

# Turkish military again strikes Kurdish areas in northern Iraq

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In the early hours of Monday morning, as many as 20 Turkish jets invaded Iraqi airspace and bombed 11 locations in northern Iraq where fighters of the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) were alleged to be sheltering. The PKK has been conducting a guerilla war against the Turkish government for over two decades, often using the rugged, Kurdish-populated terrain where the borders of Turkey, Iraq and Iran intersect as a base of operations.

At least 70 targets were struck, according to the Turkish air force. Its statement claimed the PKK presence had been “detected and verified by intelligence sources”—suggesting that the US military occupation forces inside Iraq had provided satellite and other information. The press release contained the worthless assurance that “utmost sensitivity was shown so that the civilian population in the region was not affected”.

The attack is the fifth air raid on Iraqi territory ordered by the Turkish government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan since December 16. The Turkish military claimed that the preceding raids had killed at least 175 PKK fighters and severely disrupted PKK supply lines. Kurdish sources reported dozens of civilian deaths and thousands of refugees fleeing from the targeted areas.

A PKK spokesman and representatives of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq reported that the latest bombings caused no casualties and took place against the “uninhabited hamlets of Khorakouk, Khnira and Loulan in the Qandil mountains”, in the Iraqi province of Irbil. KRG spokesman Jaba Yawar told the *New York Times* “there was no damage because this area had been deserted because of tensions”.

Whether the villages were inhabited or not, the attack is a direct consequence of the Bush administration’s encouragement of escalating Turkish attacks on Kurdish rebels inside Iraq. The raids were preceded by high-level talks on the PKK between Turkish and American

diplomats and officers.

On January 29, the *Turkish Daily News* reported: “General Ergin Saygun, deputy chief of the Turkish General Staff, will hold talks with General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, later this week mainly to discuss intelligence sharing between the United States and the Turkish Armed Forces in the fight against PKK terrorists, officials said. Saygun is also expected to meet US Under Secretary of Defense Eric Edelman and General John Craddock, commander of US forces in Europe (EUCOM) and supreme commander of NATO Allied Forces in Europe, as part of anti-PKK talks.”

Coinciding with the talks in Washington and just days before the raid, US ambassador to Turkey Ross Wilson told journalists on January 31: “Logically, anything that can be done to fracture the PKK and take away its militants is a good thing. How to do this is something for the Turkish government to decide.”

At a Pentagon media briefing on February 5, press secretary Geoff Morrell left no doubt over US backing. “With regards to recent Turkish air strikes on PKK terrorist positions within Iraq”, he said, “I think our position on that matter has not changed. We view this as a matter of self defence for the Turks and we are confident that they will continue to exercise good discretion in how they go about taking out this threat, and do so in full coordination and consultation with us.”

The US collaboration with Turkey against the PKK has developed alongside indications that the Bush administration may also align with Ankara to oppose Iraqi Kurdish ambitions to control the oil-rich area around the city of Kirkuk. The Turkish ruling elite believes that an Iraqi Kurdish region with substantial energy resources at its disposal would encourage Kurdish nationalist agitation across the region for a unified Kurdish nation-state including large swathes of territory in eastern Turkey,

northern Syria and western Iran.

In the initial years of the US occupation, Washington encouraged Kurdish ambitions by including a December 2007 deadline for a referendum over Kirkuk's future status in the US-drafted Iraqi constitution. As the deadline approached, however, the US occupation did not support KRG demands that the Iraqi parliament honour the constitution. The vote was postponed and no new date has been agreed.

US policy is bound up with broader geo-political considerations in the Middle East. Turkey, a member of the NATO alliance and a key US ally, is emerging as the major regional power, actively pursuing its own interests. Washington has viewed with particular concern the closer military, economic and political relations that are developing between Turkey and the Iranian regime, to which the Bush administration is deeply hostile.

Last July, in defiance of US opposition, Turkey signed a deal with Iran to build pipelines for Iranian and Turkomen natural gas and struck another agreement for a \$3.5 billion Turkish investment to develop three new Iranian gas fields. Over ensuing months, Turkey and Iran held high-level diplomatic exchanges even as a US fleet positioned itself in the Persian Gulf for a possible attack against Tehran. The US response has been to try to woo Ankara and isolate Iran by backing Turkish attacks in US-occupied Iraq and signalling its preparedness to sacrifice Kurdish interests in Iraq.

The shifting US attitude toward the Iraqi Kurdish nationalists was embodied in a lengthy article in January by Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute—a thinktank closely linked to the Bush administration and vice-president Dick Cheney in particular. Rubin denounced the KRG leadership as anti-democratic and corrupt and declared that its president Massoud Barzani, “enables—if not sponsors—PKK terrorism against Turkey”.

Rubin concluded: “Barzani may remain an ally, but he has disqualified himself from any substantive partnership. It is time to take a tough-love approach to Iraqi Kurdistan. There should be no aid and no diplomatic legitimacy so long as Iraqi Kurdistan remains a PKK safe haven, sells US security to the highest bidder and leaves democratic reform stagnant.”

In the face of US pressure, Barzani and the KRG have fallen into line, accepting the deferral of the Kirkuk referendum and dropping any criticisms of Turkish incursions into Iraq. In fact, there are indications that the KRG has begun assisting the attacks on the PKK in order to appease Washington.

A comment in *Wall the Street* 5 that the KRG armed forces have established checkpoints in the Qandil mountains to limit goods reaching guerilla camps and are detaining PKK financiers and couriers. The KRG is also blocking journalists from travelling to the PKK-occupied areas, in order to prevent firsthand reports on the impact of the Turkish airstrikes.

Barzani and the KRG prime minister, his nephew Nechirvan Barzani, have not issued any statement protesting the latest air raid. But the stepped-up Turkish campaign against the PKK is stoking discontent among the broader Kurdish population in both Iraq and Turkey.

In northern Iraq, the sentiment is growing that Washington is once again betraying Kurdish nationalist aspirations in order to preserve the US alliance with Turkey. American policy is being compared with 1975, when the US supported the Iraqi Baathist regime in suppressing a Kurdish rebellion, and 1991, when the first Bush administration called for a Kurdish uprising and then stood back as Saddam Hussein's forces brutally crushed it.

In Turkey, the Kurdish-based Democratic Society Party (DTP) responded to the latest air strikes by calling for its supporters to assemble on February 6 in the city of Diyarbakir and march on the Turkish-Iraqi border town of Kasrik to protest over the intensification of military operations. According to the newspaper *Zaman*, groups attempting to reach the protest from 28 Turkish cities faced harassment from police. Some 6,000 were expected to reach the Kasrik area for Tuesday's 24-hour demonstration, but only 1,000 were able to do so.



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