

A Mutual Enemy: U.S.-Turkish-Iraqi Cooperation against the PKK

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On February 21, Turkish ground forces crossed the Iraqi border in an attempt to dismantle Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) terrorist camps, following weeks of periodic aerial bombardment that began in mid-December. The incursion was partly the product of a November 5 agreement between Turkey and the United States to share intelligence in fighting the PKK, a group that the U.S. State Department has designated a foreign terrorist organization. On February 22, the White House backed the operation: "The United States agrees with Turkey that the PKK is a terrorist organization, and . . . an enemy of Turkey , Iraq , and the United States ."

Despite active U.S.-Turkish cooperation, such incursions will not have the desired results unless the Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdish parties play a role in confronting the PKK -- and unless the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which control the western and southern flanks of the PKK enclave, respectively, share Ankara's interest in rooting the group out from northern Iraq. The PKK's terrorist presence there is not only an affront to Turkey 's sovereignty, but also a threat to Iraq 's unity and the KDP and PUK's authority in the region.

Turkey's Objectives

Turkish authorities have declared that the operation is targeting PKK bases only, with no harm to civilians; it has been carried out by infantry and commando units and has not involved tanks. Authorities have also stated that the incursion will be limited in time and territory, lasting until PKK fighters have been cleared out of the area. Ankara maintains that the operation, which was launched with the acknowledgement of Iraqi and U.S. authorities, will help increase stability in Iraq as well.

The PKK Enclave

After the first Gulf War in 1991, the KDP and PUK established control over northern Iraq , eventually declaring the area a united "Kurdish Regional Government" (KRG) following the 2003 coalition invasion. Yet, even as the KDP and the PUK consolidated their power, the PKK established itself in their territory, and Turkey has subsequently refused to recognize or deal with the KRG. (Note: A map showing the location of PKK camps is available on the Washington Institute website.)

The PKK has firmly embedded itself in the region, maintaining its own checkpoints and denying KRG personnel entry without prior permission. Moreover, although Iraqi Border Police -- composed entirely of KDP and PUK militia in the north -- maintain posts along the KRG's borders with Turkey , Syria , and Iran , such posts do not exist in the PKK area. Instead, the PKK itself controls that part of the border, imposing "customs duties" on smugglers trafficking drugs, weapons, or other illegal goods across the area.

In addition to its seven large base camps spread throughout the enclave, the PKK also maintains headquarters for itself and affiliated terrorist groups in the Qandil Mountain area. These affiliates include the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PKK in Iran), the Democratic Solution Party of Kurdistan (PCDK), and the Democratic Union Party (PKK in Syria). The group has a presence outside the main enclave as well, in the Makhmour area about eighty miles southeast of Mosul .

PUK leader and Iraqi president Jalal Talabani has often acknowledged the lack of control over the PKK enclave. In October 2007, for example, he stated, "The leading cadres of the PKK do not live in the cities of the north, but thousands of terrorists live along Mount Qandil . For this reason it is impossible to capture and hand them over to Turkey ."

Impact of the 2003 Invasion

Before the coalition's Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, Turkey kept the PKK's growth in northern Iraq in check through regular crossborder operations with the help of the peshmerga -- the Iraqi Kurdish forces of the PUK and KDP. Prior to the war, the peshmerga helped Turkey in more than twenty operations, the largest involving up to 50,000 Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish forces. After the invasion, however, regional dynamics changed, and Turkey stopped its incursions.

With Turkey out of northern Iraq , the PKK exploited the situation to rearm, retrain, and regroup to an extent unparalleled since the early 1990s, when it was at the height of its power. Although Turkey's decision to cease operations was respectful to the new Iraq's sovereignty, it also led to a spike in PKK attacks on Turkish soil, causing a sharp increase in casualties and, in turn, a souring of Turkish public sympathy toward the United States. Within a few short years, the Turkish people -- long loyal U.S. allies -- lost much of their confidence in U.S. policy in the region.

Bringing in the Kurds

Coordination between Ankara and Washington has already resulted in positive consequences: Turkish planes have been able to target a number of PKK camps. But as every tactician would testify, an aerial bombardment without a land campaign yields far from perfect results -- hence Turkey 's latest ground incursion. And further incursions are possible even in the near future; if PKK activities resume once the snow melts in mountainous northern Iraq and the group regains its mobility in the rugged terrain, Turkey might again take matters into its own hands.

Alternatively, if the United States , Turkey , and Iraq cooperated on the PKK issue, they could help avoid a potential confrontation between Turkey and Iraq , eliminate a major affront to Iraq 's sovereignty, and further boost U.S.-Turkish relations. The most significant contribution the Iraqi Kurds could make would be to close off PKK escape routes during Turkish incursions. Iraqi Kurdish forces could also participate in land campaigns directly as they did in the 1990s, in order to prove that they have control over the territory as they have long claimed.

The PKK and the War on Terror

Turkey and the United States have come a long way since their tense disagreements before the 2003 invasion. Continuing American assistance against the PKK has already made a positive impact on Turkish attitudes toward the United States , among policymakers and public alike. Moreover, such assistance can help make the U.S. war on terror a campaign against all terrorists, not just those most actively targeting the United States .

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