

Is Moscow planning an Arab-Turkish war?

by Thierry Lalevée

New Kurdish guerrilla attacks against Turkey since the beginning of March are creating a new challenge for the Southern Flank of NATO, just as U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger embarks on a tour of the region on March 13. Weinberger's itinerary includes Turkey, Italy, and Spain. Indicative of the rising tension, the Greek government of Premier Andreas Papandreu refused to receive him. On March 6, Papandreu warned that Greece would not renew the contracts of the U.S. bases, unless the United States "stopped its preferential military aid to Turkey." In Spain, Weinberger's visit will coincide with a heavy debate on whether the Spanish government should renew the contract for the American air base of Torrejon, near Madrid.

The Kurdish attacks, across Iraqi or Syrian territory, are not the usual harassment tactics, but represent a qualitative shift. On March 5, some 30 Turkish jet-bombers struck Kurdish bases within three miles of Iraqi territory. Officially this was in retaliation for a Feb. 22 guerrilla attack which had killed some 14 Turkish civilians. But it was also a preemptive move. Turkish military intelligence had received highly reliable reports that the Kurds were planning a March 21 all-out military assault, which would include strikes at military and civilian targets in Turkey, including construction projects at the Ata Turk Dam on the Euphrates. But despite the Turkish bombing runs, the Kurds have since launched two more attacks against agricultural settlements on March 6-7.

The perpetrators of these operations are a newly formed coalition of Kurdish organizations, including the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) of Abdullah Ocalan, based in Damascus; the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani, also from Damascus; and the Democratic Kurdish Party (DKP) of the Barzani brothers, headquartered in Teheran. Through an agreement signed earlier this year, the three are now sharing their training bases. The March 21 attack was expected to be a combined deployment, coinciding with Iran's New Year.

Despite promises made last year, Syria has enlarged its two military camps at Meyadin and Qashmilliye, for use by the PKK. These facilities are shared with Iranian Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdarans*) who, according to an earlier agreement with Teheran, are posted there to help protect the borders with Iraq.

Similarly, under the sponsorship of both Syria and Greece, the PKK, which is closely associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) of George Habash, enlarged its operations in 1985 by creating a shadowy Kurdish Liberation Front in Athens. That bureau serves as a cover for coordination of activities between the PKK and the Armenian terrorist group ASALA. The PKK, which is under investigation in Sweden for a possible role in the February 1986 assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme, has a long record of cooperation in Bulgarian-run drugs-for-arms deals.

Moscow's game

Since the end of 1986, Soviet intelligence has been trying to scare Arab countries, warning that Turkey is out to take over the Iraqi oil fields around Kirkuk and Mossul, and re-establish some kind of "Ottoman Empire," merging its military might with oil and economic wealth. Intelligence sources believe that Moscow is toying with the idea of unleashing a Turkish-Arab conflict, aimed at destroying the Southern Flank of NATO, and strengthening the Soviet hand in the Middle East. Indicative of this was the transfer in February 1986 of the Soviet Southern Military Command from Tashkent to Baku. Initiated by the district's new commander, Gen. Mikhail Zaitsev, previously the commander of the Soviet forces in East Germany, the move is now considered proof that Moscow had already decided that the Turkish region would be the next area of conflict. Traditionally, Middle Eastern separatist organizations are directed out of Baku.

The latest Kurdish attacks could set the stage for a broader conflict. Turkey was able to retaliate against the guerrilla attack from Iraqi territory, because of the October 1984 agreement which allows it the right of "hot pursuit" within 10 miles of the border for three days, without requesting Baghdad's consent. However, the March 7 attacks were deliberately conducted from Syrian territory, since Ankara has no such agreement with Damascus. On March 8 and 9, the Turkish government issued two stern warnings to Damascus, not to allow such acts from its territory, but cautiously refrained from delivering any ultimatum. Then on March 10, a Syrian envoy was sent to Athens, reportedly to upgrade AS-ALA activities against Turkey. Both Iran and Libya proceeded to denounce "Turkish expansionism." Libya has supplied the Kurds with weapons and training for years, including the recent delivery of SAM-7 missiles.

Aware of Moscow's trap, Turkish leaders are expected to react cautiously, though there are domestic pressures for harsher retaliation. Some circles are talking about northern Iraq and northern Syria as "natural Turkish territories." Observers believe that Moscow may want to see the repeat of a 1957 precedent: Following several Kurdish strikes, Turkey intervened against Syria. The Soviets then mobilized their forces on the borders, to force a Turkish withdrawal. Such a move now could prove a test of the strength of the NATO alliance.