

MERIA

TURKEY'S CHANGING RELATIONS WITH THE IRAQI KURDISH REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

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Since the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion in the early 1960s, Turkish policymakers have perceived Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq as a major threat to the country's national security, fearing that the Iraqi Kurdish experience would encourage Turkey's Kurds to take similar steps towards autonomy and even independence. However, from the mid-2000s onwards, Turkey's relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government has improved tremendously. This dramatic change has been driven, first, by the growing Turkish economy's search for new markets and new energy sources; second, by the government's flexible approach toward the Kurdish question; and third, by the rise of the Democratic Union Party in Syrian Kurdish politics.

Turkish policymakers have always been uneasy about the Kurdish nationalist movement in northern Iraq, fearing that it might encourage Turkey's Kurdish citizens to take similar steps and lead them towards establishing an autonomous structure within Turkey or even an independent Kurdish state. Especially in the aftermath of the 1958 coup, which overthrew the Iraqi monarchy, Turkey began to feel concerned that the political uncertainty in Iraq would provide a favorable environment for the Iraqi Kurdish nationalist movement to flourish. During this period, Mustafa Barzani called for the Kurds of Iran and Turkey to join forces in a common struggle.¹ As a result of the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion in the early 1960s, Turkish policymakers pursued a cautious policy, and they supported the Iraqi regime's efforts to suppress the Kurdish rebellions in Iraq in the decades that followed.

Turkey's uneasiness about the developments in northern Iraq increased with the beginning of the armed struggle of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK) against Turkey in the early 1980s. Since then, Turkish policymakers have perceived northern Iraq as an area where the PKK found easy refuge and Iraqi Kurds as actors providing help and support for the PKK. Thus, throughout the 1980s, they

pursued a policy of cooperation with the Iraqi regime against both countries' Kurdish nationalist movements. The hot pursuit agreement signed between Turkey and Iraq in 1984, which allowed Turkish and Iraqi armed forces to cross the border into each other's territory in order to follow criminals, was a good example of this situation. Furthermore, since the early 1980s, cross-border operations into northern Iraq have been a significant aspect of Turkey's counterinsurgency policy against the PKK. Although Turkey made an effort to seek the alliance of the Iraqi Kurdish leaders in its fight against the PKK in the early 1990s, both the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish actors could not completely get over their distrust towards each other. On one hand, during this period, Turkish policymakers worked with Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani as allies in the struggle with the PKK, granted diplomatic passports to these Iraqi Kurdish leaders, and allowed them to open representative offices in Ankara. On the other hand, Turkish policymakers' concerns about the possibility of an independent Kurdish state persisted as the Iraqi Kurds gradually established a regional government in northern Iraq.²

Although Turkey's concerns about northern Iraq decreased to some extent in the aftermath of PKK founder and leader Abdullah Ocalan's

capture and imprisonment in 1999, this period did not last long, and the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003 provided new opportunities both for the Iraqi Kurds and the PKK. Eventually, in 2004, the PKK ended its unilateral ceasefire (which the PKK had declared after Ocalan's capture), encouraged both by new political developments in Iraq as well as by Turkey's failure to find a lasting solution to its Kurdish issue. At this point, the PKK relaunched its attacks against Turkey, and the PKK presence in northern Iraq once again began to occupy a significant place on Turkey's security agenda.

Despite this troubled background in Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds, there has been a sweeping change in Turkey's northern Iraq policy from the mid-2000s onwards. In a period of a few years, the Iraqi Kurds turned into Turkey's economic partners; Massoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), began to play an important role in Turkey's efforts to resolve its Kurdish question through political means; and Turkey allied with the KRG against the rise of Syrian Kurds in the ongoing Syrian civil war. This is a very interesting turn of events, given Turkey's perception of northern Iraq and the Iraqi Kurds as an existential threat to its national security for several decades. This article analyzes the major causes of this change in Turkish foreign policy and discusses the prospects for the future of Turkey-KRG relations.

TOWARDS A NEW ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

One major factor that paved the way for the improvement of relations between Turkey and the KRG was increasing demand from the Turkish economy. The emergence after the U.S. war in Iraq of the KRG as a relatively stable region, compared to the rest of the country, and as a region with ample economic opportunities, allowed Turkey to develop a new attitude toward Iraqi Kurds from the mid-2000s onwards. The KRG began to seem like an ideal venue for the growing Turkish economy to invest in, as well as an alternative

source for the country's increasing demand for energy.

