

Turkey and Northern Iraq: Tightening Relations in a Volatile Environment

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For decades, the Kurdish question has stood at the core of Turkey's policies towards its neighbors in the Middle East. Bilateral relations with Iraq, for example, have long been occupied with issues related to terrorism and border violations by Turkey for the purposes of retaliation and hot pursuit of Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) militants seeking refuge in northern Iraq. In addition, the strengthening of the Kurds in Iraq was generally seen as embodying possible dangerous repercussions for Turkey's territorial integrity. However, the growing cooperation in recent years between the Turkish government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has been one of the notable transformations in Middle Eastern politics.

This article attempts to sketch the motives behind this growing cooperation, outline its limits, and assess the regional implications of this relationship. It will address four main areas driving Turkish policies toward northern Iraq: domestic politics, economic rationales, the regional security impetus, and global considerations. While the article will trace some of the longer term processes behind the transformation in Turkish-KRG relations, it will highlight the period following the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq, a period that has yet to be thoroughly examined by scholars.

Background

Turkey's primary objective in the 1991 Gulf War was to stop the large refugee flow from northern Iraq from entering Turkey, prevent the

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establishment of any independent Kurdish entity, and secure the mountainous areas along the border to clear them of a terrorist presence. Once policies failed to achieve all these aims and violent terrorist acts continued, Turkish President Turgut Ozal hoped to drag the PKK into negotiations through the influence of the Kurdish Regional Government, established just then. He decided to provide Turkish diplomatic passports to Kurdish leaders Mesud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, who successfully extracted a short lived ceasefire deal from PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1993.¹ This strategy by Ozal to use the KRG was to be the initial step of a commonly applied strategy to search for a solution to Turkey's internal Kurdish question through external affairs, mainly via Iraq.

Following the enigmatic death of President Ozal, Turkey returned to the tough military approach towards the Kurdish question. During the period of Prime Minister Tansu Ciller in particular, and by way of the Special Units Operations, the denial of ethnic identity and the level of conflict deepened, resulting in thousands of unsolved murders and assassinations. Following the heavy pressure leveled on Syria to stop letting the PKK operate from its borders against Turkey and with the help of American and Israeli intelligence, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured in Kenya in 1998, which prompted the PKK announcement of a ceasefire. This ceasefire lasted until the 2003 Iraq War.²

On June 1, 2004, fears of renewal of the violent phase in Turkish-Kurdish relations were proven correct and the PKK announced the end of the six year ceasefire.³ The post-2007 period, however, and the consolidation of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule in Turkey gave greater opportunity for the AKP to act boldly and declare a "Kurdish opening" that included granting more individual and collective rights to Kurds, secret negotiations with the PKK, and increased dialogue with the KRG by way of a new consulate in Erbil, the KRG capital. In the framework of the "zero problems with neighbors"⁴ and the "Kurdish opening" policies, Turkey inherited the Ozal legacy of attempting to forge political and economic cooperation with the KRG, but began to pursue this in a much tighter way (in terms of political cooperation) and on a grander scale (in terms of the economic relations) than in the past.

Domestic Political Concerns

The bold "Kurdish opening" policy adopted by the AKP after the 2007 elections did not last long. It was practically ruined with the Habur

incident of 2009: what was supposed to be a symbolic surrender of a few PKK activists and a way of preparing the general Turkish public to some concessions to the PKK turned into a PKK political show of strength. Another notable setback was the Silvan attack of July 2011, in which 13 Turkish soldiers were killed in an ambush in Diyarbakir. During the 2011 elections campaign, the AKP promised the creation of a more democratic and inclusive constitution that would meet the demands of Kurds. However, despite the AKP's decisive victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections with almost 50 percent of the vote, the prospects for a new and reformed constitution met with full disappointment. The AKP began diverting public attention from the new constitution to multi-billion dollar "fantastic projects" such as the Istanbul canal,⁵ Fatih project,⁶ and the third bridge on the Bosphorus. One of the reasons behind this policy of diversion of public attention was to gain time for resolution of the uncertainties generated by the "Arab Spring." The same uncertainties gave the PKK the incentive to avoid peace talks with the Turkish government and to wait for a post-Assad Syria with greater opportunities. Therefore, both the AKP and the PKK adopted a "wait and see" approach. Meanwhile, the AKP increased its cooperation with the KRG by hosting KRG President Mesud Barazani and KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani in Ankara in May 2012, a visit in which a contract to transfer some of the KRG's oil to Turkey's refineries was signed (without the consent of Iraq's central government) and common concerns over terrorism were expressed.⁷

While there is a growing understanding in Turkey that the PKK problem cannot be solved only by military means, these measures are nonetheless still heavily in use. In this respect, cooperation by the KRG with Turkey in intelligence sharing and employing some measures against the PKK (although not directly fighting them) is seen as useful and important. Even the fact that the Kurdish leaders have been willing to speak publicly against the PKK has been seen in Turkey as influential. For example, already in 2009 Iraqi President Jalal Talabani said that there were only two options for the PKK; either lay down their arms or leave Iraq. The KRG leaders followed with similar statements. One of the PKK leading figures said in response: "Talabani is trying to please Turkish generals and we do not believe anymore that Talabani can play a role in the solution of the Kurdish problem. Nobody can drive us from the Kandil Mountains."⁸ Thus, as the talks with the PKK are not yet progressing

and the KRG, at least in public and official statements, is promising cooperation with Turkey, the Turkish side is motivated to continue its warm relations with the KRG.

Economic Considerations

In the economic sphere, as well as in regional calculations, the developments of the “Arab Spring” altered Turkey’s plans. Turkey had aimed to increase regional cooperation and interdependence through its “zero problems with neighbors” policy, and thereby boost its economic development. At a conference in Beirut in November 2010, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed the necessity of a regional integration policy, a kind of “European Schengen area” in the Middle East.⁹ Turkey took the first step toward a regional integration policy by cancelling reciprocal visa requirements for Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya. A few months later, in January 2011, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reiterated the intention for a regional integration body right before the outbreak of the “Arab Spring,” which caught Turkey, like other countries, by surprise.¹⁰ For Turkey, the “Arab Spring” marked a new era

in which Turkey suffered substantial economic losses in countries such as Libya and Syria, where Turkish companies had previously been engaged in major commercial activity. Along with growing relations with the Gulf states, the development of much closer cooperation with the KRG (although it can be viewed as a strategic paradigm shift in Turkey’s regional policies) also made sense from a solely economic perspective.

Before the “Arab Spring,” in addition to its activities in other parts of Iraq, Turkey was active in the energy sector in southern Iraq, through the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPOA), and in the construction sector through private companies, even in very sensitive Shiite areas such as Sadr City.¹¹ However, with the “Arab

Spring” progressing, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in his speech in April 2012, criticized Turkey’s policies vis-à-vis the Shiites and referred to it as “a hostile state.”¹² Consequently, the most plausible region in Iraq for Turkey to direct its economic activity seems to be oil-rich Iraqi

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Iraq's economic importance for Turkey must be examined in order to fully understand Turkey's policy objectives. According to 2011 statistical data, Iraq is the second largest export destination for Turkish goods, and it is estimated that at least 50 percent of this trade is with northern Iraq. In the first half of 2012, compared to the same period of 2011, data indicates the increase of Turkey's export to Iraq by 37 percent and imports from Iraq by 13 percent. In the same period with respect to that of 2011, the rise of Iraq's share in Turkey's total exports is 20 percent, and in Turkey's total import is 58 percent.¹³ Considering the regional instability and economic crisis, this extraordinary upward trend can be linked to the economic cooperation with the KRG. In late April 2012 in his visit to Turkey, KRG Minister of Trade and Industry Sinan Celebi pointed out that 25 new Turkish companies are launched every month in Iraqi Kurdistan. He stressed Turkish companies' stronghold in the construction and banking sectors in the region.¹⁴ In their visits to Turkey in May 2012, Mesud and Nechirvan Barzani signaled growing cooperation in issues related to the economy and terrorism. On May 20, 2012, at an energy conference in Erbil, energy agreements were signed – without consent of the central Iraqi government – between Turkey's Minister of Energy, Taner Yildiz, and KRG Minister of Natural Resources Ashti Hawrami, whereby Iraqi Kurdistan's oil and gas will be directly transferred to Turkey, and later, some of the refined oil will be imported by the KRG. Explaining the details of the project, Hawrami announced that with the addition of the newly planned pipelines, it aims to transfer one million barrels of oil, four times the current production, to Turkey's refineries and ports.¹⁵ Still, there are doubts about how feasible such a project would be since the PKK clearly demonstrated its resentment through attacks on the existing Kirkuk-Yumurtalik pipelines in late August 2012.¹⁶ The potential, however, is great, as the KRG needs Turkey as a route for export, and Turkey has both growing energy needs of its own and is interested to serve as an energy hub.¹⁷

