

Turkish-US tensions continue over Kurds in northern Iraq

Justus Leicht
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The role of the Kurds in northern Iraq continues to be a source of considerable tension between the US and its NATO partner Turkey. While the two Kurdish organisations PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) have developed into the most important and reliable supporters of the American occupying forces in Iraq, Turkish military and nationalist forces regard any broad influence by the Kurdish groups in neighbouring Iraq as a nightmare to be prevented at all costs.

The US government has made considerable efforts to quell the conflict with the Turkish military and nationalists, which they have relied upon up to now, in particular in the case of US differences with the elected Turkish government (AKP—Justice and Development Party) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Nevertheless, conflicts continue to flare up. The precise background to the incident in which US soldiers took prisoner Turkish special forces at the beginning of July in the northern Iraqi city of Suleimaniya remains unclear. A joint statement on the affair made by Ankara and Washington consisted mostly of hollow phrases, with both sides maintaining different versions of what took place.

The Turkish special unit consisting of three officers and eight junior officers was arrested July 4 and taken to the military prison in Baghdad, handcuffed and with sacks over their heads. After reports in the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet*, which is close to the army, a vigorous round of diplomatic wrangling took place by telephone. The prisoners were eventually freed three days later.

The arrests unleashed a storm of protest in Turkey, but Washington reacted coolly. Only after a few days had passed did a speaker for the Bush administration nonchalantly declare that the Turkish unit had been “involved in suspicious activities.” This was the accusation that stuck. At the same time, Washington emphasised its desire to maintain its relationship with Turkey.

Information released by American sources to the media make much sharper accusations. According to these reports, on arrest the special unit was found to possess over \$100,000 in sniper equipment, 15 kilos of explosive material and a map of the town of Kirkuk. Reportedly marked on the map was the residence of the local Kurdish governor. The building, which housed the special unit at the time of its arrest, was the headquarters of the pro-Turkish “Iraqi Turkmen Front” (ITF), which is alleged to have received military training and equipment from the ultra-right Turkish “Grey Wolves.”

In other words, Turkey has been accused of state-sponsored terrorism and the deliberate destabilisation of American occupied Iraq. The brutal and humiliating form of the arrests—according to the Turkish media they were “treated like Al Qaeda terrorists”—and their imprisonment in a jail designed to hold supporters of the overthrown Iraqi regime were the logical consequences of such accusations. Had Iranian or Syrian units been apprehended under similar circumstances the result undoubtedly would have been an hysterical political campaign, calls for international sanctions or even cruise missiles directed at Teheran or Damascus.

Instead the American ambassador in Ankara rushed to meet the Turkish

army general staff and members of the government to express his “regrets” over this “inexplicable incident.” The supreme commander of American forces in Europe, General James L. Jones, travelled to Ankara and established a commission together with a Turkish general to investigate the incident.

The Turkish government continues to maintain that the US accusations are “ridiculous.” The presence of Turkish troops in northern Iraq and the equipment used by them are known to the American forces, it claims. Ankara’s only aim is to establish “stability” in Iraq and therefore any so-called plans for assassination are “illogical.” In addition it is “impossible” that Turkish soldiers could be involved in illegal activities.

Both sides remain true to their own version of events. In its final declaration of July 15 the commission states: “The US side noted the Turkish concerns related to the kind of treatment its military personnel were subjected to during the unfortunate incident. The Turkish side noted the US expressions of concern about reported activities of Turkish personnel in northern Iraq. Both sides expressed regret that this incident occurred between allied troops and the custodial treatment of the Turkish soldiers.” This is far removed from the American apology sought by Ankara.

In fact, Turkish-US differences over the Kurdish issue remain as pronounced as ever. As a result, similar incidents in the future are possible.

Just a few months ago, barely a week passed without Turkish warnings and threats directed against the Kurds who predominate in the region of northern Iraq. It was only the blunt threat by the American army that during the Iraq war it could not exclude the possibility of “friendly” fire that prevented tens of thousands of Turkish troops from marching into these northern regions. In particular, any take-over by the Kurds of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and conflict with the ethnic group of the Turkmen were stipulated by Turkey as sufficient “reasons for going to war.” In the meantime, both of these variants have taken place.

