

Turkish forces push deeper into Kurdish northern Iraq

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In defiance of demands by the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) that Turkey end its invasion, Ankara is continuing to deploy men and equipment into Kurdish northern Iraq. Turkish troops have pushed at least 30 kilometres inside Iraqi territory since the invasion was launched on Thursday night on the pretext of destroying the mountain bases of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Hundreds of special forces commandos are said to be operating in the remote north-eastern Qandil mountains, where Iraq's border intersects with both Turkey and Iran. Since mid-December, Turkey has conducted repeated air strikes on the area, bombing villages and vantage points where it claimed there was a PKK presence. The Iraqi Kurdish mayor of Deralouk told the *Washington Post* that more than 100 mountain villages had been abandoned because of the air war. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, estimates that 1,255 people were displaced by Turkish bombing.

Turkish troops have reportedly crossed the border in the Zap region, on the western edges of the mountains, and engaged in bloody clashes with PKK fighters. Turkish air strikes and helicopter gunship assaults were carried out on Saturday near the town of Amadiyah. One Turkish helicopter was shot down.

The exact number of Turkish forces involved is the subject of conflicting reports. The Iraqi government in Baghdad has downplayed the incursion, claiming it is "very, very limited" and involves no more than 1,000 troops. The PKK-linked *Firat* newsagency, however, said on Sunday that 5,000 troops and at least 60 tanks were now converging on the town of Haftanin. A large concentration of Turkish troops was also seen moving from the Turkish town of Cizre eastward toward Iraq. In all, the Turkish military is believed to have well over 50,000 troops mobilised on the Iraqi border. The Turkish press claimed Friday that the invasion involved 10,000. Reuters, citing a Turkish military source, reported that 8,000 troops have entered Iraq.

Available information suggests that the Turkish military is

planning to permanently occupy the Qandil mountain region. Turkish warplanes have destroyed five bridges spanning a major river over the weekend, effectively cutting the mountains off from the rest of Iraq and depriving thousands of villagers of the ability to return to their homes.

Turkish commanders are claiming that their forces have already killed 112 Kurdish guerillas, at the cost of 15 of their own troops. While the destruction of bridges cuts off obvious escape routes, the Turkish military reported on Sunday that the PKK "are trying to flee southwards in panic".

The Turkish government has issued assurances that the invasion has the limited aim of destroying the PKK and that it "attaches importance to Iraq's territorial integrity and strongly defends its territorial integrity and political unity". Unconfirmed statements attributed to Turkish commanders in the Turkish media have suggested that the invasion force will be withdrawn after 15 days.

No credence can be given to such claims. While the Turkish military will certainly use the opportunity to kill as many PKK fighters as possible, the clear objective of the invasion is to thwart the ambitions of the Kurdish Regional Government for greater economic and political independence from Iraq.

For the Turkish ruling class, the existence of an autonomous Kurdish state on its southern border is already considered a tremendous danger. Throughout its modern existence, the Turkish bourgeois state has suppressed separatist demands from among its large Kurdish minority. Under certain conditions, an economically vibrant Iraqi KRG has the potential to function as the base for a movement throughout the Kurdish-populated regions of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran for the breakup of those states and the establishment of a greater "Kurdistan".

Turkish concerns have been steadily rising over the past year as the KRG has agitated internationally for major investment in oil and other economic projects within its territory. The fears will have been dramatically heightened by the declaration of independence by Kosovo and the

decision of the United States and other powers to recognise it.

It is by no means accidental that the invasion was launched just days after the Kosovo declaration and the KRG's announcement of an agreement with South Korea's National Oil Corporation to develop oil fields in northern Iraq and a \$US10.5 billion contract with Korean Ssangyong Engineering and Construction for the rapid modernisation of the region's infrastructure. Thousands of South Korean troops are still based around the Kurdish capital of Irbil. Turkey faces the possibility of major international players backing a declaration of independence by the KRG, using Kosovo as a precedent.

The invasion is also a response to renewed demands by Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani for a referendum in the oil-rich Iraqi province of Kirkuk, over whether the majority Kurdish population wants to join the KRG. On February 18, Barzani, the president of the KRG, met with representatives of the United Nations and the European Union to seek their assistance in holding the referendum within six months.

The incorporation of Kirkuk into the Kurdish region would give it control over between 30 and 40 percent of Iraq's oil fields, including what many experts believe are large untapped reserves. Turkey has repeatedly opposed Kurdish control of Kirkuk on the pretext that it could lead to human rights abuses of the large Turkish-speaking Turkomen minority in the province.

It is too early to determine what the impact of the Turkish invasion will be on the flow of investment into Kurdistan and the status of Kirkuk. It will further aggravate ethnic tensions in the city, however, between Kurds and Turkomens. Any move by the KRG to hold a ballot is likely to be met with violent provocations intended to exacerbate the divisions and justify a Turkish intervention.

Turkey's actions have been supported by the Bush administration and the US military is supplying intelligence on PKK locations and movements. Turkey is considered a crucial ally in the Middle East, particularly in the event of an American military confrontation with Iran and the long-term US geopolitical struggle with Russia and other powers for domination over the resources of the Central Asian republics. In the final analysis, the ambitions of its erstwhile Kurdish collaborators in Iraq are expendable.

There is clear nervousness in Washington, however, over the implications of the invasion and the potential for the outbreak of open fighting between the Turkish forces and the KRG. Defense Secretary Robert Gates told journalists on Saturday that his view on the Turkish operation was "the shorter, the better".

On Sunday, the Turkish government declared that "local Iraqi groups are expected to prevent members of the terrorist

group [the PKK]... from entering their region and being given protection there". If they use allegations that the KRG is providing protection to PKK fighters to justify moving deeper into the Kurdish region, they will be resisted by the 80,000-strong pesh merga militia. The Kurdish leadership is well aware that the operation has wider motives than just dealing with the PKK.

Barzani declared on Saturday: "We doubt the true intentions behind the Turkish attacks and we believe that their target is the Region of Kurdistan and not the PKK. Otherwise what is the reason behind destroying vital bridges used by the citizens in their daily lives, well inside the populated areas? What has this to do with the PKK?"

As the situation stands, Turkish forces are consolidating positions that place them within a short distance of key Kurdish centres such as Dohuk and the capital Irbil. If they do not withdraw clashes are likely. Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebani told the BBC on Sunday that the invasion "could destabilise the region because really one mistake could lead to further escalation".

The chaos and instability created by the US invasion is now engulfing the only part of Iraq that has been somewhat spared the destruction inflicted on the rest of the country.

For the US occupation, the consequences will be considerable. In particular, the US backing for Turkey is shattering whatever support existed among Iraqi Kurds for the American presence in the country. Serhat Erkmen, a Middle East expert with the Eurasian Strategic Research Centre, told the Turkish paper *Zaman*: "Kurds will start thinking, 'whenever we act in cooperation, the United States dumps us.'"



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