

Turkey Looking Southeast

John Roberts

Introduction

If there's one point of the compass that is an ever-present focus of attention for Turkey's generals, politicians, and developers it's southeast. For both generals and politicians southeast is the direction in which lies Turkey's most troublesome neighbour, Iraq. Iraq is troublesome because most of the country is run by a regime with which Turkey's most important allies, the United States and Israel, are vehemently at odds. It's doubly troublesome because of an acute irony: the very lack of control which Iraq's vilified ruler, Saddam Hussain, has over the Kurdish-populated parts of his country adjoining Turkey, which throws up as many problems for Ankara as for Baghdad.

The reason for this is that, quite simply, much of Turkey's own southeast has for 14 years been the scene of one of the biggest and most sustained insurgencies of the late 20th century: the brutal war waged by a particularly vicious Kurdish separatist movement and the equally tough and, sometimes cruel, forces of the Turkish state. The intertwining of these problems, the internal Kurdish conflict and the external Iraqi crisis, is further mixed up with two key development issues. Within Turkey, the south-east is the focus of the most ambitious power and agricultural development programme in either Europe or the Middle East, the Southeast Anatolia Programme, known by its Turkish initials as GAP (see map).

This programme is so massive that its ramifications also become important to Turkey's generals and politicians. Because the GAP scheme is based on harnessing the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, one of its most obvious by-products is a significant reduction in the flows of these two rivers to Syria and Iraq. This makes the issue highly political in an international context. For their part, the generals are concerned because the Turkish/Syrian dispute – in which Turkish control of Euphrates waters was set against Syrian support for Turkey's Kurdish separatists – prompted some extreme warlike statements, and even military build-ups, by the Turkish leadership last October.

And underlying all this is the classic Levantine question: Can we be quite sure that all parties in

practice accept their current borders, or are Syrian claims to *terra irredenta* in Turkey, and Turkish claims to *terra irredenta* in Iraq, not quite so frivolous as their critics sometimes suggest.

The conundrum facing the Turkish authorities thus has three main facets: the internal security situation within Turkey's borders – essentially the 14-year war between the Turkish state and the PKK; the development of the southeast, essentially the GAP scheme and the harnessing of the Tigris and Euphrates; and the immediate external ramifications with regard to Syria and Iraq – which includes the question of possible irredentist claims but which is essentially an issue of power politics and, in particular, the future of Iraq. These issues all overlap, and each impacts on the others. But each is important in its own right – and it appears to be deliberate policy in both Ankara and Damascus that while the issues of alleged Syrian support for the PKK and Turkish limitations on the flow of Euphrates river water have been effectively twinned for more than a decade, in theory, at least, both governments consider them to be quite separate issues which therefore – one might argue locally, if ironically – require quite separate resolution.

The PKK war

The Turkish State has been locked in war with the Kurdish Workers Party – known by its Turkish initials as the PKK – since August 1984. The PKK's exact aims remain somewhat contradictory: it has sometimes seemed to be fighting for outright independence for Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey and at other times appeared willing to accept autonomy. The Turkish state is unwilling to concede either objective, but argues that the true goal of the PKK is the overthrow of the entire Turkish state, saying that to this end the PKK has instigated unrest far beyond the traditional Kurdish areas of the southeast.

What has been clear is that the war has been particularly vicious – on both sides. It has been fought in guerrilla/terrorist fashion – both sides have committed acts of terror in the sense of attacks intended quite simply to frighten the rest of the population into submission. As of early 1999, the



Turkish military do finally seem to have brought the area back under effective state control, but since the armed forces have generally been somewhat over-optimistic concerning their successes in this 14 year old war in which some 30,000 people have died, Turkish claims of victory should perhaps be interpreted as meaning most of the area is safe enough by day, but that the situation by night may well be somewhat different.

The October crisis with Syria grew out of Turkey's frustration at the manner in which the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan could conduct a war against the Turkish state from a safe haven just across the border. Öcalan had made Damascus, and the adjoining Beqaa valley of Lebanon, his base in the early 1980s, after he was forced out of Turkey in the wake of the military coup of 1980, occasioned by a feeling that Turkey was on the verge of civil war between rightist and leftist gangs. In early October, Turkey informed Syria that it would take action unless the Syrian government halted its support for what it termed "*Öcalan's terrorist groups*" – and formally requested the extradition of Öcalan to Turkey. As a result, Öcalan moved to Moscow, but he was forced to move again after Turkey's strong protests.

