

Turkey: Conflicts over deployment of troops to Lebanon

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While the international media has taken Turkish participation in the UN force in Lebanon for granted, the political debate in Turkey over this step has become more heated as the deadline has neared for a decision. At issue is the dispatch of approximately 1,000 soldiers.

The extent of the conflict is apparent from the fact that the government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the Islamist AKP (Party for Justice and Development) favours Turkish participation, while the Turkish president, Necdet Sezer, is opposed.

The majority of the population in Turkey is opposed to sending troops to Lebanon. Most Turks reacted to Israel's aggression against Lebanon with abhorrence and anger. There is a widespread suspicion in Turkey that the task of the planned international military operation is to finish the job which Israel failed to carry out—the disarmament of Hezbollah and the conversion of Lebanon into a Western protectorate.

The traditional bases of the right-wing, conservative and Islamist parties in Turkey, small farmers and the urban poor, are already bitter and alienated from the government. Following neo-liberal reforms carried out by Erdogan at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, real wages have fallen and many small farmers confront ruination. Recent weeks have witnessed large-scale protests by hazelnut and wine producers, as well as other layers of agricultural workers.

The Islamist camp, including the AKP itself, is split over the issue. Erdogan is said to have warned the leadership of his party against a repeat of March 2003, when the AKP-dominated parliament refused to permit American troops to use Turkish territory to invade Iraq from the north. The result was a clear deterioration in relations between the Turkish government and the US, together with an increase in the influence of Kurdish nationalists in northern Iraq.

Other proponents of Turkish participation in the UN force, such as Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, invoke the traditions of the Ottoman Empire—something that evokes little sympathy in Arab countries—or depict a Turkish deployment

as a means of assisting the Lebanese.

The government has stressed that the aim is an exclusively humanitarian intervention, and that Turkish troops will avoid engagement with Hezbollah at all costs. During a recent trip to Lebanon, Gül made very clear that Turkey had no intention of taking on Hezbollah: “We will act only by taking in consideration the wishes of the Lebanese government, people and Lebanese groups.” His reference to Lebanese “groups” could only mean Hezbollah.

The irony is that the US and Israel are vehemently in favour of a Turkish deployment in Lebanon, precisely to provide the operation with an appropriate “Islamic” fig leaf. Other Muslim countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, which have also stated their readiness to send troops, do not officially recognize Israel. Jerusalem rejects any participation by such countries and favours Turkey instead, based on the latter's membership in NATO and many years of close diplomatic and military relations with Israel. The US, which has repeatedly provided international loans to Turkey and for whom Turkey is an important customer for US armaments, has even toyed with the idea of Turkey playing a leading role in the UN force.

Syria has also declared its support for Turkish participation in the international force, and has gone so far as to say it will make its territory available for logistical purposes. The promise came during a visit by Gül to Damascus, which was officially aimed at urging Syria to exert a moderating influence on Hezbollah. Gül no doubt reassured Syria that, for its part, Turkey would not take action against Hezbollah.

Turkish participation in the Lebanon force is also hotly disputed in the Turkish press, irrespective of ideological leanings. The commentaries in the largest liberal and conservative secular dailies alternate between hopes that Turkey can increase its foreign policy clout by sending troops and assertions that, in any event, it is obliged to contribute to the stabilization of the region, and fears that the country could become embroiled in a bloody conflict for the sake of Israeli and American interests.

A number of AKP deputies, including the former foreign

minister, Yasar Yakis, have rejected sending Turkish troops. The biggest opposition faction in parliament, the left Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party), has also declared its opposition, together with the SP (Happiness Party) of Recai Kutan and Necmettin Erbakan, the founder of political Islamism in Turkey. The SP emerged as an Islamist minority from the FP (Virtue Party), which was banned in 2001. The AKP represented the majority faction to emerge from the ban.

Right-wing extremist nationalists are also vehemently opposed to a Turkish military presence in Lebanon. The leader of the fascist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), Devlet Bahçeli, declared that Turkish troops should be sent into the Kandil Mountains in northern Iraq and not to Lebanon. The Kandil Mountains are home to several thousand fighters of the Kurdish nationalist PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party), following their withdrawal from Turkey. For the past two years, PKK militants have carried out attacks on Turkish soldiers inside Turkey itself.

Turkish President Sezer used similar arguments when, on August 25, he declared: "As long as Turkey has its own domestic problems, it is not the job of Turkey to resolve the security problems of other countries." He then rhetorically posed the question: "Why should the Turkish army be in Lebanon if Turkey is unable to obtain support in the fight against terrorist organizations?"

For some years Turkey has been urging the US to conduct a military offensive against the PKK in northern Iraq, or at least allow the Turkish army to carry out its own punitive operations in the region.

Overstretched already in Iraq, the US has little interest in deploying its troops against the PKK, an organization which has expressly given its political support to the US-led occupation of Iraq. The pro-American puppet regime in Baghdad is also unable to carry out such an offensive—it already has its hands full suppressing the popular resistance to the occupation.

The Kurdish nationalist parties that control northern Iraq are genuine supporters of the US occupation, but do not want to see the extensive autonomy they enjoy jeopardised by an invasion of Turkish troops.

As gesture of goodwill towards Turkey, the US appointed a special envoy a few weeks ago for the resolution of the PKK problem, and called upon the organization to lay down its weapons and refrain from the use of force. The PKK reacted with the offer of an armistice to Turkey up to September 1, provided that Ankara agrees to negotiate autonomy for the Kurds and an amnesty for PKK fighters.

Representatives of the AKP welcomed the US initiative. At the same time, however, the Turkish media reported that Turkish combat aircraft and helicopters had attacked PKK

camps in the north of Iraq.

It is unlikely that the attacks have substantially impaired the organization, which has more than twenty years of experience in guerrilla warfare. Military and nationalist circles in Turkey are also unlikely to be satisfied with this step, as was clear from the stance adopted by Sezer, who is known to be close to the military.

The conflicts between the government and the military as well as disputes over how to deal with the Kurds are bound to intensify. At the end of August, the post of general chief of staff, filled currently by the moderate Hilmi Oezkoek, will be taken over by the hard-liner Yasar Büyükanit.

Büyükanit has developed close relations with the US in the course of his career, and made his own uncompromising position clear on the Kurdish conflict. Last Friday, the *Turkish Daily News*, citing Büyükanit, reported: "Those involved in anti-terrorism acted in accordance with the law, he said, adding that anyone who wanted to attack the military and the police would be punished eventually. The Republic of Turkey and its military are determined to eliminate these groups. No one can hide behind human rights or democracy to attack this country or its regime."

A few months ago, Büyükanit was implicated in the so-called Semdinli affair, in which death squads with links to the Turkish military were shown to have been active in the predominantly Kurdish area of southeast Turkey. The military blocked any investigation into his role. The investigating public prosecutor was sacked, together with a high-ranking police official who had testified against Büyükanit before a committee of inquiry.

The aggressive course pursued by the US in the Middle East has served to strengthen the most right-wing forces in Turkey, which are intervening with increasing vehemence in political life.



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