

# More Turkish Border Incursions Likely

Hot Pursuit Common , Iraq Unlikely to Complain About Anti-PKK Operations

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Terrorist landmines exploding, paramilitary police stations being overrun, helicopters shot down, and cross-border incursions: These were daily headlines in Turkish newspapers covering the campaign against PKK terrorism in the first half of the 1990s. In the last few months they have returned to the front pages after the PKK renounced their so-called ceasefire (which never existed anyway, according to the "contact" tallies over the last few years). Fueled by supplies of military grade high explosives and modern weapons acquired in the "arms bazaar" in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq , the PKK has launched a spring offensive against Turkish security forces and civilians alike.

From 1983 to 1998, Turkey conducted no less than 33 cross-border incursions into Iraq to route the PKK. Some of those involved only air power, while others were combined arms operations, including some at Corps-strength (30,00-50,000 troops) lasting for weeks and months, penetrating over 80 kilometers deep into Iraqi territory. Since then, Turkey has maintained about half a dozen forward operating/fire bases (FOBs) 2-3 kilometers inside northern Iraq, with a combined troops strength of a couple of battalions in total, including armor and artillery assets. One of the FOBs at Bamerni airbase has been frequently visited and photographed by the international media over the years.

The [incursion of Turkish troops this week](#) was simply a limited hot pursuit, involving infantry and Special Forces numbering a few battalions and supported by fixed and rotary wing air assets. Turkish artillery has been pounding PKK targets inside northern Iraq for months now, with the Turkish Air Force flying reconnaissance missions and a ground-attack mission on June 06, according to the Turkish press.

Cynics speculate that the approaching July 22 general elections in Turkey and high profile attacks in major Turkish cities, such as the one in the national capital Ankara on May 22, pressure on the AKP government to be seen to be "tough on terrorism". However, the massive Turkish troop deployment near the Iraqi border is routine, repeated every spring as the snow melts and the terrain becomes easier to negotiate for the estimated 3,500+ PKK terrorists who use northern Iraq as a home base.

Given the existing US troop commitment elsewhere in Iraq , the Turkish authorities have realized they can not expect somebody else to do their job for them. They can not continue to "take it on the chin" either. The body count in the first week of June is already 8 troops and 2 civilians dead and 32 wounded, against 4 PKK dead and 1 wounded. Thanks to their emphasis on asymmetric warfare relying on IEDs, the PKK is no longer suffering the kill ratios the Turkish security forces enjoyed in the 1990s.

While US authorities have called on Turkey to not invade northern Iraq, recurring incidents of hot pursuit are unlikely to draw opposition from the US, or from Baghdad for that matter, as long as the numbers don't exceed more than a full brigade on the ground and do not proceed much deeper into Iraq than the vicinity of the existing Turkish FOBs.

The PKK terrorism problem is further complicated by the fact that it does not only concern Turkey, Iraq and the US, but Iran and Syria as well. Turkish authorities positively identified the members of a PKK squad, which murdered 4 Turkish lumberjacks on May 31, as Syrian and Iranian nationals. At least one PKK "general", Fahman Hussein, is known to be a Syrian. The PKK also operates inside Iran both to stage terrorists before attacks in Turkey and to attack Iranian forces. Iran has so far only used artillery to attack PKK targets inside Iraq, but Iranian authorities are watching what the Turkish military is doing on the Iraqi side of the border very closely.

The coming summer weeks and months are likely to bring more PKK IED blasts in major Turkish cities killing and maiming civilians, boosting the existing Turkish popular support for Turkish military incursions against PKK bases in Iraq. While an invasion-size operation--such as the Corps-level incursions of the 1990s--would require civilian government approval and perhaps even a parliamentary mandate (as is required by the constitution to send Turkish troops abroad) limited hot-pursuits, such as the current ongoing operations, lie at the discretion of the Turkish generals. Although a bilateral agreement between Turkey and Iraq allowing hot pursuit up to 5 kilometers deep expired in 1988, Turkish military lawyers think a 60-year-old treaty between Turkey and Iraq still provides legal grounds. What kind of a domestic and international arrangement the Turkish authorities can reach to establish a 30 kilometer wide cordon-sanitarie on the Iraqi side along the border, remains to be seen, though Turkey is turning to the UN for that purpose. ---

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