



Turkey and Northern Iraq on the Course of Rapprochement

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Perhaps the most consequential and drastic decision in Turkish foreign policy in recent months was to engage in direct negotiations with Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. This is significant because, since the onset of Iraq War in 2003, Turkey has sought to ignore or marginalize Iraqi Kurds, and has refrained from all acts that could be viewed as concessions or de facto recognition. Although the Iraqi Kurdish leadership has received red-carpet ceremony in Ankara in the 1990s, Turkish foreign policy toward northern Iraq, since the war, has been stymied by anxiety and emotional rhetoric. The policy of projecting illegitimacy to the Kurdish Regional Government has cost Turkey a significant loss of clout not only in northern Iraq but also in the wider Iraqi political affairs, as Kurds have come to occupy significant positions in the central government as well.

Background

The Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq has long been viewed as an existential threat by Turkey. This is rather ironic, as Turkish support for the creation of a safe heaven in northern Iraq in 1992 made it possible for the Baghdad regime to lose nearly all sovereign prerogatives in the area. The power vacuum left in northern Iraq by the first Gulf War has enabled PKK to use this territory as a staging ground for raids into Turkey and also a sanctuary where it could enjoy relative freedom from Turkish counterattacks. As a result, Turkey, especially during the height of the PKK assaults in the 1990s, was keen on collaborating with Baghdad and Iraqi Kurds to conduct cross-border operations aimed to eliminate PKK's rear bases.

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After the Gulf War, Turkey served as a gate to outside world for the Iraqi Kurds and also as a channel for the flow of international aid into the enclave. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, made several visits to Ankara and were given passports to travel abroad; in short, Iraqi Kurds had found a patron in Ankara. Turkish policy was driven by the calculation that the engagement would allow Turkey to exercise influence, and reign in Kurds' separatist aspirations. Turkey continued to harbor suspicions for the rise of an independent Kurdish state, yet the nature of Kurdish politics at the time made it seem like a distant possibility. The Kurds in Iraq had a long history of rivalry and violent conflict, the last episode of which began in 1994 in the form of a civil war.

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As long as Iraqi Kurds remained weak and divided, they were not considered a formidable threat against Turkey's security interests in northern Iraq. Following the US-brokered peace

agreement between the Iraqi Kurds in 1998, Turkey's fears were heightened. Yet, it was still able to shape the process through active diplomacy and engagement with Iraqi Kurds-- the so-called Ankara process. During that time, Turkey established a permanent military presence in northern Iraq not only to gather intelligence against the PKK, but also to keep an eye on Iraqi Kurds should they move for greater autonomy or even independence despite assurances they provided to the contrary.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the chaos that followed refueled fears that the division of Iraq along sectarian or ethnic lines could give rise to an independent Kurdish state, thus seriously jeopardizing Turkish security. Turkey feared most the contagious effect that this development could have on its own Kurdish population possibly energizing separatist aspirations among them. Thus, a decade-long *modus vivendi* between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds has collapsed. Turkish fears have not proven groundless: Talabani's and Barzani's factions adopted a draft constitution in 2002 which foresaw a loosely federated Iraqi state. The document envisaged the expansion of the area under Kurdish control to include Kirkuk. To make matters worse for Ankara, the document insisted on the right of the Kurdish region to become an independent state. In 2004, to win Kurdish support for interim Iraqi Constitution, Kurdish Regional Government attained broad powers of self-government including legislative and judicial powers in addition to the recognition of Peshmerga as an independent force from the Iraqi central government. A provision was also added to the document allowing residents of Kirkuk to hold a referendum to determine the status of the city. On top of all that, the re-emergence of the PKK in 2004 has directed Turkey's attention once again on Iraqi Kurds who have been accused of harboring and supporting terrorists. And, that's when the discourse of the vast majority of

Turkey's policy community has taken on an increasingly confrontational line. Insulting statements were directed against the Iraqi Kurdish leaders, and conspiracy theories implicating Americans in PKK attacks have filled the air. There is no doubt that the rising anti-western sentiment over the EU's constant stalling of the progress in membership, and the widespread disappointment over Americans' disregard for Turkey's legitimate security concerns have sharpened Turkey's attitude toward Iraqi Kurds. Thus Turkey has abandoned its long-established policy of working with the Iraqi Kurds in its fight against the PKK. The policy of the militarist establishment in Turkey centered on implicating Iraqi Kurds in PKK attacks and projecting them a sense of illegitimacy. This policy has given valuable ammunition to the PKK who nearly provoked Turkey into a unilateral intervention against PKK in northern Iraq—a move that could have led to clashes with Iraqi Kurds and severing all ties with the US. At the last minute, reason prevailed in Turkish policy.