On 7 October, both President Suleiman Demirel and Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz voiced Turkish concerns. Said Demirel: "*There is a bloody incident in Turkey, which is separatist terrorism. Many*

innocent citizens, police officers, teachers, administrators and soldiers died in Turkey. Syria supports this separatist terrorism, we have said this many times. We are losing our patience."¹ For his part, Yilmaz accused Syria of waging an indirect war against Turkey by supporting PKK rebels, saying "the time has come to end the dark games of Syria." Yilmaz also accused Syria of being the headquarters of terrorism in the Middle East. At the same time, the Turkish army moved up to the Syrian border while Turkish warplanes flew controversial missions into Syrian airspace. Turkish Chief of Staff Huseyin Kivrikoglu said relations with Syria already constituted a state of "*undeclared war.*" For its part, Syria denied sheltering PKK rebels, despite Öcalan's residence in Damascus.

In a strictly military sense, it was a phoney crisis, intended to focus Syrian attention on a core issue, the need to cease political support for Öcalan and the PKK. Although Turkish scholars tried to stress their country was actually threatened, not least because of its vulnerability to missile attack assault from Syria, the fact that Turkey used only 10,000 troops in its build up to confrontation would seem to indicate the Turkish High Command did not expect to actually go to war.²

In the event, Syria expelled Öcalan, who turned up unexpectedly in Rome, precipitating a crisis in Turkish-Italian relations. Italy arrested Öcalan in the expectation he could then be extradited to Germany

to face trial on long-standing charges levelled against him by the German authorities. But Germany, with extensive Turkish, Kurdish and Turkish/Kurdish communities had no wish to get embroiled, and no extradition was sought. With Italy considering whether to put him on trial Öcalan fled the country in January.

The Syrians have their own anxieties concerning Turkey. Damascus wants Ankara to replace its interim pledge to ensure provision of some 500 cubic metres of water per second (15.5 billion cubic metres of water a year) – amounting to about half the river's historic flow across the border with Syria in the era before Turkey began its giant dam building programme on the river. Instead, Syria wants Turkey to conclude a multilateral agreement with both Syria and Iraq, based on a formula which would ensure a guaranteed Euphrates River flow from Turkey to Syria of 700 cm/s (21.7 bcm/y). Syria has already agreed with Iraq to pass on at least 58% of all Euphrates water received from Turkey.

But when Iraqi and Syrian officials met on 24 September to discuss regional water shortages, Turkey boycotted the meeting, according to Syrian delegation leader Ibrahim Makhul. Turkey has routinely insisted the water dispute should be discussed only after the Syrian government has halted its support for the PKK.

Iraq's Irrigation Minister Mahmud Diab al-Ahmad had said in August that his country would seek legal means to stop Ankara monopolising the Euphrates. He said Iraq would face *"a serious problem if Turkey continues to build hydroelectric and dam projects"*, a comment with profound implications concerning the Tigris river, as well as the Euphrates. Turkey's State Minister Salih Yildirim countered that Iraq had nothing to fear from Turkish hydroelectric projects and should co-operate with Turkey instead of holding up building work.

The GAP scheme

Yildirim is in charge of the GAP scheme, a massive US\$32bn irrigation and hydroelectricity development programme in Southeast Anatolia. Begun in the early 1980s, its main goal is to provide hydropower for the nation and to use irrigation to transform eight provinces in the south-east – some 10% of Turkey's national territory – into one of the world's great food-producing areas.

Current proposals call for the eventual irrigation of some 1.7 million hectares of land and the provision of 27 billion kW of power per year. Such targets can change as individual projects are amended, but,

overall, roughly half the project has now been completed, with several new hydropower dams on the Euphrates, and the first of their equivalents on the Tigris, producing roughly one-fifth of all Turkey's electricity. The biggest project to date, construction of the giant Ataturk Dam and the complementary Urfa diversion tunnels, was begun in 1981 with main construction work taking more than 10 years to complete. Although the dam itself was finished in 1986, with water impounding completed in August 1990 and the last of its eight power plant units operational in 1993, the projects intended to distribute water from the Urfa tunnels to some 476,000 hectares are still far from complete.

Development of the GAP region has profound transboundary implications (see map). Downstream riparians stand to suffer both from an absolute reduction in the volume of water they might otherwise expect to receive and from pollution in the newly-irrigated areas. The latter problem is caused by the fact that drainage from much of the irrigated area seeps downhill, across the border into Syria, where water used for irrigating the GAP area emerges as springs in northern Syria – but potentially contaminated by added pesticides and fertilisers. The volumes of water which Syria and Iraq receive are directly impacted on the Euphrates River by the construction of the Ataturk Dam and the recently constructed Birecik Dam, located almost on the border with Syria.

