

Turkey attacks PKK, YPG in Iraq, Syria

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Last week, Turkey announced an invasion code-named “Claw-Lock” into areas of northern Iraq controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Air strikes and Special Forces raids targeted the Kurdish-nationalist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). While Turkey declared over 50 militiamen dead, the PKK claimed it had killed nearly 30 Turkish soldiers so far.

This takes place as US-led NATO powers escalate a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and surging energy and food prices worldwide intensify anger in the working class in every country. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkish government faces an unprecedented economic and social crisis and an increasingly militant working class at home.

Last Monday, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said the Turkish air force hit “shelters, bunkers, caves, tunnels, ammunition depots and so-called headquarters belonging to the terrorist organization,” referring to the PKK. He said the Turkish army used artillery, ATAK helicopters, and armed drones in the Metina, Zap, and Avasin-Basyan areas of Iraqi Kurdistan.

This invasion is part of a series of Turkish military operations against PKK positions in Iraq’s Duhok province: Operation Claw in 2019; Operation Claw-Tiger in 2020; and Operation Claw-Lightning and Operation Claw-Thunderbolt in 2021. Turkey has had a permanent military presence in the area since 2016 with over 35 military points, according to a statement from the Turkish presidency in 2020.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, “Soon there will not be a place called Qandil,” referring to the PKK’s central headquarters. Murat Karayılan, a PKK leader, said this is not an “operation,” but a “major war.” He said the current fight against the Turkish army is for “survival.” Another PKK leader, Duran Kalkan, threatened to turn all cities in Turkey “into a war zone.” Afterwards, two attacks occurred in Istanbul and Bursa. The Turkish Interior Ministry blamed the PKK and its allies.

The Turkish state-owned TRT World reported that the

latest Turkish invasion is proceeding with direct support from KRG Peshmerga forces. It wrote, “With the start of the operation, and even days before, Kurdish Peshmerga forces were deployed to the area to block routes and prevent the PKK from going underground in Kurdish towns and villages.”

It added, “The offensive began days after [Iraqi] Kurdish Prime Minister Masrour Barzani’s Ankara visit last week.” On April 13, just before this visit, US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary Joey Hood met with Masrour Barzani and KRG President Nechirvan Barzani in Erbil.

However, Baghdad sharply denounced Turkey’s illegal invasion of Iraqi territory. On Tuesday, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry summoned the Turkish ambassador, handing him a “firmly-worded note of protest” urging Turkey to “put an end to acts of provocation and unacceptable violations.” Iraqi officials denied Erdoğan’s claims that Iraq supported the Turkish invasion.

The Turkish invasion in Iraq is accompanied by operations against the US-backed People’s Defense Units (YPG) militias, the PKK’s allies in Syria. The Turkish Defence Ministry claimed its forces killed 50 YPG militiamen in Mare, a district north of Aleppo. Kurdish fighters also claim that they killed 10 Turkish special forces in the district. The Turkish army has occupied parts of northern Syria since 2016 to prevent the formation of a YPG-led Kurdish enclave on its southern borders.

Turkey’s invasion of Iraq comes amid multiple US-backed maneuvers to reduce Europe’s energy dependence on Russia. Among these is the sale of natural gas from Iraqi Kurdistan to Europe via Turkey, reportedly with Israeli support.

Kurdish Prime Minister Barzani met with Boris Johnson last Tuesday in London. According to a statement from Johnson’s office, “Prime Minister Barzani spoke about his aspiration to export energy to Europe, and the Prime Minister lauded his efforts to help reduce Western reliance on Russian oil and gas.”

Currently, there is no gas pipeline between Turkey and

Iraq. According to the Turkish state-owned Anadolu Agency (AA), work on building a pipeline stopped after the 2017 Kurdistan independence referendum crisis. On February, AA cited an Iraqi official saying, “KRG will start selling natural gas to Turkey in 2025.”

However, Iraq’s Federal Supreme Court ruled last February that the Erbil administration cannot export oil and gas independently from Baghdad, so that Baghdad must be included in future plans.

According to *Rudaw* in Iraqi Kurdistan, “the Energy Ministry of the Kurdistan Region signed an engineering, procurement and construction contract with KAR Group in December 2021 for the expansion of the natural gas pipeline network towards the Turkish border.” The Kurdistan natural gas pipeline would thus reach to within 35 kilometers of the Turkish border.

The region from which Ankara is seeking to expel PKK militias in Iraq is apparently of critical importance for the planned gas pipeline.

However, NATO’s goal of escalating its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine while paralyzing the Russian economy is putting pressure on Europe to end its oil and gas imports from Russia even sooner. This was a major topic in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus during visits by US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland in early April.

During her visit, she reiterated that Washington has withdrawn its support from the EastMed pipeline project between Greece, Cyprus and Israel, which excludes Turkey. Speaking to the Greek daily *Kathimerini*, she said it will be “very expensive and take 10 years to build. Everybody needs energy now, needs gas, needs electricity. So that’s why we are changing focus now towards LNG.” She added, “this part of the world can also be an energy engine for Northern Europe.”

Nuland also referred to “the Floating LNG Terminal in Alexandroupoli. That allows Greece to be an energy hub not just for your own needs, but for all Southeastern Europe at the key moment.” The terminal would become operational by the end of 2023, according to the Greek-owner company Gastrade.

While visiting Turkey, Nuland activated the Strategic Mechanism, a new instrument aiming to improve bilateral ties and resolve problems between Washington and Ankara. Speaking to *Hürriyet Daily News* in Turkey, she referred to the ongoing normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations based on potential energy supply projects from the eastern Mediterranean.

She said, “First of all, it’s strongly in our interest, we believe it’s in the interest of both Israel and Turkey to

have good strong relations, trade relations, energy relations,” adding: “Among the things that this war highlights is the need for all countries that still have a high amount of imports of oil and gas from Russia in their mix to find ways to diversify and to diversify fast.”

At the end of March, Erdoğan announced that a gas pipeline from Israel through Turkey to Europe is on the agenda. Israeli President Isaac Herzog made a state visit to Ankara, the first for an Israeli president since 2007, in early March. Erdoğan said that possible Turkish-Israeli gas cooperation was “one of the most important steps we can take together for bilateral ties.”

The Leviathan field in the eastern Mediterranean, Reuters reports, “already supplies Israel, Jordan and Egypt. Its owners—Chevron and Israeli firms NewMed Energy and Ratio Oil—plan to crank up production from 12 to 21 billion cubic meters (BCM) a year. By comparison, the European Union imported 155 billion cubic meters of Russian gas last year, covering close to 40 percent of its consumption.”

Reuters cited Israeli officials saying that a potential under-sea pipeline between Turkey and Israel would run 500–550km and cost up to €1.5 billion to build (the EastMed pipeline cost €6 billion). However, such a pipeline would raise decades-long issues and new potential conflicts over Cyprus and the NATO-led war of regime change in Syria because it “would need to cross waters of either Cyprus, which Ankara does not recognize, or Syria, with which Ankara has no diplomatic relations and has backed rebels fighting the government in Damascus.”



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