

Turkey's Military Presence in Iraq: A Complex Strategic Deterrent

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Brief Analysis

Despite moving some forces away from Mosul under pressure from Baghdad, Turkey still retains a robust cross-border presence that could help counter any PKK or Islamic State hostilities in northern Iraq.

The recent crisis between Baghdad and Ankara over Turkey's military presence at the northern Iraqi forward training base of Bashiqa has put a spotlight on an issue that stretches back to 1992. The strategic rationale of this Turkish forward deployment can be traced back to a paradigm shift in the 1990s, when the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) adopted a low-intensity conflict strategy in response to terrorist threats from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The current deployment is an extension of Ankara's geostrategic reaction to small wars along its southern borders, and TAF is unlikely to pull back in the near to midterm.

THE ROAD TO A PERMANENT TURKISH PRESENCE

At the peak of the violent PKK challenge in the early 1990s, TAF replaced its Cold War-era, heavy-division-based order of battle with a highly mobile and rapidly deployable brigade-based force. At the time, PKK militants in the mountainous border areas of northern Iraq were using nighttime movements to enhance mobility and protect themselves against Turkish forces. In response, TAF improved its army aviation capabilities by procuring attack and utility helicopters with night vision, using them for robust close air support and air assault commando operations.

TAF also adopted a search-and-destroy strategy in place of its earlier outpost-based defensive approach, reinforcing

its elite mountain commando units to that end. The transformation bore results, leading to the deployment of a Turkish Navy Amphibious Brigade battalion for counterterrorism operations in southeastern Anatolia and along the Iraqi border.

Despite this dramatic transformation, however, TAF still faced a challenge: the PKK was greatly benefiting from the power vacuum in northern Iraq following the first Gulf War. At the time, the group's leadership was based in Syria and the Beqa Valley of Syrian-occupied Lebanon, where it had been given safe haven by Hafiz al-Assad, father of current Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, since the early 1980s. Yet the Turkish-Syrian border areas were predominantly lowland and had been pockmarked by extensive minefields since the beginning of the Cold War, so they were not suitable for PKK raids on Turkish outposts. Thus, the group established staging areas and operating bases in the vacuum of northern Iraq, which it used to reconstitute itself after Turkish counterterrorism operations. Although Ankara had signed a Border Security Cooperation Agreement with Iraq in the 1980s, the document only allowed hot-pursuit efforts following terrorist attacks, not long-term wide-scale operations.

Nevertheless, Turkey launched an ambitious cross-border military campaign starting in 1992, deploying some 15,000 Air Force, Army, and Gendarmerie personnel for operations in northern Iraq. The campaign was Turkey's second-largest after the 1974 military intervention in Cyprus, and it inflicted heavy casualties on the PKK. In 1995, TAF initiated an even larger campaign, Operation Steel-1, deploying some 35,000 troops as far as sixty kilometers deep into Iraqi territory and mobilizing the 2nd Tactical Air Command, located in Diyarbakir according to the Air Force's doctrinal order of battle at the time. Special Operations Forces penetrated even more deeply for military intelligence purposes. A series of multi-brigade operations followed in 1997, including Operation Hammer.

To meet its overarching goal of gaining strategic depth in northern Iraq, TAF began to build a permanent presence in tandem with its cross-border campaigns. In 1994, a civil war erupted between the two main Kurdish factions in the north: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which was aligned with Iran and the PKK at the time. The war raged on despite numerous ceasefires, paving the way for an open-ended Turkish presence at several Iraqi bases with the KDP's tacit and gradually open cooperation. By decade's end, this presence amounted to a brigade-size force focused on three objectives: ensuring stability in northern Iraq, preventing Iranian influence through PUK domination, and curbing PKK use of the area as a safe haven and staging ground.

ASSESSING CURRENT DEPLOYMENTS

Open-source evidence suggests that Turkey's current presence in northern Iraq is centered on a reinforced battalion-size armor formation at Bamerni Airport in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). A commando battalion is positioned in Kani Masi with a border security mission intended to prevent PKK infiltration. In addition, Special Operations units have been conducting liaison missions with KRG, KDP, and PUK officials for over two decades.

Moreover, the rise of the Islamic State (IS) spurred Turkey to deploy forces even deeper inside northern Iraq. In spring 2015, Ankara sent troops to Bashiqa -- which lies near Mosul, outside KRG-controlled areas -- to train Sunni Arabs and Kurds against IS. And earlier this month, it sent a battalion-size force from the 3rd Commando Brigade there, supported by some twenty-five M-60A3 tanks. It should be mentioned that the Turkish Land Forces were reorganized under an assertive modernization agenda in the 2000s, and its commando brigades are now manned with professional troops to a considerable extent.

Encouraged by Tehran and Moscow, Baghdad criticized Turkey's presence in Bashiqa, most recently threatening to take Ankara to the UN Security Council. In response, TAF has relocated most of its forces to KRG-controlled territory for now, hoping to alleviate the tension.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

At present, Turkey has around 3,000 troops in Iraq. Although this contingent would not reflect adequate force generation to recapture Mosul or protect the entire KRG area from IS, it serves some key functions that could benefit U.S. interests.

First, by deploying a robust commando battalion and tanks near IS positions in Mosul, Ankara has underscored its political-military position in northern Iraq. And by relocating its troops instead of withdrawing them altogether, Ankara has signaled that it is ready to use hard-power assets in Iraq by working with the KRG, thereby projecting its influence against the PKK and IS.

Second, from a purely military standpoint, the forward deployment could spearhead a larger follow-on incursion if needed. Turkey has been bombarding PKK camps in northern Iraq since 2007, with U.S. assistance in target acquisition. If it ever felt the need to launch a ground operation as well, having 3,000 troops and dozens of main battle tanks waiting across the border could be tantamount to having a rapid reaction force inside Iraq -- whether against the PKK or IS.

Third, Ankara seems to be reacting to Russia's so-called "Gerasimov Doctrine," whereby Moscow is establishing a sphere of influence in the Levant through nonlinear approaches, such as coordinating with Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus on cruise missile flight paths from the Caspian Sea into Syria. In response, Ankara is using its own military to signal that it will not stand down in the regional competition with Moscow and Tehran. Significantly, its main deployments have been near Mosul, a formerly Ottoman city whose ownership Turkey contested with the British Empire after World War I. Ankara has maintained an interest in the city ever since; after the Iraq War, it established good contacts with Sunni Arabs in Mosul, including former governor Atheel al-Nujaifi and his highly influential family.

Although Turkey's forward-deployed units cannot change the military reality in a wide area of operations, it is important to underline that any hostility against them -- such as the recent IS attack on Bashiqa camp -- could lead to escalation. For the time being, Ankara has pulled most of its personnel back from Bashiqa, leaving only trainers. With or without that base, Turkey has already established a complex deterrent in northern Iraq. Yet any new forward deployments near the front lines with IS -- at Bashiqa or elsewhere -- could make Turkish forces a target in the future.

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