

## A Summer Offensive? Explaining Turkey's Saber-rattling on the Iraqi Border

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### Summary

In March of this year, Turkish hints about upcoming military operations led many to assume that Ankara will launch a major anti-PKK offensive in Iraq during the summer. Some fighting is likely, but the saber-rattling may have been an exercise in coercive diplomacy, setting the stage for negotiations in Baghdad. While several Turkish-Iraqi agreements were concluded, including on security, their significance has likely been oversold, and Turkey's ambition to enlist Iraqi and Kurdish support against PKK remains a work in progress.

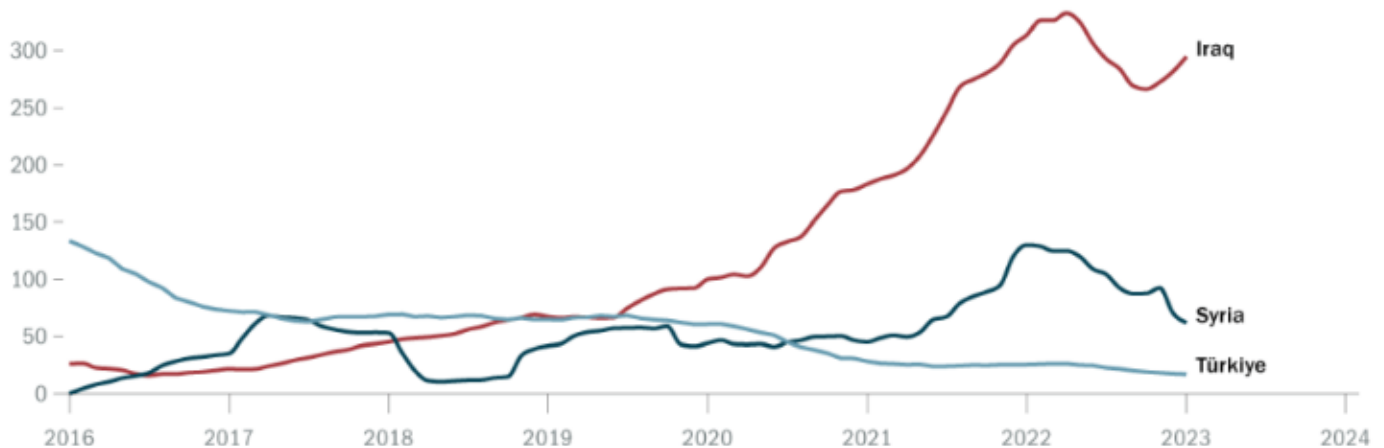
### The Issue

This spring, Turkey seemed to be beating the drums of war. "Hopefully, this summer, we will have permanently resolved the issue regarding our Iraqi borders," President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [said](#) in March, warning that Turkey will never tolerate a "terroristan" on its southern border. Soon, speculation was rampant about an upcoming major offensive.

Since 2015, when talks collapsed and fighting resumed, Turkey has made slow but steady progress in its conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In fact, [most of the fighting](#) now plays out on foreign soil, as Turkey launches cross-border interventions and uses drones to attack PKK strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

In northern Syria, the PKK-linked Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controls significant territory under US—and to some extent Russian—protection. But even though the SDF statelet is a source of new power and influence, Iraq remains more fundamental to the PKK's survival. The mountainous Iraqi border has been the PKK's entry point to Turkey since the 1980s, and its leadership is based at Qandil Mountain, in Iraqi Kurdistan. Northwestern Iraq, near [Sinjar](#) and the triborder area, is the SDF's lifeline to the world and critical for US military access. Should that border be blocked, the SDF would crumble.

Turkey's relations with Iraq are complex and involve both the federal government in Baghdad and the



Violent incidents in the Turkey-PKK conflict, 2016–23 (Events per month, 12-months moving average)

Source: [ACLED/ICG](#)

Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil, which is often at odds with Baghdad. The regional government is a vehicle for two party-militias, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Turkey has good ties with the KDP, but Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan recently [branded](#) the PUK “a national security threat” due to its collaboration with the SDF and the PKK.

To go after the PKK in Iraq, Turkish forces fight [on both sides of the border](#) and have unilaterally established dozens of outposts on Iraqi soil, while a relentless drone campaign kills both PKK leaders and [civilians](#). In the past few years, hundreds of villages have reportedly been [depopulated](#) as Iraqi Kurds flee the Turkish operations. Turkey’s aggressive tactics have [strained](#) its ties with Iraq’s federal government, which includes PUK and KDP representatives. But while PKK-related disputes tend to take center stage, Turkey and Iraq have many other disagreements in need of resolution.

Most notably, the two countries have quarreled for decades over how to share the water of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which Turkey diverts with upstream dams. Climate change has made the problem more urgent, especially for Baghdad, which suffers economic crisis and social protest and cannot also afford the [destabilizing](#) impact of [drought](#).

