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Turkey's Military Options for Dealing with the PKK: a Preliminary Assessment

by

Stephen J. Flanagan and Sam Brannen¹

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Summary

The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a group the United States, the European Union, and Turkey consider a terrorist organization, has been staging attacks in Turkey from camps in the mountainous border regions in northern Iraq for three decades. The Turkish public has become outraged by escalating PKK attacks in recent weeks, and on October 17, the Turkish parliament by a nearly unanimous vote authorized cross-border military strikes into Iraq against the PKK. This has raised fears of wider regional instability and further tension in Ankara's relations with Washington.

In the current crisis, Turkey's military options are likely to have limited effect on the PKK and are fraught with international and domestic political risks. For this reason, Ankara is pursuing diplomacy. The Turks must know, though, that it is nearly impossible for the central Iraqi government in Baghdad to take real action against the PKK, and it is highly unlikely that the Kurdish regional government will take action under current circumstances. The United States is rightly worried about maintaining relative stability in northern Iraq and is unlikely to commit forces to hunt for the PKK because of the existing demands of operations elsewhere in the country. Covert cooperation with Turkey is a possibility, but such action would have significant operational challenges due to the harsh geography and would not repair relations with a restive Turkish public that has lost confidence in their U.S. ally. Also, U.S. special operations forces are already under tremendous demand elsewhere in Iraq and in Afghanistan. U.S. involvement may also risk opening a new front against U.S. troops in Iraq at a time when commanders and Pentagon officials are looking to draw down forces. The situation for all parties is dangerous and challenging. Any solution to this crisis would need to come in the larger framework of the future of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) as a neighbor to Turkey.

The Current Crisis

Over the past three weeks, PKK terrorists have infiltrated Turkey and killed 28 soldiers in two separate planned ambushes and the detonation of a landmine, kidnapping 8 soldiers in the latest operation on October 14, with another planned attack foiled on October 22. Tens of millions of Turkish flags have been sold across the country and Turks are wearing black ribbons to show solidarity, mourning, and patriotism. Jingoist headlines urging the government to action and black banners with the names of the soldiers killed and captured pervade the media. Mass demonstrations against the PKK and violence

¹ Dr. Flanagan is Director and Mr. Brannen is a Fellow at the International Security Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Kaley Levitt provided research assistance for this piece.

against Turkey's own internal Kurdish population (15–20 million, heavily concentrated in the southeast, out of the total population of 72 million) have been on the rise.

Turkish deputy prime minister Cemil Cicek on October 23, ordered a ban on "broadcasts related to the terrorist attack likely to have a negative impact on public order and morale... by creating an impression of weakness concerning the security forces." On October 26, a Turkish high court lifted this ban. Any weakness now perceived by the Turkish population is the weakness of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and not the Turkish General Staff, which Turks instinctively turn to in times of crisis. The Turkish parliament voted nearly unanimously two weeks ago to allow military action and incursion into Iraq and the population is impatient for results. With the tension in civil-military relations between the AKP and the Turkish General Staff still simmering from a near-coup this summer, this is the Turkish military's opportunity to again prove their relevance as the authority in matters of the state. On the other hand, operational failure at this time could further damage the Turkish military's prestige and role as guardian of the secular state. This likely drives greater caution in military advice on operations against the PKK—especially in light of recent regional lessons, such as the disastrous 2006 operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon by the Israeli Defense Forces, or the continued struggle by the U.S. military against non-state actors elsewhere in Iraq. Unlike in these campaigns, of course, the PKK is based away from major populated areas, but in a strategic environment no less dangerous. A sense that the PKK wants to draw Turkey into northern Iraq colors the high-level debate on what action to take.

Past Military Operations

The PKK began its insurgency in southeastern Turkey in 1984, which led to more than 37,000 deaths over the next 15 years. During this time, the Turkish military regularly undertook cross-border strikes into northern Iraq to disrupt PKK training camps and operations. These ranged from small raids by special forces units to several major division and corps-sized operations (10,000–40,000 troops) in 1995 and 1997 that began with heavy artillery barrages and were supported by both rotary and fixed-wing air strikes. The troops were transported to remote areas by air and armored vehicles, but the terrain required hunting the PKK on foot. The Turkish armed forces also tried to establish a buffer zone to separate PKK bases in Iraq and Turkey with little success.

