

Turkey hails Iraq incursion as success

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The Turkish military announced on Friday that it had completed its operations in northern Iraq against the guerillas of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and had withdrawn the troops that were sent across the border on February 21. According to Turkish media sources, the last elements of the invasion force had returned to their bases by Sunday.

The incursion has been touted in Turkey as a complete success and a decisive assertion of its role as a major regional power in the Middle East. Government and military spokesmen have made clear they view the operation as a precedent that accords Turkey the right to militarily intervene into Iraq whenever it sees fit.

Details have now been released as to the character of the invasion, which took place under tight censorship and, it now appears, a significant amount of disinformation. Contrary to initial claims, Turkish forces apparently did not deploy into the rugged Qandil mountains located where the borders of Turkey, Iraq and Iran intersect. The assault, according to the new version of events, was a surgical strike against a PKK concentration in the Zap mountain region on the Iraq-Turkish border north of the Kurdish Iraqi towns of Zahko and Amadiyah. News reports throughout last week were able to confirm evidence of significant fighting in that area.

According to the Turkish military, some 300 PKK fighters were operating in the targeted area. Using detailed information provided by the US military, Turkish forces deployed by air into the mountains amid freezing temperatures and heavy snowfalls. A combination of air strikes and ground operations destroyed the villages, bases, command centres and supply depots used by the PKK. Four bridges were also blown up.

Turkey claims to have killed at least 240 rebels during the week-long operation, at the cost of 24 Turkish troops and three border guards. No details have been released of civilian casualties. The remote area is still off-limits to journalists who could independently verify Turkish claims that there were no non-combatants in the battle zone.

Turkish spokesmen have categorically denied that the

withdrawal was the result of political pressure from the Bush administration. Last Thursday, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who was in Ankara for meetings with Turkish officials, called for Turkey to “wrap this thing up as soon as they can”. His remarks were echoed by Bush in Washington.

The Turkish military, however, insisted in a statement that there had been “no inside or outside influence on the decision” and that “some of the troops had already returned on the day [Thursday] when some reports on this issue [US pressure] emerged”. The official Turkish stance is that it had achieved its military objectives.

The head of the Turkish military, General Yasar Büyükanıt, stressed the point on Saturday and again yesterday. “Speculation that Turkey got out because the United States said go out is not true. If they can prove it, I will take off this uniform”, he declared. Referring to the harsh weather conditions confronting the Turkish forces, he told critics of the withdrawal: “We could not carry out the operation for another week, otherwise we would have suffered losses.”

Turkish president Abdullah Gul endorsed the military’s statements and rejected speculation in the Turkish press that the government had not been informed of the withdrawal. He told journalists: “Of course I knew about the withdrawal. The operation ended the way it was planned. Talking publicly about military plans would have jeopardised our troops in northern Iraq.” Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan also released a statement declaring he had been “in close contact with the General Staff since the beginning of the operation, during every second of it”.

For the Turkish ruling elite, the key concession that it extracted from Washington was the right of its armed forces to violate Iraqi national sovereignty in pursuit of Turkish interests.

Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Ali Sahin made clear that as far as Turkey is concerned, it has a free hand to launch future incursions on the pretext of disrupting PKK operations. He declared: “The PKK should not be happy

because Operation Sun [the codeword for the February 21 attack] has ended. The ‘sun’ rises every morning.” General Büyükanıt stated yesterday: “There will be operations when needed. We will continue. We will try to inflict heavier blows on the PKK.”

Despite the denials, the US position was without any question the major factor determining the extent of the Turkish operation. Its forces did not, as some strategists within Turkey had advocated, occupy the towns at the foothills from which the PKK mountain bases logically derive food, fuel and other essential supplies.

The Bush administration gave a green light for the Turkish incursion, but it was clearly nervous about the reaction of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the broader Iraqi Kurdish population.

Few people in the Middle East are under any illusions that Turkey is only concerned with hunting down PKK fighters. The US overthrow of the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein has called into question the very survival of the Iraqi nation-state. Above all, it raises the possibility of the northern Kurdish region, which was granted considerable autonomy by the US occupation in 2003, declaring independence. The Kurdish bourgeois parties were the most enthusiastic supporters of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the KRG is the only area of the country that has been relatively stable.

For the Turkish ruling elite, the existence of a Kurdish autonomous statelet on its southern border is viewed as a direct threat. It could spur on agitation for a greater Kurdistan, fuelling separatist sentiment in Iran, Syria and south-eastern Turkey, which has the largest Kurdish minority in the Middle East. The ability of the PKK to operate largely unchallenged in the northern Iraqi mountains only fuels Turkish concerns.

Washington therefore finds itself attempting a delicate but increasingly difficult balancing act. Turkey has tremendous strategic and economic importance to the US plans for domination of the oil and gas of the Middle East and Central Asia—the true motive for the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Turkey is a hub for various pipelines bringing energy resources out of both regions. Militarily, Turkey possesses the largest armed forces in NATO, outside of the US itself. Historically, it is a geopolitical rival of two perceived obstacles to US interests—Russia and Iran.

To consolidate its alliance with Turkey, however, the US must appease its demands for action against the PKK and place strict limits on the autonomy of the KRG. Ankara is particularly opposed to the Kurdish ambitions

to incorporate the main northern Iraqi oilfields around the city of Kirkuk into the KRG. Such a development would provide a Kurdish state considerable economic resources if the Kurdish parties moved in the direction of formal independence from Iraq.

The US has made considerable efforts since late last year to meet Turkish concerns. The Bush administration prevailed upon the Iraqi Kurdish parties to accept a delay in the scheduled December referendum on Kirkuk’s status until June. The US military began providing the Turkish armed forces detailed information on PKK targets in northern Iraq and gave the Turkish air force access to Iraqi air space to carry out a series of air strikes. Finally, Washington agreed to this month’s ground invasion.

A significant motive in the Bush administration’s stance has been to cut across the growing relations between Turkey and Iran and seek to align Ankara with Washington’s efforts to isolate and threaten the Iranian regime. At the same time, however, the US does not want a war to break out in northern Iraq between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds and has insisted that Turkish operations be strictly limited to the PKK-controlled mountains.

The net effect of US policy is that it satisfies neither side. The US occupation of Iraq is thwarting the ambitions of the Kurdish elite but failing to provide sufficient reassurances to Turkey that the threat of Kurdish separatism has been dealt with. The June deadline for the settlement of Kirkuk will bring matters to a head. If no referendum is held, it will be interpreted among Iraqi Kurds as a devastating US betrayal. If a referendum is scheduled, Turkey is likely to invade before it takes place. Whatever Washington ultimately does, it has the potential to ignite a political powder keg.



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