

Turkey rejects timetable to end invasion of northern Iraq

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Turkey has rejected out-of-hand the demands of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to end the invasion of northern Iraq, which it launched on February 21 on the pretext of destroying the mountain bases of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK has conducted a guerilla war for a separate state in the Kurdish-populated regions of southern Turkey since 1984.

Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek told the media on Wednesday: “No one should expect us to withdraw our soldiers without completing our mission. And our mission will be accomplished when the terrorist camps in northern Iraq are destroyed.”

Similar statements were issued following Thursday’s meeting in Turkey between US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and senior Turkish political leaders, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul.

Gates told a press conference that he had advised the Turkish government “that they should wrap this thing up as soon as they can”. His remarks were echoed by President Bush in Washington, who said his message to Turkey was that “they need to move, move quickly, achieve their objective and get out”.

In response, Turkish army commander Yasar Buyukanit, who took part in the meeting with Gates, dismissively told the press: “A ‘short time’ is a relative term. Sometimes this can mean one day and sometimes it can mean one year.”

The stance of the Turkish establishment reflects their confidence that the US statements are largely diplomatic window-dressing. The incursion was planned well in advance with the Bush administration and is taking place with the full collaboration of the US military in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. American satellite, aerial and ground intelligence is being supplied to the Turkish forces now operating in the north of Iraq.

Precise information on the impact of the Turkish invasion is not available. The fighting is taking place in the rugged and previously PKK-controlled Qandil mountain range, under conditions of heavy snowfalls and freezing temperatures. The Turkish military has imposed tight censorship over its operations. The Iraqi Kurdish authorities, despite their condemnations and calls for a withdrawal, have prostrated themselves before Turkish demands that they provide logistical support to the invasion of their own territory. The KRG is preventing journalists from travelling anywhere near the frontline and has deployed thousands of its pesh merga militia to prevent PKK guerillas from fleeing the mountains to escape

Turkish air strikes and the advance of Turkish troops.

The KRG has gone as far as to issue a press release denying a Turkish military claim that wounded PKK fighters were being treated in Iraqi Kurdish hospitals. In a statement on Wednesday, KRG spokesman Jamal Abdullah told the Turkish newspaper *Zaman*: “We challenge anyone who says that wounded PKK fighters are receiving treatment in our hospitals. We have nothing to do with PKK fighters, and routes to areas where clashes are taking place are closed.”

The Turkish government claims that 8,000 to 10,000 troops are involved in the invasion, hunting down an estimated 3,000 PKK guerillas. The only reports of casualties are those being provided by the Turkish military or by PKK spokesmen.

The Turkish military claimed on Wednesday that it had killed 230 PKK guerillas, at the cost of 24 of its troops. It reported that air strikes and long-range artillery had struck 225 PKK targets and that close-range artillery and ground assaults had been deployed against another 475 sites. The targets included bridges, villages and caves where guerillas were allegedly sheltering, anti-aircraft batteries, and command and communication facilities. Asked about civilian casualties, Turkey’s Cemil Çiçek simply declared there were no civilians in the battle zone.

PKK sources claim that its fighters have killed more than 80 Turkish troops. On Thursday, the PKK claimed that its forces had surrounded 200 Turkish soldiers in a valley and were closing in on them.

There have been a number of suggestions in the Turkish media and political establishment that its military will permanently occupy the Iraq side of the Qandil Mountains. *Zaman* reported on Tuesday: “Experts say the military might create a buffer zone in this area to prevent future terrorist attacks on Turkey. This is expected to be done through the establishment of bases in Zarkho and Harkuk, similar to the long time Turkish military base in northern Iraq located in the town of Bamerni.” Zarkho and Harkuk lie at the foot of the mountains some 15 to 20 kilometres inside Iraq.

The Turkish government has denied that it intends to occupy the mountains and insisted that it will withdraw its forces once the PKK is dealt a death blow. The invasion, however, does have a far broader objective. It is aimed at shattering the ambitions of the Iraqi Kurdish elite for control of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk and the main northern Iraqi oil and gas fields.

As a reward for Kurdish collaboration with the 2003 US

invasion, the Bush administration included a clause in the new Iraqi constitution that paved the way for a referendum in Kirkuk by December 2007 over whether the majority Kurdish population wanted to incorporate the province into the KRG. The Kurdish region consists of the majority Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Irbil and Sulaymaniyah. In terms of resources and infrastructure, it is among the more backward and poverty-stricken areas of Iraq. Kirkuk, and the revenues from its oil and gas, would provide the basis for rapid economic development and large-scale inflows of foreign investment.

