Bombing in Irbil points to growing instability in northern Iraq

Peter Symonds
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Among the many lies and half truths contained in President Bush's keynote TV address last Sunday was a reference to the relative calm in northern Iraq. Desperate to latch onto any glimmer of good news, Bush declared in his speech: "The north of Iraq is generally stable and is moving forward with reconstruction and self-government."

Two days later, a huge car bomb exploded outside a US intelligence compound in the northern city of Irbil, killing at least three people and injuring more than 40 others, including six Americans. The blast not only shattered the illusion of quiescence but highlighted the sharp tensions that have been created in the region by the US military occupation.

According to eyewitnesses, the driver, who died in attack, tried but failed to drive the vehicle into the compound then detonated the bomb near the perimeter. Estimates put the amount of high explosives in the bomb at between 150 and 200 kilograms. Such was the force of the blast that it destroyed several nearby homes, tore the façade off others and set fire to parked vehicles. Part of the bomber's car was found over a kilometre from the blast site.

US soldiers were immediately flown in by helicopter and, with the support of Kurdish militia, sealed off the area. Major James Bullion, a US military spokesman in Irbil, told the media that three people were believed dead—two children and an elderly woman. But the toll could be higher. "There were lots of body parts around not belonging to any of the injured or dead that we accounted for," he said.

The blast was the first of its kind in northern Iraq. Elsewhere US military forces are coming under various forms of attack—on average 15 times a day and the figure is rising. But the north of the country, which has been under the effective control of pro-US militia for more than a decade, has been relatively quiet. That in itself raises some awkward questions: who were these intelligence officials and what were they doing in Irbil, particularly if the region is considered "generally stable"?

No details have been forthcoming from the Pentagon. The Defence Intelligence Agency in Washington confirmed that four of the injured Americans, described as "military intelligence officers," suffered serious wounds and were taken by helicopter to Mosul for treatment. The other two, acknowledged as military personnel, were less seriously injured.

The compound was not marked. It was guarded by a special Kurdish militia unit and the American personnel were dressed in civilian clothes. Local Iraqis did not realise that it was used by US intelligence and some were angry that it had been sited in a residential area. "It was a blasphemy to put their base in a civilian neighbourhood," Najib Abdullah, a petrol station manager, told the media.

Mufsen Jamil, Kurdish security chief for the area, explained that US forces had only recently taken over the compound. "The Americans had been in the neighbourhood for about 40 days," he said. "Frankly we were worried. From our information, there's a lot of TNT coming over the border. And we know there are people out there who want to destabilise [the north] just like the rest of Iraq."

Even though no organisation has claimed responsibility for the blast and investigations have just begun, unnamed Kurdish officials immediately blamed the Islamic fundamentalist militia—Ansar al-Islam. The group is a convenient scapegoat. In February, US Secretary of State Colin Powell claimed that Ansar al-Islam was the link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and produced photographs of what was purportedly to be an Ansar "chemical weapons factory".

At the time, exiled Ansar leader Mullah Krekar denied any connection to Al Qaeda and reiterated his group's longstanding enmity to the Hussein regime. His militia

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escorted a group of foreign journalists to the building shown in Powell's photograph where they found no evidence of any weapons factory. The story almost certainly originated from pro-US Kurdish militia—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—which have a history of armed conflict with Ansar.

As part of its invasion of Iraq, the US military collaborated with the PUK in an all-out offensive against Ansar's strongholds in the Halabja Valley in late March. After pounding the area with cruise missiles and bombs, some 6,000 PUK fighters, backed by US Special Forces, seized a number of small villages near the Iranian border held by 600 to 800 Ansar fighters. Seeking to appease Washington, Iran shut its borders just prior to the offensive, cutting off their lines of retreat.

It is possible that Ansar survivors have managed to regroup and launch the attack in Irbil. But Washington's intrigues with the KDP and PUK militia have created other enemies. As the offensive began against Ansar, the US launched a barrage of cruise missiles against the town of Khormal killing 46 people and causing a flood of refugees. The town was controlled by a second Islamic militia—Kormala Islami Kurdistan—with which the PUK had an uneasy alliance. It appears that the PUK, with US backing, took the opportunity not only to deal with Ansar but to send a message to a potentially troublesome ally.

The Kurdish north of Iraq is also refuge to an estimated 5,000 fighters from the PKK/KADEK, a separatist militia of Turkish Kurds. The group is rapidly becoming a focus of US attention because of negotiations currently underway between Washington and Ankara over the dispatch of 10,000 Turkish troops to Iraq. Washington is desperate for additional troops, particularly from Muslim countries like Turkey, to shore up its position both politically and militarily in Iraq.

The Turkish military are keen to mend relations with Washington after the parliament in March blocked US plans to use the country as a base for invading northern Iraq. But the Turkish government faces continuing popular opposition to any support for the US occupation and is driving a hard bargain. As part of the deal, Washington has already offered $8.5 billion in additional loans, contingent on Turkey providing military assistance in Iraq and implementing the IMF's restructuring package.

But the Turkish government has other conditions. In particular, it is insisting that the US military shut down any PKK/KADEK bases in northern Iraq. The US has already pledged to disarm those fighters who fail to surrender under an amnesty law passed last month in the Turkish parliament. It is not too far fetched to assume that at least one of the tasks of the recently established military intelligence unit in Irbil was to draw up plans to deal with the PKK/KADEK fighters.

While any deal to dispatch Turkish troops is dependent on a resolution in the UN Security Council, planning appears to be well advanced. Turkey's Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul indicated on Tuesday that the government was willing to send the troops and that military planning could be completed by the end of the month. US State Department, Pentagon and CIA officials are due in Turkey next week to discuss details.

However, in its desperation for troop reinforcements, Washington threatens to undermine whatever semblance of stability has existed in the northern Iraq. The presence of Turkish troops, even if they are not stationed in the Kurdish areas, will provoke opposition, not only from the PKK/KADEK, but from Washington's Kurdish allies who are deeply suspicious of Turkish ambitions in northern Iraq.

The issue has already created an open rift among the US-appointed political stooges in the Iraqi Governing Council. Close US ally Ahmad Chalabi, who is currently acting president, has signalled his support for the plan, provided that no more than 10,000 Turkish troops are sent and they are not deployed in Kurdish areas. As a result, Chalabi has received a cordial invitation to visit Turkey.

On the other hand, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a senior KDP leader, has publicly opposed the intrusion of troops from any of Iraq's neighbours. Referring to plans to station Turkish troops in the west of the country, Zebari pointed out that the supply lines for any Turkish military contingent will necessarily pass through the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq.

Whoever carried out this week's attack on the US military intelligence compound at Irbil, the blast is symptomatic of the barely concealed tensions that exist in the region, which could rapidly escalate into armed conflict, directed at US occupation forces in particular.

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