For its part, the US initially agreed to the occupation of northern Iraq by Turkish troops when Turkey in return agreed to allow American troops to use Turkish territory as a base for its operations. Only after the Turkish government rejected the American request on May 1, following massive public opposition, did Washington throw its weight behind a strategy involving the Kurds.

Since then the two main Kurdish organisations, PUK and KDP, have proved to be the only reliable main allies of Washington in Iraq. They are the only organisations that have been allowed to keep their heavy armaments. The main opposition to the US troops comes from the Arabic population comprising Shiite and Sunni communities. The most important organisation of the Shiites, SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and Al Dawa, have half-heartedly agreed to back the occupation regime, but due to their Islamist beliefs and close links to Shiite Iran, both organisations are little trusted in Washington.

The fact that America is relying on collaboration with Kurdish parties is

a nightmare for nationalist circles in Ankara. They fear that a Kurdish state, or broad autonomy for the Kurds in northern Iraq, could re-ignite demands for Kurdish self-determination inside Turkey itself, thereby threatening the country's unity. Such a development would also mean that Turkey would have to finally give up its attempts to establish domination of the oilfields in Kirkuk and Mosul.

For years, Turkey has been expressing its apparent concern for the Turkmen minority in northern Iraq. It is no secret to the western media that Turkey is behind the arming of the "Iraqi Turkmen Front." The Turkmen Front has continually called for a Turkish intervention in the region and is regarded as an instrument for pressure from Ankara on the Iraqi Kurds.

A further reason for the activity of the Turkish military in northern Iraq is the presence of guerrilla fighters of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which has renamed itself the KADEK. Three years ago the organisation retreated into the north of Iraq when its leadership officially ditched the party's long-standing armed struggle for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey.

Up to now Turkey has rejected conciliatory offers from the PKK and has repeatedly sent troops into northern Iraq in order to persecute an organisation which the US also continues to brand as "terrorist." However, at the moment the US is not prepared to jeopardise stability in the north of Iraq by allowing massive numbers of Turkish troops to take up an offensive against the PKK. In light of the increasing resistance from layers of the Iraqi population the US is unwilling to open up an additional front against the PKK—in particular because the latter have never attacked American targets and have frequently made declarations of loyalty to Washington.

Representatives of the Bush government have assured Turkey, however, that they will "not tolerate" the presence of the PKK, and also appear to be prepared to permit some limited activity by the Turkish military in northern Iraq. The deputy chief of staff for the Turkish army, Yasar Büyükanit, indicated that American representatives in their joint commission had recognised that the Turkish army has a "legitimate reason" to be in Iraq.

Büyükanit made clear that the Turkish army would not withdraw from the region "until the terrorist group PKK/KADEK has been completely overcome." According to Turkish sources the army has received a "security zone" from the Americans along the Turkish-Iraqi border and is also free to move within the entire region of northern Iraq. The only stipulation is that the US army be warned in advance of Turkish troop movements. To this end, joint committees have been proposed and a Turkish liaison officer has been sent to Baghdad.

While Turkish generals have been meeting with representatives of the American army behind closed doors, an hysterical nationalist campaign has been launched inside Turkey. At first sight the campaign appears to be aimed at the US, but in fact the real aim is to whip up chauvinist hostility against the Kurds and discredit the elected Turkish government of the AKP.

Army chief of staff Hilmi Özkök opened the campaign by proclaiming: "National pride and the honour of the armed forces are being threatened!" He received support from both right-wing and left-wing camps. The extent of his support ranged from the right-wing newspaper *Hürriyet* and the fascist MHP (National Movement Party), which has many supporters amongst army special units to the parliamentary opposition, to the left Kemalist CHP (Republican Peoples Party), the Stalinist organisations TKP (Turkish Communist Party) and IP (Worker's Party) All accuse the government of not having done enough to defend the "national pride and honour of the army" against the US.

