

Turkey in the crosshairs

The Washington Times, October 15, 2007

A combination of events - including a dramatic upsurge in violence from Kurdish terrorists based in northern Iraq and a House resolution condemning Turkey for the mass killings of Armenians more than 80 years ago - have created an explosive, dangerous situation on the Turkish-Iraq border that could endanger the resupply of U.S. forces in Iraq.

In recent years, Ankara has been complaining with considerable justification about an upsurge in attacks from northern Iraq by members of the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Beginning in 1984, PKK forces (based in Syria and Lebanon) launched a bloody war in southern Turkey in which 37,000 people were killed; the war appeared to have ended in 1999 after Turkey pressured Syria to exile PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who has been imprisoned in Turkey for the past eight years. Unfortunately, however, the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq has failed to crack down vigorously against PKK operatives based in KRG territory. The PKK has made a comeback, and during the first half of this year, it was responsible for the deaths of at least 80 Turks. On Sept. 28, Turkey and Iraq signed an agreement to clamp down on PKK operations in Iraqi territory, but the agreement did not give Turkey permission to pursue PKK operatives inside Iraq. The following day, the PKK ambushed a bus carrying Turkish soldiers and civilians, killing 12 people. Then, last weekend, another PKK attack killed 13 Turkish soldiers.

As anger mounts in Turkey over the PKK, the Bush administration has been urging restraint while simultaneously leaning on Iraq (and Iraqi Kurdish leaders in particular) to take action against terrorists operating from their territory. But last week, as Turkey was burying its most recent war dead and American diplomats were working feverishly to prevent the situation on the Iraqi border from exploding, the House of Representatives (in this case members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee) decided to pour gasoline on the fire, approving a resolution accusing Turkey of committing genocide against the Armenians between 1915 and 1923. And House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has agreed to bring the resolution to the floor - all the better to ensure that U.S.-Turkish relations, already damaged by the failure of Washington and Baghdad to stop PKK attacks, continue to worsen. Ankara is now hinting that the genocide resolution could cause long-lasting damage to Washington's military relationship with Turkey, a nation critical to the resupply of the 160,000-plus American soldiers in Iraq.

Two things need to happen right away 1) Responsible adults on Capitol Hill need to bury the Armenian genocide resolution to prevent it from doing more damage to relations with Turkey, a critical ally, and 2) Washington needs to press the Iraqi government, especially the Kurds, to act now to put the PKK out of business. That's the way to ensure that Ankara does not take the dangerous, destabilizing step of sending its forces across the border into Iraq.