Policy-makers in Ankara failed to realize that the war in Iraq has created new realities and unleashed new forces that had to be taken into account. The changes that Iraq war created in regional politics, often at the expense of Turkey's interests, could not be wished away simply by marginalizing the Iraqi Kurds who have now emerged as important actors in their own right. Thus the latest official contact with the Kurdish Regional Government indicates a significant and welcome policy shift. The visit by Turkey's Special Envoy for Iraq, Murat Özçelik and Primer Minister's chief foreign policy advisor, Ahmet Davudoğlu to northern Iraq at the beginning of May pursuant to a National Security Council decision in late April to "open dialogue with all elements of Iraqi politics" may be seen as an early indicator of a new era in Turkish-Kurdish Iraqi relations. So what accounts for this policy shift? The external and domestic sources of Turkey's northern Iraq policy deserve careful attention.

External Influence on Turkey's Northern Iraq Policy

Any attempt to ignore external stimuli or structural imperatives on foreign policy decisions would be seriously lacking, as these factors have an important impact on foreign policy calculations and the constraints and opportunities faced by the decision makers. With respect to recent Turkish policy shift towards northern Iraq, two such factors have enabled Turkish policy makers to seek a course of rapprochement with Iraqi Kurds: a significant pace of normalization in Turkish-American relations and the EU membership process which puts Turkish politics to tests of all sorts.

Turkey's Iraq policy cannot be studied in isolation from Turkish-American relations which, according to some, have reached one of its lowest points with Turkey's dismissal of an American request to open up a northern front against Iraq in 2003. There is no doubt that Turkey's decision effectively marginalized its interests from Iraqi affairs, yet not so much as a result of a deliberate policy of



punishment on the part of the US-as it is perceived by Turkey- but because American interests were focused elsewhere and its energy was stretched too thin. As a result, the US has failed to act on Turkey's legitimate security concerns for a long time, and it has not put much pressure on Iraqi Kurds for adopting a tougher stand against the PKK. This has fueled Turkey's suspicions about American intentions concerning the Kurds, animating conspiracy theories derived from Turkey's perennial fear of being divided by foreign actors. There is no doubt that the two sides had diverging interests in northern Iraq. While Turkey perceived the consolidation of Kurdish authority in northern Iraq as an existential security threat, the US considered any intervention in northern Iraq as endangering all chances of stability in the rest of Iraq. Americans finally decided to listen to

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Turkey's concerns not because Turkish intervention seemed imminent, but because US interests in the changing regional power dynamics have placed Turkey into an almost indispensable position. Prime Minister Erdogan's

visit to Washington on November 5, 2007 has become a catalyst for the restoration of Turkish-American relations. President Bush's unequivocal support for the Turkish case against the PKK has later translated into tangible policies such as opening up northern Iraq's airspace and providing real-time intelligence against PKK targets. Equally important for Turkey was the pressure put by the US on Iraqi Kurds to collaborate with Turkey against the PKK. American efforts quickly bore fruits as Turkish perceptions of America's secret agenda were rectified and the intense tension in Turkish politics has subsided.

There is no doubt that American assistance to Turkey has come with conditions or at least with some expectations. Turkey has also faced pressure from the US to do its part for the normalization of relations with Iraqi Kurds, and to deepen dialogue through diplomacy. The active role played by the US in helping to defuse tensions between Ankara and Kurdish leadership and especially the cold shoulder given to Barzani after his harsh remarks against Turkey has once again increased American leverage with the Turkish policy circles. The dissipating sense of urgency to act against the PKK after the operations has allowed Turkish government some breathing room to initiate an opening with Iraqi Kurds without being tainted as traitors. The political climate in Turkey before the American-sanctioned military operations against PKK was such that restraint was understood as weakness. No elected government could withstand such mounting pressure to act decisively against PKK terrorism. Thus American involvement has been an enabling factor



for the conciliatory approach toward Iraqi Kurds to find expression in Turkish policy circles.

Another external factor that has significant influence on all facets of Turkish political life is without doubt Turkey's relations with the European Union. Despite shortcomings on both sides of the relationship, the focus of Turkey's main foreign policy orientation has not changed. Turkey's commitment to the EU membership has come with the acceptance that its policies would be subject to constant scrutiny. If anything, it is the EU process that inflicted restraint in Turkish policy toward northern Iraq and raised the cost of a unilateral intervention to an unbearable level. Ankara has known that intervention in Iraq without American acquiescence would receive serious objections from the EU, seriously diminishing its chances for accession. Thus Turkey conducted a strong diplomatic offense against PKK terrorism before the operations, and it has effectively avoided any serious criticism for its operations in northern Iraq from the EU or from any other global actor for that matter.