CHP deputy Orhan Eraslan, a member of the parliamentary legal committee, attacked one of the laws planned by the government, which calls upon members of the PKK to give themselves up. The law envisages freedom from punishment for all those who had not taken part in attacks

on Turkish security forces and reduced sentences for all those who give information on their former comrades. The law offers nothing to leading members of the PKK and has been rejected by the organisation. Eraslan maintained that the AKP had agreed the law at the behest of the US in order to return the 5,000 PKK fighters in northern Iraq to Turkey. "The US wants to export the terror in northern Iraq to Turkey. This law will only encourage terror," he said.

Dogu Perincek, chairman of the Stalinist Workers Party (IP), went even further. At a press conference he accused the AKP government of concluding a secret deal with the US whereby Turkish troops were due to completely withdraw from northern Iraq after a period of four months. Until then the army was required to refrain from any activity against the PKK unless it had the specific agreement of the Americans. In addition, Turkey was to be turned into a federal state within four years, with the Kurdish occupied regions of southeast Turkey acquiring a similar status to that of northern Iraq. The IP is renowned for its extreme nationalism and the unceasing support it gives to the Turkish military—an expression of the Stalinist line of the so-called "progressive role of the national bourgeois" in backward countries.

On the other hand, the newspaper *Hürriyet* made clear who was the real target of the campaign: "The US has been our ally for 50 years. For the first time, Washington treated Turkey in a hostile way by detaining 11 Turkish soldiers in northern Iraq. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been following an indecisive and wrong Iraq policy, is responsible for it. This is unfortunate for Turkey but unfortunately this was what the Turkish nation wanted.... Now Turkey is paying the price of its votes for the AKP" (*Hürriyet*, July 7, 2003).

The state president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, has also found his own way to line up with the nationalist forces. On July 15, one day after the conclusion of the investigation into the events at Suleimanija, he pardoned Ibrahim Sahin, one of the notorious commanders of the Turkish special units, apparently for health reasons ("hearing and psychological problems"). A member of the extreme right-wing nationalist MHP, Sahin had been sentenced to six years in prison for his role in the Susurluk scandal. He has close contact with mafia boss Abdullah Catli and like many other military, police and political figures had been involved in countless murders, kidnappings, bribery scandals, weapons and drug deals in the course of the dirty war against the Kurds. He is a shining example of the "honourable" nature of the special units which general chief of staff Özkök called upon to be defended.

This nationalist campaign has not hindered Turkish generals, however, from meeting in Ankara last weekend, after the conclusion of the joint investigation committee, with the commander of US military forces in Europe, James Jones, and the new commander of the US central command, John Abizaid. According to a statement of the general staff, the two sides exchanged general information over their military collaboration as well as more specifically on measures to combat the PKK/KADEK and the establishment of an international protection force for Iraq. The US is also interested in involving Turkish forces in one of the allied occupation forces the US plans for the next period.

In return the US has offered the generals help in the suppression of Turkish Kurds. In an interview published in *Hürriyet*, US Ambassador Robert Pearson declared: "We desire no threat to Turkey from the PKK to remain in Iraq.... They will either surrender or face the alternative of not doing so.... The alternative is the use of military force." Cynically he then added: "They are Turkish citizens, not Iraqis. They should return home to Turkey." He is merely waiting for the passing of the conciliation law and working on a joint strategy with Turkey. In order to guarantee the success of this process it was important, Pearson warned, that Iran refuse any PKK request for refuge.

As if to clearly demonstrate the character of the newly won friendship between the US and Turkish generals, the Turkish constitutional court

banned the HADEP (Kurdish People's Democracy Party) on the same weekend. This is by far the most influential party in Kurdish occupied southeastern Turkey, with mayors in most of the region's towns and cities.

As justification the judges stipulated, alongside other reasons: "According to the constitution, everybody should be considered Turkish as long as they have Turkish citizenship.... HADEP authorities said in various speeches that the Kurds are a different nation from the Turks, that Kurds are subjected to oppression and cruelty, that there is a war between the PKK terrorists and Turkey, and that the Kurds should be on the side of the terrorists in this war" (*Zaman*, July 20, 2003).



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