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Northern Iraq on the boil

Kurds' struggle with Islamists aggravates tensions

As a war against Iraq looms, region's players are jockeying for position

Ed Blanche

Special to The Daily Star

The recent surge of fighting in northern Iraq between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a key component of the Bush administration's campaign against Saddam Hussein, and Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam), reputedly an ally of Osama bin Laden, may be an opening skirmish in the anticipated US attack on Iraq.

But the clashes between these two groups in a highly volatile region where the geostrategic interests of all the key regional powers - Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria - intersect threaten to complicate the Americans' efforts to stitch together some sort of coalition before the Bush administration goes gunning for Saddam.

The actions of Turkey, Iran and Syria in the coming weeks could impact significantly on US plans. None of the three wants to see the others expand their control of this region, but it seems increasingly likely that they will seek to do so when the Americans launch their invasion of Iraq. Whether this involves military or political action, it is bound to have a destabilizing effect.

That is the last thing the Bush administration wants, but it may not be able to prevent it. The fighting between the PUK, which has close ties with Iran, and Ansar al-Islam could well be the first shots in the struggle for control of northern Iraq.

The flurry of diplomatic activity by PUK leader Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani, who heads the other main Iraqi Kurdish faction, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), with Ankara, Damascus and Tehran in recent days underlines the delicacy of the situation. So too did the weekend visit to the region by two ranking US senators, Joseph Biden, the Delaware Democrat who is outgoing chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican who sits on the same panel.

They addressed the Kurdish legislature in Irbil, insisting that their trip, the highest-

level US visit to the Kurds' autonomous region established under Allied protection after the 1991 Gulf War, was a "fact-finding mission." But it clearly bolstered Kurdish leaders at a time when the Americans are seeking the support of Kurdish guerrillas, who number some 70,000, in their drive to topple Saddam.

The Americans claim that Ansar al-Islam, whose members adhere to an extreme form of the Sunni Wahhabite branch of Islam, is part of Al-Qaeda. Whether that is true or not, the PUK has found it convenient in its negotiations with the Americans. Nor is it clear whether Ansar has links to Saddam, as the Americans insist, the better to justify their plans to get rid of him, while providing no solid evidence. The remote, mountainous region has always been the haunt of guerrillas, brigands and smugglers.

The whole issue of Kurdistan is deeply troubling to Turkey, whose support is vital for the Bush administration. It fears the Americans will make a deal with the Iraqi Kurds to give them independence once Saddam is no more. That is anathema to Ankara, which spent 15 blood-soaked years crushing its own Kurdish separatists. It has fought to contain Kurdish nationalism while suppressing Islamic fundamentalism, and the emergence of Ansar al-Islam over the last year or so has injected a dangerous new element into an explosive equation.

The new government in Ankara is dominated by moderate Islamists, but it remains unclear what its policies are, and how much tolerance it will be shown by Turkey's generals, the real power in the country. They forced the collapse of an earlier Islamist-led government in what was a military coup in all but name.

The Turks also have to keep a close eye on Iran. It too has a restive Kurdish minority whose separatist aspirations were crushed in the 1980s during the Khomeini era. It may be more than just coincidence that amid the revived aspirations of independence among Iraqi Kurds the divisional commander of the Revolutionary Guards Corps in Sanandaj, a mainly Kurdish town in western Iran, was assassinated in October by gunmen suspected of belonging to the leftist Komala, one of the two main Kurdish groups active in Iran. They have been largely quiescent for years.

Last month, Iranian authorities refused to allow Kurdish legislators to attend the regional Parliament convened by the PUK and the KDP in northern Iraq to stake a claim for autonomy from Baghdad once Saddam had been removed. A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Tehran said an Iranian Kurdish presence at the gathering "could be taken as interference in Iraq's internal affairs." Iran has emphasized the territorial integrity of Iraq and since the developments in northern Iraq are to a large extent linked with American regional policies, any attendance by Iranian deputies would be interpreted as taking sides with such policies."

Ansar al-Islam controls a mountain stronghold overlooking the town of Halabja, where in March 1988 chemical attacks by Saddam's forces killed 5,000 men, women and children. It comprises of a cluster of villages near the border with Iran, which is playing a complex game along the frontier and is clearly striving to maximize its position in the event of war.

