

# As Turkey-Iraq crisis escalates, US plans military strikes on PKK bases

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With the Turkish military poised to strike the guerrilla bases of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq, Washington and London are engaged in frantic diplomatic activity to prevent a Turkish intervention that would further destabilise the US occupation of Iraq. However, as the *Chicago Tribune* reported yesterday, the Bush administration is also drawing up plans for military attacks on the PKK, either by US forces or jointly with the Turkish army.

The Turkish government has seized on recent PKK attacks inside Turkey to justify a huge military buildup along the border with Iraq. At least 60,000 heavily-armed soldiers, backed by tanks, artillery, warplanes and helicopter gunships, have been assembled to hit PKK camps in the rugged Qandil Mountains bordering Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Last week, the Turkish parliament voted overwhelmingly to authorise the government to order cross-border operations.

On Sunday, tensions reached boiling point after some 200 PKK rebels attacked a Turkish army post, killing at least 12 soldiers and capturing eight others. The Turkish military counterattacked, pursuing the guerrillas over the border into Iraq. According to the Turkish press, combat aircraft hit more than 60 targets inside Iraq. However, Turkey held back from launching a large-scale invasion into Iraq's Kurdish north.

The Turkish government is insisting that the US and Iraq take action to destroy the PKK's bases, capture the PKK leaders and hand them over to Ankara. In response, the US and Britain pressed the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government to deal with the PKK. A series of meetings over the past two days in Washington, London and Baghdad has failed to resolve the issue.

After speaking to Prime Minister Gordon Brown in London, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan ominously warned: "We cannot wait forever... We have to make our own decision." In Baghdad, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, while calling for a diplomatic solution, rejected out-of-hand the suggestion of a ceasefire with the PKK, which he insisted was a "terrorist organisation".

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack described the frenzy of diplomatic activity as a "full-court press" by Bush administration officials to prevent a Turkish invasion of northern Iraq. The basketball analogy, however, implies a

planned strategy. It would be more appropriate to describe the US response as one of sheer panic as the consequences of the Bush administration's criminal invasion of Iraq and its reckless preparations for a new war on Iran come home to roost.

The Kurdish north of Iraq is routinely hailed as the great success story of the US occupation. In reality, it is a highly unstable house of cards. As the pay off for their backing of the US invasion in 2003, the Bush administration allowed the two major Kurdish nationalist parties—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—to establish an autonomous region in three northern provinces. From the outset, Turkish leaders regarded the regional government as a threat that would encourage broader Kurdish separatist sentiment. They were particularly hostile to its demands for control of the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, which has a sizeable Turkmen population, and the surrounding oil fields.

The failure of the US to take any action against PKK guerrillas entrenched in the Qandil Mountains has only heightened tensions with Turkey. The PKK and its sister organisation, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which operates inside Iran, have been allowed to function freely in Iraq's northern provinces, obtaining supplies and finance through its major cities. Despite denials, there is ample evidence that the US and Israel have been covertly arming and training PJAK guerrillas as a means of gathering intelligence inside Iran and destabilising the Iranian regime. The *New York Times*, for instance, published a lengthy story yesterday citing a PJAK leader as saying there was "normal dialogue" with American officials.

The lack of any clear cut dividing line between the PJAK and PKK—both groups operate from the same mountainous areas, share a similar Kurdish separatist program and common origins—only underscores the Bush administration's hypocrisy and cynicism. To keep US ally Turkey on side, the US has branded the PKK as a terrorist organisation, but not the PJAK.

Any Turkish attack on the PKK/PJAK bases and Kurdish villages in Iraq would inevitably provoke an angry reaction among Iraqi Kurds and threaten to draw in Kurdish peshmerga militia units and the Iraqi army. Such a move would be deeply destabilising, not only for the Kurdish regional government, but also the Iraqi government in Baghdad, which relies heavily on

PUK/KDP support.

Washington is clearly desperate to prevent a Turkish military intervention in Iraq or a breach in the US/Turkish alliance. Quite apart from long-term strategic considerations, the US military funnels around 70 percent of its air cargo to Iraq via a major US air base in southern Turkey. At the same time, more than 1,000 Turkish troops are in Afghanistan as part of NATO forces, helping to prop up the US-led occupation of that country.

While publicly calling for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, the Bush administration is also making preparations for a military assault on PKK bases. President Bush spoke to Turkish President Abdullah Gul on Monday via telephone. According to White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe, Bush offered reassurances to Gul that the US would work with Turkey and Iraq “to combat PKK terrorists operating out of northern Iraq”.

The *Chicago Tribune* yesterday reported that military action was discussed. An unnamed US official familiar with the Bush/Gul conversation told the newspaper that the US was seriously looking into options beyond diplomacy to deal with the PKK. “It’s not ‘Kumbaya’ time anymore—just talking about trilateral talks is not going to be enough. Something has to be done,” the official said.

A range of military options were being considered, including air strikes and the use of cruise missiles against PKK bases. Another option discussed was to persuade the Kurdish regional government to use its militia forces to establish a cordon around the mountains where the PKK is entrenched, in order to choke off its supply routes. The deployment of US troops to hit the PKK was considered to be a final resort.

Highlighting the fears in Washington, the US official told the *Chicago Tribune*: “In the past, there has been reluctance to engage in direct US military action against the PKK, either through air strikes or some kind of Special Forces action. But the red line was always, if the Turks were going to come over the border, it could be so destabilising that it might be less risky for us to do something ourselves. Now the Turks are at the end of their rope, and our risk calculus is changing.”

Bush’s discussion with Gul followed an urgent telephone call on Sunday by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, urging him to hold back from an immediate military attack inside northern Iraq. *Chicago Tribune* reported that Erdogan had given a 72-hour reprieve on any cross-border attack. The Turkish government is under pressure from the military and opposition parties, particularly extreme right-wing nationalists, to launch a military operation. At the same time, however, it is deeply concerned about an open breach with the US and the consequences of war that threatens to be inconclusive and could become a broader regional conflict.

An article posted on the *Thomson Financial* web site indicated that the US and Turkey may be planning a combined military operation against the PKK. As he flew to London on

Monday, Erdogan told reporters: “We may conduct a joint operation with the United States against the PKK in northern Iraq... We expect to work jointly, just as we do in Afghanistan.” Speaking of his conversation with Rice the previous day, he added: “She was worried. I saw she was in favour of a joint operation. She asked for a few days time and said she would come back to us.”

The Iraqi Kurdish nationalist parties are obviously alarmed. By slavishly supporting the US occupation of Iraq, the PUK and KDP calculated that they would have American backing to establish their own small political and business empire in northern Iraq that would eventually include the oil-rich region around Kirkuk. Having declared that it would resist any Turkish invasion, the regional government is now under pressure from its American sponsors to take action itself against the PKK. Its jealously guarded “autonomy” is rapidly crumbling under the pressure of demands from Ankara and Washington.

After discussions at the White House, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh, a member of the PUK, told the Brookings Institute on Monday: “My worry is that there are demands of the KRG and the Iraqi government to ‘fight the PKK’. That could well be a recipe for an open-ended conflict in which we will not win and will basically destabilise the only stable part of Iraq.”

There is a long history of the sordid manoeuvres by various Kurdish nationalist politicians with the major powers ending in disaster for the Kurdish people. The present situation is no different. The “stable” north of Iraq may well become the new battleground for “an open-ended conflict”. Those immediately responsible are the PUK and KDP leaders who tied the fate of Iraqi Kurds to the Bush administration and its criminal occupation of Iraq.



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