In fact, Turkey has had economic relations with the Iraqi Kurds since the early 1990s, when a no-fly zone was established north of the 36th parallel at the end of the 1991 Gulf War, when Turkey helped an autonomous Kurdish region to emerge in northern Iraq. However, the increasing economic and political stability in northern Iraq in the mid-2000s, as well as the improving living standards, provided a newly favorable environment for Turkish companies to enter into the economic life of the region.³ With constantly growing economic ties, by 2013, the KRG had become Turkey's third largest export market, with \$5.1 billion exports in that year. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of Turkish companies operating in the KRG rose from 485 to 1,500 approximately. Turkish brands were seen everywhere in the KRG, ranging from shopping centers and construction projects to a wide range of consumer goods.⁴

An important dimension of trade relations between Turkey and the KRG involved the latter's vast oil and natural gas resources. Since the mid-2000s, the demands of Turkey's expanding economy have forced Turkish policymakers to search for new energy markets. This is a key issue since Turkey has been significantly dependent on Russia and Iran for its oil and natural gas imports. In order to guarantee its energy security and achieve its goal of becoming an energy hub in the region, Turkish policymakers believe that it is essential for Turkey to diversify its energy suppliers. This need became even more urgent when Turkey's relations with Russia worsened after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015 in response to Russia's violation of Turkish airspace over the Turkish-Syrian border.

In the 2000s, the KRG emerged as an alternative source of oil and natural gas for the Turkish energy demand, which increases by six to eight percent annually.⁵ In November 2013, an energy deal was reached between the JDP (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi or Justice and Development Party) government and the

KRG, and oil began to be shipped from Turkey's Ceyhan Port in May 2014, with Turkey playing a key role in transferring KRG oil to international markets. By July 2015, oil exports from Iraq to Ceyhan reached 16 million barrels.⁶ Furthermore, in November 2015, the KRG Minister of Natural Resources Ashti Hawrami announced the KRG's plan to export approximately 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas to Turkey in the next two years.⁷ Turkish officials stated that "national gas company, BOTAS [Petroleum Pipeline Corporation], would open a tender for the construction of a 185km pipeline from Silopi, on the Iraqi-Turkish border, to connect with the Turkish grid at Mardin."⁸ There were also discussions about the possibility of the connection of the KRG natural gas exports to the Trans-Anatolian pipeline (TANAP) in the future.

The KRG's oil and gas exports to Turkey have been an issue of contention between the KRG and the Iraqi federal government, which has been uneasy about the KRG's independent oil exports via Turkey. In fact, Baghdad and Erbil reached an agreement in December 2014 which stipulated that the KRG would supply 550,000 barrels of oil per day for the Iraqi federal government to export through Iraq's State Organization for Marketing Oil; in return, the Iraqi federal government would give the KRG 17 percent of Iraq's national budget in monthly stipends.⁹ However, from June 2015 onwards, the KRG itself unilaterally began to export most of the oil and continued with direct sales from Ceyhan with the excuse that Baghdad did not pay the KRG what it deserved out of the national budget. Although the fall in oil prices in 2014 put the KRG in a difficult situation in terms of its oil revenues, oil flow through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline nonetheless continued without major interruptions, with the KRG exporting around 600,000 barrels of crude oil per day through the pipeline.¹⁰

A NEW APPROACH TO THE KURDISH QUESTION

The Justice and Development Party's (JDP) tenure in Turkey marked important developments with respect to the country's age-old Kurdish question. In the early 2000s, the JDP came to office with an agenda of advancing Turkey's European Union (EU) accession process. This was a time period shortly after the EU officially declared Turkey as a candidate member during its Helsinki summit in 1999 and when there was increasing support for EU membership among the Turkish public. Within this context, the JDP government passed a number of EU harmonization reforms through the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT), which decreased the Turkish military's role in national security policies and granted a number of cultural rights to the Kurds. However, the key event that showed the JDP's distinctive approach to the Kurdish question was the then-Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's famous August 2005 speech in Diyarbakir, a predominantly Kurdish city in southeastern Turkey and a Kurdish spiritual center. In his speech, Erdogan stated that while he was opposed to regional or ethnic separatist movements, he approved cultural pluralism. He argued that the state had made mistakes with respect to Turkey's Kurdish question in the past and stated his hope that local cultures would be freely expressed under the umbrella of the Republic of Turkey.¹¹ Erdogan even declared in Diyarbakir that "the Kurdish problem is my problem."¹²

Erdogan's Diyarbakir speech laid the groundwork for the JDP government's subsequent efforts to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means. Launching its Kurdish Opening policy in 2009, the JDP government expressed its intention to address the grievances of Turkey's Kurdish citizens, which would ultimately lead to the end of PKK violence in Turkey and even the disarmament of the PKK. However, the Kurdish Opening policy did not involve a clear plan about what kind of steps the JDP government would take in order to bring about a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question, and this led to growing discomfort among the opposition parties and nationalist circles in

