

PolicyWatch #1242

Turkish Troops in Northern Iraq?

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Yesterday, the Associated Press (AP) reported that thousands of Turkish troops had crossed into northern Iraq to pursue members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization on the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations. Later, the AP corrected this, reporting that only a few hundred Turkish troops were involved in the incursion. Meanwhile, the White House, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari issued statements that no Turkish troop incursion had taken place in Iraqi territory.

The PKK has recently increased its attacks inside Turkey, including suicide bombings, killing more than eighty people since the beginning of 2007. Most of these attacks involve improvised explosive devices (IEDs) similar to those being used against U.S. troops in Iraq. Given the escalated PKK-related violence, how likely are Turkish incursions into Iraq at this stage?

Past Turkish Crossborder Operations in Iraq

The PKK launched a violent campaign against Turkey in 1984 using its bases in Syria. In 1991, following U.S. intervention in Iraq, Baghdad lost control over the Kurdish areas in the north, which came under the rule of two Iraqi Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The PKK exploited the political uncertainty in northern Iraq to move into bases there and launch attacks on Turkey.

In response, Turkey resorted to "hot pursuit," an international legal concept that permits the security forces of one country to cross the border of another country in pursuit of fleeing criminals. During the 1990s, Turkey conducted twenty-nine crossborder incursions into Iraq to strike at the PKK. Some of these involved only air power, while others were combined-arms operations, including several that involved as many as 30,000 to 50,000 troops. These latter incursions lasted for months, penetrating more 80 kilometers into Iraqi territory. Aided by the Iraqi Kurds, the operations proved successful in crippling the PKK.

Turkey also received U.S. aid in its capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, expelled from Syria in 1998 under the imminent threat of Turkish military action against Syria. Ocalan was jailed in Turkey in 1999, from where he issued orders to his followers to retreat to bases in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq.

After Ocalan was imprisoned for life, the PKK seemed to devolve into a minor terrorist group. Yet, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq changed that picture. Turkey, which did not participate in the war, lost its ability to keep the PKK under check in northern Iraq. The Turkish presence in that area withered to a dozen forward operating/fire bases (FOBs) located two to three kilometers inside the Iraqi border, with a combined troop strength of two battalions, including armor and artillery assets. The FOB at the Bamerni airbase has been frequently visited and photographed by international media over the years.

PKK Resurgence

Since 2003, the PKK has found plenty of room to maneuver. The organization regrouped -- and changed its name -- resuming the armed struggle it had suspended after Ocalan's arrest. In due course, PKK violence has spiked. In 2006 alone, the group claimed to have killed close to 900 Turks in almost 500 attacks.

Lately, fueled by supplies of military-grade explosives and modern weapons acquired in Iraq, the PKK has launched a spring offensive against Turkish security forces and civilians alike. After a necessary respite during the winter months (the terrain of northern Iraq along the Turkish border is extremely mountainous and susceptible to long, cold winters), the group launched strong attacks in May that killed thirty-three people. And because of its emphasis on asymmetric warfare and IEDs, the PKK is no longer suffering the high casualty rates it did during the 1990s. The violence has continued into June, with eight Turkish troops and two civilians killed in recent days, along with thirty-two wounded; the PKK suffered four dead and one wounded in those incidents.

These developments are testing the Turkish strategy, prevalent since 2002, of restraint toward the PKK. Yesterday's reported incursion of Turkish troops might be seen as a sign of this change. The incursion appears to have been a limited hot pursuit, involving a few infantry and special forces battalions supported by air power. It followed Turkish military build-up along the Iraqi border, as well as Turkish media reports of military planes flying reconnaissance missions over the area.

Some analysts would suggest that the aggressive deployment of forces along the border is related to Turkey's domestic politics in the run-up to the July 22 general elections. Yet it should be noted that substantial Turkish troop deployment near the Iraqi border occurs every spring as the snow melts and the terrain becomes easier to negotiate, raising the risk of attack from the estimated 3,500 PKK members who use northern Iraq as a home base for terrorist attacks into Turkey.

Implications for the United States

Given U.S. troop commitments elsewhere in Iraq, Turkish authorities have realized that they cannot expect U.S. forces to do their job for them. And given the rising Turkish casualties, Ankara may not continue to take PKK attacks "on the chin" anymore. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and other high-ranking U.S. officials have asked Turkey not to invade northern Iraq, but Ankara's options extend beyond simply invading or doing nothing. Hot pursuit tactics, for example, might not draw active opposition from Washington -- or from Baghdad, for that matter -- as long as the troop numbers are limited (that is, less than a brigade) and do not go much deeper into Iraq than the existing Turkish FOBs.

This summer is likely to bring more PKK IED blasts in major Turkish cities, killing civilians and boosting the existing popular support for military incursions into Iraq. Although an invasion-size operation -- such as the corps-level incursions of the 1990s -- would require civilian government approval and perhaps even a parliamentary mandate (which is required by the Turkish constitution in order to send troops abroad), limited hot pursuits, such as the current ones, lie at the military's discretion. The bilateral agreement between Turkey and Iraq permitting hot pursuits up to five kilometers deep expired in 1988, but Turkish military lawyers seem to believe that a sixty-year-old treaty still provides legal grounds for deeper incursion. In a June 5 letter to the UN Security Council, Turkey proposed the establishment of a 30-kilometer *cordon-sanitarie* on the Iraqi side of the border in which Turkish troops would have the right of hot pursuit.

Further PKK violence will bring more Turkish incursions into Iraq. On May 30, the U.S. military relinquished military control over the northern Iraqi provinces of Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaymaniya to the KDP and PUK. Since the U.S. military did not have a significant troop presence in these provinces to begin with, it was a largely symbolic move. Hence, any Turkish incursions into Iraq will now take place in areas outside U.S. military control. On June 7, the KDP and PUK declared that they would not engage the PKK. Nevertheless, as in the 1990s -- when Iraqi Kurds allied with Turkey against the PKK -- it seems that KDP and PUK assistance is one of the ways to defuse the current situation.

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