On the Tigris, current Turkish plans for constructing a 1,200mW dam at Ilisu in Mardin province have significant downstream implications. The principal impact concerns Iraq, although it should be noted that for some 50km or so, before it enters Iraq, the river constitutes the Turkish-Syrian border. In October 1997, addressing a major conference on regional water issues in Istanbul, the legal adviser to the Iraqi foreign ministry, Akram al-Witry, said that for Turkey to arrange financing with Switzerland for the US\$1.5bn Ilisu Dam without first securing consent from the downstream states would constitute a violation of international law. Witry added that the World Bank, which has been reluctant to invest in Turkey's dam construction programmes in the GAP region, was urging states with such projects to conduct negotiations with fellow riparians in good faith. With Iraq currently possessing some 63,900 mcm/y of renewable resources, and using some 49,100 mcm/y, major Turkish abstraction could cause serious problems.

However, in December 1998, the Swiss government approved Sfr755m (US\$550m) in export risk guarantees for Ilisu, despite strong objections by

Swiss humanitarian and ecological organisations which claimed the project will “*upset the political, social and ecological equilibrium of this Kurdish area of Turkey.*” Although the Tigris projects in the GAP scheme do eventually call for considerable abstraction of Tigris waters for irrigation, it should be noted that the Ilisu dam is for hydropower only, thus the only loss of water should be from evaporation in the lake behind the dam, whilst such losses should be offset by the greater ability of the Turkish authorities to regulate water flows to the benefit of all downstream inhabitants.

For Iraq, as for Syria, the question of how much Turkey might eventually abstract from the rivers is of vital importance. Estimates vary, but if all the GAP projects were to be completed, then at some point between 2010 and 2015, the flow of the Euphrates could well be cut by around 40-50% of its flow rate in the pre-dam era, whilst the flows of the Tigris might be cut by perhaps one-quarter. The Arab Centre for the Study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) has already argued that Iraq currently faces a water deficit by 2010 and Syria by 2025.

Such assumptions can be challenged, in that a reduction of water or irrigation and agriculture could extend the availability of water for domestic and industrial use for several decades, but what is not at issue is that Turkish abstractions are likely to prompt its Arab neighbours into re-thinking their own water use, whilst continuing to raise major questions concerning the allocation of scarce resources.

Turkey's complex relationship with Iraq is, of course, shaped by a multitude of factors. Any government in Ankara finds itself torn between global and regional imperatives. In global terms, it remains vitally important for Turkey to remain a close ally of the US, particularly whenever its relations with the European Union and individual western European countries are strained. But it is also concerned that it should not go too far with regard to antagonising Baghdad. For while successive Turkish governments have little love for Saddam Hussain, they are all concerned at the implications which a possible break-up of Iraq might have on the region in general and Turkey in particular. The prime concern, of course, is that the autonomous Kurdish areas of northern Iraq might then formally become an independent state, thus changing the context in which Turkey's own war against the PKK is being fought.

In the last several years, Turkey has intervened in force in northern Iraq on several occasions to eliminate PKK bases in the Iraqi Kurdish areas. In the process, Turkey has itself become a power in terms of inter-Kurdish relations in Northern Iraq, particularly concerning the balance of power between the region's two most prominent (and routinely feuding) leaders: Massoud Barzani and Jelal Talabani.

Bulent Ecevit, who took over as Prime Minister leading a minority left-of-centre government in Turkey on 17 January, said in successive interviews at the time that the only point of dispute he had with the United States concerned Iraq. He called for at least a partial lifting of sanctions and for an end to military confrontations in the no-fly zones (NFZs). The northern NFZ is routinely patrolled by US and British aircraft stationed at the NATO base at Incirlik, in southeast Turkey. Ecevit also argued that US initiatives aimed at forming an alliance between Barzani and Talabani could lead to the partition of Iraq and that the goal of the international community in northern Iraq should be the preservation of the region's integrity as part of Iraq. Partition, said Ecevit, would cause trouble not only for Turkey, but also for the whole region.

