
IRAQ, TURKEY SUMMON EACH OTHER'S AMBASSADORS IN PROTEST

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Turkey and Iraq summoned each other's ambassadors on Wednesday to protest statements by one country's prime minister and the other's parliament, a move reflecting growing tensions between the two neighbors, both fighting the Islamic State group.

Iraq's Foreign Ministry summoned Turkey's ambassador to Baghdad to condemn allegedly "provocative" comments made by Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım on Tuesday about the planned operation to dislodge IS militants from the northern city of Mosul, said the ministry's spokesman, Ahmad Jamal.

Yıldırım told ruling party legislators in parliament that the Iraqi operation could spark Shiite-Sunni sectarian tensions if the majority Sunni region around Mosul were to be placed under Shiite militia control after the offensive.

However, it is still unclear if the Shiite militias, the core of the Iraqi paramilitary forces battling IS, will take an essential part in the Mosul operation.

Relations between Iraq and Turkey have become strained since late last year when Turkey sent unauthorized troops to the region of Bashiqa, northeast of Mosul to train anti-IS fighters there. Baghdad considers this a "blatant violation" of Iraq's sovereignty and has demanded Turkish withdrawal, a call Ankara has ignored.

Yıldırım comments on Tuesday echoed those of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan days earlier during a parliamentary session in which Turkish legislators extended the mandate of Turkish forces in Syria and Iraq for one more year. Erdoğan expressed Ankara's willingness to join the imminent battle for Mosul.

In Iraq, the parliament on Tuesday adopted a resolution denouncing the extension of Turkish troops' presence and asking the government to consider them as "occupation forces." Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi later told reporters the presence of Turkish troops "is one of the challenges" ahead of the Mosul operation, warning that Ankara's insistence could lead to a "regional warfare."

In Ankara, the Iraqi envoy was summoned for a protest over the Iraqi parliament resolution. The Foreign Ministry said Turkey has for years suffered from terror threats arising from instability in Iraq and had strongly supported Iraq's territorial integrity, stability and security.

Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus defended the Turkish presence in Iraq and also Syria, saying it's "not meant as an invasion."

"We have no intention of interfering in those countries' interior affairs," he said.

Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city about 360 kilometers (225 miles) northwest of Baghdad, is the last remaining IS urban stronghold in Iraq. The government is now gearing up for a major offensive to retake Mosul from IS and has pledged to recapture the city this year.

Kaynak/Source: