

Iraqi president visits Ankara in wake of Turkish incursion

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Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, who is also a Kurdish leader, visited Turkey on March 5 along with the five senior economic and security ministers. The visit took place amid ongoing Turkish air strikes on northern Iraq against Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) rebels and just one week after Ankara ended a ground incursion that the Iraqi government denounced as an “unacceptable” violation of its sovereignty. Turkish President Abdullah Gül invited Talabani to Ankara on February 21—the day the military assault began.

The acceptance of the invitation under such conditions highlights the strategic importance of Turkey to both the US and various factions of Iraq’s pro-occupation elite. The Bush administration views Ankara, with its large military and growing economic clout, as a major counterweight in the Middle East to Iranian efforts to assert regional dominance. Inside Iraq, Turkey inevitably exerts considerable influence. Oil from the country’s north is piped to Turkish ports for sale on the world market. The Turkish port of Ceyhan is also the destination for the US-backed project to develop an alternate means to Russia’s pipeline network for transporting oil and gas from the Central Asian republics to the European Union.

The Iraqi government, with Washington’s encouragement, has sought to reassure the Turkish ruling class that Kurdish nationalist ambitions will be curbed in northern Iraq and has offered Ankara the prospect of an even greater role in the exploitation of Iraqi oil and gas reserves.

Talabani pledged Iraqi assistance to Turkey in dislodging PKK guerillas from their bases in the rugged mountains of northern Iraq. Even more significantly, he declared that the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which controls the country’s three northern provinces, would actively assist. The KRG, he said, had

been requested by Baghdad to “put pressure on PKK units to give up their weapons or leave the region”.

Until now, the KRG has made no attempt to use its pesh merga militia to establish their authority over the PKK-controlled areas. There is considerable sympathy inside Iraq’s Kurdish parties for the perspective of a greater Kurdistan that would include south-eastern Turkey, as well as parts of Syria and Iran. The notion of suppressing Kurdish rebels on behalf of Turkey is not a popular one.

Kurdish resentment towards Turkey is amplified by Ankara’s opposition to the KRG’s perspective of incorporating the oil-rich Kirkuk province. Turkey’s assertion that it has the right to militarily intervene inside Iraq is not limited to the PKK-held mountains. It has also declared its right to deploy troops to Kirkuk, on the grounds of protecting the city’s ethnic Turkomen community from abuse by Kurdish nationalist forces.

Kurdish control of Kirkuk would dramatically enhance the KRG’s economic importance and, in the event of a declaration of Kurdish independence from Iraq, provide considerable resources. It is therefore bitterly opposed by Turkey, which views the very existence of the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq as an incitement to Kurdish separatism throughout the Middle East.

The US occupation encouraged Kurdish ambitions by including a stipulation in the Iraqi constitution that a referendum on Kirkuk’s status would take place by the end of 2007. Last year, however, as the Bush administration sought to strengthen its relations with Ankara, it prevailed on the Iraqi Kurdish factions to accept a six-month delay.

Every signal from Washington indicates that the US is not prepared to create diplomatic tensions with

Turkey by backing Kurdish demands for a referendum in June. The Bush administration pointedly distanced itself on Saturday from military commanders who implied last week that the US was prepared to enter into negotiations with the PKK. A White House spokeswoman stated: “We have not and will not negotiate or hold talks with the PKK, nor do we expect Turkey to do so... The PKK is a common enemy.”

Talabani’s conduct in Turkey indicates that the Iraqi Kurdish elite—or at least a significant faction—are also prepared to relinquish their aspirations to control. His first act after disembarking was to pay homage at the mausoleum of Kemal Atatürk, the first president of the modern Turkish republic.

Iraqi Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani held talks with senior Turkish ministers over closer economic ties, including a free trade agreement and major investments in Iraqi oil and gas. Turkish deputy minister for foreign trade Kursda Tuzmen told journalists: “Turkey’s priority is to invest in the development of Iraqi gas fields, for import and transit to Europe.” Further discussion took place on constructing a gas pipeline parallel to the oil pipeline that ships Iraqi oil from Kirkuk to Ceyhan—something that would not take place if the KRG were to control Kirkuk.

Within two years, Tuzmen declared, the objective was to boost bilateral Iraqi-Turkish trade from \$US3.5 billion in 2007 to \$20 billion. Turkey is intending to open a consulate in the Iraqi city of Basra to facilitate greater Turkish investment into the oil and gas sector in southern Iraq as well. Shahristani declared that Turkey could construct oil refineries “wherever it liked” in Iraq. The Iraqi oil minister again denounced the KRG’s various contracts for oil projects with transnational energy companies as illegal, declaring that the Kurdish region had no authority over oil and gas resources.

Talabani concluded his visit by addressing an audience of Turkish business leaders on Saturday. He declared that Iraq wanted “strategic relations in all fields, including oil, the economy, trade, culture and politics, with Turkey”. The Bush administration issued a statement noting it was pleased with the outcome of the Iraq-Turkish meetings.

US ambassador to Turkey Ross Wilson announced on March 7 that Vice President Dick Cheney will visit Ankara en route to the NATO summit in Bucharest

from April 2 to 4. The last time Cheney travelled to Turkey was in 2002, in an attempt to secure Turkish backing for the invasion of Iraq.

Iran will undoubtedly be a major issue in the discussions between Cheney and President Gül, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the head of the Turkish military, General Yasar Büyükanit. Despite US overtures over recent months, Turkey has not made any definite moves toward lessening its political and economic engagement with the Iranian regime.

A major meeting of the Turkish-Iranian Business Council is currently underway in Tehran, at which Iran is expected to seek greater Turkish investment and involvement in the development of its energy sector, in defiance of UN economic sanctions pushed through by the US and its allies.

While the Bush administration was no doubt hoping that Talibani’s trip would help woo Ankara away from Tehran, sections of the Iraqi elite, including the president, are responding to uncertainty about the outcome of US-Iranian tensions by maintaining their own relations with Iran. Iranian President Ahmadinejad was welcomed to Baghdad on March 2-3 with full honours.



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