Turkey has other reasons for wishing to remain on at least tolerable terms with Iraq. The main Iraq-Turkey pipeline runs through southeast Turkey, and Turkey earns up to US\$300m a year in transit fees. However the line is vulnerable. In one incident in late November, reported Mardin Governor Fikret Guven, a PKK squad cut an oil pipeline near Midyat, a pumping station on the Iraq-Turkey line, burning 100 tonnes of crude. A similar incident was reported in early January. In recent years, Turkish governments have discussed with Baghdad the prospect of constructing a gas pipeline alongside the existing oil line to provide fuel for Turkey's soaring internal energy demands. Meanwhile, Turkey remains the beneficiary of one aspect of *de facto* Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, the massive trade in smuggled petroleum and diesel into Turkey from Iraq, a trade that yields the Kurdish authorities the bulk of their revenues.

At present, it looks as if Turkey can just about stomach the *status quo* in northern Iraq, in which the Kurds enjoy *de facto* autonomy but are prevented from moving to independence by a combination of external pressures and internal dissension. But were the prospect of independence to grow, then Turkey might be faced with an unpalatable decision: whether to hope that aiding the Kurds would ease its own problems in Turkey

or, more likely, whether the best way of crushing Kurdish separatism in northern Iraq would be to aid Baghdad in the restoration of its authority over the north – or to take over the area itself.

Borders: The Sanjaq and the Wilayet

The question of borders is somewhat peculiar. Syrian and Turkish concerns are rarely phrased openly by officials. Both countries officially acknowledge the *status quo*, that Syria's border with Turkey is the boundary established by the French mandatory authority in Syria following France's handover of the Sanjaq of Alexandretta (the modern Turkish province of Hatay) to Turkey in July 1939. In the same manner, Turkey and Iraq officially agree that the Iraqi-Turkish border is the line agreed by Britain and Turkey in the 1926 Ankara agreement, which incorporated Mosul and an extensive region into what was then the League of Nations mandated territory of Iraq.³

But official acceptance of current borders is not necessarily the same as outright acceptance. The Alexandretta handover took place in dubious circumstances and prompted a flood of refugees into northern Syria. Moreover, with Syria on the edge of revolt against its mandated French masters, the transfer became a *cause celebre* which still rankles in important Syrian circles. Thus Syrian-produced maps routinely portray the Sanjaq as an integral part of Syria, whilst Syrian military affairs and politics have been dominated for more than three decades by Alawite officers, a number of whom are the children or grandchildren of refugees from the Sanjaq.

As for Mosul, even before the Gulf crisis of 1990-91 led to the end of Saddam Hussain's direct authority over much of Northern Iraq, right-wing Turkish circles have voiced occasional suggestions that the extensive territory which comprised the former Ottoman Wilayet of Mosul should be part of the Turkish republic. Once *de facto* Kurdish autonomy was established in an area of northern Iraq which embraces most of the old wilayet – though not Mosul itself – the issue has more subtly been placed on the international agenda. Turkish troops conducting offensives against the PKK have frequently operated in the area and, if only from a military perspective caused by the absence of Iraqi troops, its annexation would be quite practicable – though its retention might prove quite another matter.

There is clearly a considerable view within the Turkish establishment that Syria still harbours irredentist designs on Alexandretta whilst a similar

point could probably be made concerning the fears of Iraqi officials in Baghdad concerning possible Turkish designs on northern Iraq. But such concerns and doubts do not necessarily constitute a cause of crisis, let alone war. The Turkish-Syrian crisis (if crisis it was) of October 1998 did not centre on any Syrian challenge to Turkish authority over Hatay, it concerned Syrian support for the PKK.

The constant Turkish raids into northern Iraq have not prompted any of Turkey's recent governments – which cover a wide range of political complexions – to re-assert the claims to Mosul made by their forebears in the opening years of the Turkish Republic. The Hatay issue is perhaps best considered as dormant, though perhaps dormant in the way that Alsace-Lorraine was officially dormant from 1871-1914. Turkish dominance in the region makes it highly improbable that Syria would actively seek to reassert formal claims to the territory. This would only be changed were Turkish internal authority to crumble or collapse.

The Mosul question remains slightly more open, since the future of northern Iraq remains in doubt. But Turkey abides by the consensus view (still shared by such diverse authorities as the United Nations and the governments of the United States and Iraq and, it would appear, the main Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq), that the legal unity of Iraq should be maintained. The dispute, as ever, is over the way in which such unity should be cemented – and who should apply the cement.

Conclusion: What does the future hold?

