

Turkish Airstrikes in Northern Iraq

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Q1: Did the United States approve the latest Turkish airstrikes in northern Iraq?

A1: The Turkish offensive has been a long time coming in the eyes of the Turkish public, who were outraged by an uptick this autumn in violence by the terrorist group, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), based in northern Iraq. Despite claims by U.S. officials on and off the record, the United States almost certainly approved the December 16 Turkish airstrikes into northern Iraq against PKK targets. Three-hundred Turkish troops were also moved across the border this week, mainly as a show of force, and have since been recalled. The United States may deny authorization of any strikes to avoid further inflaming anti-U.S. sentiment in Iraq's government and population, but the reality is that the U.S. military is in the awkward position of guaranteeing and controlling Iraq's territorial sovereignty. Turkey has, since July 2003, demonstrated that it will not enter Iraq without U.S. approval, unless in hot pursuit of terrorists who have carried out an attack on Turkish territory. Following the terms of an agreement reached during a November 5 visit to the White House by Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the United States is providing its NATO ally with real-time targeting information on the PKK inside Iraq from an intelligence center in Ankara (according to the November 18 *Washington Post*), and conceivably, the United States is also authorizing limited incursions. A series of high-level military channels of communication have been established between the Turkish General Staff and their U.S. counterparts, including Commander of Multinational Force-Iraq General David Petraeus and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright.

Q2: Who are the PKK?

A2: The PKK is a Maoist terrorist organization of likely 3,500 to 5,000 ethnically Kurdish guerilla fighters (of almost equal numbers men and women). Turkey has waged a bloody counterinsurgency and counterterrorist war against the PKK since 1984, leaving more than 37,000 dead, including dozens of Turkish security forces in a flare-up of PKK violence over the past several months. Although the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, was captured by Turkey with U.S. assistance in 1999 and has since been convicted and imprisoned, the organization continues to operate under a number of top lieutenants still at large. PKK members are overwhelmingly from Turkey's less-developed southeast and operate from safe havens in the remote, mountainous, tri-border region of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. The PKK claims to seek political autonomy for the region's Kurdish population, including the 15 to 20 million Kurds in Turkey and roughly 10 to 12 million in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. A number of Kurdish politicians were elected to office in the latest Turkish elections, and some analysts have claimed that the resurgence in PKK violence is aimed at disrupting the peaceful political accommodation of increasing Kurdish rights in Turkey. A peaceful settlement could extinguish all remaining Turkish support for the PKK—a decidedly cult-like organization that thrives on violence. The PKK depends on smuggling and organized Kurdish criminal syndicates throughout Europe (especially in Germany) to finance its operations. The nature of the relationship among the PKK, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, and other post-2003 Iraqi insurgent groups is difficult to determine. Some recent attacks against Turkish bases in the country's southeast have been carried out using U.S. weapons, fueling speculation in Turkey about U.S. involvement with the terrorist group. Most likely, these weapons got into PKK hands through the Iraqi or Coalition contractor-supplied black market.

Q3: Could the Turkish strikes affect oil exports?

A3: Probably not. Although PKK leadership has threatened to attack oil pipelines to retaliate against Turkish attacks, the military forces (Peshmerga) of the KRG can likely deter or prevent such an attack by the PKK. The main oil pipeline from Kirkuk in northern Iraq to Ceyhan, Turkey, exports 500,000 barrels of oil per day. There is some truth to Turkey's charges that the KRG has far more information on the whereabouts and activities of the PKK than it is disclosing. It will use this information to maintain stability and infrastructure security in northern Iraq. The Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline that runs through Turkey is well outside the current operational area of the PKK forces in Turkey, which are limited to the mountains of the southeastern-most three provinces. Turkey stakes enormous importance on its role as an energy transportation corridor and has no interest in disrupting supply. It is also entered into a very beneficial economic relationship with northern Iraq, which it does not wish to disrupt.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Q4: How will Turkish actions affect U.S.-Iraq dynamics?

A4: If Turkish actions remain limited and precisely targeted—involving attack helicopters, F-16 jets, special operations ground forces, and artillery isolated in the rural areas of northern Iraq—there is no reason to believe the actions will further destabilize Iraq. Neither will they likely eliminate the PKK. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is quite right that ultimately there needs to be a political solution to the PKK problem, but such a solution does not look likely in the short term. While the United States fights its war on terror by military means, it would be quite hypocritical to prevent a close ally, Turkey, from fighting its own.

These limited military actions will, however, damage political relations between U.S. and Kurdish leaders in Iraq, who must answer to their people, among whom there is widespread tacit, if not active, support for the PKK. A number of ethnic Kurds—including President Jalal Talibani and Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari—play moderating, effective roles in calming and directing Iraq's tempestuous central government. The KRG is afraid that these actions could destabilize their relatively peaceful region of Iraq and frighten away foreign investors. The central government in Baghdad—especially the Arab Shia members such as Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki—are highly suspicious of Turkey's long-term designs for their country, especially for the rich northern oil fields. Their suspicion is underlined by Turkey's majority Sunni composition and previous relationship with Saddam Hussein.

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