During this period, Turkish military superiority and firepower was challenged by the PKK's knowledge of terrain. The Turkish government waged a classical counterinsurgency campaign in its southeast that, after frequent international complaints of human rights abuses, came to include economic development projects for Kurds, in addition to continuous operations by paramilitary police (*Jandarma*) and military units against PKK hideouts in mountainous regions in Turkey and Iraq. Local Turkish-Kurdish militias were also formed with state support to fight the PKK. Ankara's efforts to genuinely win hearts and minds were less successful, however, and it mistakenly declared the PKK defeated several times, only to be victimized by several spectacular attacks on civilian targets. In 1998, Turkey nearly went to war with Syria because it was harboring PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and other PKK top commanders. In 1999 Ocalan was captured, with the help of the United States, tried, and jailed. Ocalan called for a ceasefire which lasted until 2004. The Turks, however, continued low-level operations in northern Iraq against the PKK. Indeed, on July 4, 2003, U.S. forces detained several Turkish special forces operating in northern Iraq, which further soured bilateral relations.

The Setting

Turkey's provinces of Sirnak and Hakkari share a 238 mile border with Iraq's provinces of Erbil and Dahuk. Recent PKK activities have been concentrated in this area. PKK militants have also historically moved across large portions of the Turkish border with Iran and Syria, another 922 miles in length, sharing some of the operational territory with the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PEJAK), which is aligned with the PKK. The tri-border region of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran is rugged and remote, and is the heart of an area populated by the Kurds since around 1000 BC. The PKK is believed to have 3,500 to 5,000 fighters based in a valley surrounded by the Kandil mountains (with peaks ranging from 9,500–14,000 feet high), which straddle the Iran-Iraq border and are linked by foothills covering the 60 miles to Turkey. In any operation against the Kurdish strongholds, Turkish forces would have to move over these 60 miles through difficult terrain and could receive air support from bases in Diyarbakır or Malatya. It is likely that Turkish forces would be met with planned ambushes and an array of anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) from the PKK. The amount of weaponry and munitions now circulating in Iraq is also of concern and would be readily available to the PKK by way of corruption in the Iraqi security forces and the raiding of Saddam's weapons caches after the 2003 invasion and collapse of the Ba'athist regime. This summer, Turkey turned over captured PKK American-made weapons to the United States and a Department of Defense investigation is underway that suggests a group of U.S. contractors may also have been involved in weapons smuggling in the country.

Although the most favorable option from Turkey's perspective, it is unlikely that the U.S. or Iraqi governments will be willing or able to take military action against the PKK. On the Iraq side of the border, the PKK's area of operation is under the provincial control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), whose U.S. military counterpart is Multinational Division-North (MND-N). On October 26, former MND-N commander Major General Benjamin Mixon stated that he had no plans for any operations against the PKK. U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates also dismissed the possibility of a large-scale joint operation, saying on October 24, "Without good intelligence, just sending large numbers of troops across the border or dropping bombs doesn't seem to make much sense to me." Secretary Gates' statement did not dismiss the possibility of smaller operations, likely employing U.S. Special Operations Forces. In a recent interview, General Petraeus seemed also to suggest such covert cooperation may be an option.

Despite statements that "all options are on the table" from the Iraqi government in Baghdad, it is unlikely that Iraqi troops will confront the PKK. Any agreement struck between the Iraqi central government and Turkey would necessarily rely on either Iraqi special operations forces, which are in very high demand elsewhere in the country and rely on the United States for a range of combat support services and airlift; or would employ the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, which are well-trained and capable but solely under the control of the KRG and highly unlikely to operate against fellow Kurds. To put into context the unwillingness of the KRG to act against the PKK, they formally closed the PKK's offices in major northern Iraqi cities only last week, despite years of protestation from Ankara.

Likely Military Operations

Turkish unilateral military options in northern Iraq against the PKK are numerous, but none is likely to bring about the eradication of the terrorist organization or its base of support in Iraq and southeastern Turkey among the Kurdish population. The most unlikely military option and most destabilizing for the region would be a multi-division Turkish land invasion, like those staged several times during the

1990s. The nightmare situation would see this force push toward major populated areas such as Erbil or Dahuk, where conflict with Kurdish forces might occur.

