

## Turkish Intervention in Northern Iraq

Turkey once owned the three regions that constitute modern Iraq (the northern Kurdish region, the central Sunni region, and the southern Shia region). Hence Turkey has an agenda in Iraq, one that is not necessarily aligned with US ambitions.

The implications politically and militarily of Turkey making any further move deeper into northern Iraq are significant.

### Background

America made a number of assumptions before starting the second Gulf War. These assumptions were key to US diplomacy and planning for the war it intended to wage against Iraq. US assumptions also affect much US thinking about how a post-war Iraq would look and act.

The US assumed that Turkey would allow US heavy ground forces (those with main battle tanks like the US M1 Abrams) to deploy in eastern Turkey before fighting began.

The US assumed that any heavy troops on the ground would be able to open a second front in the coming war.

The US assumed that its aircraft and those of any allies would be free to conduct combat operations from Turkish airfields against Iraq.

Finally, and curiously given known history, the US assumed Turkey would have no ambitions for herself in the event of any war against Iraq.

US assumptions proved to be flawed.

Turkey has long been a key member of NATO, and during the Cold War occupied a crucial position by allowing amongst many things the stationing of US tactical nuclear weapons on its soil.

Unfortunately, Turkey has long had strained relations with many key western European nations. Entry into the European Union has long been a contentious domestic issue. Turkey is yet to attain membership.

Turkey's internal politics prior to conflict were also complicated by the problem that Turkish Kurds have used tactics of terror to agitate for self-government. Many of the Kurdish targets have been Turkish military personnel. The Turkish military has a history of being politically involved in domestic politics, and any Turkish government must accommodate military concerns.

US planning was not helped by the fact that in early March, two weeks before combat operations began, secular Turkey elected a new Prime Minister. The US assumed the new PM would be sympathetic to US planning, and would keep Turkey out of any role in post-war Iraq and its administration.

The Turkish parliament has approved US and UK air operations from Turkish bases. Significantly, Turkey has not approved combat operations by US ground forces.

It is a little noted fact that some 10 000 – 15 000 Turkish troops were in the narrow border strip of northern Iraq, doing humanitarian duty, and they have been there since

shortly after the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

The Turkish parliament, whilst denying the US permission to deploy ground forces, has approved deployment into the border region of northern Iraq of approximately 1500 additional Turkish ground forces (described as commandos). As late as 24 March these troops remained within 24 kilometres of the Turkish border along with other Turkish troops.

Turkey has long had strained relations with its Kurdish minority, some of it the consequence of appalling colonial administration in the days when the Turkish Empire stretched from Constantinople to the Persian Gulf.

### Current Situation

Any Turkish incursion further into Iraq would need to draw its supplies through the region with a Kurdish minority that has separatist tendencies located in eastern Turkey. These provinces, along with Turkey generally, lost out economically in the 1991 Gulf War when UN sanctions were imposed on Iraq.

Furthermore, the Kurdish factions living in north-eastern Iraq have said they will resist with military force any Turkish incursion. The US, in the absence of its own heavy ground presence in northern Iraq, is encouraging military operations by the Kurds to tie down Iraqi forces.

Any Turkish move deeper into northern Iraq may last only a few days, or presage a longer occupation.

The US, concerned Turkey may become involved militarily, has stated that it opposes the use by Turkey of any of its troops stationed in northern Iraq for combat operations.

Strategically, any move by Turkey to expand its presence in post-war Iraq is likely to antagonise the US leadership. The US had offered Turkey A\$10.2 billion in direct aid, and over A\$40 billion in loans, to compensate Turkey for any economic hardship caused by the war.

If the Turkish army secures Kirkuk, nearly 50 per cent of Iraq's oil reserves (which generate half of Iraq's annual A\$32 billion of oil revenue) would be in Turkish hands. Fears of such a loss in part explain statements by the US about using Iraqi oil to rebuild Iraq.

A Turkish move deeper into Kurdish dominated northern Iraq would put at risk the political viability of Iraq as we know it.

