

Invasion is wrong answer to Turkey's problems

By Wesley Clark

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Just over a week after US president George W. Bush and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, [met in Washington](#), Turkish [troops remained poised](#) to move across the border into Iraqi Kurdistan in an attempt to destroy elements of the Kurdistan Workers party (PKK). We can only hope that a solution based on the idea of joint co-operation against the PKK that seemed to be forged in the Oval Office meeting, focusing on diplomatic engagement between the US, Turkey, Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government, will trump the still-looming military assault.

The Turks are understandably angry and ready for war. Accumulated frustrations over recent attacks by the PKK erupted in public demands for a decisive military solution. Turkish popular opinion strongly supported attacks on rebel base camps inside Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Turkish armed forces have mobilised more than 100,000 troops on the Iraqi border, setting the stage for a massive Turkish invasion of northern Iraq that would have disastrous consequences.

On paper all wars seem simple. Turkish military planners may hope that one bold thrust into Iraqi Kurdistan will, once and for all, eradicate the PKK. A glance at what soldiers call the "troop-to-task" ratio might suggest that the job could be done quickly. Turkey has a very good army and it would seem feasible that 100,000 well-trained and fully equipped Turkish troops could quickly capture or kill 3,000 PKK rebels hiding in an area somewhat larger than Maryland.

But war is never simple. The friction and fog of war always conspire to make the actual combat far more complex, time consuming and bloodier than the sterile and optimistic plans written in the comfort of remote headquarters. Even a military genius like Alexander the Great was stalled by the inhospitable terrain of southern Turkey and northern Iraq. Despite popular longing for a quick military solution, a Turkish invasion of Iraq would bring only stalemate, frustration and – more ominously – destabilise the region, undermine US-Turkish relations for decades, and jeopardise the stability and prosperity of Iraq's Kurdistan region.

Turkey will certainly benefit by continuing on the more creative and diplomatic path now being pursued by Mr Erdogan. He has secured a US promise to share intelligence and to co-operate in neutralising PKK elements in Iraq and preventing their movement across the border. He should open a dialogue with the KRG to formulate joint measures to prevent the PKK from striking Turkey from Iraqi territory. To that end, he needs to embrace the establishment of four-party talks between Turkey, Iraq, the US and the KRG. This must be the way forward.

War is not the answer, especially given the creative alternatives available. First, strike the PKK where they are vulnerable, not in the mountain base camps where they are strongest. Divide the enemy by crafting an amnesty that permits civilians and lower level PKK members to lay down their arms and rejoin society. This worked in Northern Ireland to isolate radical fringes of the Irish Republican Army and it will work here, where the PKK's popular support at best is tepid.

Second, the US and others could cripple PKK operations by cutting off its financial support. PKK's centre of power is not, and never has been, in Iraqi Kurdistan; its popular base lies in south-eastern Turkey. Its financial base is in the cities of continental Europe, where the money is raised. Its leaders travel freely in European capitals. A co-ordinated international effort is needed to interdict the flow of money and supplies to the PKK.

Decades of military action against the PKK have failed to produce a lasting solution and it would fail again. Albert Einstein was not a military strategist but he did know something about how to solve problems. He also recognised the folly of substituting haste for thoughtful, reasoned decision making when he said: “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

Dealing with the PKK is an essential element of resolving the larger conflict in Iraq and improving the peace in the region. This challenge requires a creative strategy, one rooted in diplomacy and dialogue. Most of all it requires leaders with vision who rise above raw emotion – courageous leaders who are willing to forego short-term violent actions in order to wisely serve their nation’s long term interests.

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