

# Turkey's War in Northern Iraq: By the Numbers

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

**Ankara is fighting a lethal and largely hidden counterinsurgency against PKK elements across the border, but the conflict's rising profile may carry high costs for both U.S. interests and Iraqi sovereignty.**

On July 27, Iraq lodged a complaint against Turkey at the UN Security Council, and Iraqi militias fired rockets at the Turkish consulate in Mosul. Both actions were taken in retaliation for a July 20 Turkish artillery strike that killed nine Iraqis and wounded thirty-three in the Kurdistan Region resort of Parakh. They were also the most recent incidents in a conflict that has spanned decades, largely out of sight, and is now escalating quantitatively and qualitatively. The main beneficiaries of the clashes may be Iran-backed militias, who welcome having Turkey as a new rationale for so-called “resistance” (*muqawama*) attacks outside the framework of the Iraqi state. If the present trajectory continues, it risks endangering multiple U.S. and Iraqi interests.

## Why Has Turkey Been Operating Inside Iraq?

In 1983, Turkey began conducting ground incursions and other cross-border operations against bases in northern Iraq belonging to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), a Turkish militant group designated as a terrorist entity by Ankara, Washington, and other governments. Most of these strikes were launched in response to particularly painful PKK attacks that succeeded in killing soldiers or police personnel inside Turkey. At times, Saddam Hussein's government gave tacit approval for Turkish operations up to three miles inside Iraq. By the mid-1990s, portions of this border belt—which the Turks dubbed the “Temporary Danger Zone”—had been expanded to ten miles.

After Saddam withdrew his forces from the north in 1991, the local Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) could not prevent seasoned PKK cells from establishing bases deeper inside Iraq. In response, Turkey sent lumbering armored units as far as fifteen miles across the border in pursuit of militants, eventually erecting a permanent artillery and helicopter base at Bamerni as both a forward observation post and a means of extending its reach against the PKK.

Yet the group simply moved deeper into the Kurdistan Region, infiltrating Gara (25 miles inside the border), the Qandil Mountains (60 miles), the UN-monitored Rostam Joudi refugee camp in Makhmur district (110 miles), and Sinjar (which gave the PKK a pathway to the Syrian border).

Beginning in 2008, Turkish airstrikes gradually supplanted ground incursions. The U.S. military provided intelligence for these strikes early on as a way of incentivizing a more selective approach, but Turkey has since become more reliant on its own drone and human intelligence sources.

## Expansion and Escalation

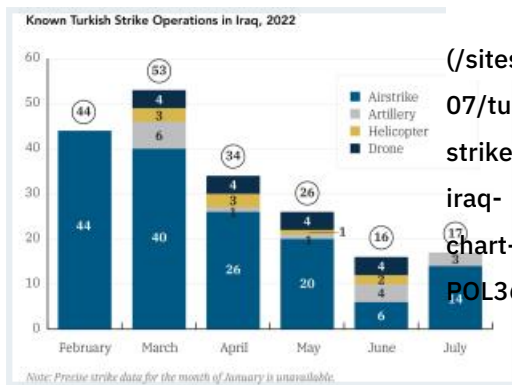
Over the past few years, Turkey's efforts to negate the PKK's strategic depth have gone to extraordinary lengths. In Syria, it has undertaken large cross-border operations (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-putin-erdogan-raisi-summit-spark-turkish-incursion-syria>) intended to displace the Kurdish People's Defense Units (aka the YPG, which originated as an offshoot of the PKK) and replace them with Turkish-backed militias. In Iraq, Ankara's cooperative relationship with the KDP has enabled it to employ a wide range of tactics across the border, often without attracting as much international attention.

First, after the Islamic State captured Mosul and the local Turkish consulate staff in 2014, Ankara established its deepest base in Iraq: Zilkan. Constructed on the high ground overlooking Mosul, the base lies fifty miles inside the Kurdistan Region and provocatively within visual range of Iran-backed Iraqi militias on the Nineveh Plains.

Second, Turkey has modernized its cross-border operations—instead of temporary incursions by ungainly armored units, it now launches longer campaigns each spring in which agile helicopter-transported special forces establish hilltop commando bases as deep as 20-30 miles inside Iraq in order to observe and block PKK lines of movement “with fire” (i.e., via snipers, machine guns, missiles, mortars, drones, and helicopters). Today, about 600 square miles of territory in the north is garrisoned by Turkish outposts and checkpoints, or approximately 3.5 percent of the Kurdistan Region and 0.3 percent of Iraq overall. Much of this territory was not fully controlled by Iraqi Kurdish forces prior to Turkey's entrance, and it has since become increasingly depopulated due to the warlike conditions.

Third, Turkey has greatly expanded its drone strikes, not only blanketing the border and Qandil areas, but also striking as far as 175 miles inside Iraq, hitting federally controlled areas such as Sinjar and Mosul. In many cases, Bayraktar drone crews track and target PKK leadership figures by either following them as they travel south from the border area or detecting them via spies on the ground if they enter urban areas (e.g., in search of medical treatment). Typically—though not invariably—these drone strikes are very successful operations with a low degree of collateral damage, akin to precise U.S. drone strikes undertaken against terrorist targets worldwide.

