

Turkey's Growing Military Presence in the Kurdish Region of Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Turkey's continued invasions in the KRI are part of Turkey's broader regional strategy and expansion.

On Monday, April 18, the Turkish military launched a new invasion into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), deploying ground and air forces into the mountains. As with previous incursions, Turkey used the pretext of fighting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to explain its entry into Kurdish territory. However, Turkey has established permanent military bases and posts after each military campaign since 2018. These bases are catalogued in a 2020 map released by the Turkish presidency, pinpointing forty military bases inside the KRI. Though the post was deleted soon after posting, the map remains on

<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/06072020> the internet. (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/06072020>)

Turkey frequently launches new operations within the KRI during the spring, translating into increasing land grabs in the KRI since 2018. Ankara's pretext for these operations has some justification; the PKK presence in the KRI has been real [since the 1980s \(https://www.amazon.com/Blood-Belief-Kurdish-Fight-Independence/dp/0814757111\)](https://www.amazon.com/Blood-Belief-Kurdish-Fight-Independence/dp/0814757111). But for Turkey, the invasion of KRI has had far more significant outcomes than limiting the operations of the PKK. For example, the PKK has not lost its ability to launch attacks inside Turkey, but it has limited its activities to self-defense. Instead, Turkish occupation of areas inside the KRI will allow it to target the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) entity and its aspiration of independence or even the thought of repeating an independence referendum-like event.

The expansion policy in Iraq is part of Turkey's regional aims that have been taking shape since 2018. Turkey continues to directly meddle in the affairs of Syria and Libya, and continues to balance its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas while attempting to mend ties with Egypt and the Gulf states. Turkey also sided directly with Azerbaijan when it launched a war on Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, and is seeding its [influence in Africa. \(https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/rise-turkey-africa\)](https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/rise-turkey-africa) Turkey has been playing a [double game \(https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/30/turkey-welcomes-russian-oligarch-money-but-its-risky-for-its-economy.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/30/turkey-welcomes-russian-oligarch-money-but-its-risky-for-its-economy.html) in the Russian invasion, but the international community is turning a blind eye as long as Turkish drones are sold to Ukraine.

Furthermore, Turkish interests in the region also extend to its ability to secure the current oil pipeline from Kirkuk to its Cihan port and perhaps a future [gas pipeline \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/will-renewed-interest-iraqi-kurdish-gas-fuel-turkey-iran-rivalry\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/will-renewed-interest-iraqi-kurdish-gas-fuel-turkey-iran-rivalry) like the KRG is in progress to establish with the help of Turkey. KRI's natural gas is appealing for Turkey to control its security, especially as Turkey's President Recep Tayyip [Erdoğan recently pledged \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/04022021\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/04022021) to bolster Turkey's access to natural gas through a deal with Iraq.

Though it might not be an [easy ride \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-iraq-kurdish-gas-easier-said-done\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-iraq-kurdish-gas-easier-said-done) for Turkey to take the Kurdish natural gas—given the disputes among Kurds themselves and with Baghdad—Turkey is still the sole place to make the case for any party to export the natural gas. The gas deal is essential for Turkey, and it enjoys [international backing \(https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/uk-kurdish-leaders-discuss-energy-exports-replace-russian-oil-gas-2022-04-19/\)](https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/uk-kurdish-leaders-discuss-energy-exports-replace-russian-oil-gas-2022-04-19/). As Europe struggles to find alternative suppliers in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this pipeline could replace a reasonable amount of the Russian natural gas being supplied to Europe, especially as expectations regarding increased production from Algeria and Libya have fallen by the wayside. Geopolitically, Iran is against such a deal with Turkey, but its own limitations as an importer—due to U.S. imposed sanctions—make it an unrealistic alternative.

As part of Turkey's expansion policy, Iraq has been a significant target, including an attempt by Turkey to control a considerable number of Iraqi political entities. For example, Turkey has exploited the lack of Sunni leadership in Iraq since 2003, and after nearly two decades, Erdoğan was able to recently unite [the Sunnis \(https://shafaq.com/ar/%25D8%25B3%25DB%258C%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A9/%25D8%25A8%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B6%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25B1-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AE%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AD%25D9%2584%25D8%25A8%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AE%25D9%2586%25D8%25AC%25D8%25B1-%25D9%258A%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D8%25BA%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586\)](https://shafaq.com/ar/%25D8%25B3%25DB%258C%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A9/%25D8%25A8%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B6%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25B1-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AE%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AD%25D9%2584%25D8%25A8%25D9%2588%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AE%25D9%2586%25D8%25AC%25D8%25B1-%25D9%258A%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D9%2582%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2588%25D8%25BA%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586) under his banner. Indeed, Turkey's attempts started from Nineveh after 2003 (<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%253A%252F%252Fportal.arid.my%252FPublications%252F66735dfd-b01d-45.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>) but expanded to include Sunnis in the west of Iraq. Today, the semi-unified Sunni bloc in the Iraqi parliament is directly influenced by Turkey. Likewise, Turkey used the Turkmen minority in Kirkuk and Nineveh for its political advantage. For example, the Turkmen Front party was established by Turkey in [Erbil in 1995 \(https://books.openedition.org/ifpo/1115\)](https://books.openedition.org/ifpo/1115). Since then, the Turkmen Front has been supported by Turkey and is used for various agendas, including targeting the Kurds and their political parties in the disputed territory. Turkey went even further by establishing militias for both Sunnis and the Turkmen Front. In 2015, without any agreements with Baghdad or the U.S.-led global coalition fighting ISIS, Turkey (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37751579>) formed a Sunni



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