

Conflict between Turkey and the US intensifies

By Peter Schwarz
17 October 2007

The conflict between Turkey and the US over the question of military intervention by the Turkish military in northern Iraq is intensifying.

On Monday the Turkish government approved and passed onto parliament a motion empowering the army to carry out military actions in neighboring Iraq. The Turkish parliament is due to vote on the measure Wednesday. The passage of the motion is regarded as assured, given the fact that the governing AKP (Party for Justice and Development) commands a large parliamentary majority.

The motion gives the government and army broad powers to intervene in neighboring Iraq during the period of one year. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stressed that any planned Turkish operation would be directed exclusively against the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which occupies bases in northern Iraq, but the motion included no geographic specifications that would limit the Turkish intervention.

It is well known that Ankara is determined to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and also any annexation of the city of Kirkuk by the autonomous region of Kurdistan—an issue which is subject to a popular referendum at the end of the year.

Kirkuk lies at the heart of the oil producing region in northern Iraq and its revenues would provide a Kurdish state with a solid financial basis. Large Turkmen and Assyrian minorities reside in Kirkuk, along with the Kurds and Arabs. The Kurdish regional government has systematically sought to extend Kurdish influence in the city at the expense of these other ethnic groups.

Sources close to the Kurdish regional government have made clear that there would be vigorous opposition to any attempt by the Turkish army to invade the region and that Turkey must reckon with heavy losses in the event of any incursion. The Iraqi government in Baghdad is also emphatically hostile to a Turkish intervention and sent its foreign minister to Ankara to plead its case.

Washington fears that any Turkish military incursion could plunge the relatively calm north of Iraq into chaos and open up a new front between two traditional allies of the US—NATO member Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds.

American State Secretary Condoleezza Rice therefore requested the Turkish government to refrain from a military intervention. Rice told journalists in Moscow on Saturday that she telephoned the Turkish president, prime minister and foreign minister to make clear that, “We all are interested in a stable Iraq and anything that destabilizes [that] will harm both our interests.”

Her appeal was not successful. The motion adopted by the Turkish government does not contain a time-frame for a possible military intervention and a government spokesman was more conciliatory, declaring: “We hope we do not have to make use of it.” But there is no mistaking the saber-rattling in Ankara.

Prime Minister Erdogan warned, “Our patience is at an end,” and continued, “If terrorism is based in a neighbouring country and if that country does very little about it, then it falls upon us to act.” When asked about possible international reactions he answered: “If we take this path we have already calculated the costs. We will pay the bill.”

He denied the US had any right to lecture him over Iraq. “Nobody asked our authorization before launching an attack on Iraq from tens of thousands of kilometres away,” and added that his country “had no need of advice from anyone on the subject of an operation” against Iraq.

Already last weekend Turkish troops fired more than 250 artillery shells and at least 10 missiles into Iraqi territory and, according to military experts, an invasion of Iraq must take place soon for any chance of success before the start of winter in the rugged mountains of the northern part of the country.

Tensions between Ankara and Washington have also been exacerbated by the resolution passed by the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, which refers to the mass murder of Armenians in 1915 as genocide. This touches on a fundamental pillar of Turkish state policy. In an interview with the newspaper *Milliyet*, the commander of the Turkish armed forces, General Yasar Büyükanit, warned that “military relations with the US would never be the same” if the resolution were to pass the Senate.

Ankara has even threatened to close the US airbase at Incirlik if the resolution is approved. A large proportion of American supplies for its war against Iraq pass through this base.

Enormous geopolitical issues lie at the heart of the controversy about action against the PKK and the definition of the murderous Turkish military operations in 1915. The overthrow of the Hussein regime in Baghdad and the shattering of Iraq by the American occupation have thoroughly disrupted the unstable equilibrium established by the major colonial powers after the First World War on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire.

Following World War I, the victorious powers drew artificial borders in the desert sand, playing off one ethnic community against another and placing corrupt, crony dynasties in power to secure their colonial rule. These borders and institutions remained largely intact after formal national “independence” was achieved in the aftermath of the Second World War.

In line with the wishes of the Great Powers, hardly anything was to remain of Turkish influence within the borders of the former Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 envisaged Kurdish and Armenian states, as well as the transfer of large areas of today’s Turkey to Greece. Military officers led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, rebelled against the treaty and conducted a three-year war, which eventually led to the annulling of the pact in Lausanne in 1923.

This was the origin of modern Turkey, which elevated nationalism to the status of a state cult. Any discussion of the bloody pogrom against the Armenians, which preceded modern Turkey’s emergence, was banned and regarded as a mortal danger to the mythology surrounding the emergence of the nation-state—as was any attempt at recognizing the rights of national minorities such as the Kurds.

During the Cold War Turkey swam in the wake of the US and played an important strategic role on the east flank of NATO. The Turkish ruling elite defended its power by a series of military putsches and was always able to rely on the backing of the US.

The international situation changed profoundly with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the Iraq war. Its alliance with America no longer serves as a reliable guarantee of protection for the Turkish bourgeoisie. The US has been transformed from a factor of stability into the principle source of instability. The old historical contradictions are emerging anew and the borders drawn up in Sèvres and Lausanne are once again called into question.

Turkey is adopting an increasing aggressive foreign policy. In the 1990s it tried to advance its interests in central Asia and the Turkish-occupied areas of the former Soviet Union—with little success. Under the AKP regime the Turkish ruling elite has renewed its efforts to establish links with the European Union—and has once again been rebuffed. Now it is seeking to increase its influence in the Middle East—a region, which was once part of the Ottoman Empire. In so doing Turkey is taking less and less notice of US desires.

It is noteworthy that in the midst of the controversy over possible military action by Turkey in northern Iraq, the Syrian

head of state, Bashar al-Assad, was due to fly into Ankara for talks about the situation in Iraq and the conflict in the Middle East. Although Syria is on the list of US “terror states,” Ankara has improved its ties with Damascus in recent years. Like Turkey, Syria is also strongly opposed to a Kurdish state in northern Iraq, fearing the consequences for the Kurdish minority in its own country.

For a period it appeared that the change of direction in Turkish foreign policy would be accompanied by a liberalization of relations inside the country itself. The AKP made some largely symbolic concessions to the Kurds and out-maneuvered some of the most right-wing elements within the state apparatus. But that situation has changed with the decision to pursue military intervention in Iraq.

Kurdish refugees in Iraq will not be the only ones to suffer, so will Kurds living in Turkey. At the same time the position of the generals and right-wing nationalists within Turkey is being strengthened. The government’s green light to the military for an invasion of Iraq has played into the hands of this right-wing.

The bloodbath in Iraq, which has already cost hundred of thousands of lives, now threatens to engulf the entire region.

On the same day that the Syrian president was due to visit Ankara, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Teheran. It was the first visit by the head of state of a world power in Iran since the revolution of 1979. Putin participated in a conference of states neighboring the Caspian Sea, to discuss distribution of the enormous reserves of gas and oil under that body of water.

Here there are major differences between Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, on the one side, and Iran and Turkmenistan, on the other. Europe and the US also have a burning interest in the fate of the energy reserves in and around the Caspian.

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