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Report

Evolution of Turkey - Iraqi Kurdistan's Relations

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Iraq, Turkey forces in joint drills after Kurdish vote [Getty Images]

The article rethinks Turkish-Kurdish relations in the context of Kurdistan's referendum for statehood. In recent years, there has been a growing perception among informed observers of Middle Eastern affairs that Turkey has recalibrated its foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds' ambitions for statehood.⁽¹⁾ Such observers were perplexed when Turkey steadfastly opposed the Iraqi Kurdish push for a referendum on independence. The article advances a twofold argument. Firstly, if anything, recent months have shown that despite difficulties in the relationship that it has with Baghdad, Turkey still values the territorial integrity of Iraq more than its close ties to Erbil. Moreover, and secondly, the episode prior and in the aftermath of the referendum has also illustrated that what was previously been depicted as very close ties between Turkey and Kurdistan region seems to have missed a key point: the two parties do not seem to have gone beyond a fragile transactional relationship.⁽²⁾

Introduction⁽³⁾

There are many factors in Turkey's policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum. The first is Turkey's default position, which is to support the territorial integrity of countries to its east and southeast. The fact that Kurds almost uninterruptedly populate the belt lying along Turkey's southern and southeastern borders has been one of the main motivations for Turkey to uphold the principle of territorial integrity in its neighborhood so tenaciously. For instance, while any irredentist claims between its Middle Eastern neighbours causes alarm and consternation in Ankara, the same does not apply to its western border. The breakup of Yugoslavia or the emergence of countries like Kosovo caused much concern. To the contrary, Turkey welcomed the new states. In fact, when the Kosovo provisional government unilaterally declared independence from Serbia without even holding a referendum, Turkey was

among the first group of states in extending recognition to this new state. The major difference in Turkey's ambiguous approach to state break-up along its western borders and its alarm when it happens along its southeastern borders is due to Turkey's ever-present Kurdish issue.

The 'Golden Era' in Turkey–KRG relations

However, for a while Turkey's default position, particularly towards the Iraqi Kurds, appeared to be changing. The thaw in Turkey–KRG relations occurred around 2008. Besides the de-securitisation of the Middle East and the Kurdish issue, burgeoning economic and trade ties between Turkey and the KRG were major contributors to a positive turn in relations. In fact, by 2009–10 Iraq featured among Turkey's top three trading partners. This received a further boost when Turkey also sought to resolve its own domestic Kurdish issue through peaceful and political means. Despite some interruptions, this policy continued in the 2009–2015 period. The sectarianisation of the region's politics and the power of Shia parties and Iranian influence in Baghdad further cemented relations.

During this period, personal bonds between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani appeared to be solid. In the context of improved relations, the two sides reached higher levels of interdependence in economic, political and energy issues. This was an asymmetric interdependency. Kurdistan's level of dependence on Turkey was greater than the other way around. In fact, this created concern in regional capitals like Baghdad and Tehran as well as in Washington. Turkey has been the Iraqi Kurds' gateway to the rest of the world. Despite the opposition of the central Iraqi government, Kurdish oil flows to international markets through Turkey. During times of economic difficulty, Turkey has also provided much-needed economic support to Iraqi Kurdistan.

All these developments have generated questions as to whether Turkey had changed its position on the Kurdish aspiration for statehood in Iraq. Turkey played a crucial role in helping the KRG to lay the foundations for its economic independence from Baghdad. When pro-Iranian former Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki cut Iraqi Kurds' share—17 percent—of the national budget, the KRG tried to make up for this loss by independently selling its oil onto the international market. This move, which was facilitated by Turkey, was seen as a major step towards economic sovereignty. Likewise, during the fight with ISIS, Iraqi Kurds effectively acquired most of the territories that were designated as disputed between the central government and Erbil. These disputed territories were supposed to be resolved according to Articles 140 and 119 of the Iraqi constitution by no later than December 31, 2007.⁽⁴⁾ The more ground ISIS lost, the more Kurds recovered what they considered to be part of a projected state of Kurdistan—claims disputed by the Baghdad government. The KRG has since 2016 expanded its territory by more than 40

percent. This was a direct result of the victorious fight against ISIS.⁽⁵⁾ At the time, Turkey either kept silent or offered low-key criticism of the Iraqi Kurds' territorial expansion. More-over, Turkish officials - starting with Erdogan - changed their discourse over Kurdish ambitions for statehood, which they framed as an internal Iraqi dispute only two years ago. Many, including the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, interpreted this as Turkey's tacit acquiescence to Kurdish independence.

