

Tony Blair - Turkey and Iraq

The video clips of Saddam Hussein's execution on 30 December 2006 have further alienated Arab opinion towards the West, and both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair have reviewed their Iraq strategies.

President Bush still argues that 'victory' in Iraq can be achieved, but the British do not share his optimism.

Tony Blair and his British advisors have quietly distanced themselves from this latest US policy. They are already looking beyond the horizon and pin little hope on the latest Bush plan for Iraq. If the time span for a revitalisation of support for George Bush regarding Iraq is short, then Tony Blair is facing a similar time constraint. Mr Blair is committed to retiring from the post of British Prime Minister during 2007 and is therefore under immense pressure to extricate the UK from Iraq and to secure a settlement which has a reasonable prospect of bringing peace and stability to the region.

While most commentators focus on the Sunni / Shi'ite rift, UK policy advisors have been assisting Tony Blair to formulate a policy which will effectively lead to the partition of Iraq. The background to Mr Blair's strategy lies in the longstanding and cordial relationship between the UK and Turkey. These ties have been greatly strengthened since 2004 when the UK became a vocal advocate of improving the international standing of the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, a state which is only formally recognised by Turkey. This relationship has also been nurtured by Cherie Blair's representation in 2006 of a UK couple who were being sued in the UK by a dispossessed person from the Greek Republic of (South) Cyprus. In addition, the UK has been Turkey's staunchest ally in the difficult EU accession negotiations.

There have however, been setbacks to this relationship. Tony Blair has persistently tried to persuade Turkey to commit troops to Iraq: so far, without success.

Any partition of Iraq would need to take account of the distribution of the various ethnic and religious groups. The Sunnis are prominent in the west and the Shi'ites in the south and east. However, the other significant group is that of the Kurds. The Kurds effectively control the north and were savagely repressed by Saddam Hussein. There are also sizable Kurdish populations in Southern Turkey, Syria and Iran.

While US policy has been generally viewed as favourable towards the Kurds and their desire for an autonomous administration or even a secessionist state, the UK has been sympathetic towards Turkish concerns for security and the suppression of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) as this is considered a terrorist organisation. Although Mr Blair's overtures for Turkey to send troops to Iraq have not borne fruit, he is now proposing that Turkey effectively occupies the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq. In return, Turkey will be expected to contribute to the pacification of Iraq.

From a Turkish perspective, the opportunity to extend its sphere of influence to Mosul and Kirkuk in North Iraq is enticing. It will be given a free hand to search for and destroy PKK fighters who reside in Iraq and mount terrorist attacks in Turkey. In addition, Turkey would have control of the valuable oilfields of the Kirkuk region and the pipeline linking Kirkuk to Bayji and then north to Turkey.

However, the US has recently signalled support for the referendum on Kirkuk to go ahead. Under Iraq's new constitution, a local referendum is to be held during 2007 to determine whether Kirkuk should join the Kurdistan regional confederacy (the united administration of Irbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniya provinces).

Because of its oil wealth, the Kurds wish to incorporate Kirkuk and for it to become their regional capital. Due to the impending referendum, there are reports of significant numbers of Kurds flocking into Kirkuk in order to become eligible to vote on this issue. Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on 16 January, warned Iraqi Kurdish groups against trying to seize control of Kirkuk. He said Turkey would not stand by amid growing ethnic tensions, by which he meant persecution of Turks and other minorities in the Kirkuk region. This speech prompted accusations of interference by Iraqi Kurds.

Although the Blair proposal is extremely ambitious and contentious, the current disastrous situation does call for bold measures. This would be the first step in a larger plan, whereby the Shi'ite regions of south and east Iraq would link to Iran, a country with which the UK, unlike the US, has sought to develop good relations. This would then leave the Sunni area of western Iraq which could either orient towards Sunni dominated Syria or possibly become the remnant of Iraq with pan Arab backing.

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