

Turkey's assault on Kurds in Iraq presages regional conflicts

Jean Shaoul
27 August 2011

Turkish jets invaded Iraqi airspace between August 17 and August 22 to carry out an intense bombardment of the Kurdish autonomous region, attacking 349 targets, killing at least 100 and injuring scores more.

An army statement said that the raids on the mountainous region around Qandil, Hakurk, Avasin-Basyan, Zap and Metina in northern Iraq would continue in order to eradicate suspected militant bases belonging to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) used to launch attacks within Turkey.

The PKK is seeking to establish an autonomous Kurdish state and greater cultural and political rights for the Kurds in Turkey's southeast, adjacent to its borders with Syria, Iran and Iraq, also home to significant Kurdish minorities. Last February, the PKK ended its unilateral ceasefire with the Turkish government in the 30-year-long conflict that has claimed at least 44,000 lives. The PKK is designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and the US.

The army said, "North of Iraq and inside the country will be closely monitored for any separatist terror actions ... air and land operations will continue until they are eradicated".

It has claimed that up to 2,000 PKK militants operate in Iraq.

Kurdish sources cite different casualty figures. Ahmed Denis, a PKK spokesman, acknowledged that three of its fighters had been killed during strikes on Dohuk province. He added that if Turkey continued its attacks, the PKK would "go to war with Turkey".

Turkey's raids, the first since 2010, followed a series of attacks in Turkey's eastern provinces that reportedly killed 40 soldiers in July and most recently an attack on a military convoy in the southeast that killed 11 soldiers and a member of a village militia. While the PKK has not claimed responsibility for the attacks, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said his government "had run out of patience" and those who carried out the killings "would pay the price".

Zaman, the pro-government daily, quoted "confidential sources" in Ankara that Turkey was setting up "operational front garrisons" inside northern Iraq to supersede its existing low-key intelligence presence to monitor Kurdish activities.

Turkey's 2,500 troops, which have been stationed inside Iraq for the past 15 years without the approval of the Iraqi government, will now increase. While the world's press has said relatively little about Turkey's raids on Iraqi territory, they must have Washington's approval.

The new facilities would permit the extended deployment of troops and special forces at short notice, with air cover and aerial bombardment from Turkish bases. According to *Zaman*, the government is seeking parliamentary approval to conduct such cross-border operations at will. It presages an all-out assault on Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region.

These developments indicate that Ankara is abandoning its policy of engagement with its Kurdish citizens. In the 2007 election campaign, Erdogan acknowledged past injustices, saying, "The Kurdish problem is my problem" and sought to make a number of concessions to the Kurds, including a Kurdish language television channel that broke the 80-year-long embargo on the use of the Kurdish language.

Despite Turkey's strong economic growth in recent years, the social and political divisions within the country remain deep, particularly between the industrialised west and the agrarian and underdeveloped east where Turkey's 20 million Kurds live. Not only is the Kurdish region very impoverished, there is also strict censorship of the Kurdish press. Journalists and politicians are subject to constant persecution by the police and judiciary, and hundreds of Kurdish activists remain in jail. Kurdish candidates were only allowed to stand in last June's elections after a sustained campaign and were then disqualified again after the election.

Following the revolutionary developments in Tunisia and Egypt, there have been ongoing demonstrations and tent city protests by the Kurds in Istanbul, Izmir and the Kurdish heartland in the southeast. Protests also took place in the Kurdish regions in Iraq, Iran and Syria. As tensions rose, the government deployed teargas and troops to disperse the demonstrations, resulting in the deaths of several demonstrators, exacerbating Turkish-Kurdish relations.

Ankara's increasingly tense relations with its Kurdish minority threaten to destabilise its relations with other regional powers, derailing its much vaunted foreign policy of having "zero problems with your neighbours" that has seen Turkey's political and economic influence in the region grow.

Ankara has long held that Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and the US-led coalition forces have not done enough to suppress the activities of the PKK and dislodge it from its base in Iraq's mountainous terrain in the north.

Iraq, which has supported the beleaguered regime of President Bashar Assad in Syria and recently signed a multibillion-dollar agreement with Tehran and Damascus over gas supplies to Syria, has opposed Turkey's attacks. Baghdad's Shiite-dominated government has recently faced a resurgence of attacks by Sunni militants, which is likely to reinforce the alliance between the Shiites and Kurds.

Kurdish officials in northern Iraq have responded angrily to the attacks, saying that the Turkish shelling had targeted and killed civilians, including a family of seven travelling in a car. Kardo Mohammed, a member of Iraq's Kurdish parliament, said the shelling constituted a breach of international conventions, "principles of friendship" and agreements between the two countries.

He told Reuters news agency, "The Turkish shelling targeted civilians basically, and the proof is the killing of these seven civilians, including children."

"We do not believe that the planes cannot differentiate between civilian and military, or a child and a fighter carrying a rifle," he continued.

Turkey alleges that Israeli intelligence, long active in Kurdish Iraq, has played a role in whipping up tensions against Ankara, adding to the deteriorating relations between the two countries following Israel's assault on Gaza in 2008-2009 and the killing of nine Turkish citizens on the Mavi Marmara aid flotilla to Gaza in May last year.

The air strikes followed Iran's shelling of camps and fighters belonging to the Kurdish Party of Free Life for Kurdistan (PJAK), formed in 2004 as a splinter group from the PKK, in northern Iraq near its border with Iran.

Iran's bombardment could only have been carried out with the approval of, if not cooperation with, US forces stationed in Iraq. It was possibly a quid pro quo for a decrease in attacks on US forces in Iraq by Shiite militants backed by Iran. At the very least, it was a warning that Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government had to rein in militants and stop them attacking targets in Turkey and Iran.

At the same time, Iran's intervention was a signal to

Turkey to stop criticising Tehran's ally, the Assad regime in Syria, and supporting Syrian oppositionists, and a warning that should Ankara intervene in Syria, then Tehran had the power to destabilise Turkish-Kurdish relations. It follows Tehran's move to station its naval vessels in Syria's ports earlier this year.

Turkey's relations with Syria have also deteriorated, as the political unrest in Syria's Kurdish northeast makes it once again a base for PKK's operations in Turkey. Earlier this year, Turkish forces clashed with PKK militants and seized arms caches that they had brought in from Syria.

Turkey has played host to several meetings of Syria's disparate opposition groups, much to the anger of Damascus, and called on President Assad to stop using force against the ongoing protest movement and carry out reforms aimed at appeasing the mass movement—for fear that the unrest will spread to Turkey and create a flood of refugees into the south of the country.

In 1998, Turkey came close to waging war on Syria over its support for then PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and its terrorist attacks in Turkey.

When the possibility became known that Turkey might invade Syria to unseat Assad, with or on behalf of NATO and the Western powers and with money from the Sunni monarchies in the Gulf, Tehran reacted with fury, threatening military action against Ankara.

Turkey also faces a reemergence of the nearly 40-year-long conflict over Cyprus, which recently started oil and gas exploration of its shores in the eastern Mediterranean. Ankara has warned that it would intervene militarily if drilling goes ahead without resolving the conflict and ensuring the Turkish Cypriot bourgeoisie's share of the proceeds.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact