

Interview with Cengiz Candar

Cengiz Candar: I can't rule out a military incursion into Iraq after the elections

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Prominent journalist and foreign policy analyst Cengiz Candar does not rule out a Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq after the elections "in the foreseeable future" but stresses such an action would have devastating consequences for everyone including Turkey.

Candar stresses that "patriotism dictates to be against an ill-fated adventure like an incursion into Iraq." He says the dynamics and current trends in Turkey may force such a cross border operation and warns that this could lead to a zero sum game.

He insists that a win-win situation can only happen if Turkey accepts the role of becoming a mentor to the Iraqi Kurds and accepting their existence.

Here is the full text of the interview :

The New Anatolian: You are known to be heavily involved on Turkish-Iraqi affairs. Nowadays, a Turkish military intervention to Northern Iraq is on top of Turkey's political agenda. This is your time and you keep silent. Why?

Cengiz Candar: That is true. My involvement with Iraq dates back to late 1970's. Interestingly, that is through the current Shiite Vice-President of Iraq, Adel Abdulmehdi with whom I shared an apartment in my Beirut days, when my initial interest in what I will call "the Iraqi file" started. By the way, I got to know Jalal Talabani, the current President of Iraq since the year 1973. Therefore, apart from "the Iraqi file", my interest on the Iraqi Kurdish issue even precedes my acquaintance with Adel Abdulmehdi.

Then, as special advisor to late President Turgut Özal, I acted as an intermediary between him and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership in 1991. With Özal's endorsement and backing, I played a major role in the establishment of initial contacts between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdish political movement. That signified breaking the ice since the foundation of our republic. And, since then, I followed keenly the developments in Iraq, on Turkish-Iraqi and Turkish-Kurdish relations. The point where we have reached is diametrically opposed what I have been advocating since decades. I am watching and waiting for the dust to settle. The period we are in is laden with demagogy and belligerent discourse. In such a tense polarized atmosphere, the voices of reason are drowned. For me, it is time to wait and see, while preserving serenity and savvy.

The New Anatolian: Don't you feel you are obliged to raise your voice and propose an alternative course as what you term as serenity and savvy?

Cengiz Candar: I did already. I spoke on various TV programs. I wrote repeatedly in my columns. I participated in a number of panels, here in Turkey and also in Washington and elsewhere. My views on this issue are well known. However, in the last weeks preceding Turkey's July 22 elections, frenzy prevails and the political climate related with the power struggle in Turkey is so poisoned that any sober assessment reaches to deaf ears.

We need to wait for the aftermath of the elections to see how the things will unfold in respect to northern Iraq.

The New Anatolian: Does that suggest that you do not expect a Turkish military incursion to northern Iraq prior to elections?

Cengiz Çandar: No, I do not. But, this does not mean that the current belligerent discourse is not generating its own dangerous dynamic and intoxicating the atmosphere between Turkey and the Kurds. Unfortunately, I cannot rule out a devastatingly and unnecessary adventurism on Turkey's part in the foreseeable future.

The New Anatolian: Can you elaborate?

Cengiz Çandar: The heated discourse on the possible military incursion into northern Iraq is a by-product of an intense power struggle in Turkey. It is an open secret that the military is attempting to corner the ruling party and the government and to discredit it by giving an image that it is insensitive in addressing Turkey's crucial security needs. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and the Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, particularly, in turn, began to make equally belligerent statements not to let the ultra-nationalist opposition parties benefit at the ballot box. Nonetheless, if the dominant political discourse on the Kurdish issue, on the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and on the situation in northern Iraq becomes so belligerent and hostile, it generates its own dynamic. It raises high expectations in the Turkish public for a military operation against the PKK presence beyond the Turkish borders. The Turkish political class becomes a captive of its own discourse and might feel obliged to undertake military action across the frontier with Iraq. Apart from this, such a dominant political discourse intoxicates the atmosphere between Turkey and the Turks and the Kurds in general in an irreversible way.

That concerns me more than anything else.

We should keep on mind that prior the 1967 War between Israel and Arab countries, neither of the warring parties desired that confrontation. In that war, Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan were involved. When we read the archives now, we find out that each one of them was maneuvering against the other. Yet, it went out of hand and led to the Six-Day War whose consequences are defining today's intractable Middle East question. A confrontation with magnitudes of Turkish incursion into northern Iraq will have equally complex results for the region as a whole and will be devastating for our country Turkey, as well.

Patriotism dictates to be against such an ill-fated adventure.

