

Iraqi Kurdistan Faces Trouble on Two Fronts

Author: IWPR

The Turkish army makes war-like noises and Sunni extremists stage hit-and-run raids along the border with Iran.

While sectarian violence and extremist acts dominate daily life in many areas of Iraq, the Kurdish Region enjoys relative stability and safety - but threats loom from the north and south.

The three Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah are much more stable than the rest of Iraq. Bomb attacks are rare - the last one occurred on May 9 in front of the ministry of interior in Erbil, killing 14 people. There are very few cases of kidnappings and no internecine killings or ethnic cleansing.

In many respects, the Kurdish Regional Government, KRG, has managed to establish de facto autonomy, which is questioned less and less by other political groups in Iraq - although the apparent plan to expand the Kurdish area to include Kirkuk and disputed areas around Kirkuk, Mosul, Mandali and Sinjar remains controversial.

One of the main reasons for the relative peace here is the tight control exerted over the region by the Asayish, the Kurdish security services.

For instance, Arabs fleeing the violence in the south are searched prior to entering the Kurdish Region, to ensure there are no insurgents amongst them. And only once they have passed other security checks can they be registered.

But Arab extremists seeking to smuggle themselves into Iraqi Kurdistan pose less of a threat than militants based across the border in Iran, who are blamed for bomb attacks in the region.

An Asayish officer told IWPR that "elements within the Tehran regime" sponsor cross-border raids by Sunni extremists and supply them with weapons.

These extremists are often referred to as members of Ansar al-Islam, a radical group linked to al-Qaeda which was active in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan for a number of years. Its followers were either wiped out or dispersed by the American military in 2003, but the name is still commonly used as a tag for Sunni militants.

The Asayish source says that although there are many facts pointing to Iranian support for the militants, this is rarely raised in public in case it jeopardise relations between the KRG and Tehran.

"Asayish knows of many cases of Iran helping the [the extremists], but doesn't talk about it because it might compromise ties between the KRG and the Iranian government," he said. "[Kurdish officials] don't accuse Iran directly for political and economic reasons."

The militants have attacked Kurdish members of the Iraqi army along the Iranian border east of Sulaimniyah.

But the head of the army's border guard force in Sulaimaniyah province, Ahmad Dskarayy, insists there is no evidence to suggest that Tehran is helping the infiltrators.

Dskarayy complains that the 500 border guards he has at his disposal are not enough to keep the extremists at bay. "We have told the Iraqi government that we need 2,000 more, but they have not responded," he said.

Ismat Argooshy, head of Kurdish security forces in the area, admits that extremists are penetrating the frontier. "There is no country in the world whose borders have not been violated by smugglers. Kurdistan has the same issues and along with the smugglers, terrorists also come in," he told IWPR.

Complicating matters, says IWPR's Asayish source, is that some border guards are bribed by the militants to turn a blind eye when they lay a roadside bomb. The troops may even stage incidents themselves, he said, in order to make the government aware of the risks they face and lobby for higher pay.

But by far the biggest danger the Kurdistan Region is facing comes from Turkey. The Turkish chief of staff, General Yasar Buyukanit, has threatened several times to invade Kurdistan, not only to destroy the Kurdish Workers Party, PKK - which has resumed its attacks on Turkish forces from its mountain bases in Iraqi Kurdistan - but also to prevent the KRG from taking over Kirkuk.

In the last few months, the Turkish army has shelled Iraqi northern border areas in all three Kurdish provinces.

Dohuk and Erbil provinces have borders with Iran and Turkey, and Sulaimaniyah is within range of Turkish artillery. Some residents of villages in these areas have fled and there have been reports of casualties.

There appears to be no solution on the horizon. The KRG has shown no will to confront the PKK. And although US officials have repeatedly promised Ankara that it will tackle the Kurdish rebels, they seem to have turned a blind eye to their activities, as the American military has been preoccupied with the dire security situation elsewhere in Iraq.

While the Turkish authorities have so far held off from intervening in Iraqi Kurdistan, the threat has not gone away. There are already several thousand Turkish troops in the border region, deployed there following an accord between Ankara and Saddam Hussein's regime under which Iraqi and Turkish troops were allowed to move a few kilometres into each other's territory to hunt down rebels.

The Turkish troops are based close to Dohuk province and in a triangular area between Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister, who is a Kurd, told a press conference on July 9 that Turkey has deployed 144,000 troops along the frontier.

To reduce the risk of a direct confrontation with its NATO ally, America has pulled its troops out of Iraqi Kurdistan - a decision made following a meeting between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul on May 27, where a possible outbreak of Turkish-Kurdish hostilities was discussed.

On May 30, US commanders and Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, signed an accord transferring security responsibility for the region from Coalition forces to the Kurdish Peshmerga. American troops were hurriedly pulled out of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah, but remain in force in and around Kirkuk.

While Iraqi Kurdistan faces threats from Turkey and Iran, it is itself accused of provocative actions and abuses in disputed areas outside the region. These are nominally controlled by the Iraqi federal government, but militarily in the hands of Kurdish militias.

The major disputed area is Kirkuk, but there are other contested districts such as Shingar in Ninewa province, Khanaqeen in Diyala and Tuz Khurmatu in Salahaddin province. These disputes are a consequence of the Saddam government's manipulation of administrative boundaries in the north with a view to curbing Kurdish territorial ambitions and reducing the number of ethnic Kurds and Turkomen in Kirkuk.

Some minorities living in the disputed areas, such as the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Yezidi and Shabak, who are often targeted by Arab extremists, also complain of harassment and persecution by Kurdish security personnel.

"They are intimidating us because they want to take our land by force," said Hunein Kaddo, a member of parliament from the Shabak minority, who speak Kurdish but regard themselves as a distinct group. "The Arabs want to kill us, and the Kurds feel free to oppress us as well."

The Kurdish security forces are accused of singling out those living in the disputed areas who oppose apparent Kurdish annexation plans.

A report by the New York-based Human Rights Watch, published in July 2007, is heavily critical of the way the Kurdish military deal with people they detain.

Human Rights Watch found that in the vast majority of cases, those held by Asayish were not charged, granted access to lawyers nor brought before an investigative judge. The report said there was no method by which prisoners could appeal their detention or be brought to trial within a reasonable period of time.

The human rights group found several cases where detainees remained in behind bars after being acquitted of serious offences or completing their sentences. Most had no knowledge of their legal status, how long they would continue to be held, or what was to become of them.

Detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch spoke of a wide range of abuses, including beatings with cables, hosepipes, wooden sticks and metal rods. They also described how Asayish officers put them in stress positions for prolonged periods, and kept them blindfolded and handcuffed continuously for several days at a time.

The vast majority of detainees to whom Human Rights Watch spoke also reported that they were held in solitary confinement for extended periods.

Asayish rejected the findings of the report, claiming the accusations had no foundation.

In the latest incident blamed on Kurdish security forces, an Assyrian farmer, Fadi Nazar Jarjis Habash, was reportedly shot and killed while riding his tractor.

Eyewitnesses said he pulled his vehicle over when a Peshmerga unit of the Iraqi army approached, but they opened fire as they passed, killing Habash. "These KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party] Peshmerga make a mockery of the Iraqi army," said one eyewitness. "Their uniform is that of the Iraqi army but the badge on their lapels is that of Kurdistan."

Although they were on an Iraqi army mission when the incident occurred, the assailants joined a KDP delegation which visited the victim's family to express their condolences.

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