Turkey. As a result, Erdogan began to fear that increasing criticisms about the JDP's Kurdish Opening policy would hurt the party's nationalist support base and even Erdogan's own future presidential prospects.¹³

The final straw that led to the collapse of the Kurdish Opening policy occurred with the Habur incident of October 18, 2009, when 34 PKK members and their families from northern Iraq entered Turkey through the Habur border gate. The PKK members remained in their guerrilla clothes and were welcomed by huge Kurdish crowds. In fact, the entry of this group into the Turkish territory was initially seen by the public, as well as by the Turkish state and by PKK representatives, as the starting point of a process in which the rest of the PKK members would gradually return to Turkey and give up arms.¹⁴ However, the scene at the Habur border gate created extreme uneasiness in the Turkish society and caused strong criticism within Turkish nationalist circles, making it impossible for the government to continue with its Kurdish Opening policy.

Based on the lessons of the failed Kurdish Opening and in the face of escalating civil war in Syria, the JDP government initiated a new process to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means. In late 2012, talks began between the PKK leader Ocalan and the representatives of the National Intelligence Organization as well as between Ocalan and the members of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (PDP). Ocalan declared a unilateral ceasefire in March 2013 and the PKK militants began to withdraw from Turkey to their bases on the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq.

The JDP government's attempts since the mid-2000s to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means have had important implications for Turkey's relations with the KRG. First, it was only possible for Turkey to make a fresh start in its relations with the KRG thanks to this changing atmosphere about the Kurdish question, along with the JDP government's willingness to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means. Second, The JDP government involved the

KRG leader Massoud Barzani as an important actor in the latest "settlement process," which was initiated in late 2012. As a popular Kurdish leader and an alternative figure in Kurdish politics, Barzani was considered an influential figure who could help mobilize support for Turkey's settlement process.

One major milestone in the settlement process was Barzani's visit to Diyarbakir on November 16, 2013, known as the "Diyarbakir Encounter." This visit brought together Erdogan and KRG President Barzani, accompanied by famous musicians Shivan Perwer and Ibrahim Tatlis from the region. Perwer and Tatlis performed a duet of a Kurdish song which made references to peace. During the Diyarbakir encounter, Barzani expressed his support for peace and appealed to the people to support the settlement process initiated by Erdogan, saying:

I thank Prime Minister Erdoğan: he has taken very bold steps and has chosen the path of peace. What I wish is for my Kurdish brothers and sisters, my Turkish brothers and sisters, to lend their support to this peace plan. The war for peace is a tough war. Believe me, without individual bravery, the war for peace cannot be won. However long the road to peace may be, it is better than even an hour of fighting.¹⁵

Thus, it is clear that the improvement in Turkey's relations with the KRG from the mid-2000s onwards was partly due to the JDP government's efforts to resolve Turkey's Kurdish question through peaceful means. Erdogan saw Barzani's involvement and support as an important ingredient of the settlement process which would help increase its Kurdish support.

However, Barzani's involvement in the settlement process was not welcomed by all Kurdish voices in Turkey. Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK have been historical rivals in the Kurdish nationalist movement, and in the aftermath of Ocalan's capture and imprisonment in 1999, a major PKK strategy was to establish affiliated parties in the Kurdish-populated regions of Iran, Iraq, and Syria in addition to its presence in

Turkey.¹⁶ Thus, in the minds of the members of the PDP, which is regarded as the PKK's political wing, Barzani's visit to Diyarbakir seemed part of a Turkish policy of "divide and rule."¹⁷ They were concerned that Erdogan was trying to take advantage of intra-Kurdish political conflicts and to resolve the Kurdish question by undermining the PKK. Ocalan was also annoyed by Barzani's visit since he perceived himself as the key Kurdish leader in the settlement process and he was not happy about Erdogan's endorsement of an alternative Kurdish actor in the region.¹⁸ Yet, regardless of these intra-Kurdish problems, the JDP government's efforts to improve Turkey's relations with the KRG came about, in part, as a result of its policy to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means.

A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Another major reason that Turkey had allied more closely KRG was the two regions' redefined common interests in the face of the Syrian civil war. More specifically, common concerns about the rise of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria united Turkey and the KRG in an effort to prevent PYD domination of the Syrian Kurdish politics and the expansion of the *de facto* autonomous region controlled by this group.