The Independence Referendum: A Stress Test of Relationships

Yet these expectations proved to be ill conceived. Leaders (including Barzani, the president of the Iraqi KRG in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region announced to the world that the northern territory would hold an independence referendum on September 25, 2017. To scuttle this move, it has pursued, though very belatedly, a policy of active diplomacy. It has since September visited the Iraqi Kurdish leadership at foreign minister and chief of intelligence level to dissuade them from proceeding ahead with this move, and has also engaged with Iran and the central Iraqi government. When these visits did not bear the desired outcome, President Erdogan broke his silence on this issue, adopting an increasingly acrimonious language on the subject.

However, like the United States,⁽⁶⁾ Turkey's diplomacy was stillborn for two reasons. First, it came too late. Barzani was voicing his intention of holding an independence referendum for more than a year; and the KRG set a date for the independence referendum on June 7. Turkey embarked on an active diplomacy to dissuade the Kurds from holding the referendum only weeks before the set date for the referendum.⁽⁷⁾ At this stage, it was no longer palatable for the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, and particularly Barzani, to accept this demand in terms of domestic political consideration. If accepted without any meaningful concessions from the central Iraqi government (which was not forthcoming), this would have significantly weakened Barzani domestically. Nevertheless, (with the benefit of hindsight) the fact that Barzani had to step down after the referendum clearly backfired. This shows that he, too, miscalculated his options.⁽⁸⁾

Second, Turkey's plea for the postponement of the referendum was not accompanied by a viable alternative offer either.⁽⁹⁾ Though Turkey voiced its readiness to mediate between Erbil and Baghdad on legitimate Kurdish demands, it did not put forward any viable and concrete proposal to settle the dispute. Moreover, the prospect of Turkey offering anything concrete to alleviate the Kurdish grievances vis-à-vis Baghdad was already very limited. For, Turkey had little leverage, if any, over the central government, which made it unlikely for Ankara to be able to play the role of a strong mediator between the sides.

The question that was still on many observers' mind was the following: Given the nature of relations between Ankara and Erbil in recent years, why has Turkey been so opposed

to the Kurdish independence referendum and prospect of Kurdish statehood. Alternatively, why didn't Turkey try to explore another option that could still prevent the Kurdish independence while not playing into the hands of the central government and Iran?

Turkey's Concerns over Kurdish Statehood

First, with the break-down of the Kurdish peace process and the subsequent urban warfare that took place in 2015–16, the Turkish government began once again securitising the Kurdish issue, alongside the securitisation of the Middle East as a whole.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has done its utmost to change perceptions of the Middle East in Turkey. For a long time, the Middle East was largely regarded through the prism of a security threat. It was seen as the geography of Kurdish separatism, 'Islamic radicalism' and backwardness. Upon coming to power, the AK Party gradually worked to de-securitise these perceptions of the Middle East through economic engagement. Domestically, this has been accompanied by a new approach to the Kurdish issue and Kurds: adopting a more political and civilian approach rather than a security one.

In recent years, we have witnessed the reversal of this politics of desecuritisation, both towards the Middle East and the Kurdish issue. The break-down of state authority, the rise of extremist groups, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-Democratic Union Party (PYD) gains in Syria and Iraq, and the pressure that this has put on Turkey's border and internal security have culminated in a change of approach to the Middle East.

Moreover, the AKP- nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) alliance and its leader Devlet Bahçeli in the run up to Turkey's constitutional referendum on an executive presidency seems to have had a significant impact on the country's foreign and domestic policy.⁽¹¹⁾ President Erdogan and the AKP are determined to hold onto this alliance in the run-up to Turkey's three crucial elections in 2019.⁽¹²⁾ The implication of this—accompanied by the new type of statism that is prevailing in Ankara—would be a regressive 'Bahçeli effect' on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. Given the centrality of the Kurdish issue to the political identity of the MHP, it is plausible to argue that in no policy area will the impact of this alliance be felt as strongly as it is on the Kurdish issue and the government's approach to the regional Kurds.

For this domestic policy consideration, Erdogan's preference would have been not to be forced to have a stance on the Kurdish independence debate. In other words, Erdogan's first choice would have been not to be forced to make a choice. His hope and calculations were probably pinned on the assumption that the referendum would be postponed. Because either decision he makes would carry political cost for him,

particularly in the run up to the 2019. The coalition that made it possible for the constitutional referendum, which changed Turkey's parliamentary-centric political system to that of the executive presidency, to pass on 16 April was also a factor that put him in a difficult position to take a clear stance on the referendum. Both the additional Kurdish and nationalist Turkish voters were crucial for the passage of the referendum with only 51,4 percent of the votes. Erdogan wants to preserve these voting blocs while going for the contests of 2019. He can ill-afford to lose any component of this bloc. In this respect, his strong rejection of the referendum would have alienated the Kurdish voters (particularly the conservative and Islamist Kurds who generally vote for the conservative-Islamic party, currently AK Party). Whereas his silence would have had the same impact on the Turkish nationalist voters. When Barzani decided to go forward with the referendum, he had to take a clear stance, as a result of which he was ready to sacrifice some part of his conservative Kurdish electoral base.

