

# U.S. and Kurdish Forces Keep Iraqi Northern Front Stable

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The northern front was supposed to have been occupied by tens of thousands of U.S. troops who would make up the second front of a pincer movement against Baghdad. But Turkey's refusal to allow American forces and heavy armor to cross the Turkish-Iraqi frontier means that only a few thousand moderately armed allied soldiers are now engaging Saddam Hussein's troops in the north. And fighting along side the allies are lightly armed Kurdish forces.

Although the revised allied campaign in the north has been successful, many analysts believe that the original plan might have backfired. While there's little doubt that American tanks rolling across northern Iraq toward Baghdad would shorten the war, it also might have opened the door for Turkey to send large numbers of troops into Kurdish-controlled territory -- igniting a conflict between Turks and Kurds.

"I guess we have everything to be thankful for the fact all hell did not break loose in the north," says Charles Pena, Director of Defense Policy Studies at the Cato Institute here in Washington. "The Turks showed some restraint and did not come across the border, really in large numbers. And the Kurds did likewise show restraint. So that, combined with the fact that the Iraqi forces in the north don't seem very interested in engaging in offensive operations means that the north has stayed relatively stable. So we have not had a second front that we have had to deal with to any major degree militarily. Admittedly, we have not made the kind of progress that we've made in the south, but at least we haven't seen a collapse or otherwise difficult situation transpire."

"I think the situation in the north has gone surprisingly well," says Peter Galbraith, an authority on northern Iraq at the U.S. National War College in Washington. "American forces have now been deployed to the north; they're working with the Kurdish peshmerga, or guerrillas. The Iraqis have retreated from some of their front line positions along the ceasefire line between the Kurdish controlled part of Iraq and Saddam's Iraq. And the road to Kirkuk appears to be open. The Kurds have come to have a central role in American strategy. They are the northern front. And I think that is entirely appropriate because, after all, the Kurds are Iraqis. And it is much more convincing that the struggle for Iraqi liberation be waged on Iraqi soil principally by Iraqis -- that is to say, the Kurds," he says.

With tens of thousands of men under arms, the Iraqi Kurds are the only opposition group in the country able to help the allies bring about a regime change in Baghdad. Military analysts often compare the Kurds to Afghanistan's Northern Alliance that helped rout the Taliban. But neither the Northern Alliance nor the Kurds represent the entire

Afghan or Iraqi people.

Soner Cagaptay, Middle East analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says Kurdish military involvement in the campaign against Saddam Hussein could ultimately pose a political problem. "The Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was also a coalition of irregulars and some regular army forces, but predominantly irregulars run by various war lords from different ethnic backgrounds," he says. "So here is the similarity. There are also differences. The Kurds in northern Iraq do not represent the Iraqi people in general. They represent one component of Iraq -- simply the Kurds. They don't represent the Arabs and they don't represent the Christian minority. The people will not necessarily see the Kurds as representing the interests of the entire Iraqi people."

For years, Turkey has obliquely threatened to send troops into the region to thwart Kurdish political ambitions. And during the run-up to the Iraq war, officials in Ankara voiced concern over the fate of northern Iraq's Turkish minority -- the Turkmens -- and over who will ultimately control the oil-rich cities of Mosul and Kirkuk.

Middle East analyst Soner Cagaptay says that Kirkuk is a tougher issue and is culturally important to both the Turks and Kurds. "They do consider Kirkuk as part of their Kurdish territory in northern Iraq," he says. "This goes against claims by the region's strong Turkish minority -- the Turkmens, for whom Kirkuk is a bastion of cultural and political life in northern Iraq. Although they may not be a majority in Kirkuk, the Turkmens dominate the city because they are its cultural and political middle class, and its elite. So the question is: 'Will the Kurds advance on Kirkuk? And if they do, how will the city's Turkmen population see that? Will they see that as an assault?' So I think here the Kurdish leadership has to be very politically savvy to take into account that the Kirkuk issue is as emotional for the Turkmen minority as it is for the Kurds, and that the possible resolution of this issue should be one that is palatable to not only Kurds, but also to the Turkmens and to other groups in the region, including the large Christian minority -- the Assyrians."

Turkey is particularly worried that a Kurdish federal zone or an independent Kurdish state in what is now northern Iraq would lead to similar demands from its own 12-million Kurds. "The Turks do not want the Kurds to get Kirkuk for the very simple reason that they think that if Kirkuk falls into Kurdish hands, the Kurds will have access to resources such as oil, and therefore become wealthy," says international relations professor Henri Barkey of Lehigh University. "And if they become wealthy, then they will seek independence. And if they seek independence, they may have irredentist claims on Turkish territory."

"Turkey's interests are two-fold," says Peter Galbraith of the U-S National War College. "First, that there not be a large influx of refugees into Turkey. That's not going to happen. Over the long term, Turkey is concerned that a Kurdish federal unit in a new Iraq might become the basis for an independent state. And that might happen. I don't think that Iraq can be held together if the Kurdish part of its population does not want to be part of Iraq. And that certainly is the situation today."

Lehigh University's Henri Barkey says balancing these competing interests won't be easy. "On the one hand, the United States is talking about bringing democracy to Iraq and at the same time it has had to bend over backwards to satisfy Turkish demands," he says. "The Turks basically are saying that Iraq should not be a federal state, that the Kurds in Iraq should not have 'x or y or z'. But if Iraq is going to be democratic and the people of Iraq are going to decide their own fate and what kind of country they will have, it is not up to the Turks or even the United States to decide the structure or shape of a future Iraqi government. So the Turks, by insisting so heavily on playing a role in northern Iraq, have also undermined their own position. The Turks want Iraq to be unified and they want Iraq to remain one country -- they don't want the Kurds to secede -- and yet they are doing everything in their power to ensure that the Kurds will look for secession because if the minimal needs of the Kurds are not satisfied after 10 years of virtual complete autonomy, why should the Kurds accept anything less?"

As the Iraqi war continues, questions remain about its progress and its aftermath. Can the Kurds and the allies effectively coordinate their efforts should fighting intensify in the north? What role will the Kurds play in taking key cities such as Kirkuk? And will Turkey remain on the sidelines or will American troops be forced to play peacemaker between the Turks and Kurds?

Most observers say balancing the demands of northern Iraq's Kurds and those of the country's other ethnic and religious groups -- as well as Turkey's concerns -- will be crucial to avoiding what could be a war within a war.

Victor Morales / Washington ❖

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