There is no doubt that the Syrian civil war provided tremendous opportunities for Syrian Kurds. In late 2012, when the Assad regime's forces withdrew from the north of Syria, the PYD occupied three main provinces, namely Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin, and began to develop a local autonomous rule in these areas. Turkish policymakers perceived the PYD's advance in northern Syria as a threat to Turkey's national security mainly because, along with the KRG, which emerged gradually in northern Iraq beginning in the early 1990s, this would be the second Kurdish autonomous establishment in Turkey's immediate neighborhood. Furthermore, the PYD is closely linked to the PKK, with PKK leader Ocalan as its ideological leader; it is explicitly

a member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization which includes the PKK.

The PYD's emergence as the leading Kurdish actor in Syria also went against the KRG's interests in the region because of the historical rivalry between KRG President Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Ocalan's PKK. Both Barzani and Ocalan had claims to a leadership role among Kurdish nationalists, which led to outright conflict within the context of the developments in Syria. As the KRG made an effort to increase its influence among Syrian Kurds, the PYD followed a line closer to the PKK both ideologically and in terms of its political objectives in Syria.

In response to the rise of the PYD in Syrian Kurdish politics, Barzani at first promoted the unification of various Syrian Kurdish groups other than the PYD in 2011 under the name of the Kurdish National Congress (KNC). He also played an important role in the signing of the Erbil Agreement in 2012, which established the Supreme Kurdish Council and created a power-sharing arrangement between the KNC and the PYD. However, this power-sharing agreement was never implemented.¹⁹ Instead, tensions increased, with the PYD deciding not to allow peshmerga fighters into Syria and the KRG closing the Iraqi-Syrian border to prevent the passage of humanitarian aid into areas controlled by the PYD. The relationship between the KRG and PYD deteriorated further when Barzani's KDP rejected PYD members' entry into the Erbil governorate in northern Iraq and the PYD barred pro-Barzani leaders from crossing the border into Syria.²⁰ In 2014, the KRG even dug a trench along the Iraqi-Syrian border, which symbolized the extent of the differences of opinion and struggle for power among the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. While the Barzani administration argued that the trench aimed at stopping illegal crossings through the border, the PYD complained that its main objective was to isolate and weaken "Rojava" (meaning "the West" in Kurdish, referring to the predominantly Kurdish-populated western areas of Syria).²¹ The conflict over political

influence in Syria showed that Barzani's KDP had failed to impose its influence in Syrian Kurdish politics, and that the PYD's political agenda, revolving around Ocalan's idea of democratic autonomy, had prevailed.

Since the predominance of PYD rule in northern Syria threatened the interests of both Turkey and the KRG, these two actors were forced into a common strategic axis against the PYD. Both Barzani and Erdogan openly opposed the PYD's unilateral declaration of autonomy in 2013 and strongly criticized PYD policies in northern Syria. Barzani accused the PYD of having made secret deals with the Assad regime and of imposing its agenda on other Kurdish groups in Syria. In November 2013, Barzani also asserted that the PYD "has gone too far in committing violence against other Kurdish groups in Syria."²² Erdogan, on the other hand, began referring to the connections between the PYD and the PKK. He argued that from Turkey's perspective, the PYD in Syria, as well as the PYD's armed wing People's Protection Units (YPG) and the PKK were all equivalent, since they are all terrorist organizations. In response to U.S. cooperation with the YPG in the struggle with the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), following U.S. envoy Brett McGurk's visit to Kobani in January 2016, Erdogan told U.S. officials they would have to choose between Turkey and the PYD, asking, "is it me who is your partner, or the terrorists in Kobani?"²³

WHITHER TURKEY-KRG RELATIONS?

From the mid-2000s onwards, Turkey's relations with the KRG have been improving within the context of a growing Turkish economy, in search of new markets and energy resources, an updated and more flexible approach to resolve the country's age-old Kurdish question through peaceful means, and both Erdogan and Barzani's opposition to the PYD's establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. However, the rapidly-changing regional dynamics show that the future holds a number of uncertainties for the Turkey-KRG axis.