Then there’s the oil problem. For years, the Kurdistan Regional Government sold oil through a pipeline to Turkey, which brushed aside Baghdad’s objections in the interest of energy security and profit. In 2023, however, Iraq won an international arbitration case and \$1.5 billion in damages, which Turkey refuses to pay. Exports ground to a halt as negotiations began over how to resolve the dispute between Baghdad and Ankara, on the one hand, and Baghdad and Erbil, on the other. The delay has been especially painful

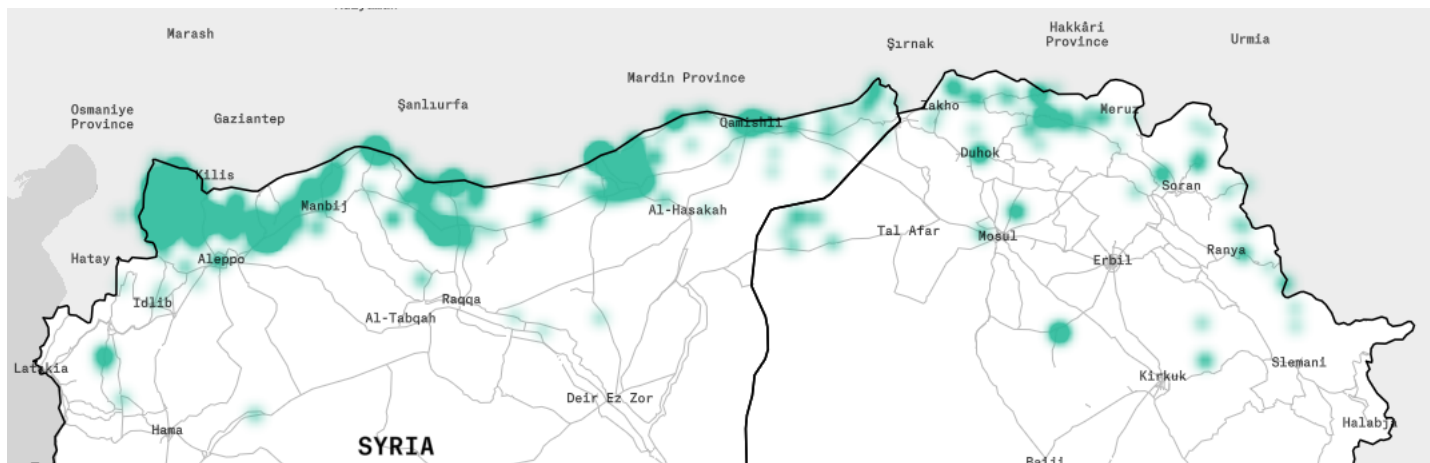
for Iraqi Kurdistan, whose economy depends on the oil rent. In early April 2024, Baghdad announced that it is [repairing](#) another defunct pipeline to bypass Kurdish-controlled infrastructure. As much as they may disagree with each other, pressure on Erbil serves both Ankara and Baghdad

Recently, Turkey also [latched on](#) to Iraq’s Development Road [project](#), an ambitious plan for overland transport between Europe and the Persian Gulf. While economically seductive, the project suffers from regional opposition, conflict risks, and Iraq’s corruption-riddled politics. Turkey has also [linked](#) the Development Road to its own security concerns, noting that goods would need to transit areas now under PKK influence and calling for the group’s removal.

In early March, Turkey began to [hint](#) at plans for a major offensive, albeit without initiating any visible preparations or force buildups. The saber-rattling came at an opportune moment for Erdoğan, serving to highlight his government’s nationalist credentials in the run-up to hotly contested local elections on March 31. As it turns out, it was also a prelude to diplomatic engagement.

On March 14, Fidan led a top-level security delegation to Baghdad. A joint [communiqué](#) noted that Turkey and Iraq will set up institutions to enable security cooperation and that Iraq now considers the PKK an illegal organization.

On April 22, Erdoğan touched down in Baghdad for his first visit since 2013. The trip produced some 26 bilateral [agreements and memoranda](#) on matters [large and small](#), including a ten-year deal on water resources and a [quadrilateral agreement](#) with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar to support the Development Road. Erdoğan then [went on to Erbil](#),



Civilian harm claims resulting from alleged Turkish actions, 2015–24. Source: mapping and data provided by [Airwars](#) to SUITS (May 2024)

meeting KDP leaders. On his return home, he made [hopeful](#) statements about Iraq's new view of the PKK.

## Analysis

Many in the media and in the analyst community seem to take for granted that Turkey will launch a large summer offensive in Iraq. The warlike Turkish rhetoric is not, however, a very reliable indicator. Erdoğan has repeatedly made explicit attack threats in the past, particularly in Syria, only to quietly shelve his plans when opposition proves too strong or other opportunities emerge.

While an operation may still happen, it seems possible that the March-April saber rattling was an exercise in coercive diplomacy, intended to jump-start security talks and soften up Iraqi positions as Erdoğan readied for a visit of state. That interpretation is reinforced by the fact that much remains undecided after the Baghdad talks. The much-touted [water agreement](#) is apparently just a framework deal that aims to improve Iraq's own water management, and the Kurdish pipeline dispute has yet to be resolved.

