

Turkish government gives green light for military intervention in northern Iraq

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The Turkish government has given the army a green light to cross the border and conduct a military action in Iraq. A crisis group chaired by President Abdullah Gül gave permission October 9 for the military to intervene against the separatist Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) in neighboring northern Iraq.

The office of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that, in addition, the government had given a command that "all legal, economic and political measures, including cross border operations, be employed in order to terminate the existence of the terror group in neighboring countries." The government is applying to parliament October 15 for full powers to go to war.

Just a few weeks after its success in parliamentary elections and the elevation of its candidate, Gül, to the post of president, the AKP (Party for Justice and Development) has bowed down to pressure from the generals, who have long been demanding a free hand to conduct operations in northern Iraq. The head of the Turkish general staff, Yasar Büyükanit, who took part in the crisis meeting, has been calling for such powers since May.

With its green light to the generals, the moderate Islamic AKP government has also strengthened the hand of the military with regard to domestic policy. In recent months, the military had been forced to accept a number of significant blows to their power.

Prime Minister Erdogan and Gül, his foreign minister at that time, had initially opposed pressure from the general staff led by Yasar Büyükanit, for cross-border operations. When the military tried to prevent the election of Gül with the threat of a putsch, the AKP called new elections and notched up an impressive success. Many voters supported the AKP because they regarded the latter as a democratic counterweight to the power ambitions of the army. Now, such hopes have proved to be completely unfounded.

In fact, by giving the military a free hand for military

action in Iraq, the AKP has made itself virtually a hostage of the army. "This is a very dangerous charter, which could create severe problems for Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan," was the comment by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

It still remains unclear when and to what extent the Turkish army will intervene in northern Iraq. Any large-scale actions, however, would have far-reaching consequences for Iraq, Turkey and the entire Middle East. The decision by the Turkish government means further suffering for the refugees and inhabitants in northern Iraq as well as the Kurdish people in the east of Turkey. It strengthens the position of the military in Turkish political life and will directly plunge the country into the bloody carnage in Iraq.

NATO member Turkey has the biggest army in the region, but until now has conducted a relatively restrained foreign policy. A more active military role on the part of Turkey will intensify the rivalry with other regional powers for supremacy in the Middle East, which has been thrown into turmoil by the Iraq war.

The Turkish generals want not merely to crush the PKK, which is estimated to have around 3,000 fighters stationed in the Iraqi mountains. They want to also prevent the emergence of a *de facto* independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq—a development that has become more likely in the wake of the debacle of the American occupation. They fear that such a state could encourage separatist tendencies among the Kurds in the Turkey and threaten the territorial integrity of the country.

A Turkish invasion could lead to a direct confrontation with units of the northern Iraqi regional government under Massoud Barzani. Barzani and other representatives of the northern Iraqi Kurds had threatened months ago to use their troops to resist a Turkish incursion.

The US government has for some time sought to dissuade Turkey from intervening in Iraq. The Iraqi Kurdish leaders are amongst the most reliable props of the

American occupation, and the north of Iraq was regarded up to now as relatively stable. A Turkish invasion, on the other hand, could open a new front in Iraq.

Relations between Ankara and Washington have cooled considerably in recent years. Despite promises made, neither the US nor the Kurdish regional government has proceeded against the PKK, while for domestic reasons the Iraqi Kurdish leaders are unable to resort to force in expelling the PKK. In addition, in order to destabilise the regime in Tehran, the US supports the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), an Iranian Kurdish organisation that is alleged to have close links to the PKK.

The immediate cause for the change of course on the part of the Turkish government was the heaviest attack carried out by the PKK in the last 12 years. Some 15 Turkish soldiers died last weekend as a result of attacks launched by the PKK. One week before, 12 villagers, including several so-called “village protectors,” had been shot in a minibus—although the PKK denied responsibility for this latter attack.

The right-wing Turkish media and parties reacted to the attacks with a broadside of chauvinism. Daily papers appeared with death notices on the title page. The tabloid *Hürriyet* banged the drum for an invasion into Iraq. Thousands took part in the funeral services for the dead soldiers, and in Ankara and Trabzon, professors and student organised silent marches. There were also demonstrations in Istanbul.

The anti-American tone of this campaign was very evident. Deniz Baykal, the leader of the Kemalist CHP (Republican People’s Party), accused the US of using the PKK to split Turkey. The leader of the fascist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), Devlet Bahçeli, called for a popular referendum over an invasion of northern Iraq.

The passing of a resolution by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives, terming the massacre of Armenians by Turkey 92 years ago as “genocide,” only served to further inflame antagonisms. The resolution is next to be subject to a vote by the full House.

For Turkish nationalists, the massacre of Armenians is a taboo issue. Anyone using the word genocide must reckon on legal persecution resulting in a prison sentence, or even with death threats.

In order to hinder the passing of the resolution, threats were made in Ankara to close the military base at Incirlik, which serves as a vital supply route for the US occupation of Iraq. US President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defence Secretary Robert Gates all

tried to prevent the acceptance of the Armenia resolution, in order to avoid any escalation of tensions with Ankara.

In Washington, an increased foreign policy engagement by Turkey is widely seen as a chance for the US to expand its own interests in the region.

An article in the July-August edition of the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs* stated: “After decades of passivity Turkey is now emerging as an important diplomatic player in the Middle East.” If the country is “treated correctly...it could be a chance for Washington and its western allies to use Turkey as a bridgehead to the Middle East.”

However, such a move is conditional—the article continues—on taking seriously Turkish concerns over the role of the PKK.

In this respect, American foreign policy confronts a profound dilemma. It must decide between the Turkish military and the Kurdish nationalists, whose support is so important for the US in Iraq. If the US gives the Turkish army a free hand to act against the PKK, the result would be the inevitable destabilisation of northern Iraq. For its part, the Turkish army is adamant in its opposition to any concessions to the Kurdish nationalists in the Iraq.

Regardless of the conflicts between the government and military, Ankara is increasingly developing its own interests, which are at odds with those of Washington. The Turkish government agrees with Washington over the necessity to oppose an Iranian nuclear programme but seeks the collaboration of both Tehran and Syria to resolve its long-standing conflict with the Kurds. Both Iran and Syria are home to substantial Kurdish minorities and fear the consequences of a separatist movement.

Turkey is also increasing its economic collaboration with Iran. Against the will of the US, the Turkish government is seeking to include Iran and its reserves of natural gas in a major project—the planned Nabucco pipeline, which will connect the Turkey via the Balkans with western Europe.



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