

Washington discusses plans for covert action against Kurdish PKK in Iraq

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An article in the July 30 edition of the *Washington Post* revealed that plans are being discussed in Washington to open up a new front in Iraq by dispatching US special forces to the north of the country in a covert operation against positions and camps occupied by rebels attached to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

According to the article, entitled, "Bush's Turkish Gamble", US special forces would "help the Turks neutralize the PKK" and "behead the guerrilla organization by helping Turkey get rid of PKK leaders that they have targeted for years."

The plans were announced by Eric S. Edelman, a former aide to Vice President Cheney and currently undersecretary of defense, to a select group of Congress members, including members of the Armed Services Committees in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Edelman is a former US ambassador to Turkey and retains close links with official political and military sources in the country.

In response to skepticism over such an operation by some of those attending the meeting, Edelman declared that the intention was to conduct a covert operation and that, after the mission, the government would deny any involvement by US forces.

Under conditions of increasing fractional warfare between the main Sunni and Shiite groups, in part deliberately encouraged by the US, the Kurdish government in northern Iraq has emerged as one of the most dependable allies of the US occupation. In line with the Iraqi constitution, the Kurdish parties have established an enclave in the north of Iraq run by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Now plans are being discussed to throw further fuel on the fire and intensify divisions in the ravaged country with a provocative military action against PKK militants.

The US initiative is a response to increasing pressure by the Turkish military for a full-scale military invasion of the province. The Turkish army has been massing troops on its border to northern Iraq and Turkish generals have repeatedly threatened to cross the border in pursuit of PKK forces. Currently Turkey has a well-equipped army of 250,000 soldiers near the border, facing some 4,000 PKK fighters hiding in the mountains of northern Iraq.

The Turkish high command has been campaigning for an

invasion of northern Iraq for some months, and just days before the recent parliamentary election Turkish artillery fired on PKK positions inside Iraq's borders. One day later, on July 20, and just two days before his successful reelection, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (AKP—Justice and Development Party) made his own threat of a military incursion into Iraq against the Kurds.

Erdogan's threat was then repeated after the elections when, in an interview with the *Sunday Telegraph*, AKP deputy Egemen Bagis said that US should note that Turkey is ready for an incursion into northern Iraq, irrespective of the repercussions for relations between Turkey and Washington. Bagis underlined that Turkey would not hesitate and would not ask permission for a possible cross border operation.

Up until now Prime Minister Erdogan has been able to avoid a vote in the Turkish parliament on such a cross-border operation, but following his re-election the Turkish military high command has stepped up its own campaign for an invasion.

While the latest US plans for an intervention by its special forces represents a concession to the Turkish government and military, they reflect at the same time increasing frustration by both the US administration and Ankara at the failure by the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq to take action against the PKK.

The KRG, led by President Masoud Barzani, has proved to one of the most loyal supporters of the US occupation. Following the recent withdrawal of the main Sunni bloc, the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF), from the Iraqi government, the US is even more dependent on the assistance of the Kurdish faction in the national parliament headed by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. But for some time both Barzani and Talibani have been under pressure from Turkey's ex-Special Representative for Countering Terrorism, retired general Edip Baser, and his US counterpart Joseph Ralston, to take effective action against the PKK in the north—all to no avail.

The reluctance by the KRG leadership and Talibani to deal with the PKK has also been a source of friction between the Turkish government and its military leadership. Prior to the recent election the AKP leadership expressed its readiness for talks over the situation in Iraq with Kurdish nationalist leaders

(with the exception of the PKK). The Turkish military high command has always insisted, however, that it is opposed to any talks taking place until the Kurdish government in Iraq takes effective action against the PKK.

The latest plans for a US covert operation against the PKK are obviously aimed at breaking this logjam and preventing an incursion by the Turkish army. While the US plans to crack down on the PKK are being discussed, US officials are moving towards strengthening relations with Ankara and encouraging Turkey as a power broker in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula—particularly with the aim of isolating and increasing pressure on Iran.

In a statement issued at the start of this year, the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Emre Taner, urged Turkey to become much more ambitious in the field of foreign policy. Taner wrote, "In the period we are in, we will see the process by which many nations lose the marathon of history. All values, structures, relations, systems and social order, be they socio-economic or political, religious or moral, are being reshaped and redefined. This process is representative of the period in which new key players, secondary players and the rules of the international system are being redefined and even reborn."

According to Taner, Turkey had to ensure it was in a position to play the role of a "key player." "Turkey does not have the luxury of letting things flow at its own pace or of simply following laissez-faire tactics with regards its policies."

Plans for a new role for Turkey are also being debated within American foreign policy circles. A recent article for the Stratfor think tank takes up this theme. Author George Friedmann points to the rapid growth of the Turkish economy in recent years and its increasing economic and political importance in the region of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula.

"Turkey is not China," Friedmann writes, "but in becoming the largest Muslim economy, as well as the largest economy in the eastern Mediterranean, south-eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus and east to the Hindu Kush, Turkey is moving to regain its traditional position of primacy in the region. Its growth is still fragile and can be disrupted, but there is no question that it has become the leading regional economy, as well as one of the most dynamic. Additionally, Turkey's geographic position greatly enables it to become Europe's primary transit hub for energy supplies, especially at a time when Europe is trying to reduce its dependence on Russia."

US-Turkish relations had been strained, Friedmann notes, primarily because of the close links developed by the US and Kurdish forces in Iraq going back to Operation Desert Storm.

However, in light of the situation in Iraq, where the US will at some point be confronted with the necessity of withdrawing some of its forces, Washington needs "a regional power to counterbalance Iran." Noting Turkey's good relations with Israel, Friedmann argues, "This is a vital question because of Iran. The assumption we have consistently made is that, absent

the United States, Iran would become the dominant regional power and would be in a position, in the long term, to dominate the Arabian Peninsula, shifting not only the regional balance of power but also potentially the global balance as well."

Friedmann concludes with an appeal—echoing Taner—for Turkey to resume a major role in the region. "For the past 90 years, Turkey has not played its historic role. Now, however, economic and politico-military indicators point to Turkey's slow reclamation of that role. The rumours about Turkish action against the PKK have much broader significance. They point to a changing role for Turkey—and that will mean massive regional changes over time."

Irrespective of discussions over the role of future US-Turkish relations, the fact remains that the latest plans by the US military for a military strike on the PKK are a further indication of the complete and utter recklessness policy of the Bush administration. While such an operation might serve to temporarily placate the Turkish military, it would certainly provoke hostile reactions from the Kurds in northern Iraq and open up a further front in the war-torn country. On many occasions the Turkish military and political establishment have made clear they are not merely opposed to the PKK, but also to the prospect of any sort of independent Kurdish province. A referendum on the fate of the oil rich city of Kirkuk is due later this year, and any vote for autonomy would be vociferously opposed by nationalist circles in Ankara.

In addition, any further closing of ranks between the Washington administration and the Turkish military will also increase the problems of the Turkish government. While adopting fully the economic program laid down by the western banks and the IMF, Erdogan is aware of the popular hostility within Turkey towards the US, particularly in the wake of the Iraq war. A recent survey revealed that levels of anti-US sentiment were higher in Turkey than anywhere else in the region. Any new overtures from Washington can only serve to increase popular opposition to the Turkish government itself.

Plans for a US operation to "neutralise" the PKK will therefore not only antagonise the Kurdish minority and increase the bloody toll of victims in Iraq—it also threatens to destabilise one of Washington's most important allies in the region.



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