Regionally, the closer the referendum date got, the clearer the positions of regional and international actors have become. At the regional level, Iran has emerged as the most vocal opponent of the independence referendum, whereas Israel has become the only vocal proponent of Kurdish independence. Turkey has allied itself with Iran and the central Iraqi government on this issue. Moreover, while some actors tellingly spoke out, for others, they were recognisable by their relative silence on the issue. Gulf countries are examples of regional actors that have maintained relative silence. Saudi Arabia's minister of Arab Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan visited Barzani and offered mediation between Erbil and Baghdad. The United Arab Emirates kept silent on this issue. This regional picture sheds light on post-Arab Spring regional realignments. The fact that Israel is publicly supporting Kurdish independence and Gulf Arab states are not opposing it seems to be further strengthening the Iranian and Turkish opposition to the independence referendum, given the acrimonious nature of relations between them. To be more precise, whereas it was Turkey's identity-crisis that was largely at play on the Kurdish independence referendum. Turkey has not still crafted a notion of an identity which can accommodate "Kurdishness". For Iran, it was the regime's insecurity that was one of the paramount factors that motivated the Islamic Republic to strongly oppose and quash the Kurdish bid for independence. In other words, what was seen as more threatening from Iran's perspective was the geopolitical identity of a would be Kurdistan. That would place a more or less Western-leaning alliance made up of the U.S., Israel, and Gulf countries on Iran's borders. The Iranian regime views this scenario with much apprehension, a threat to regime-security. This issue also reflects the regional divide that has become more evident with the Qatari crisis. In fact, the recent thaw in Turkish-Iranian relations has been facilitated not by shared interests, but rather by shared concerns. Of the list of shared concerns, the rise of the Kurds of the region tops the list. The same logic applies to Turkish-Iranian pro-Qatari positions during the Gulf crisis.

Both countries were concerned about the intentions of the Arab–Gulf coalition that imposed a blockade on Qatar.

The above-mentioned factors have formed a background of forceful Turk-ish reactions to the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. Beside a powerful discourse, Turkey has tried to express its dissatisfaction with the referendum through several means prior to the event. The Turkish Armed Forces launched a series of military exercises on September 18 outside the town of Silopi, which sits less than 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the intersection of Turkey's borders with Syria and Iraq. Turkey's leadership also sent clear messages that diplomatic, economic and security options would be implemented if the referendum was not cancelled. Turkey even agreed with Iran and Iraq to consider taking "coordinated counter-measures" against the KRG's bid to hold the independence referendum at a trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in New York. However, none of these warnings dissuaded the Iraqi Kurds from holding the referendum on September 25, which received around 93 percent of public support for independence, with a voter turnout of 72 percent. .

In the aftermath of the referendum, despite Turkey's strong rhetoric, it did not undertake many consequential concrete measures. In fact, it was not what Turkey did; rather it was what Turkey did not do that counted more during this crisis. To be more precise, Turkey not opposing to Iraq-Iran's plans in the aftermath of the referendum proved to be fateful. At this stage, it appears that most of what Turkey has demanded for normalisation of the relations with the KRG after the referendum has happened. Baghdad took control over disputed territories including Kirkuk. The KRG accepted the Iraqi federal court's verdict of annulling the referendum. Probably, Baghdad soon will also co-administer the KRG's border crossings and airports. On top of this, the architect of the referendum Mesut Barzani stepped down from his position as president of the Kurdistan region. In his place, his nephew Nechervan Barzani, which was one of the primary architects behind Turkey - Kurdistan relations, stepped onto the political stage. All this is providing the ground for re-normalisation. However, this re-normalisation will not be swift. It will be a slow and gradual process. The relations are unlikely to go where they were before the referendum. Recovery will take times. However, the speed and evolution of the relations or recovery will not be only dependent on the bilateral Turkey - KRG relations, but also on Turkey - Iraq and/or Turkey - Iran relations. If Turkey feels that it is unlikely to gain anything meaningful (be it in the form of fighting the PKK, oil or reconstruction contracts) from central government and Iran for sacrificing the KRG and Barzani, it is then likely to reconsider its recent policy. It will remain to be seen if by then, Turkey's leverage will have been weakened.

In short, all this has demonstrated that despite the difficulty of the relationship that it has with Baghdad, Turkey still values the territorial integrity of Iraq more than its once

very close ties with Erbil. But the episode prior and in the aftermath of the referendum has also illustrated that what was previously been depicted as a very close ties between Turkey and Kurdi-stan region seems to haven't gone beyond a fragile transactional relationships.

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