## Implications

- An expanded Turkish presence in northern Iraq is likely to cause armed conflict between Turkey and the Kurds.
- US pressure for the Kurds to become involved militarily in the war is likely to fuel Kurdish agitation for the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state.
- The establishment of a Kurdish state is likely to see the Shia in southern Iraq demand similar autonomy.
- The three developments above would deeply complicate US political ambitions for a single post-war Iraqi state.
- Sunni Saudi Arabia, already concerned by a Shia dominated Iran, would resist the establishment of a Shia government in southern Iraq.
- Australia at the close of combat operations may be pressured to remain, rather than withdraw its

forces as is currently planned, if the US administration looks to Australia to provide legitimacy to any military government by remaining engaged.

- A disintegrating Iraq may find it difficult to pay for Australian grain.

## Further Reading

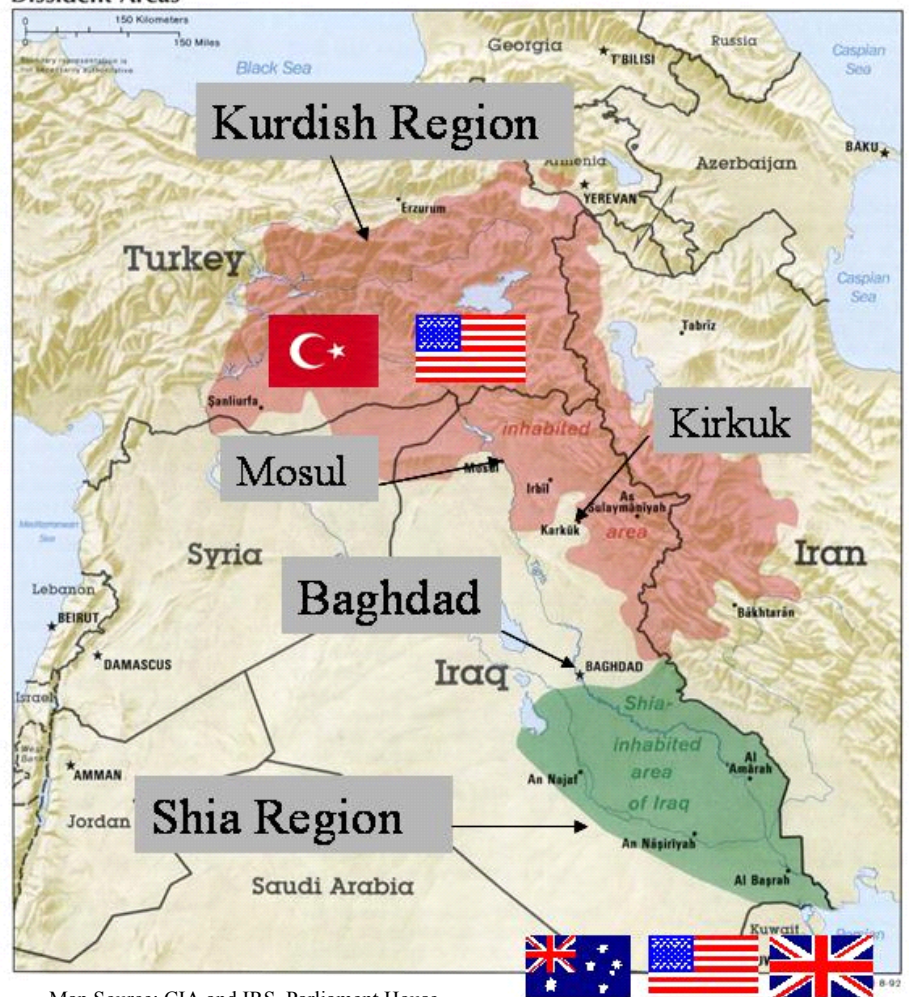
- For further details on likely trade consequences see Jeffrey Robertson, 'Conflict in Iraq and Australian Trade', *Research Note forthcoming*, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2002–03.
- For further information on broader political issues, see Michael Ong, '[Iraq: Issues on the Eve of War](#)', *Current Issues Brief*, no. 19, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2002–03.

### Peter Rixon Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Group Information and Research Services

*Views expressed in this Research Note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Information and Research Services and are not to be attributed to the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Research Notes provide concise analytical briefings on issues of interest to Senators and Members. As such they may not canvass all of the key issues. Advice on legislation or legal policy issues contained in this paper is provided for use in parliamentary debate and for related parliamentary purposes. This paper is not professional legal opinion.*

© Commonwealth of Australia  
ISSN 1328-8016

## Dissident Areas



Map Source: CIA and IRS, Parliament House