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## **TURKEY, IRAQ EDGING CLOSER TO CONFRONTATION AHEAD OF BATTLE FOR MOSUL**

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BY PAUL MCLEARY

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Just weeks before Iraqi troops are to begin their push to retake the Islamic State-held city of Mosul, an unexpected wrinkle has appeared: Turkey wants in on the fight, and refuses to pull its troops out of Iraq despite Iraqi threats that Ankaras refusal could lead to war.

Responding to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadis call last week for Turkey to pull its 2,000 troops and two dozen tanks out of their base near Mosul, President Tayyip Recep Erdogan shot back Tuesday that Abadi should know his limits since the Turkish army has not lost so much standing as to take orders from you.

We will approach the operation in Iraq, the operation that will be in Mosul soon, with the same attitude, as aggressive cross-border operations in northern Syria, Erdogan said Tuesday. Turkey cannot intervene against the threats right next to it? We dont need permission for this, and we dont plan on getting it.

Turkey is concerned that once ISIS is pushed out of Mosul, the Shiite-led government in Baghdad will make it difficult for Sunni residents of the city to return, while Kurds will dominate the surrounding areas. (Kurdish forces have grabbed control over the contested city of Kirkuk thanks to the onslaught of the Islamic State.) Ankara is leery of Kurdish fighters, even though it maintains cordial relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, given its decades-long battle with Kurdish terrorist group PKK.

The controversy over Turkish troops in Iraq comes at a tough time domestically for both countries. Abadi is struggling with a restive parliament that wants Turkish forces out of Iraq. Meanwhile, Erdogan and the Turkish military are still smarting after Julys failed coup. Thousands of military officers have been purged or arrested in the wake of the coup attempt, and those left behind are looking for opportunities to prove their loyalty to the increasingly authoritarian Erdogan, who wants to show he commands a functioning, and competent, military.

With about half of Turkish generals in jail or ousted, an ongoing Kurdish insurgency in its south,

and deployments in Iraq and northern Syria, the Turkish military is overstretched, but the government is trying to project power in the region and domestically, said Gonul Tol, director of The Middle East Institutes Center for Turkish Studies. It wants to rebuild the image of the military, and sticking it out in Iraq would be a big part of that.

Another reason the Turks feel the need to stay is to continue training Sunni tribal fighters to take on both ISIS and after that, likely, Iranian-backed Shiite militias. The idea is to find fighters other than Kurdish peshmerga to take the war to terrorists and other militants; too much Kurdish success, especially in northern Syria, has worried Ankara.

Turkey is trying to show the U.S. that they don't need the Kurds, Tol continued. But Turkey is fighting on several fronts, so it is hard for them to remain there for long.

The battle between Baghdad and Ankara erupted late last month after the Turkish parliament voted to extend its Iraqi deployment by another year. Iraq's parliament responded by requesting a U.N. Security Council session to condemn the Turkish move, calling it a blatant violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Abadi followed that up by insisting that the Turkish presence in Iraq — which he originally negotiated in December 2014, months after Mosul fell to ISIS in the first place — had no justification.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim immediately shot back at Abadi, vowing to stay no matter what Baghdad says.

Turkey wants to make sure that as the Islamic State is rolled back, Kurdish forces don't fill up the vacuum. It launched an operation in August to push Kurdish fighters to the east bank of the Euphrates in northern Syria.

If you try to change the demographic structure in Mosul, you will ignite the fire for a major sectarian war, Yildirim told members of his ruling AK Party recently.

Both Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu have demanded that Turkish troops be involved in fighting for both Mosul and the Islamic States de facto capital of Raqqa, in Syria. Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army fighters poured over the border into Syria in August to push both ISIS and the Kurds off the border, and continue to slowly push south toward Raqqa.

Capt. Jeff Davis told reporters at the Pentagon Tuesday that he would leave the back and forth to

the Iraqis and the Turks, but encouraged all parties to focus on the common enemy at hand, which is ISIL.

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Kaynak/Source: