

Washington's dirty military intrigues in northern Iraq

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The US military is rapidly becoming embroiled in a murky war of manoeuvre and intrigue in northern Iraq, in league with its Kurdish militia allies—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Backed by US Special Forces, helicopters and air support, some 6,000 PUK fighters are massing in the Halabja Valley in north eastern Iraq for an offensive on a small enclave held by the Islamic fundamentalist group—Ansar al-Islam. The militia, formed less than two years ago, is estimated to have only 600 to 800 fighters and to control just 15 small villages near the border with Iran.

The Bush administration claims, without offering a shred of evidence, that Ansar is the “missing link” between Al Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime. Both Baghdad and Ansar leader Mullah Krekar vigorously denied any connection. Krekar, who lives in exile in Norway, reiterated his hostility to the Ba’athist regime and said his group had no ties with Al Qaeda.

Washington insists that it is targeting Ansar as part of its “global war on terrorism” and to prevent attacks by the group on US troops opening up a northern front against Baghdad. In all likelihood, the operation is also a US payoff to the PUK, which has been engaged in bitter fighting with Ansar, in return for the PUK’s close co-operation in the war on Baghdad.

The US military opened the offensive on Ansar with a barrage of up to 50 cruise missiles last Saturday against villages under its control. Estimates of casualties are imprecise. According to a report in the Canadian-based *Globe and Mail*, six Ansar fighters were killed in the initial attacks and an unknown number were injured. Later the same day, three people, including Australian cameraman Paul Moran, died in a suicide bomb attack in the area, apparently a reprisal

carried out by Ansar.

Significantly, the cruise missile attack also targetted the town of Khormal, which is under the control of a second Islamic militia—Komala Islami Kurdistan. Unlike Ansar, Komala actively cooperates with the PUK administration in the region, for which it receives a monthly payment of about \$250,000. Sandwiched in between PUK and Ansar militia, it has tried to maintain a precarious neutrality—accused by each of aiding the opposition.

Komala leaders reacted angrily to the attack, which left at least 46 people dead and caused an exodus of refugees fleeing for safety in anticipation of further bombing. Komala leader Sheikh Mohsin declared: “We deplore this decision to attack us since we have been against the [Iraqi] regime, not America. If we are targetted, America must clarify why that is, and if this has been an accident then there must be an apology.”

There has, however, been no explanation and no apology from Washington. In his speech to the UN Security Council last month, US Secretary of State Colin Powell made great play of an alleged chemical weapons factory run by Ansar. He exhibited an aerial photograph, giving its location as Khormal. As it turned out, the building was not in Khormal but in the Ansar-held village of Sargat. Moreover, an inspection of the building by Western journalists found no evidence of a weapons factory—chemical or otherwise.

It is unlikely the strike was accidental or that the US did not know the political affiliation of the town. The American military has been working closely with PUK leaders in preparation for the assault on Ansar strongholds. PUK leaders have publicly apologised for the attack and denied that they asked the US to target Khormal. But no one really believes the claim.

A PUK official pointed to the real motives in off-the

record comments cited in the *Globe and Mail*. “There is no distinction between the Islamic parties,” he said. “The best thing is to eliminate them.” In other words, the PUK has taken the opportunity to settle its scores with a political rival. And the US military has obliged with an unprovoked attack that has left over 40 people dead.

The attack has had the added bonus for the US military of clearing a path for the assault on Anwar villages. Following the cruise missile strike, the PUK suggested that Kormala group shift its base of operations elsewhere. Facing the possibility of another attack, the Komala militia have evacuated the area under an agreement that allows them to keep their arms, their \$250,000 monthly payments and a bonus of \$600,000.

One final aspect deserves mention—the actions of Iran. As cruise missiles were hitting Ansar villages on Saturday, the Iranian authorities shut the border with Iraq and prevented injured Ansar fighters from receiving medical assistance in Iran. As Kurdish officials noted, the move represented an abrupt reversal of Iranian policy, which previously allowed Ansar to move freely across the border.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, Iranian intelligence officials were closely involved in brokering negotiations between the PUK and Kormala. Whether or not there is any formal agreement, it appears that Tehran, despite its opposition to the US war on Baghdad, has reached an understanding with Washington to cooperate in northern Iraq. An apparent payoff to Iran came on Monday when the US bombed three villages inside northern Iraq used by fighters from the Peoples Mujahideen Organisation (MKO)—a group opposed to the Tehran regime—to launch attacks against targets inside Iran.

At the same time, US warplanes have continued to bomb Ansar villages in preparation for a full-scale assault by US-PUK forces expected in the next few days. Sporadic clashes are already taking place. On Monday a group of Ansar fighters attacked a PUK militia unit outside the village of Anab, leaving one PUK and three Ansar soldiers dead. Local villagers are caught in the middle. “We don’t mind if the Ansar fighters get killed. But we are innocent civilians. We are now very afraid that America is going to bomb us,” one told the *Guardian* newspaper.

The sordid intrigues surrounding the offensive are just a small indication of the political minefield into which the US military has stepped in northern Iraq. Yesterday 1,000 US paratroops from army’s 173rd Airborne Brigade jumped into the area to secure control of a key airfield and pave the way for further airlifts of troops and military hardware.

Originally, the Pentagon planned to open up a northern front against Baghdad by dispatching more than 60,000 troops, backed by heavy armour, through Turkey. When Ankara refused to allow a US invasion from its territory, the US military was forced to resort to more lightly-armed paratroops. But without a further massive influx of troops, a US offensive, in league with Kurdish militia, against heavily entrenched Iraqi positions near the northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul appears a risky exercise.

The more likely purpose of the paratroop drop is to provide Washington with a military presence in the increasingly volatile situation in northern Iraq. As the *Washington Post* noted: “One of the brigade’s immediate aims is to keep the 40,000 Turkish troops on the border from starting a ‘war within a war’ with US-backed Iraqi Kurd forces.”

Turkey has threatened to invade northern Iraq if the PUK and KDP try to create an autonomous Kurdish region or seize Kirkuk and Mosul. The PUK and KDP, whose militias made their first military moves towards these cities, have warned that they will resist any Turkish incursion militarily. Washington has now dispatched its own forces to try to put its stamp on affairs in the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq.



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