

Turkey sends troops to Iraq

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On October 7, the Turkish parliament gave the green light for the sending of troops to Iraq. Voting in favour were 358 deputies of the governing moderate Islamic AKP (Justice and Development Party), with 183 deputies of the opposition CHP (Republican Peoples Party), voting against.

The parliamentary decision gives the head of the Turkish government, Tayyip Erdogan, a free hand to work out with the US the conditions, extent and time period for the intervention by Turkish troops. It is presumed that Turkey will send 10,000 troops to central Iraq for a period of one year. The Turkish contingent will then be by far the biggest from any country apart from the two main occupying powers—the US and Great Britain. It will also be the first contingent to be sent from a country that is predominantly Muslim.

Suppositions that the decision to send troops would fail to be backed inside Erdogan's own parliamentary fraction—as was the case in a similar vote March 1—proved to be unfounded. In the March vote, around 100 deputies voted against the stationing of American troops preparing for the invasion of Iraq on Turkish territory. The vote was a setback for the government at the time and served to worsen the atmosphere between Ankara and Washington.

Before the latest vote, there were once also indications of opposition inside the government's ranks. The chairman of the parliamentary foreign policy committee, Mehmet Dulger, stated that the US only wanted Turkish troops, rather than American soldiers, to be killed by the Iraqi opposition. In addition, according to opinion polls, about two thirds of the Turkish population are against sending troops to Iraq, but it appears that Prime Minister Erdogan was able to present irresistible arguments to win over rebellious deputies.

Although Erdogan allowed parliament to debate and vote on the Iraq intervention with the public

excluded—according to the CHP, because of its “fears of the Turkish people”—it is an open secret that the Turkish government expects to be repaid for its mercenary services. The US Congress has agreed to a credit of \$8.5 billion for Turkey, which is strictly bound to the condition that Turkey support the US in Iraq. For its part, Turkey urgently needs the credit to avoid a renewed collapse of the currency and economy as a whole. The economic collapse of 2001 brought ruin to broad layers of the Turkish population, and support for the current government is largely based on the fact that recently there has been some stabilisation of the economy.

In addition, Turkey has reportedly received assurances that the Americans will take action against the estimated 5,000 members of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK/KADEK) who are mainly based in northern Iraq. Having publicly agitated for intervention, it was in particular the leadership of the Turkish army that made involvement dependent on repressive measures against the Iraqi Kurds. The head of the military general staff, Hilmi Özkök, compared the entire proceedings to a game of lotto: if you are not prepared to take risks, then you cannot win anything.

The PKK/KADEK had called off its guerrilla war against the Turkish state and retreated into northern Iraq four years ago following the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan. In the meantime, the organisation has offered to give up its weapons and loyally serve the Turkish state in exchange for a general amnesty and the awarding of cultural rights to the Kurds. Turkey has refused to negotiate over such terms.

The US has officially declared the PKK and its successor organisation the KADEK to be terrorist organisations. However, until now, the US has refrained from taking any action against their bases in northern Iraq. There are basically two reasons for this. Firstly, the PKK/KADEK has never been a threat to

American ambitions in the region and has used any available opportunity to express its readiness to cooperate with the occupying power. The leaders of the organisation go so far as to welcome the US occupation as the first step towards the establishing of democracy throughout the Middle East! Secondly, the American army, already beleaguered by a determined Iraqi resistance, has had little interest in opening up a new war front.

Now there are indications that a deal has been struck between Turkey and the US. After discussion over several days, representatives of both governments declared that they had reached mutual agreement on a “plan of action,” in the words of US secretary of state Powell, to “eliminate” the “threat” represented by the PKK. The US government’s broadcast service Voice of America (VOA) said that, if necessary, military means would be employed towards this end. The Turkish newspaper *Zaman*, which is close to government circles, had already stated in September that the US would begin bombing PKK camps inside Iraq from the start of November, with Turkish troops positioned to intercept guerrilla fighters attempting to flee across the Turkish border.

At the moment, it is unclear whether such a military operation will take place, and what it would comprise. What is clear is that any operation will only serve to reignite tensions surrounding the unresolved Kurdish conflict. Leaders of the PKK have already indicated that should they be pressurised into a corner they would be prepared to retaliate with attacks on civilian targets in the west of Turkey.

While the US is stepping up pressure for a Turkish intervention in Iraq, the response inside Iraq itself has been to broadly reject such a move. In particular, the two Kurdish parties KDP and PUK are opposed. Both are represented in the US puppet transitional government and are amongst the most loyal supporters of the American occupation.

The security situation in those areas of northern Iraq dominated by the KDP and PUK has been relatively stable—in stark contradiction to the situation in the rest of the country. This could change very quickly, however, with the intervention of Turkish troops. Turkey has posed as the defender of the Turkmen minority in northern Iraq and repeatedly threatened, if necessary, to prevent with military means the

emergence of an independent Kurdish state in the region. The current Turkish troop deployment is planned for the Sunni-dominated areas of central Iraq, but would at least partially spread northwards in order to open the way for reinforcements and supplies.

The foreign minister of the Iraqi Transitional Council, the KDP functionary Hoshiyar Zabari, rejects any intervention by Turkish troops. The chairman of the council and Pentagon ally Ahmed Chalabi also spoke out against the dispatch of Turkish troops, stating: “We need fewer foreign troops, not more.”

In less diplomatic terms, what is expressed here is that the Iraqi population would regard the Turkish army—quite correctly—as a force sent to bail out the US-British occupying powers. Many inhabitants of Iraq have also not forgotten the legacy of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, whose sultans kept modern Iraq under heel right up until the First World War. Such fears were only exacerbated by a comment from, of all people, the Turkish foreign minister, who recently justified sending Turkish troops by stating that, after all, “We have ruled this region for centuries.”



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