Its relationship with Ansar al-Islam is murky. Some senior officials in the PUK, which has relied on support from Tehran in the past, believe that hard-line

elements in Iran have given the Islamic guerrillas access to weapons and allowed them to move back and forth across the border. That may have stopped when the US began taking an interest in Ansar, with US and British intelligence conducting surveillance missions along the border, which makes the Iranians extremely uneasy as they see US forces moving into Central Asia, Afghanistan and elsewhere on their periphery.

The Iranians oppose any US invasion of Iraq, although they seem to be seeking to keep a foot in both camps by allowing anti-Saddam Iraqi militants to participate in opposition discussions with Washington.

But the unwelcome attention given to the region, along with repeated US allegations that Iran was aiding Al-Qaeda and concern that Bush seeks "regime change" in Tehran as well, apparently prompted the Iranians to deny entry to Ansar's reputed leader, Mullah Krekar - real name Fateh Najmeddin Faraj - in September when he arrived from Norway. Tehran put him on a plane bound for the Netherlands, then tipped off Dutch authorities that Krekar, an Iraqi Kurdish preacher who has lived in Norway since 1991, was heading their way. The intention seems to have been to distance the Iranian government from the Islamic group.

Krekar was arrested when he arrived in Amsterdam on Sept. 12. He remains in custody and reportedly has been questioned by FBI agents. Jordan has requested his extradition on charges of drug smuggling, but there are suspicions that these were trumped up so that US intelligence could get to question Krekar in a country where interrogations are harsher than those permitted in Western Europe.

The Turks have threatened to seize northern Iraq, including Kurdistan and the oil fields around Kirkuk and Mosul, if it looks like Iraqi Kurds intend to declare the region an independent state. Tehran does not want to see the Turks move south, taking control of the strategic region and extending their border with the Islamic Republic.

US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, a leading hawk in the administration, cautioned Turkey during a visit to Ankara on Dec. 5 not to take unilateral action in northern Iraq during a US-led attack, but clearly Turkey's plans complicate US efforts to secure the Kurds' support.

The Turks may simply be maneuvering for increased US aid as a reward for their support. But Ankara is reported to have drawn up plans to send some 10,000 troops as much as 100 kilometers into northern Iraq if war erupts, ostensibly to block any mass influx of refugees. Amid the intensified Turkish military activity along the border, Turkish Kurds of the outlawed Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) - formerly known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) - have reportedly deployed man-portable surface-to-air missiles in the Harkuk and Kandil mountains on the border.

There have been reports in recent weeks that Iran has also deployed large numbers of troops along its border with northeastern Iraq, with Tehran echoing Ankara's explanation of stemming any refugee flood.

Since 1995, Iran and Syria, which also shares a border with northern Iraq, have tolerated several large Turkish incursions into the region to battle the PKK. But the

latest Turkish deployment would seem to have more to do with blocking any Kurdish attempt to declare the region an independent entity, which would undermine Syrian influence in the region, than keeping out refugees. With this vital corner of the world gripped by mounting tension, it would make sense for the PUK, possibly supported by US Special Forces teams which have been infiltrated into Iraqi Kurdistan in recent weeks, to eliminate Ansar al-Islam, believed to number around 500-650 guerrillas, before any US invasion, particularly as Islamic fighters are reported to have crude chemical weapons.

It is thus likely that the PUK will intensify its efforts to wipe out Ansar al-Islam in the coming weeks, to prevent any attack on their flank if they are called upon to move against Saddam.

Iran's role in this murky affair remains unclear, but it has for years been active in the border region, and even had intelligence officers in northern Iraq in 1994-96 when the US Central Intelligence Agency was active there plotting - disastrously unsuccessfully - with the Kurds and other Iraqi dissidents to overthrow Saddam. The PUK's links with Tehran deteriorated somewhat once Ansar al-Islam became a problem a year ago after US forces dismantled Al-Qaeda and the Taleban in Afghanistan post-Sept. 11. This seems to have stemmed largely from a US offer to back Talabani with air strikes against Ansar al-Islam. The prospect of that was too close to the bone for Tehran, given Ansar's proximity to the border, and Talabani, possibly at Tehran's urging, persuaded the Americans to let the PUK handle the Islamic group.

The PUK says Tehran is now promising to help it eliminate Ansar. One way would be to allow the PUK to cross into Iran and take the well-fortified Islamic guerrillas from the rear. Whether that happens remains to be seen, but getting rid of the Islamic guerrillas will only remove part of the problem that is boiling up in northern Iraq.

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