One source of uncertainty regarding the future of Turkish-KRG relations is the ISIS threat, which has significantly challenged the Turkey-KRG alliance since 2014. Hiwa Osman, a famous Iraqi Kurdish journalist, argued in a speech that:

Up until very recently, up until the episode of Isis, we used to say in Iraqi Kurdistan that the Shi'as of Iraq have Iran, the Sunni Arabs of Iraq, they have the Sunni Arab states, and we in Iraqi Kurdistan, we the Iraqi Kurds have Turkey. But this has changed, I think...When they [ISIS] attacked Erbil the night of the 15th of August, as Iraqi Kurds, and I was one of them, I was expecting the first plane that hits ISIS would be a Turkish plane. I was expecting that the first phone call of help that the President [Massoud Barzani] receives would be from President Erdogan.²⁴

However, Iraqi Kurds were disappointed when Turkey was not the first to offer help when ISIS advanced towards northern Iraq and attacked Erbil in August 2014. Indeed, Turkey has not been an active player in the international coalition's struggle against ISIS, and is often regarded as a "reluctant ally"²⁵ in this process. Even in defending the small Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani from ISIS forces, a struggle which became an important symbol for Kurdish nationalism, Turkish help was not forthcoming. Only after intense domestic and international pressure did Turkey agree to allow Iraqi peshmerga forces to cross the border into Kobani to join the fight against ISIS. The PYD leader Salih Muslim repeatedly accused Turkey of providing arms and sanctuary to ISIS, as well as allowing easy passage through its borders.²⁶ The ISIS threat also played an important role in uniting Kurds from different countries. In the face of ISIS attacks, YPG, PKK, and peshmerga forces from the KRG became allies, fighting together against ISIS. The KRG even allowed PKK to move its forces and weapons out of its bases in the Qandil Mountains to join the defense against ISIS.²⁷

Adding further uncertainty have been disruptions in relations between Turkey and the KRG following the end of the settlement process with the PKK and the reintroduction of Turkish airstrikes over the PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains. In the aftermath of the bombing in Suruc, Sanliurfa in July 2015 by an ISIS suicide bomber, which killed 32 youth activists who were there to “help rebuild the Syrian town of Kobane,”²⁸ the PKK killed several policemen and soldiers and attacked military posts, putting a clear end to the already-fragile settlement process. In response, Turkey relaunched its fight against the PKK from the summer of 2015 onwards and began to carry out air strikes on PKK bases in northern Iraq. However, while Massoud Barzani criticized the PKK’s acts and called upon the organization to leave the Qandil Mountains, he also criticized Turkey, blaming Turkish air strikes for the deaths of several Iraqi Kurdish civilians. Developments since 2015 show that the end of the settlement process in Turkey will cause further problems in the Turkey-KRG partnership. For example, in 2015 and 2016, the PKK attacked the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline several times, disrupting the flow of oil and causing economic difficulties for the KRG.

However, these challenges to the relationship between Turkey and the KRG do not mean that the Ankara-Erbil alliance is doomed. First, despite the ongoing military cooperation among different Kurdish groups in the fight against ISIS, it is not clear whether these actors will ever be able to overcome their ideological and political differences. Developments since 2014 have proven that tensions between Barzani’s KDP and the PKK/PYD have not disappeared completely despite their alliance in the ongoing fight against ISIS. There was intense rivalry among different Kurdish factions combating ISIS in November 2015 during the defense of Sinjar, an Iraqi province which is home to the Yazidi Kurdish community. Furthermore, once the fighting was over in Sinjar, the PKK complained that Barzani took all the credit for the victory against ISIS.²⁹ Additionally, the KRG, which is undergoing economic hardship

because of the recent fall in oil prices, continues to depend on the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline for its oil exports. Despite these challenging developments, Turkey remains the KRG’s main economic gateway to the outside world. And finally, Turkey’s support remains key for the possibility of a future independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Barzani is well aware that a future independent Kurdistan will not be able to survive without the support of the major regional actors, including Turkey. Events unfolding in December 2015 in Bashiqa, an Iraqi town north of Mosul, confirm this analysis. When Turkey deployed around 150 troops and 25 tanks with the goal of training Kurdish peshmerga and Arab forces to fight against ISIS, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi accused Turkey of intervening in the domestic affairs of Iraq and requested immediate Turkish withdrawal. In the face of this crisis, Barzani took the Turkish side, saying that “[a]ccording to our knowledge Turkey and Iraq agreed beforehand on the deployment of Turkish soldiers near Mosul. An alliance was established to train and support volunteer soldiers that will liberate Mosul.” Barzani added that “[t]his affair had been blown out of proportion.”³⁰ Thus, in light of the political and economic background of Turkish-KRG relations, and despite major challenges to the Turkey-KRG partnership, it is likely that their cooperation will continue within the context of emerging regional dynamics.

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NOTES

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²⁹ Deutsche Welle, “Kurds Claim Sinjar ‘Liberated’ from IS,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 13, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/kurds-claim-sinjar-liberated-from-is/a-18848093>.

³⁰ Semih Idiz, “Why is Turkey Stirring the Iraqi Cauldron,” *Al Monitor*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-troops-deployed-in-bashiq-a-stirs-cauldron.html>.