

Turkish military flexes its muscles in northern Iraq

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Reports of a Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq yesterday have highlighted the escalating tensions between the two countries along the border. In recent weeks, Turkish leaders have repeatedly warned that the Turkish army would take action against separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) camps in Iraq, if US and Iraqi forces failed to do so. The PKK has waged a guerrilla war inside Turkey for more than two decades.

Concerned to play down yesterday's incident, Turkish, Iraqi and American officials quickly issued formal denials that any Turkish troops had crossed the border. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari told the media in Baghdad there was no evidence of any incursion. In Washington, US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe declared there had been "no new activity" in northern Iraq.

In Ankara, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul also denied the reports, but did not rule out future Turkish military operations. "There is no such thing, no such entry to another country," he told NTV television. "If such a thing happens, then we would announce it. We are in a war with terror, we will do whatever is necessary to fight terrorism."

Nevertheless, three unnamed Turkish officials confirmed to Associated Press that several hundred Turkish troops had been involved in a "hot pursuit" raid into a remote mountainous region of northern Iraq yesterday. One source based in the border region said 600 commandos, backed by several thousand troops on the border, entered Iraq before dawn and returned later in the day. He claimed that the raid across from the Turkish border town of Cukurca was in response to an attack by PKK rebels inside Iraqi territory. According to Associated Press, the three officials stood by their comments despite government denials.

Jabar Yawir, a deputy minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, yesterday told Reuters: "This afternoon 10 Turkish helicopters landed in a village in Mazouri, which is... 3 kilometres inside the Iraqi border. They landed around 150 Turkish special forces. After two hours they left and there were no confrontations with the PKK." He confirmed that the village was in an area controlled by the PKK.

Whatever its exact character, the Turkish operation yesterday is part of a pattern of confrontation that threatens to boil over into a large-scale military invasion. According to media reports last week, the Turkish military has boosted its forces on the Iraqi border with large contingents of extra soldiers, tanks and armoured personnel carriers. On Sunday and Monday, Turkish troops reportedly shelled PKK positions inside northern Iraq.

In an interview with NTV News Channel on May 29, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan reinforced the message that the

continued existence of PKK camps inside Iraq would not be tolerated. "We want all acts of the terrorist organisation to come to an end. We expect the United States and Iraq to eradicate the terrorist organisation's camps in northern Iraq. We have already informed them of our expectations," he said. The prime minister did not rule out a unilateral Turkish intervention. The PKK has an estimated 4,000 fighters in northern Iraqi camps.

Turkish Chief of General Staff, General Yasar Buyukanit, put the matter more bluntly on May 31, telling reporters he favoured a military incursion to clean out the PKK bases. He said the military was ready, but the order had to come from the government. "The political authorities must determine whether, once we go in, we act only against the PKK, or if something will happen with [KRG President Massoud] Barzani as well... I already told Turkey and the world on April 12 that we need this... As military men, we are ready, but all military men need orders."

An intense political crisis in Ankara is undoubtedly a factor in these threats. Fresh elections are due on July 22 in a bid to break the constitutional crisis that erupted over the failure of the ruling Islamist Party for Justice and Development (AKP) to secure parliamentary support for its presidential nominee—foreign minister Gul. In the course of the political standoff, which has witnessed large opposition rallies, the Turkish military issued a thinly veiled warning that it would intervene directly to defend the country's secular state. In the lead-up to the election, AKP leaders—determined not to be outflanked politically—have proclaimed their opposition to "terrorism" and offered cautious support for a military assault in northern Iraq.

While the tensions on the Turkish-Iraqi border involve a good deal of posturing by both the government and the military, there is no doubt that the Turkish establishment as a whole is hostile, not only to repeated PKK attacks inside Turkey, but to the emergence of a quasi-independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. As the price of their support for the 2003 US-led invasion, the two major Kurdish nationalist parties in Iraq—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—insisted on the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region with extensive powers and its own security forces.

General Buyukanit's provocative reference to KRG President Barzani was no mistake. The two men were at loggerheads in April after Barzani accused Turkey of interfering in preparations for a referendum later this year on the inclusion of the northern, oil-rich Iraqi city of Kirkuk in the Kurdish region, and threatened to retaliate. It would be easy, he warned, for Iraqi Kurds to stir up their 30 million ethnic brethren in southeastern Turkey. Buyukanit responded by declaring that a cross-border attack was necessary and that the Turkish

military was ready to carry it out. The Turkish government demanded that the US haul Barzani into line.

Ankara is bitterly opposed to the extension of the Kurdish region to Kirkuk, which has a substantial Turkomen, as well as Arab, population. More fundamentally, Turkish leaders fear that the addition of Kirkuk's oil wealth to the Kurdish region will establish the economic basis for the KRG to declare full independence—a move that would provide political encouragement for Kurdish separatists in Turkey, as well as Syria and Iran. Inside Kirkuk itself, sectarian violence is escalating as Kurdish leaders press ahead with their demand for a referendum despite the opposition of Arab and Turkomen residents.

