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**ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF TURKEY'S CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR OPERATION  
NORTHERN WATCH**

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Some political elements in Turkey have been concerned in recent years about the use of the Turkish air base at Incirlik by Western powers to enforce a 'no fly' zone over the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq. The aim of the operation is to protect the Kurdish people of the region from the revenge of the Saddam Hussein regime, and to monitor Iraqi compliance with United Nations Security Council directives. In the past, the operation was known as Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) and the states taking part in it were, apart from Turkey, the USA, the UK and France. Since 1 January 1997, OPC has been replaced by Operation Northern Watch (ONW). The French have not taken part in ONW, leaving the combat aircraft of the USA and the UK to fly missions over Northern Iraq in support of ONW. (Turkish personnel do not fly over Iraq as part of ONW, but do contribute to the operation within Turkey and Turkish airspace.)

Public concern in Turkey about the use of Incirlik by the West increased during November 1997, when press reports emerged suggesting that Incirlik might be used by the US to mount retaliatory attacks on Iraq following the rift between Baghdad and the UN over the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons inspection programme. Fears were heightened when the US transferred extra combat aircraft to Incirlik. In the course of about ten days, four F-16 fighters and five KC-135 tankers arrived at the base near the city of Adana. However, both Turkey and the US moved quickly to deny reports that Incirlik would be used for US retaliation against Iraq over the UNSCOM controversy. In fact, the increase in aircraft numbers were within the previously agreed limits. But in the meantime, the affair had highlighted once again the use of Incirlik by western combat aircraft and the arguments for and against such deployment.

Some senior Turkish politicians have, over the years, seen the West's operations from Incirlik as interfering with the restoration of normal relations with a close neighbour, Iraq. They also believed it indirectly strengthened Turkey's own Kurdish separatist rebels, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), by creating a power vacuum in the Iraqi-Kurd enclave. The two main Kurdish parties in the area have been in conflict and it was argued that this has also helped the terrorist PKK become entrenched in the region. In recent years, some Turkish politicians were willing to see the West's operations from Incirlik continue for a wide range of reasons, but wanted to see greater Turkish control over these operations.

In June 1996, the Turkish Parliament voted on an "interim formula" worked out by the caretaker Yılmaz Government whereby deputies would ballot on an extension for what was then OPC to the end of July only. Then, under the incoming Erbakan Government, deputies voted to extend the mandate for a further five months. In this article, as an outsider who has visited Turkey and Northern

Iraq, I propose humbly to put forward my own views as to why it may well be in the interests of Turkey in the longer term to permit OPC's successor, ONW, to be based in Turkish territory, and why it is in the interests of the Western powers to take on board Turkey's legitimate concerns about the use of Incirlik as a base for their combat aircraft.

There is little doubt that if ONW were to be abandoned, and if this were to be accompanied by a decision on the part of the West to discontinue all protection for the Iraqi Kurds, the results would be disastrous for the people of the enclave in Northern Iraq, who have already been suffering the effects of a local civil war between Iraqi-Kurd factions. But there could also be serious repercussions for Turkey, including having to face a fresh influx of refugees to its border areas. Some analysts believe that in the event of the West withdrawing its protection, the forces of Saddam Hussein would move quickly to invade the Iraqi-Kurd region and exact a terrible vengeance. One experienced observer who holds this view is General Wafic Al-Sammara'i, who is in an almost unique position to understand Saddam's thinking. The general was head of Iraqi Military Intelligence during Desert Storm, and was constantly at Saddam's side during that conflict. Later, he had a senior post in the nerve centre of Saddam's power, the Office of the Presidential Palace. He defected in 1994, and outlined his views on Saddam's probable strategy vis-à-vis the Kurdish region in an interview with the author.

The general conceded that the loss of Incirlik to Western combat aircraft might not of itself be sufficient to tempt Saddam to move against the Kurdish region as the US has other means of making strikes against Iraqi targets. US options include the use of heavy bombers from Diego Garcia, carrier-based US aircraft in the Gulf and submarine-launched Tomahawk missiles. But other observers would argue that abandonment of Incirlik could serve to tempt Saddam to begin to squeeze the Kurdish enclave, and that at the very least it would send him the wrong signals. Undoubtedly, the loss of Incirlik as the main base of ONW would detract from the capability of the coalition partners to enforce the no-fly zone, and it would remove an important military option for them. General Michael Ryan, the commander of US Air Forces in Europe underlined the military importance to the US of Incirlik, during a recent visit to the base. He commented: "Incirlik remains the best base for force projection. It's our furthest reach east."

An onslaught by Baghdad on the Kurdish region could, in turn, lead to yet another exodus of Kurdish refugees to the borders of Iran and Turkey, as happened after the Gulf War in 1991, putting great pressure on Turkey and possibly leading to serious destabilisation of the border region. Turkey has sufficient problems already in the region, fighting against terrorist acts perpetrated by the illegal PKK, without having to face a major refugee crisis. In any Iraqi offensive against the Kurdish region, Saddam would, in particular, target one of the two main Iraqi Kurd parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and various opposition elements that have been re-grouping in the PUK sector of the enclave, including the re-organised militia of the opposition umbrella group, the Iraqi National Congress. But there is no guarantee that Saddam would not also turn against the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), despite the fact that the KDP enlisted the support of Iraqi forces against its bitter rival, the PUK, in August 1996, as part of the ongoing civil war between the two Kurdish factions.

The rapprochement between the KDP and Baghdad was seen by some analysts as little more than a temporary, de facto alliance that suited their respective interests at that particular time. (One is mindful of the fact that KDP leader Massoud Barzani has seen three of his brothers and thousands of his clansmen killed by the Iraqi regime.) From Iraq's point of view, the KDP with its strong militia

must still represent an unwelcome challenge to Baghdad's sovereignty. Iraqi action against the KDP could, in turn, undermine the latter's activities against the PKK. Also, if Saddam took back control of the enclave, there is no guarantee that he will not provide aid to the PKK, whom he has helped in the past when it suited him, as a way of putting pressure on Turkey. While Turkey is understandably concerned about the power vacuum in Northern Iraq that has allowed the PKK to flourish, other serious problems could also arise for Turkey in the event of Saddam taking over the enclave and crushing the Iraqi Kurds.

During the period of OPC, there was concern in Turkey over rules of engagement for OPC forces, and in considering the future of ONW, the Western powers will have to address the legitimate concerns of Turkey, which has always been a loyal member of NATO and which made many sacrifices by its aid to the Allied Forces during the Gulf War. Ankara claims that its economic, commercial losses amount to some \$30 billion to date. It has been reported that in meetings with senior officials in Washington in March 1996, Turkey's deputy chief of general staff, General Çevik Bir, accompanied by the Foreign Ministry's deputy undersecretary, Ali Tuygan, sought assurances of a more assertive role for Turkey in commanding OPC, and a more concrete definition of the rules of engagement for OPC pilots. There had been concern in Turkey over some attacks by US OPC pilots on Iraqi targets. According to various informed sources, there is regular consultation between the present partners in ONW, and US sources have indicated that Turkey's concerns are being taken on board as operational details for ONW are worked out.

Despite the fact that OPC failed to deter Iraq from sending its forces into the Kurdish area to attack the PUK in August 1996, its achievements have been very worthwhile. In its earlier phase it performed a vital humanitarian role, and oversaw the solving of the 1991 refugee crisis. It has given protection to the Kurds of Northern Iraq, and ONW continues to provide protection. Turkey has a vital role to play in safeguarding the Kurdish enclave, and until Saddam makes his peace with the international community, few would argue against the proposition that Turkey is doing an important service to the world by remaining in ONW.