

# Raising the Stakes



The Kurdish people are an awkward presence in the complicated and tense geopolitics of the Middle East. Whether in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, or Syria, they are in the midst of highly unstable situations. There is turmoil in Iraq; the possibility of a military attack on Iran; uncertainty over Turkey's political direction; and the continuing problem of the treatment of Kurds in Syria. Each country has a significant Kurdish population which, for all the diversity, poses related questions for these states and international policy. Increasingly vigorous Kurdish nationalism is raising the stakes. This has been strengthened by the firm establishment of the effectively autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.

**t** HE COMPLEX MOUNTAIN borderlands between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey are mainly populated by Kurds. This greatly complicates the relationships between them.

Recent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) attacks in Turkey have raised the tension to its highest level since the late 1990s. Iranian forces have also suffered at the hands of the Freedom and Life Party (PJAK). Most of the incidents occurred in areas bordering the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Both the region and its administration are recognised by the Iraqi constitution and government – much to the chagrin of Ankara.

The killing of forty Turkish soldiers and civilians has produced an intensely nationalist public mood and the government has been under enormous pressure to deliver a robust response, to destroy the PKK and send a message to the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. Turks demand firm action to show the country is not weak, even though a military solution is unrealistic.

The struggle between the PKK and Turkey has killed 37,000 people since 1984. A five-year PKK ceasefire ended in 2004. While exact figures are hard to come by, perhaps three thousand of its five thousand active fighters