Domestic Sources of Turkey's Northern Iraq Policy

Although external influences shed some light on Turkey's foreign policy options with regard to northern Iraq, the recent policy shift cannot be attributed to these factors alone. In the end, external constraints and opportunities need to be interpreted by policy-makers. How they define their situation serves as an important guide for future policy options. In order to obtain a fuller account of the dynamics of foreign-policy making, studies must take greater account of the specific ideas driving states' foreign policies. To make a better sense of Turkey's recent policy shift toward Iraqi Kurds, one needs to pay close attention to the deep changes in the ideas or the vision driving Turkish foreign policy over the last few years.

These changes can be summarized as a shift away from a win-lose approach to a win-win approach with willingness for greater activism in world affairs. The abandonment of the traditional isolationist or confrontationist line for greater involvement in addition to an emphasis on soft power instruments, as legitimate elements of foreign policy, are the main thrusts of the new Turkish foreign policy. The idea or the vision behind the new policy is the rediscovery of Turkey's potential to play an important role in its surrounding regions and on the world stage. As a result, Turkish policy is now much more assertive, "pro-active", and "multi-dimensional". An offshoot of this general approach is to arrive at "zero-problems with neighbors". Over the past few years, Turkey has established strong ties with Syria and normalized relations with Iran. Ankara's relations with both of these countries were seriously strained in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of their overt support for the PKK. Turkish government has expanded its economic and commercial ties in the region with the expectation that these ties would "spill-over" to political relations. It has also supported or created several peace



initiatives. Turkey's greater activism in its region has not led to the reversal of its traditional western orientation. Turkey strengthened relations with its neighbors without straining relations with its traditional allies. Its commitment to close political and economic relations with the neighboring states made it possible to construct common ground in confronting security challenges including the PKK threat.

From the perspective of this new direction in Turkish foreign policy, marginalizing Iraqi Kurds seems rather like a contradiction. One would have expected a much earlier and deeper diplomatic dialogue with northern Iraq; this is the place after all where Turkey finds its most important security interests as seriously undermined.

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Yet the well-established militarist line in Turkish foreign policy, particularly with regard to PKK terrorism and northern Iraq, has not been so easy to confront. The government seemed, at first, to realize the importance of engaging with the Iraqi Kurds and took a number of small steps in the right direction.

These gestures met with overwhelming resistance in Turkish policy circles. The ability of the government to conduct foreign policy independent of considerations of domestic power alignments is fairly limited. It was not even possible to convince, then Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, to invite Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to Ankara, simply because he was a Kurd from northern Iraq. Soon the government fell prey to populism; fearing to alienate an increasingly nationalist electoral base, the government adopted a non-conciliatory approach and a harsh rhetoric towards Iraqi Kurds.

Turkey's policy in northern Iraq will ultimately depend on the outcome of the ongoing realignment of Turkey's political forces. Much rests on the current government's ability to overcome resistance to introducing and pushing through a substantial reform plan covering not only military but also political, economic, social and cultural bases. As it is often reiterated in circles inside and outside Turkey, the solution to the PKK terrorism relies ultimately on addressing candidly the grievances of Kurds in Turkey. These grievances, after all, constitute the major source of sympathy for the PKK. The current government has a strong electoral mandate from the Kurdish populated regions of Turkey and seems to recognize the necessity of comprehensive reform, the kind long advocated by the EU and addressed once again by the US after Turkey's military operations in northern Iraq. But the government whose party is facing a closure case by the Constitutional



Court is at a particularly vulnerable position in internal power struggles and is not well-positioned to confront the established policy line. Yet, it also needs foreign allies to overcome its internal isolation and strengthen its position vis-à-vis the other domestic forces. Creating a positive stance among the international public opinion may allow the government to secure its position against internal pressures. From that perspective, engaging with Iraqi Kurds or the talks of economic and social recovery of the southeast, and “return-home” campaigns should come as no surprise. With American involvement easing the heightened tensions in Turkish politics with regard to northern Iraq and the public opinion relatively satisfied with the military operations and the postponement of Kirkuk referendum, the government seems to have caught a window of opportunity for having, at least, the acquiescence of the military and the main opposition party for opening a dialogue with the Iraqi Kurds.

