

Opinion, 21 October 2003

### **Send 10,000 Turkish human rights monitors, not troops**

Ever since Turkish society and government turned down the demand for free military passage by US soldiers in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, a cloud hangs over the traditionally special relation between Washington and Ankara. The decision to deploy 10,000 soldiers in response to a key American demand might bring back some warmth to the relations between the two governments, but the controversy surrounding it in Turkish society does not augur well.

Whatever the UN claims to the contrary, the world remains divided in two camps over the future of Iraq, as it was before the war. There is a majority which sincerely wishes for normalcy and decency to return to Iraq, and believes that the earlier such stabilization can occur, the quicker Iraqi sovereignty can be fulfilled and the quicker a decent, rule-of-law abiding Iraqi government can emerge. Opposite are the doubters and the skeptics, some out of conviction, others for sheer interest or mischief, who see Iraq as a replica of Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation. For the first group, Turkish troops will enhance the coalition and can be effective in undermining all forms of resistance to the new system in Baghdad. For the latter, the deployment of Turkish troops will only worsen the stench in the Iraqi quagmire.

One central problem is the Iraqi response to this announced deployment by people who cannot be accused to be of Saddamite persuasion. The Iraqi Governing Council, which projects an impressively large national unity, has collectively voiced its opposition to Turkish military deployment. Any such involvement by neighboring countries creates doubts and dissensions inside Iraq, and the leaders of the Iraqi Governing Council are right to be concerned by the military deployment of their northern neighbor, as they would be of any of the adjacent countries.

Unease is stronger in the statements of the Iraqi Kurdish leaders. Only some Turkmen Iraqis seem supportive of the idea, and this gap itself bodes ill: the neutrality of Turks is difficult to accept in Iraq, considering long-standing problems of borders, water sharing and, above all, the Kurdish problem in Turkey, let alone the live Kurdish-Turkmen sensitivities in a city like Kirkuk.

Is there an alternative to either supporting Turkish military deployment to bolster the coalition, or rejecting it altogether? Possibly, if the long-standing demand to deploy human rights monitors to help a new Iraq on its democratic path is revived seriously. An impressive array of forces supports the principle. It includes historically all the leaders of the Iraqi opposition, UN decisions at various levels throughout the 1990s, especially the General Assembly acting in support of repeated recommendations by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights; and last but not least the US government, in a commitment that goes back a decade, when this request was expressed in the "dual containment" speech of a former assistant secretary of state for the Middle East, Martin Indyk, in May 1992.

The idea needs to be pursued on more than one level, especially within Turkish society, which by and large remains opposed to military deployment, and will inevitably grow more vocal and militant when soldiers start coming back in body bags. It will also be important to see how the serious human rights organizations across the world who support the principle, like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watches, can articulate it with both the CPA and the Iraqi Governing Council. The concept of human rights deployment offers an important occasion to bridge the

ongoing division worldwide over Iraq. So instead of sending 10,000 peacekeepers in the form of military troops, Turkey could export its nascent Muslim-democratic experiment to its southern neighbor in the form of “human rights brigades.” These “soldiers for peace,” as the former secretary-general of Amnesty International once called this novel form of international intervention, offer the most effective solution to the conundrum faced by both Turkish and Iraqi societies, and strengthen the worldwide search for a stable and sovereign Iraq. No doubt, some of these people risk being killed, and some military protection will be needed as the logistics of such an operation gets refined, but a whole new set-up would start for the chances of democracy in Iraq and in the region.

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