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Fluctuating Relations Between Iran
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1958'den Günümüze İran ve Irak Kürt
Bölgesel Yönetimi Arasındaki
Kararsız İlişkiler

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ups and downs bilateral relations between Iran and the Iraqi-Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Iranian politicians and Iraqi Kurds have had pragmatical relationship independent from Baghdad for many years. However, separatist Kurdish movements were seen as a joint target by both Iran and Iraq until General Abdulkarim Qasim's coup in 1958. Since the coup in Iraq, the Kurdish issue has been used against each other by two sides. The relationship between the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds has changed dramatically since the first Gulf War in 1991. However, since the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the USA, Iran's influence has been growing, not only in Baghdad, but also in Erbil. Meanwhile, after the KRG's decision to hold a referendum on independence, Iran put pressure on the KRG and tried to isolate Erbil, as Turkey, Iraq, and Syria did. Tehran is not willing to let an independent Kurdish state be established near its borders because of Iran's local Kurdish secessionist groups, such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and PJAK. This study analyzes the reasons for the conflict and cooperation between the Iranian regime, and Iraqi Kurds and focuses on how the Iranian revolution in 1979, the ISIL terrorism and the independence referendum held in 2017 have effected their relations.

Key Words: Iran, KRG, Iraqi Kurds, Independence Referendum, ISIL

ÖZ

Bu makale, İran ve Irak Kürdistan Bölgesel Hükümeti (IKBY) arasındaki inişli çıkışlı ilişkileri incelemektedir. İranlı siyasetçiler ve Iraklı Kürtler, uzun yıllar Bağdat üzerinden inşa edilen pragmatik ilişkilere sahipti. Bununla birlikte, General Abdulkerim Kasım darbesine kadar ayrılıkçı Kürt hareketleri hem İran hem de Irak tarafından ortak tehdit olarak algılandı. 1958 Irak darbesinden sonra Kürtler her iki devlet tarafından birbirlerini zayıflatmak amacıyla sürekli kullanıldı. İran ve Iraklı Kürtler arasındaki ilişkiler 1991 yılındaki I. Körfez Savaşı'ndan günümüze dramatik bir şekilde değişti. 2003 yılında ABD'nin Irak'ı işgal etmesinden sonrası İran'ın etkisi sadece Bağdat'ta değil aynı zamanda da Erbil'de de arttı. Bununla beraber, IKBY'nin bağımsızlık referandumuna gitme kararından sonra İran, IKBY'ye baskı yaparak Erbil'i Türkiye, Irak ve Suriye ile birlikte izole etmeye çalıştı. Tahran, kendi sınırlarındaki İran Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi ve PJAK gibi Kürt bölücü gruplardan algıladığı tehdit nedeniyle bağımsız bir Kürt devleti görmek istememektedir. Bu çalışma, İran ve Irak Kürtleri arasında çatışma ve işbirliği nedenlerini analiz etmekle birlikte, 1979 İran Devrimi, DAESH terörünün bölgede güçlenmesi ve 2017 bağımsızlık referandumunun ilişkileri nasıl etkilediğini irdelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, IKBY, Iraklı Kürtler, Bağımsızlık referandum

Introduction

In the Ottoman era, Iraq consisted of three major regions; comprising Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra. Iraq also consisted of some major ethnic and religious groups, such as Shia-Sunni Arabs, Turkmens, Kurds, Jews, and Christians. After the establishment of modern Iraq, these fragile and distinct social structures created new problems for the new Iraqi regime, despite their fragile ethnic and sectarian differences, which were created to be an appropriate situation for external interventions in Iraq. However, Iran has many similarities with the ethnic and religious social structure of Iraq. After official relations were established, both states suffered the same ethnic problem, i.e. the Kurdish issue. The Kurds had been living on the frontier between Iran and Iraq, and their population spread out towards Iran (10%) and Iraq (17%). Kurds living in both countries as a semi-feudal (tribal) society had kinship ties with the Kurds who were living in Turkey and Syria. The transnational structure and nature character of the Kurdish people within the national

states have caused serious ethnic and political problems for the newly founded nation states in the Middle East.

The Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had a foreign policy approach towards to two of the non-state actors in the Middle East, the Iraqi Kurds and Shias in Lebanon. Historically Iran has had deep, cultural and geographic ties with the Kurdish people and Iran has also had sectarian links and solidarity with Lebanese Shia (Reisinezhad, 2018: 61). For the Kurds mostly follow the Sunni sect of Islam, but some of them who live in contemporary Kirmanshah, like other Iranians, follow Ithna Ashari Shia (the Feyli Kurds, who were originally exiled from Iraq to Iran in 1970) and other Shia Kurds living south of Kurdistan Province in Iran. Majority of Kurds in Iran also follow the Sunni sect as an ethnic minority (McDowall, 2007: 11).

In the post-Ottoman era in Iraq, Iran was willing to support any Iraqi Kurdish group against the new found Baghdad regime. However, the Kurds in Iran had begun to revolt against Tehran to set up an independent Kurdish Sunni state, and many Iraqi Kurdish tribes were involved in these attempts in Iran. Since it was not a strong regime, Iran decided to sign a security agreement with Turkey and Iraq in 1937, known as the Treaty of Sadabad (Reisinezhad, 2018: 63-64), in order to prevent possible Kurdish revolts. In the wake of the Second World War, British and French influence declined in the Middle East, but the political interventions by the USA and USSR increased dramatically. Both Superpowers in the Cold War era supported the independent and legitimate political actors of the sovereign states, since they ‘theoretically’ opposed both the mandate system and colonization (Boulby, 2013: 48).