Successive Turkish governments have pursued similar policies with regard to the Kurdish question; it is therefore unlikely that whatever government should emerge as a result of the elections scheduled for April will radically change the policy. Nor is Turkey likely to opt for a softer policy – one more oriented to human rights – because of any doubts concerning the impact which the ongoing Kurdish crisis has on its prospects for joining the European Union. For Turkey, the PKK question is regarded as an essentially internal matter, though one with obvious international ramifications in view of the presence of Kurdish communities beyond Turkey's borders.

Much will depend on whether the PKK itself chooses to continue its armed revolt in the wake of Öcalan's flight and current uncertain plans. Over several years, as Turkish civil society grows ever stronger, pressures for an essentially military solution may weaken and autonomy may find a place on the internal Turkish political agenda. In

such a context, European attitudes – both within the EU and the Council of Europe – may have some impact. But no solution can be expected in the near future unless the army can manage to deliver what it has so far failed to do: the outright military defeat of the PKK.

The ability of successive Turkish governments to promote the GAP scheme should eventually help matters. Turkey has long had one of the fastest growing economies in Europe (and/or the Middle East!) and GAP offers local communities a chance to replace poverty with prosperity. In the long run, as the web of international law concerning transboundary resources and environmental issues grows stronger, it should be possible for Syria or Iraq to find legal, rather than political or military, ways of challenging any Turkish limitation of water flows or transboundary pollution caused by Turkish agricultural practices.

As for Turkey's borders, these essentially remain a matter of *realpolitik*. So long as Turkey maintains its cohesion and, even if large parts of the south-east were eventually to gain some kind of regional autonomy, there is no reason to doubt the cohesion of the rest of the country. Turkey's border with Syria will remain unchanged and Damascus will be loath to state publicly what some of its members probably think privately: that Iskenderun/Alexandretta should once again come under Syrian jurisdiction.

The trickiest issue concerns Turkey's border with Iraq. Because Iraq is ruled by a pariah regime, because the internal security situation in the country is so muddled, and because its regular armed forces are periodic targets for air strikes by the United States and the United Kingdom, it is almost impossible to predict what kind of Iraq will exist in just a few months time, let alone a few years from now. The continued unity of Iraq, although officially still supported by those attacking the Saddam regime, remains probable rather than definite. Were that unity to crumble, and were the Turkish state to strike an accommodation with both its own Kurds and those of Iraq, some future Turkish government might choose to expand its borders into Iraq. This is still a remote possibility, not least because of likely Kurdish antagonism, but it is not an impossible scenario.

Meanwhile, Turkey has other issues to contend with. So long as Öcalan was in Italy, at least the Turkish authorities had some idea what he was up to. On 16 January Öcalan was apparently deported from Italy, placed on board a military aircraft, and

flown to Russia. He then disappeared amidst a flurry of Turkish speculation that, denied the prospect of asylum in such varied countries as South Africa and Libya, he was bound for Armenia. The following day Gaidar Aliev, President of Azerbaijan – where Turkey has extensive interests in both direct oilfield development and in cooperation on pipelines to bring Caspian oil and gas to international markets via Azerbaijan and Turkey – flew to Ankara for emergency hospital treatment. Aliev himself said he was only suffering from 'flu, though Turkish newspapers spoke of heart problems. Aliev is 75 and is a key pillar of Turkish foreign policy in the region. For a while at least, Turkish eyes will have to be focussed as much on the northeast as the southeast.

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- ¹ Anatolia News Agency, 7 October 1998, report on an address by President Demirel in Konya.
 - ² In 'Turkey and the United States: Ambivalent Allies', a paper written for a conference on *America's Allies in a Changing World* held in November 1998 at the Begin-Sadat Institute at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, Professor Kemal Kirisci of Bogazici University, Istanbul said: "*Turkey's vulnerability to Syrian Scud missiles fired at cities or against the infrastructure of the South-eastern Anatolian Development Project became quite obvious during the October 1998 crisis with Syria.*"
 - ³ Turkish troops took physical possession of the Sanjaq of Alexandretta on 22 July 1939. The Mosul Wilayet treaty was signed between the UK and Turkey in Ankara on 5 June 1926; Nuri as-Said signed on behalf of Iraq.

John Roberts is Senior Partner in Methinks Ltd., an Edinburgh-based consultancy specialising in the Middle East and Central Asia. He is co-editor of the *Financial Times Global Water Report* and is also acting editor of the *Financial Times Energy Economist*. He can be contacted on (+44) 131 556 2627 or john@methinks.demon.co.uk