

Turkey's military operation in Iraq: Limited incursion or full-scale invasion?

By [Abid Mustafa](#)

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On 2 December 2007 the Turkish military said Saturday's operation was the first since it had been authorized by the government to launch a cross-border offensive, and that operations will continue "depending on intelligence gathered." In some quarters there is apprehension that this may mark the beginning of an all out invasion to occupy northern Iraq . To understand the reality of this military adventure it is important review the internal politics of Turkey , especially the tussle between AKP and Turkey 's powerful generals.

The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) has become a thorn in Turkish politics that raises its ugly head whenever domestic tensions surface between the Turkish Government and Turkish Army. There are two power centres in Turkey namely: the AKP dominated government and the Kemalists who have a strong representation in the armed forces and some of Turkey 's institutions. Both factions often represent conflicting interests which are shaped by outside powers. The British exercise influence over the Kemalists and the American hold sway over AKP.

Disputes between the two camps have been simmering ever since Erdogan nominated Abdullah Gul as a candidate for the post of the president. The generals vehemently objected and fabricated clashes between the domestic security forces and the PKK faction under the control of the Turkish intelligence. The aim was to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation by exploiting the religious credentials of AKP's nominee Gul.

In April 2007, just weeks before the first round of the presidential elections, Turkey 's military brass upped the ante against the AKP by threatening to invade Iraq to destroy PKK guerrilla bases. The army was assisted in parliament by the Kemalists who moved to deprive the parliament of the required quorum to proceed with the presidential elections.

Erdogan boldly responded by announcing new constitutional amendments for electoral reform (including election of the president by popular vote, shortening the term form seven to five years, reducing the voter age from 30 to 25 and allowing a second term). The parliament passed the bill, despite the outgoing president Sezer's (pro-Kemalist) efforts to disrupt its passage. Eventually, the bill was passed, but it could not be implemented in time. So Erdogan obliged by the constitution had to call for a snap general election in July 2007. The AKP won the election and also increased its majority. Erdogan then used his new mandate to nominate Abdullah Gul again as the government's preferred candidate for the post of the president.

The first round of voting was held on 20 August 2007 and Gul secured 341 votes. The second round was convened on 24 August 2007, and gave him a vote count of 337. The

third round was held on 28 August 2007, and gave Gul 339 votes. There was a quorum this time, since most opposition parties, most importantly the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), did not boycott the election. Abdullah Gül was finally elected as Turkey 's 11th President. The generals frustrated by their efforts to block Erdogan's constitutional reforms and Gul's election to the presidency, began to publicly criticise Gul's Islamic orientation. They also refused to extend him full protocol at state functions.

The generals feared that the AKP government buoyed by its recent success would unveil sweeping reforms that would affect both domestic and foreign policy issues. The generals were also deeply suspicious of Erdogan's pro-American foreign policy programme which comprises amongst other things— normalisation of ties with Armenia, acceptance of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq and an enhancement in Turkey's presence in the black sea region. So in an effort to hinder the progress of Erdogan's pro-American agenda, the generals set about manufacturing another crisis along the Turkish-Iraqi border. They timed their scheming to coincide with the passage of the Armenian genocide bill in the US senate. This they calculated would enable them to exert maximum pressure on Erdogan's government. The generals increased the military build up along Iraqi border to give the impression that Turkey was planning an invasion rather than an incursion into Northern Iraq . Below is a brief summary of the events:

Low level clashes between Turkish troops and PKK rebels had been going on for sometime, and the government in Ankara had been urging Washington to exert pressure on the Kurdish government in Northern Iraq to halt the attacks. However, towards the end of September and early October there was an escalation in bombings.

On September 25 a Turkish policeman was killed in an out post in eastern Turkey . On September 28, 12 people, including 7 village guards, were killed. Interestingly, the attack came a day after Turkey signed an anti-terror agreement with Iraq and also a day after Erdogan gave his speech to US Council of foreign relations where he discussed the Armenian genocide resolution, PKK, Cyprus and membership of EU. Soon after this incident, several press reports appeared blaming the Turkish intelligence for carrying out the attacks. More killings followed on October 7, when 13 soldiers were killed in Sirnak province.

The situation worsened on October 21, when 12 soldiers were killed and 8 were abducted by PKK fighters. Throughout this period the Turkish media and supporters of the army escalated the crisis and piled pressure on the AKP led government. Funerals, pictures of dead and wounded, and newspaper articles were used to whip up public furore against the US and its inaction over PKK.

Faced with such a situation, Erdogan in collusion with the Bush administration, moved quickly to diffuse the situation. Erdogan and Washington's strategy was to strongly condemn the attacks, adopt the demands advocated by the army and at the same time work to restrict the ambitions of the Turkish army. On October 7th, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in a statement that the United States condemned the attacks and stood with the Turkish people. He said, "The United States is committed to working with Turkey to combat the PKK and other terrorist groups. We will continue to cooperate with the Turkish government to neutralize the PKK terrorist threat. We call on Iraqi authorities to take effective measures against the PKK."

Thereafter pressure mounted on the Iraqi government to do more to halt the attacks. But

the reality of the Iraqi government is that it has little influence over the Kurdistan region, where things are managed by Jalal Talabani the President of Iraq and Barzani the leader of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The government in Ankara rejected assurances given by Malki, the Prime Minister of Iraq that he would curb the activities of PKK. Turkey could not discuss its demands directly with Barzani, as that would imply Ankara 's recognition of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Hence, Erdogan left it to the American to apply the necessary pressure. Meanwhile, Erdogan tried to delay as much as possible parliament's approval for authorising military action against the PKK. Finally, on October 17, Erdogan got the approval from the parliament, and the Turkish armed forces started bombing suspected PKK sites.

Foreign Minister Ali Barzani's also visited Iran, where Iranian officials supported Turkey 's fight against PKK, but cautioned against the military option. The Syrian foreign minister echoed similar concerns. There were also demonstrations in KRG against Turkish interference. Against this backdrop, both Erdogan and Barzani stressed at every opportunity that an invasion of Iraq was not on the agenda, but Turkey had the right to exercise its military option. The regional opinion combined with statements from the EU and the US against military action in Iraq , succeeded in putting doubts in the Turkish military about a possible venture.

On November 2, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice promised "effective" action against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq . She thrashed out a set of measures such as intelligence sharing and communication between US and Turkish armed forces, which laid the basis for Bush's meeting Erdogan, on November 5. A day before the meeting the US succeeded in coercing the KRG to hand over the kidnapped Turkish soldiers to the Iraqi authorities.

In this way, Erdogan and the US have managed to reduce tensions. The recent operation is an incursion and not an invasion as some had forecasted. Given the understanding reached between Erdogan and Bush, it is unlikely, that Turkey's military leadership will risk an all out invasion of Iraq. However this does not imply that the Turkish army and the Kemalists have surrendered to the AKP. As long as the AKP presses ahead with its pro-American reform agenda, it is more than likely that army will exploit the Kurdish issue and the religious credentials of the AKP to manufacture crisis to bring down Erdogan's government. This will continue until the AKP is either able to penetrate the army or control it by amending the constitution.

Abid Mustafa is a political commentator who specialises in Muslim affairs

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