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An armed Kurdish guard, paid by the Turkish government, at an entrance to a tent city near the Turkish-Iraqi border



Murad Sezer / AP

Exclusive: Risking a Civil War

Turkey is demanding that it send 60,000 to 80,000 of its own troops into northern Iraq

By Owen Matthews, Sami Kohen and John Barry
NEWSWEEK

Feb. 24 issue — Turkey is raising its price for allowing U.S. forces to invade Iraq from its territory. In early negotiations with the United States, Ankara spoke of sending in Turkish troops to set up a “buffer zone” perhaps 15 miles deep along the Iraqi border. This would prevent a flood of Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq, the Turks said.

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BUT NOW, NEWSWEEK has learned, Turkey is demanding that it send 60,000 to 80,000 of its own troops into northern Iraq to establish "strategic positions" across a "security arc" as much as 140 to 170 miles deep in Iraq. That would take Turkish troops almost halfway to Baghdad. These troops would not be under U.S. command, according to Turkish sources, who say Turkey has agreed only to "coordination" between U.S. and Turkish forces. Ankara fears the Iraqi Kurds might use Saddam's fall to declare independence. Kurdish leaders have not yet been told of this new plan, according to Kurdish spokesmen in Washington, who say the Kurds rejected even the earlier notion of a narrow buffer zone. Farhad Barzani, the U.S. representative of the main Kurdish party in Iraq, the KDP, says, "We have told them: American troops will come as liberators. But Turkish troops will be seen as invaders."

The White House did not respond to requests for comment; officials elsewhere in the administration played down the Turkish demands as bargaining tactics: "We told them flat out, no." But independent diplomatic sources in Ankara and Washington with knowledge of the U.S.-Turkey talks say that while the precise depth of the "security zone" has still to be agreed, the concept is "pretty much a done deal," as one observer put it. These sources add that the main U.S. concern has been that U.S., not Turkish, troops occupy the northern Iraqi cities of Mosul and Kirkuk, and that Turkish troops merely surround but not enter the heavily Kurdish cities of Erbil and Sulemaniye. To get Turkey's assent to this, these sources say, the United States had to "cave" on its demand that Turkish troops be under U.S. control.



Two days of tough negotiations in Washington last week failed to settle the other part of Turkey's price: a multibillion-dollar economic package. Turkish P.M. Abdullah Gul is now threatening to delay the all-important vote in the Turkish Parliament to allow U.S. deployments in Turkey. Pentagon officials acknowledge frustration at the problems Turkey's bargaining poses for the U.S. military buildup. Turkish sources say that when Turkey's Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis met with President Bush on Friday, the president warned that the United States might open a northern front against Iraq without Turkish participation. But military sources say that would be close to impossible.

"Turkey is playing hardball," said Michael Amitay of the Washington Kurdish Institute. "But if the U.S. agrees to these Turkish deployments, there is a real risk that the Kurds will start a guerrilla war against the Turkish troops."

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