To what extent Turkish and Iraqi views converge on the PKK is unclear. At the time of Fidan's visit in March, senior Iraqi figures [pointed](#) to a 2023 Iranian invasion scare as a possible model for how to address Turkey's demands: when faced with Iranian threats, Baghdad and Erbil had made a joint effort to [demobilize](#) Iranian-Kurdish rebels, defusing the crisis. But such an approach seems unworkable against the PKK, which is much stronger and more intransigent than the Iranian-Kurdish factions.

Iraqi and Kurdish sources speaking to the Qatari-owned daily [al-Arabi al-Jadeed](#) have claimed that Erdoğan won Iraq's approval for a summer intervention. But the paper also cited a Turkish source who disputed that notion, saying there's only a general agreement on security cooperation, without operational details. The source outlined Turkish hopes for a 40-kilometer "security zone" inside Iraq (similar to Turkish plans in Syria) and said Ankara wants the Iraqi Army to block PKK access to Syria while Kurdish forces should contain the group in Iraqi Kurdistan.

While this may be a realistic portrayal of Turkey's ambitions, it's not clear that Iraqi actors could deliver on the request and even less clear that they want to.

Notably, Turkey's calls for PKK to be not just outlawed but also listed as a "terrorist organization" have gone unheeded since the Baghdad meetings, despite [public reminders](#) from Erdoğan. Such lingering disagreements do not lend credence to the idea that Iraq has secretly offered Turkey a carte blanche for intervention.

In sum, whether or not Erdoğan intends to revive the idea of a summer offensive, Turkey likely has some way left to go before it can count on meaningful support from Iraq or even the KDP.

## Implications

Continued fighting in the borderlands is a safe bet. Drone strikes [have not ceased](#), and Turkey is unlikely to abandon its outposts in Iraq. Given that the mountain terrain makes both insurgency and counterinsurgency a seasonal affair, an uptick in violence over the coming months seems certain.

That does not necessarily mean a major offensive is in the works. It may take place, or similar action [may be taken](#) in Syria. Ankara could also threaten an attack to win additional concessions. Conversely, however, Turkey may eschew unilateral escalation to safeguard its nascent security collaboration with Baghdad, or it may opt to explore Iraqi [proposals](#) for trilateral cooperation with Syria.

Ultimately, the coming months are unlikely to see a Turkish bid for final victory over the PKK in Iraq but likely to feature a combination of incremental military action and continued engagement with Baghdad and Erbil.

## Further Reading

- » Soner Çağaptay, Selin Uysal, and Bilal Wahab (2024). "The Iraq-Turkey Reset". Washington Institute for Near East Affairs. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraq-turkey-reset>
- » Salim Çevik (2022). "Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq". Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. SWP Comment No. 37. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C37>
- » Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour (2021). "The Making of the Kurdish Frontier: Power, Conflict, and Governance in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderlands." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/07/the-making-of-the-kurdish-frontier-power-conflict-and-governance-in-the-iraqi-syrian-borderlands>



## Takeaways

- Turkey has inflicted significant damage on the PKK in recent years and uses drones to pursue the group at depth, pushing the fighting deeper into Syria and Iraq.
- While the creation of a US-backed proxy statelet in civil-war Syria has boosted the PKK's fortunes, northern Iraq is of greater overall importance to the group.
- Turkey may or may not launch a major offensive in Iraq this summer, but the saber-rattling in March and April bore the hallmarks of coercive diplomacy to strengthen Erdoğan's hand as he readied for talks in Baghdad; it may also have served domestic electoral ends. Even absent a major offensive, however, some fighting is likely.
- The agreements concluded with Iraq in March and April do not appear to have delivered major breakthroughs on any topline issue: water, oil, transport infrastructure, or the PKK problem.
- While Iraqi rhetoric on the PKK has shifted, Baghdad has not committed itself to fighting the group. To date, Iraqi-Turkish security cooperation remains undeveloped and untested.

## Rekommendationer – Svenska

- De senaste åren har Turkiet tillfogat PKK stor skada, och man använder nu drönare för att angripa gruppen på djupet. Detta har förflyttat striderna längre in i Syrien och Irak.
- Bildandet av en USA-stödd ministat under PKK-kontroll i inbördeskrigets Syrien har givit PKK vind i seglen, men norra Irak har generellt större betydelse för gruppen.
- Det är möjligt att Turkiet inleder en storoffensiv i Irak under sommaren, men vapenskramlet i mars och april bar drag av makt demonstration, ämnad att stärka Erdoğan's position inför förhandlingarna i Bagdad. Det kan också ha haft inrikespolitiska motiv relaterat till de turkiska lokalvalen. Vissa strider är sannolika även utan en större offensiv.
- De avtal som slöts med Irak i mars och april förefaller inte ha lett till stora genombrott i centrala frågor: vatten, olja, transportinfrastruktur och PKK-problemet.
- Även om den irakiska retoriken kring PKK har förändrats, har Bagdad inte förbundit sig att ta till vapen mot gruppen. Det irakisk-turkiska säkerhetssamarbetet är än så länge både outvecklat och oprövat.

### *About the SUITS policy brief*

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makers and others the tools to make informed decisions.

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