The New Anatolian: Do you not recognize that the PKK constitutes a terrorist threat, a security threat to Turkey and Turkey has every right to defend itself? Does "patriotism" not oblige Turkey to confront this security threat?

Cengiz Çandar: I do. But, the matter is more complicated than it seemingly is. First of all, the PKK is a homegrown issue. It is a by-product of Turkey's unresolved Kurdish question. Secondly, it is a splintered organization. It is by no means at its strength that it had during 1990's. Its operational ability is much more diminished. Even, the scores of military incursions into northern Iraq during the 1990's when the PKK's threat to security was incomparable as of today, did not bear fruit; how come we can hope that it will now?

In the 1990's, we had an American green light and Iraqi Kurdish allies on our side. Now, there is an apparent American red light, we will have to confront Iraqi Kurdish fighters who are much more emboldened after the removal of Saddam regime and additionally we are an accession country to the EU and such a move will play to the hands of those in the EU who never want to see a Turkey in the European family.

A Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq is a recipe for getting into Iraqi quagmire and a shortcut key for Turkey's destabilization that may endanger Turkey's territorial integrity. There are many other ways to deal with the PKK: A military incursion into northern Iraq is a non-option. Perhaps, the only non-option.

The New Anatolian: Don't you think that Turkey's political and military leadership cannot perceive such obvious facts on the ground? Why should, then, they attempt to such a folly?

Cengiz Çandar: You could address the same question to the leaders of Turkey prior to the Balkan Wars and the WW I. Their short-sightedness and mistakes ended up the collapse of our state which was an empire. Even our imperial leaders committed gross errors. A similar mindset and spirit is ostensibly prevailing in Turkey that worries me a lot. They continuously feed an inadvertent nationalism and in turn are guided by that monster that they contributed to create.

I doubt if the real issue is the PKK.

The New Anatolian: If not, what?

Cengiz Çandar: Turkish political body, yet, is far away from digesting the fact that a quasi-independent Kurdistan emerged next to Turkey. Turkish political and military leaders are not happy to see that a federal Iraq with its autonomous Kurdish component has constitutional legitimacy at the next door to Turkey. They see this as an existential risk to the Republic of Turkey with its territorial integrity.

We should take into account that the foundation of our republic coincides with the post-WW I design of the Middle East. Hence, if the post-WW I status-quo in the region, particularly in Iraq changes or is being modified, the Turkish establishment tends to see it as the beginning of the end.

They want to see the status-quo ante to be re-established. But, it will never happen. You cannot roll the wheel of history back. Iraq, under a Saddam regime-type of Sunni Arab dominated country is over. The post-WW I order is thrown into the dustbin of history. It will never come back. By the year 2003 and its aftermath, a drastic paradigm shift occurred in Iraq. We, in Turkey, should conform to new realities on the ground. We should acknowledge the paradigm shift occurred.

The New Anatolian: That means?

Cengiz Çandar: That means, as the developments in Iraq presents risks for Turkey, equally or even furthermore they offer opportunities. An emergent Kurdistan in the North of Iraq, whether within the framework of a federal (never again centralized) Iraq or even independent is God's gift for Turkey. Turkey should embrace this happening at its next door. It should extend its protective umbrella over to the Iraqi Kurds, as Iran does for Iraqi Shiites or the Arab world, in general, does for Sunni Arabs. It should engage with Iraqi Kurdish leadership and also extend its economic power for the reconstruction of the area. Turkish businesses are already doing it. What is lacking is Turkey's official stamp. The Iraqi Kurdistan is floating over a sea of unexplored hydrocarbons, oil and natural gas. The unexplored oilfields in Iraqi Kurdistan are estimated around 20-25 billion barrels. The Kurdish officials are continuously inviting Turkey to head the inevitable international involvement. That is why I wrote once, "Do not move into northern Iraq with TSK (Turkish Armed Forces), but move into Kurdistan with TPAO (Turkish National Oil Company)."

I think this metaphor that was a title of an article of mine summarizes what I stand for. If Turkey acknowledges the paradigm shift that occurred in Iraq and digests its consequences, then, it could engage in fraternal contacts with the Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and also with the president of Kurdistan Regional Government, Massoud Barzani. Such an approach, such an engagement will yield much more favorable results in containing and ultimately getting over the PKK threat. It would signal very positive signals for our own Kurdish citizens in Turkey. And, it will ameliorate and consolidate our relations with the United States. That will also increase Turkey's standing vis-a-vis the European Union. This is the only win-win situation. We should get out of this zero-sum game that heralds disaster for Turkey, as soon as possible.

The New Anatolian: Thank you.

Sources

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