The prospect of a Turkish invasion of northern Iraq again demonstrates that the US neo-colonial occupation has not only created a catastrophe for the Iraqi people, but profoundly destabilised relations throughout the Middle East. Just as the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the Sunni establishment in Baghdad helped fuel Sunni-Shiite sectarian tensions in Iraq and the broader region, so the US encouragement of Kurdish nationalists in northern Iraq has resurrected unresolved issues that date back to the collapse of the Ottoman empire following World War I. The emerging Turkish state laid claim too much of northern Iraq but was rebuffed by Britain, which ruled over newly-formed Iraq and was determined to retain control of the oil fields in the north.

The confrontation between Turkey and the Kurdish regional government underscores the incoherent and reckless character of the Bush administration's foreign policy. As the *Economist* magazine caustically noted in an article on June 5: "The number of awkward questions raised [for Washington] is as great as the number of overlapping alliances and rivalries in the region. The Kurds are America's best friends in Iraq and a decent advertisement that at least something has gone right in that bloodied country. Many plans for an American exit from Iraq involve leaving some forces in the relatively peaceful region. So a Turkish invasion would be a disaster, inserting NATO's second-largest army in the middle of territory America is desperately hoping to keep calm."

The US administration has repeatedly warned Turkey against any military incursion. In a pointed reminder of American strength, two US warplanes briefly entered Turkish airspace near the Iraqi border on May 24, drawing a rapid protest from Ankara that such violations "should not happen again". Last weekend Defence Secretary Robert Gates reiterated that the US "hopes there would not be a unilateral military action across the border into Iraq".

At the same time, the US does not want to alienate Turkey, which is an important NATO ally and economic partner. While urging Turkey not to unilaterally intervene in northern Iraq, Washington has continued to denounce the PKK as "terrorists" and sought to placate Ankara. Since 2003, the US has permitted Turkey to maintain a force of some 1,300 troops, nominally as observers, inside northern Iraq, causing friction with the Kurdish leadership. Last year Washington appointed retired air force general, Joseph Ralston, as a special envoy to Ankara to coordinate a joint approach on the PKK.

However, the US administration's ability to maintain this delicate balancing act is further complicated by its barely disguised support for Kurdish guerrillas using bases in northern Iraq to operate inside Iran. As the *Economist* explained: "According to many reports, America is stirring Kurdish ambitions in Iran, where the world's biggest bunch [of] stateless people also have a significant presence. American assistance to Iranian Kurds may involve military assistance, and those

Kurds may also operate from bases in Iraq. In other words, the Turks could find themselves shooting at Kurds who are firing back with American-supplied weapons."

In fact, the ties between Kurdish separatists fighting in Iran and Turkey are even closer than the *Economist* has cautiously suggested. Several reports point to the fact that the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PEJAK), which at the very least appears to be encouraged by the US, and probably Israel, to conduct surveillance and attacks inside Iran, is an offshoot of the PKK. Both organisations have bases inside northern Iraq and in all probability continue to maintain relations. So while the US continues to join Turkey in denouncing the PKK as a "terrorist" outfit, it is tacitly promoting its sister group, the PEJAK, as an organisation fighting for Kurdish liberation in neighbouring Iran.

The cynical character of the US "war on terror" is not lost in Turkey, where anti-American sentiment is on the rise, not only over perceived US support for Kurdish separatists, but the criminal occupation of Iraq and threats against Iran. In 2003, opposition to the US invasion was so widespread that the AKP-dominated parliament felt compelled to prohibit the use of Turkish military bases, forcing the Pentagon to modify its plans. According to the *Washington Post*, recent polls in Turkey show that only 12 percent of respondents view the US favourably.

In the lead-up to the upcoming election, Turkish politicians are stirring up anti-Kurdish sentiment and will no doubt appeal to anti-American sentiment by criticising the US for failing to halt continuing PKK attacks. An estimated 30,000 people have been killed in clashes between the military and the PKK since 1984, including 600 last year. For the Bush administration, the political danger exists that its NATO ally will be driven into closer collaboration with its arch-enemy Iran against the Kurdish rebels, right at the point when Washington is intensifying its confrontation with Tehran.

Through its backing for the venal Kurdish leaders in Iraq and their ambitions to carve out a Kurdish statelet, the US has opened up a political can of worms for which it has no answers and which threatens to drag the region into another bloody quagmire. While the Turkish government and military appear at this stage to be holding back from a full-scale invasion of northern Iraq and a rupture of relations with the US, none of the parties to the dispute are in control of what is a highly volatile situation.



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