

Iraq Struggles to Control the PKK

By Roxana Saberi in Erbil, Iraq

For months, Turkey has been pressuring Iraq to stop cross-border incursions by the Kurdish PKK rebels. Iraqi leaders say they are doing their best, but that may not be enough.

It's a fragile position Iraqi officials find themselves in. For weeks, Turkey has been intensifying pressure on Iraq to clamp down on cross-border raids by Kurdish rebels ensconced in northern Iraq. Ankara has very publicly indicated that it might invade and has stationed 100,000 troops on Turkey's southern border.

The government of the semiautonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, though, wants to do whatever it can to avoid just such an invasion. Baghdad, too, is eager to steer clear of violence on its northern border. But that may be easier said than done. Iraqi officials say that stopping Kurdish rebel groups in the mountainous border region is an incredibly tall order.

"We as the Kurdish regional government and the Iraqi government are taking steps to prevent our territory from being used as a staging post against any of our neighbors," Barham Salih, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister and a Kurd, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "We need regional cooperation to resolve this issue."

Judging from Turkey's sabre-rattling, however, such cooperation may be difficult to come by. Turkish President Abdullah Gül said once again on Sunday that his country had the right to intervene in northern Iraq to chase down Kurdish rebels entrenched in the mountains there. Gül's comments came one day after the Turkish military claimed it had crossed the border after spotting a group of between 50 and 60 members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) some 20 kilometers inside northern Iraq.

Not Doing Enough

A spokesman for the PKK has denied the claim and said that Turkish assertions of having inflicted heavy casualties on the rebels were "lies and false allegations." US forces have said they found no evidence of an incursion.

Nonetheless, the incident highlights Turkish dissatisfaction with the Iraqi response to its concerns. Ankara has repeatedly accused both the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the semi-autonomous regional government in Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq -- in addition to US troops in Iraq -- of not doing enough to stop PKK rebels from launching attacks into Turkey. Last Friday, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's cabinet authorized the military to conduct cross-border operations as it deemed necessary.

Iraqi Kurdish officials have countered that they have called on PKK members to lay down their arms and barred journalists from visiting the group's camps. They also claim to have staunchly the flow of supplies to the rebels. But the Kurdish regional government is also facing demands from Iran. Tehran has insisted that incursions across the Iraq-Iran border by guerrillas belonging to the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), an anti-Iranian offshoot of PKK that is also based in northern Iraq's Qandil Mountains, be stopped.

"This is a logical request that we must give a lot of significance to," Nechirvan Barzani, prime minister of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "We must not let our soil be used for making threats against our neighbors -- either Iran or Turkey."



'We Will Do Whatever Necessary'

The problem, though, is making good on that intention. Barzani pointed out that expelling PKK and PJAK from northern Iraq would be difficult for any government to do. "Those groups are located in very rugged, mountainous areas," he said. "Coming and going from those areas is very difficult. They take refuge there, and from those areas they go onto Iranian (and Turkish) soil, carry out operations and come back."



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The Kurdish region.

When asked if his government would expel the groups if it could, he replied: "We will do whatever is necessary -- I can't say now exactly what -- but we will do whatever we can to prevent them from using our soil against (our neighboring countries)."

Still, Barzani's government has maintained its refusal to label the PKK as a terrorist group, despite the fact that the US, Turkey and the European Union all have -- due to the group's past use of suicide bombers to attack official and civilian targets in Turkey. Iran likewise considers the Kurdish rebels to be terrorists.

"We won't recognize PKK and PJAK as terrorists unless (Turkey and Iran) ask them to negotiate fairly, and they (the rebels) refuse and continue to use weapons," General Mansour Barzani, a son of the Kurdish region's president Massoud Barzani and a commander of Kurdistan's Special Forces, told SPIEGEL ONLINE.

Drug Money

Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani explained: "We don't think that by calling them terrorists, anything will be solved. We want to take serious steps to solve this problem, not just make slogans."

He also dispelled an Iranian accusation that Washington is supporting PJAK as part of a larger effort to pressure Tehran, which the United States claims is pursuing nuclear weapons -- a charge Iran denies. "I don't think the Americans are helping or encouraging PJAK," he said. "And they have never asked us to allow PJAK to carry out its activities. This view that exists is a conspiracy theory, like many others that are spread all over the Middle East."

Indeed, the Kurdish rebels' true source of funding and weapons could make the Iraqis' efforts at controlling them even more difficult. They are, claims Mohamed Gouma -- a political advisor to the Kurdish region's president -- able to survive largely off the narcotics trade.

"They make a lot of money from that, and when you have money, you can acquire weapons from anywhere you want," he said. "PKK and PJAK don't get them from the United States or Israel, but they can get them very easily from our neighboring governments."

Despite the renewed attention being paid to the Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq, strife in the region is far from a new phenomenon. The PKK has been waging an armed struggle against Turkey for autonomy since 1984, including numerous attacks targeting both Turkish soldiers and civilians in south-eastern Turkey. Since it began fighting, it has split into various branches; PJAK has been battling Iran since 2004. The PKK and PJAK are known to live and train together.

Kurdish rebels have offered to disarm if Turkey meets a **number of conditions**, including recognition of the Kurdish minority in the Turkish constitution, a formal recognition of the Kurdish language and a withdrawal of Turkish troops from Kurdish areas, among other demands.

Renewed Interest in Joining the PKK

Just how many Kurdish rebels there are in northern Iraq remains little more than a guess. Gouma estimates the number of PKK on the Iraq side of the border to be around 500 -- much lower than Turkey's estimate of a few thousand. The number of PJAK in Iraq, he says, is "much fewer than PKK." There may, however, be a shift taking place, with various news reports claiming -- on the basis of recent comments by Osman Ocalan, the brother of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan -- that many of the Turkish rebels who had found haven in Iraq have returned to their homeland in the past two weeks. Ocalan said that Iranian Kurdish rebels are supplanting them.

That doesn't mean they are going away, though. The number of ordinary Kurds interested in joining PKK and PJAK has risen in recent weeks, claims Jesur Narine, a 15-year member of PKK who now produces documentaries about the group.

"Since Turkey spoke out against PKK, the number of youth interested in joining it (and its off-shoots) has increased," Narine said, adding that in recent years, sympathetic Kurds from around the world have donated money and sold weapons to the Kurdish rebels. "The PKK are happy now because they have become more well-known in the world. Turkey's criticism of PKK served as propaganda for it."

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