Yet Turkey's deep pursuit of the PKK has also brought it into areas where the group's networks interlace with Iran-backed militias, creating a cycle of escalation that threatens to spiral out of control. This is most notable in Sinjar, where Tehran's Yazidi partners intermingle fluidly with PKK militants. Ankara's actions in these areas—such as targeting senior Yazidi militia commanders (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ahrar-sinjar-militia-employment-yazidi-community>) and killing civilians at Parakh—have drawn escalating militia rocket and drone attacks on its bases in Iraq, which usually prompts Turkish artillery, air, and drone strikes on the militias.



(/sites/default/files/2022-07/turkish-strikes-iraq-chart-POL3633.jpg)

## Policy Recommendations

Despite the PKK's status as a designated terrorist organization and Turkey's standing as a key NATO ally, Washington still has ample reasons to seek limits on the expanding conflict:

- Iraqi sovereignty is suffering.** As long as Turkey can strike deeper and deeper inside Iraq without international repercussions, it creates a more permissive environment for Iran to do the same. In March, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps openly admitted (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/13/missiles-hit-iraqs-kurdish-capital-no-casualties-officials>) to firing ballistic missiles at Erbil, but international criticism of this Iranian strike was undermined somewhat by the lack of equivalent concern expressed about Turkey's infringements on Iraq's sovereignty. Without a consistent approach, Washington will have difficulty bringing real pressure against Tehran to stop its routine infringements—whether they be direct strikes on Iranian Kurdish insurgent factions or proxy militia strikes unsanctioned by the Iraqi state.
- Iran-backed militias are leveraging the crisis.** As expected (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawamas-duel-turkey>), Tehran's *muqawama* partners are crowding to get in on anti-Turkish attacks. On July 22, following a drone strike on Turkey's Bamerni base, the propaganda outlet Ashab al-Kahf issued a dire warning to Ankara (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/claiming-without-claiming-iraqi-militia-responses-turkish-attacks>): "Killing for killing, drone for drone, rocket for cannon." Indeed, Turkey is providing militias with a new rationale for armed "resistance" against occupation at a time when they can no longer credibly claim to be fighting the Islamic State or the U.S.-led coalition. By enabling these groups to justify their illegal ownership and use of drones and rockets, Ankara is inadvertently corroding the stability of the Iraqi state.
- Energy and water flows may suffer.** Aside from the basic rationale of having U.S. partners be at peace with each other, Iraqi-Turkish cooperation is vital for exporting much-needed energy to Europe as a way of backfilling Russian supplies. Rising tensions after incidents like the Parakh tragedy will make it harder for Baghdad and Turkey to compromise on energy matters, particularly the soon-to-be-decided arbitration (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-turkey-pipeline-arbitration-avoiding-policy-train-wreck>) spurred by Ankara's decision to give the Kurdistan Region direct access to the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline and export oil without Baghdad's approval. Furthermore, Iraq and Syria both need more water from Turkey, as new U.S. ambassador Alina Romanowski highlighted in her inaugural policy initiative (<https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/US-express-readiness-to-help-Iraq-overcome-water-crisis>) after arriving in Baghdad. This is unlikely under the current warlike conditions.

Preventing or ameliorating crises between U.S. partners is generally much less of a drain on policymakers than repairing ruptures after the fact. If the United States wants to spend less time on the Middle East, the best way to do so is to keep a lid on tensions, not let them boil over. Yet Washington is already far behind the curve on helping Baghdad and Ankara think through a win-win settlement of the pipeline arbitration, despite clear indications of an

impending policy train wreck.

As for cross-border operations, the two neighbors have negotiated rules and redlines on this matter before and could do so again, particularly with U.S. mediation. Once the UN-monitored investigation of the Parakh incident is complete, a more comprehensive fact-finding effort should be conducted to determine exactly how widespread Turkish operations are in the remote, lightly-populated, twenty-mile-wide swath along the border. Investigators should also look at Iran's routine artillery and airstrikes in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Ultimately, Ankara has no business maintaining a large, provocative, unilaterally established military base as deep inside Iraq as Zilkan. The latest rocket strikes on the Mosul consulate show that this base and the brash incursion policy it represents are bad for Turkey—not to mention for Iraqi and U.S. interests. At the same time, Washington must not forget Turkey's rationale for such behavior; after all, the United States would hardly accept a Foreign Terrorist Organization expanding a network of bases 20, 50, or even 100 miles from the homeland, nor would it back off a counterinsurgency strategy that seemed to be working (at least tactically).

This dilemma suggests the need for Washington to renew serious multilateral efforts to de-escalate Turkish-PKK violence in a way that gives Ankara some reassurance on border security. Washington would benefit from being part of an Iraqi-Turkish solution and helping Baghdad gain credit for securing concessions from Ankara, ideally including a visible redeployment away from Zilkan. Failing that, Iran-backed militias will continue portraying themselves as the sole defenders of Iraq's sovereignty.

*Michael Knights is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of its [Militia Spotlight](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight>) platform.* ❖

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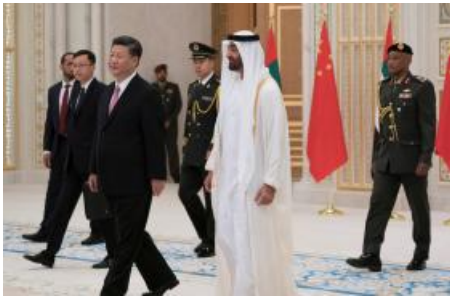
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