The Turkish capitalist elite views any economic and political expansion of Kurdish self-rule in northern Iraq as a direct incitement to separatism among the 15 million Kurds in southern Turkey and therefore a threat to Turkey's own existence. Turkish leaders have made clear since 2003 that they are prepared to militarily intervene to prevent Kirkuk being incorporated into the KRG.

Washington's endorsement of Turkish operations inside Iraq is confirmation that it has shifted position and has aligned with Turkey against the very Kurdish ambitions it once encouraged. Faced with the tactical choice of rupturing relations with Turkey—a regional power in the Middle East and long-time NATO ally—or betraying the Kurdish bourgeois parties in Iraq, the White House has chosen the latter.

The US prevailed upon the KRG last year to accept a delay in the Kirkuk referendum. No new date has been agreed and it now appears unlikely that one will ever be set. Turkey is demanding that the city be accorded "special status" and remain under the Baghdad government's jurisdiction. If this stance prevails, the KRG will be permanently marginalised to its current three, resource-poor provinces and financially dependent upon the injections it receives in the Iraqi government budget.

Gates, when questioned on Thursday, emphasised that US cooperation with the Turkish invasion would continue regardless of how long it lasted. The two countries, Gates stressed, "have shared interests".

The nature of those interests focus on the exploitation of Iraq's oil and gas reserves and the ferocious geo-political struggle taking place with Russia, China and other powers for domination of the energy resources of the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union.

Turkey's status as a linchpin in the scramble for oil and gas makes it crucial to US strategic interests. The Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan is the destination for the US-sponsored pipeline from the Caspian Sea, which was built to transport Central Asian oil and gas to European markets, independently of Russia and bypassing Iran.

A summit will take place tomorrow in Istanbul between representatives of the US, Turkish and Iraqi governments over the joint development of the northern Iraqi oil and gas fields. The pipelines from the Kirkuk oilfields also run to Ceyhan. The vast expansion of production that is contemplated by the major oil companies seeking contracts to develop the run-down northern fields will involve even closer cooperation with Turkey. The plan being finalised over the coming days is for the construction of a parallel gas pipeline to transport 10 billion cubic metres of natural

gas per year from fields north of Baghdad for export to the European Union—thereby lessening its dependence on Russia.

The fact that the talks are going ahead amid an invasion suggests that the condemnation of the Turkish actions by the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is also largely posturing. The majority of the Arab Shiite and Sunni members of the Iraqi parliament vocally oppose any Kurdish control of Kirkuk. There is no reason to doubt that many of them secretly welcome the incursion as a massive blow to the KRG's aspirations and a guarantee that the northern energy resources will remain under their jurisdiction.

From the standpoint of the American ruling elite, Kurdish interests are expendable. Sedat Laçiner, the head of the Turkish-based International Strategic Research Organisation, told *Zaman* this week: "Fewer and fewer people now believe that an independent Kurdish state will emerge in the near future. US consent for the Turkish ground operation shows Kurds do not represent a player that is powerful enough to be independent. The region will be shaped depending on the relations between Turkey, the US and Baghdad, and local powers have no outlet through which they can meddle in this process."

Washington backing of Turkey's agenda in Iraq has far-reaching implications. It can safely be assumed that the US wants something in return. The most likely *quid pro quo* is Ankara's backing for the Bush administration's stance against Iran. Until now, the Turkish government has been reluctant to go along with the US demands for sanctions and threats of military action. Instead, a series of high-level diplomatic exchanges between Turkey and Iran last year led to the signing of multi-billion dollar contracts for Turkish companies to be involved in the development of new Iranian oil and gas fields.

Indicative of a potential Turkish shift, however, Sedat Laçiner wrote a lengthy piece on February 26 on the *Turkish Weekly* website detailing what he described as the "thorny picture" of Turkish-Iranian relations. Iran, he alleged, viewed Turkey with suspicion and hostility due to its US alliance and secular constitution. Tehran, he claimed, was hindering Turkish investment in Iranian energy projects and other business opportunities and was opposed to the development of Turkish influence in Central Asia. Iran, he concluded, "is one of the significant obstacles for Turkey who wants to sustain economic integration, trade and political co-operation in the Middle East".

Access to Turkish air space and the mobilisation of the Turkish military to threaten Iran's western border would dramatically enhance the ability of the United States to wage war against the Iranian regime.



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