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TURKEY WARNS OF GLOBAL CONFLICT IF IRAQ OR SYRIA BREAK UP

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Turkey escalated its opposition to a Kurdish independence referendum in northern Iraq on Tuesday, training tank guns and rocket launchers across the southern border and saying the break-up of its neighbors could lead to global conflict.

Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli said in Ankara next Monday's vote posed a major risk and Turkey would take "every step" needed to thwart any similar steps in its mainly Kurdish southeast.

Iraqi Kurdish authorities have defied growing international pressure to call off the vote, which Iraq's neighbors fear will fuel unrest among their own Kurdish populations. Western allies say it could detract from the fight against Islamic State.

"A change that will mean the violation of Iraq's territorial integrity poses a major risk for Turkey," Canikli said. "The disruption of Syria and Iraq's territorial integrity will ignite a bigger, global conflict with an unseen end."

Kurds in north Syria, like those in Iraq, have capitalized on the turmoil in both countries to consolidate a degree of autonomy. Washington has supported Syrian Kurdish fighters battling Islamic State, despite Turkish protests.

Turkish troops dug in on the southern border on Tuesday and turned their weapons toward Kurdish-run northern Iraq.

Tanks and rocket launchers mounted on armored vehicles faced the Iraqi frontier, about 2 km (one mile) away. Mechanical diggers tore up agricultural fields for the army to set up positions in the flat, dry farmlands.

The military drill, launched without warning on Monday, is due to last until Sept. 26, Turkish military sources said, a day after the planned referendum.

A Reuters reporter saw armored vehicles carrying heavy weaponry and soldiers taking positions in specially dug areas, their weapons directed across the border. A generator and satellite dish could be seen at one location.

The show of force reflects the scale of concern in Turkey, which has the largest Kurdish population in the region, that the vote could embolden the outlawed Kurdish PKK which has waged a three-decade insurgency in Turkey's southeast since 1984.

The Turkish air force has frequently struck against PKK units operating from the mountains of

northern Iraq and limited detachments of Turkish infantry have made forays across the frontier in the past.

Turkey also sees itself as protector of Iraq's ethnic Turkmen minority, with particular concern about Kirkuk where Kurds have extended their control since seizing the oil city when Islamic State overwhelmed Iraqi forces in 2014.

Police deployed overnight in Kirkuk to prevent any outbreak of ethnic violence, residents said.

Kaynak/Source: