit bourgeoisies support and promising a new, specific social program, the AKP took office without experience or a clear approach to foreign policy issues. Yet the new leadership soon had to deal with the greatest challenge to Turkey since 1945 – its relations with the US.

The invasion and subsequent occupation caused a breakdown within Iraq and chaos in the wider region. It accelerated the empowerment of Iran and its allies in the Middle East and encouraged radical religious elements. From a Turkish perspective, the effects of the invasion were particularly destructive. For at least a decade, public relations had been based on the claim that Turkey was the key to regional stability. Turkey also presented itself as the

only country capable of bridging religious and ethnic groups in the area linking Europe and Asia. The invasion and the establishment of a puppet regime in Iraq led to a balkanization that destabilized the very sensitive Iraqi-Turkish border area, with its large Kurdish population. Furthermore, Turkey's reluctance to grant the Americans support and assistance at the start of the invasion and reality on the ground led the US to view the Kurds as allies. The Kurdish groups were granted freedom to administer their affairs and to commence a process of Kurdifying northern Iraq at the expense of its Arabs and Turkmen. The result was that Turkey lost its ability to influence northern Iraq, and American policy in the area.

It may be argued that AKP adopted a strategy that did not conform to Turkey's international interests. It is, however, important to take into account the needs of the AKP leadership to respond to the expectations of their constituency and to shape a policy that would meet the challenges both in the international arena and on the complex domestic front. Creating a neo-Ottomanist policy was meant to do this on both levels. It included a demand that Turkish special position in Iraq should be recognized. However, the gains from this have been limited and mainly theoretical. In practice, the Turks have come to terms with the situation in northern Iraq, the creation of Kurdish autonomy, and Turkey's reduced ability to intervene. This is mostly restricted to carrying out limited cross-border operations, to search for PKK militants. Furthermore, while small-scale hot-pursuit operations may be advocated for security reasons, a large-scale invasion of Iraq could invoke an Iranian counter-operation that would eventually set both regional actors on a collision course. In spite of the good relations with Teheran, one should not forget that Iran is a major security concern for Turkey.

On the other hand, Turkey is becoming a major economic actor in the development and rebuilding of Iraq, and is even involved in strengthening Kurdish autonomy in the north. After all, even Prime Minister Erdoğan indicated that the Kurdish problem is primarily a domestic Turkish problem, and its origins are not to be found in Iraq. It is mainly a political problem and thus requires a political solution. Support for the Turkmen, fights against PKK rebels in Iraq – all these, without downplaying their significance, were meant to signal to the US and the world that Turkey remained an important regional player.