Regional Considerations

AKP's rapprochement with the KRG and Barzani cannot be explained only as an "Ozalian" strategy to generate solutions for the Kurdish question through outside actors; it is much more than that. In two principal ways the KRG is seen as an ally of Turkey against several regional threats. First, the KRG is an ally that can possibly assist in shifting the internal balance of power in Iraq in favor of Turkey, which without the Kurds builds on some rather weak Turkmen and Sunni actors. This is especially important in light of Iran's growing influence in Iraq. As Sean Kane claims, Iraq "remains a regional playground rather than a regional player."¹⁸ While Iran envisions the future of Iraq as a weak state ruled by the Shiite majority, Turkey would like to see a stronger unified state (partly as a counter-balance to Iran) with power sharing agreements among the major groups (Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds) that also guarantee the rights of the Turkmen minority. In addition, whereas Turkey is interested in the development of Iraq's hydrocarbons exports (both as a consumer and as a transit route), Iran is wary of Iraq as a growing hydrocarbons export competitor.¹⁹ Not satisfied with their influence in their respective spheres (Iran in southern Iraq and Turkey in northern Iraq), both states try to exert their influence in other parts of Iraq.²⁰ One example of Iran's successful influence of Iraqi policies is the sympathy shown by al-Maliki to the Assad regime and his avowed belief in the regime's ability to make reforms. There is also concern among Iraq's neighbors that if the Assad regime falls in Syria, Iran will intensify its relations with Iraq further to compensate for the loss of its Syrian ally.²¹

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Moreover, the KRG is an ally that can assist in shifting the regional balance of power in favor of a Sunni alliance, which both Turkey and the KRG unwittingly find themselves embracing as a result of the "Arab Spring." This has already been an incentive for an improvement in relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Ironically, however, what was considered as one of Turkey's points of

strength with regard to Iraq in recent years was its ability to transcend some of the sectarian divides.²²

In addition, the KRG is seen as a possible ally that can help in containing the Democratic Union Party (PYD), PKK's extension in Syria, in a post-Assad era. In such a scenario, which in essence has already

begun, a Kurdish autonomy will be established in northern Syria. This will present Turkey with threats related to the Kurdish issue on at least three fronts – domestic, northern Iraq, and northern Syria. Coupled with the reemergence of the PKK threat from the Iranian border, this threat explains why Turkey will do its utmost to maintain its relations with the KRG. President Barzani has proven in the past his willingness and capabilities in mediating among the different Kurdish parties, and the Turks hope he will be able to convince the Syrian Kurds to join the Syrian National Council (SNC).

Global Perspective

Turkey's relations with the KRG are linked to US-Turkish relations. While Turkey objected to the 2003 Iraq War, at least until the beginning of the "Arab Spring" it was seen as one of the states that benefited most from the conflict, mainly because of the significant growth in trade relations with Iraq.²³ Turkey's resistance of the KRG's strengthening was a source of tension with the US, since the KRG had proven to be the most loyal ally of the US in the war. However, once Turkey changed in policy toward the KRG, the joint interests between Turkey, the US, and the KRG became more apparent.²⁴ When the US withdrew its forces from Iraq in 2011, it was clear that a certain power vacuum would emerge. As the US shares the Turkish concerns regarding the growing influence of Iran in Iraq, there is much incentive for the Americans to assist the KRG and the Turks in what is needed in order to counter-balance Iran. The US is thus eager for its two allies Turkey and the KRG to maintain cooperative relations. In this respect, one can expect that it will do its best to reduce the tensions between the two, should they resume.²⁵ In August 2012, US ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone said that the US administration was not happy with the performance of the KRG in containing the activities of the PKK, a statement that reflected some of the Turkish worries.²⁶ While both the US and Turkey want Iraq's unity to remain intact, they are aware that the growing rift between Baghdad and Erbil may not be bridged, and place the blame mainly on al-Maliki.

If Turkey succeeds in preventing the fall of Iraq to an Iranian sphere of influence, this will prove again its crucial role as a US ally and a NATO member, one that in some cases is second only to the US in terms of its importance to the alliance. What was seen as Turkey's constructive role in Iraq was also acknowledged by the European Union in some of the EU

progress reports related to Turkey's candidacy for the EU. In this respect, successful Turkish policies with regard to Iraq are seen as an asset to Turkey in its relations with the EU.²⁷