The Turks currently have over 100,000 troops and equipment massed in the southeast of Turkey and along the Iraq border. Airfields and airbases dot the region. There are already 1,500 Turkish troops in Iraq, among them special operations forces trained in counter-terrorism, which have been monitoring PKK activities. Over the past week, there are newswire reports that targets were hit in northern Iraq by F-16 jets, helicopter-borne commando raids, attack Cobra helicopter bombardment, and artillery shelling. For the past several days, Turkey has also been carrying out internal strikes in the mountains of Sirkak Province and Tuncelli Province against supposed PKK infiltrators. It is uncertain what casualties may have been inflicted on the PKK, or what disruption was caused to the organization. It is possible that despite public outcry for action, the Turkish government wants to keep operations quiet due to strong international opposition and the fragility of the region at present. The PKK is thought to number 3,500 to 5,000 fighters, commuting between spartan mountain redoubts and local villages. There have been suggestions that some elements of the KRG also actively supply and support the PKK.

Another possible option for the Turkish military would be to establish a so-called *cordon sanitaire* (buffer-zone) to keep PKK militants out of Turkey. This option is unattractive given past experience with the PKK and the organization's ability to regroup and strike into Turkey even after years of inactivity or seeming containment. Whatever action is taken by the Turkish military, it will likely happen in the next few weeks. By late November, winter weather in this mountainous region will limit military options and the PKK will retreat further from the Turkish border, waiting until the spring to strike again.

In addition to internal guerilla resistance to a Turkish invasion, the PKK would have several options for counterattacks, using operatives based inside Turkey and along its borders. The PKK might also launch attacks against oil pipelines, including the line from Kirkuk in Iraq to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan or the BTC pipeline that brings oil from Azerbaijan via Georgia to that same port. In the past, the PKK has even resorted to attacks on Turkey's economy, deliberately setting forest fires on Turkey's Mediterranean coast near major tourist destinations.

Other Factors Influencing Turkish Actions

Turkish civilian and military leaders know that cross-border military operations into Iraq are fraught with international and domestic political risks. Cross-border strikes would threaten stability in the one relatively secure region of Iraq, and furthering Iraq's instability is not in Turkey's interest. While Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said Turkey will make cross-border strikes whenever they are needed, major operations would almost certainly not be launched until after Secretary Rice's bilateral meetings with Turkish President Gul, and Prime Minister Erdogan on the morning of November 2 in Ankara, and the November 2-3 meeting in Istanbul of foreign ministers from all of Iraq's neighbors, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the G8, and the European Union that will explore ways to help stabilize Iraq. In addition, the chief of the Turkish General Staff, Yasar Buyukanit, said Turkey would not launch a cross-border operation until after the November 5 visit of Prime Minister Erdogan to Washington. Military action would trigger a crisis in relations with the United States, which are already strained. Relations with Iraq would also be soured, and transit trade in crude oil and gasoline at the Habur Gate border crossing, which is vital to the economy of southeastern Turkey, could be disrupted. Statements from European Union countries in recent weeks have also made clear that Turkey's efforts to advance membership negotiations would

suffer, particularly if there were significant civilian casualties among the Kurds as a result of its military action.

Only Syria has endorsed Turkish military action against the PKK. Two weeks ago during a visit to Ankara, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad expressed his unconditional support for Turkey to conduct cross-border operations. Syria shares Turkey's concern with its own Kurdish population in the face of possible Kurdish irredentism in northern Iraq. Iran, battling Iraq-based Kurdish terrorists, also supports Turkey's right to defend itself. It is not likely in the near-term, however, that Syrian or Iranian forces would operate jointly with Turkey against the PKK; though they could cut off escape routes favored by the terrorists and might pass intelligence.

Military strikes into Iraq would also impact the power struggle between the moderate Islamist AKP government and the military and other secular (Kemalist) nationalists who are suspicious of AKP's agenda. Responding to EU pressures, the AKP government has sought to improve the rights of the Kurds in Turkey and been open to dialogue with the KRG in Iraq. The Turkish military and the Kemalists continue to favor a rigid policy of "Turkification" of the Kurds and have been agitating for cross-border strikes for some time. A large-scale invasion would require Prime Minister Erdogan to declare martial law in at least five eastern provinces to control adverse reactions among the heavily Kurdish population and to guard against further PKK reprisals. The military would be fully in charge, so this would be tantamount to a partial coup, which the AKP has feared since it assumed control of the presidency, as well as the government, in July. If the AKP government authorizes limited strikes, as expected, and they do not staunch PKK attacks, Erdogan would likely face calls from the General Staff and secular parties for larger strikes. As noted above, however, the TGS knows from experience the potential for operations in Iraq to become a quagmire.