Policy Recommendations

It is obvious that Iraq is not any close to stability even after the troop surge last year; the relative improvement in the security situation seems too fragile to hold. There is an emerging consensus in American politics for a phased deployment that will remove US combat forces from Iraq while leaving a residual force stationed in northern Iraq to strike at al Qaeda elements and to secure America’s energy interests. The confidence in American policy circles in attaining the goal of Iraqi national reconciliation is rapidly eroding. A decentralized state with strongly autonomous regions seems to be the only sustainable political goal in Iraq. Turkey would prefer to see a return of central government authority and control over the entire Iraqi territory. This would include bringing oil resources under the firm control of the Iraqi central government and Kirkuk remaining under the jurisdiction of central authority. However Turkey may wish for this, the clock cannot be turned back. Turkey must face the reality that the chances for keeping Iraq intact are getting lower by the day. Even if actual break-up can be avoided, it is futile to expect that Kurdish Regional Government will be willing to relinquish possession of sovereign prerogatives it enjoys under the current status as evidenced by the KRG’s opposition to the framework national hydro-carbon law on the grounds that it would centralize oil development and management. Even so, the postponement of Kirkuk referendum is an indicator of the KRG’s susceptibility to diplomatic engagement.

In the end, Turkey’s policy options are closely linked with American interests in Iraq. Thus a policy of a large-scale military assault that seeks to control parts of northern Iraq or to seize oil fields in Kirkuk and Mosul would have a devastating impact on all spheres of Turkey’s foreign relations. In any case, a sustainable solution to Turkey’s security concerns in northern Iraq cannot be achieved by using military force alone. This leaves Turkey with a single option: to open a constructive dialogue with the Iraqi Kurds. Unless Turkey engages with the regional government, military incursions into northern Iraq are likely to inflict



only short-term damage on the PKK. The Kurdish leadership has been quite pragmatic in their relations with other actors in the region. They are more likely to take an action against the PKK if Turkey can be more candid on its true intentions. There is plenty of precedent for Iraqi Kurds cooperating with Turkey against PKK. Iraqi Kurds need Turkey's political support vis-à-vis the other actors in Iraq, especially if the current American rapprochement with Shia and Sunni forces gains ground. In case of an early American pull-out, the Iraqi Kurds need Turkey even more as a counter-balance against Iran. Thus, Iraqi Kurds will be willing to cooperate with Ankara, if they perceive that Turkey is not an existential threat for them. If Turkey extends "zero-problem with neighbors" policy to northern Iraq, there is every indication that Kurds will reciprocate. The change of rhetoric after the visit of Özçelik and Davudoğlu is striking.

Turkey has a great deal to lose by continuing to marginalize Iraqi Kurds, as this attitude contributes to the rise of ultra-nationalism especially among the younger generation. Even after 16 years of de facto independence, it is doubtful that a national consciousness that supersedes tribal loyalties has taken root among the Iraqi Kurds. The perception of Turkey as the "other" contributes to nation-building in northern Iraq more than any other constructed symbol of nationhood.

As the security situation in Iraq further destabilizes, Turkey should start preparing for the spill over of security threats from Iraqi borders. Al Qaeda has already established itself just across the border. The prospect for the establishment of a fundamentalist regime in Iraq, albeit indications to the contrary, should still be taken into account. Turkey must realize that a stable and democratic northern Iraq is an invaluable barrier between it and an increasingly chaotic Iraq. The Kurdish Regional Government has succeeded so far in preventing the penetration of Iraqi insurgents into northern Iraq. Turkey should seek an active role in nurturing the fragile democratic elements in northern Iraq as this the only panacea for long-term peace and stability. Not to mention the economic benefits Turkey will yield from good relations with Iraqi Kurds from construction deals to oil development contracts to cross-border trade. The current inroads that Kurdish leaders have made with economic actors in Turkey mostly relied on private business contracts. Foreign direct investment is a valuable tool of soft power which Turkey has not yet utilized to a full extent in northern Iraq. Turkish government must take a proactive stand in establishing strong economic relations with northern Iraq, as increasing commercial ties is an important step in building confidence politically.

In the final analysis, it is extremely important that Turkish policy should stop looking at northern Iraq from the prism of PKK. And the relations with Iraqi Kurds should not remain hostage to the developments on that front; unless Turkey takes the necessary measures, PKK will continue to exist with or without a sanctuary in northern Iraq. It is also not realistic to expect engagement with Iraqi Kurds will yield immediate results, as confidence-building takes time. There is no doubt that Ankara's good relations with Iraqi Kurds will have a positive impact on



their Turkish brethren. This should become a part of Turkey's effort to introduce a comprehensive new plan to the Kurdish issue as separate from the PKK problem. It is time for Turkey to turn inwards and face the mistakes it has made in addressing the root causes of PKK terrorism and to stop looking for solutions outside.