Conclusion

There are thus many significant motives driving the rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG. Still, there are several underlying tensions that threaten to hinder further development of this relationship. First, Turkey has not yet accepted the prospect of a fully independent Kurdistan, which for the Kurds in northern Iraq is more a question of "when" rather than "if."²⁸ Second, Turkish historic claims for control over Mosul and Kirkuk will become more vocal in case of Iraq's disintegration, and as the KRG de facto controls these areas, this will continue to be a source of tension.²⁹ Third, the recent rise in the PKK terror attacks in Turkey, as well as the prospect of the resurgence of the PKK threat from Syrian and Iranian territories, may result in increased repression in Turkey towards the Kurds, a development the Kurds in Iraq are likely to resent. Finally, Turkey may at some point resist the attempts of Iran and Saudi Arabia (as well as al-Maliki) to push it towards taking a decisive side in

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the sectarian divides in Iraq and the Middle East in general. Turkey, then, might push the Kurds to make further concessions in order to maintain Iraq's unity, attempts that they will resist or resent.

Israel has for many years seen the Kurds as a possible ally in the Middle East, as part of its peripheral policy.³⁰ In the past, the Turks have condemned Israel's relations with the Kurds and have raised several accusations with regard to its contribution to some of PKK successes. In this respect, Israel has an interest that the current

trend of improved relations between Turkey and the KRG continue. And even if it will not serve as a point of convergence of interest between Israel and Turkey, there is much importance to Israel that Turkey serves as a counterweight to Iranian influence in Iraq.

Notes

- 1 Gareth Jenkins, "Turkey and Northern Iraq: An Overview," Jamestown Foundation, February 2008, p. 13.

- 2 Ronald D. Crelinsten, "Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in a Multi-Centric World: Challenges and Opportunities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11, no. 4 (1999): 170-96; see p. 172.
- 3 Ihsan Bal, "PKK Teror Orgutu Kronolojisi," <http://www.usak.org.tr/dosyalar/dergi/z6UFq2LoFkdiuzBbZSt9qHMi7u4Ke2.pdf>.
- 4 The "zero problems with neighbors" policy initiated by then-Turkish Senior Foreign Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister and later Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was intended to improve relations with Turkey's immediate neighbors and to solve ongoing problems with them.
- 5 The Istanbul canal is planned to be an artificial sea level waterway that will connect the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara and enable bypass of the Bosphorus strait.
- 6 The Fatih project aims to improve the educational system by broadly increasing the use of information and communication technologies in the educational process.
- 7 "Neçirvan Barzani'den Türkiye çıkarması," *Sabah*, May 17, 2012.
- 8 Both statements are taken from Mesut Ozcan, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards Iraq in 2009," *Perceptions* 15, no. 3-4 (2010): 116.
- 9 "Ortadoğu'ya Schengen'i önerdi," *Haberturk*, November 26, 2010.
- 10 Sean Kane, "The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq," Unified States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 276, June 2011, p. 12.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 "Iraqi PM Maliki says Turkey is becoming 'Hostile State,'" April 20, 2012.
- 13 Turkish Statistics Institute (TUIK).
- 14 "K.Irak'ta Türk firmalarıyla kimse yarıyamaz," *haber7.com*, June 26, 2012, <http://www.haber7.com/ekonomi/haber/873743-kirakta-turk-firmalariyla-kimse-yarisamaz>.
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- 16 "Kerkük-Yumurtalık Petrol Boru Hattında Yangın," *Hürriyet*, August 27, 2012.
- 17 Bill Park, *Modern Turkey: People, State and Foreign Policy in a Globalized World* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 99.
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- 19 Kane, "The Coming of Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq," pp. 3, 5.
- 20 In this respect, see Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey's New Engagement with Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan," United States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 237 (2010), p. 6. See also Shwan Zulal, "Survival Strategies and Diplomatic Tools: the Kurdistan Region's Foreign Policy Outlook," *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012): 150.
- 21 Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Mission Unaccomplished," *Jerusalem Post*, January 22, 2012.
- 22 Kane, "The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq," p. 10.
- 23 See for example Owen Matthews, "Triumph of the Turks," *Newsweek*, November 27, 2009.

- 24 Henri J. Barkey, "A Transformed Relationship: Turkey and Iraq," in Henri J. Barkey, Scott B. Lasensky, and Phebe Marr, eds., *Iraq, its Neighbors and the United States: Competition, Crisis and the Reordering of Power* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute for Peace, 2011), p. 69.
- 25 Bill Park, "Turkey, the US and the KRG: Moving Parts and the Geopolitical Realities," *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012): 112.
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- 28 Ofra Bengio, "Will Barzani Declare Independence?" *Jerusalem Post*, April 22, 2012.
- 29 Park, *Modern Turkey*, pp. 87-88.
- 30 For more on the Israel's peripheral strategy, see Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel's Foreign Policy?" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no.2 (2012): 27-40.