In the beginning of 1945, the Soviets supported the Azari Turks under the lead by Jafar Pishevari who had governed temporarily “National Autonomous State of Azerbaijan” from December 1945 to December 1946 as unrecognized de facto state. Pishevari behaved as a Soviet proxy political leader in Northern Iran until Soviet troop’s departure (Bolukbasi, 2011: 48). Some of such activities were fulfilled by the Communist Soviet-backed parties, such as the Tudeh and the Kurdish Communist Party or Komala (The Organization of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan) (Ward, 2009: 181). At the same time, the Iranian Kurds announced the independent Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad, in January 1946 (Wilber, 1981: 240), which survived until Mohammed Reza Shah’s troops arrived in Mahabad in December 1946 (Nader, 2016: 104). It should be mentioned, that there was some difference between the Kurds and Azerbaijani Turks in Iran. Differences are such as: historical problems and disputed issues among the people, Turks were living in Urmieh, from Rezaieh to Maku, Kurds as tribes living in hills commanding the plains and some places mixed (Roosvelt, 1947: 258).

During the Iranian crisis between November 1945 and June 1946, the USA countered the Soviets in Iran. The crisis occurred because of the Soviets’ reluctance

to withdraw their army from Northern Iran and their support to some separatists' groups in Iran, such as the Turks, Kurds, and Communist Tudeh Party. After strong criticism by the USA, the Soviets started to mobilize their military presence away from Iran and towards their own borders, and the USA also achieved the first political victory of the Cold War against Moscow (Hess, 1974: 117). The Mahabad Republic was an important experience in the Kurdish national memory, which was affected by the latter formation of the Kurdish insurgent groups, not only in Iran but also in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. This study will examine the important turning points in bilateral relations between Iran and Iraqi Kurds, sensitive issues and mutual expectations. The argument of this study is that the relations between Iran and Iraqi Kurds are not on a long term strategic level and these relations are built in the context of absolute short term tactical gains.

From Solidarity to Conflict in Iran and Iraq Relations over the Kurds

In July 1958, the Iraqi Hashemite regime was ousted from power by a coup led by General Qasim. While Iraq sided with the Soviets, Iran sided with the USA and it was also the turning point in Iran's foreign policy towards non-state actors in the region. Soon after relations between the Iraqi Kurds and Qasim shifted from reconciliation to conflict, Iran started to set up strategic relations with the Kurds in Iraq against Qasim's regime (Reisinezhad, 2018: 73), because the Shah was concerned that the new Iraqi regime would be able to diminish the Persian sovereignty over its own Arab-populated territory in Khuzestan and also Soviet-affiliated regime would encourage leftist groups in Iran. Under such circumstances, the Kurds became the most appropriate pawn for Iran's Shah against Baghdad. This was a unique milestone between Iran and Iraq because until 1958, both states had not used Kurds to disadvantage the others. Since then, Kurdish groups have been used as a convenient tool in order to diminish the Iraqi government's power and influence other actors in Iraq by Iran's regime.

General Qasim reconciled with the Kurds in 1961, but soon after negotiations were broken because of the military attacks against Mulla Mustafa Barzani's guerrillas (peshmerga) by Iraqi forces in Northern Iraq. This internal conflict between Baghdad and the Kurds created some opportunities for external powers such as the USA, Israel, and Iran who jointly decided to support the Iraqi Kurds against Qasim (Polk, 2006: 114). Then, Saudi Arabia and other Arab oil exporting states raised oil prices and imposed an embargo on the Western states that supported Israel for long term. This act allowed the Gulf Countries to increase their income, despite the fact that their expenses also increased because of their dependence on the Western arm embargo as a result of the military expenditure of the Gulf States. However, Iran had many positive opportunities to improve its relations with Western states and increase its oil income. Iran's huge military power focused on Iraq because, after the 1968 coup, Baghdad demanded sovereignty over Khuzestan (in southwestern Iran where 5 million local Arabs lived) in Iran and the entire Shattul

Arab River. Iran also generously supported the Iraqi Kurdish insurgents financially and armed them against the Baghdad regime, which was the biggest enemy of the Shah regime at that time.

In the beginning of 1970, Iran sent troops into the borders of Iraq and a low intensity war broke out between Iran and Iraq, and diplomatic ties also were cut off until 1973. Both Iran and Iraq started to use the sensitive ethnic Kurdish issue against each other in order to damage its influence on the balance of power in the region. In the wake of the 1972 Soviet-Iraq Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, the USA began to support the Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish groups against Baghdad (Koç, 2018: 337). Although the Baghdad government and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), the main Kurdish party under the leadership of Barzani against Baghdad, signed an agreement on the autonomy of Kurds in March 1970, it was never applied and was later cancelled. The fight repeated between Baghdad and the Kurds, and Iran provided modern arms and ammunition to the Kurds in order to weaken Iraq with the aid of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). After the Shah's regime signed the Algiers Agreement with Iraq, it decided to cut off the military and financial support it had been providing to the Iraqi Kurds. Soon after this agreement Iraqi Kurds had to refuge in Iran with the leadership Mustafa Barzani with his 200.000 people (İzzeti, 2005: 263-264). Both Iran and Iraq had agreed to not support the proxy Kurdish armed groups against each other and they reestablished diplomatic relations with each other. Due to the lack of Iranian military and financial support, the Kurds, who were tactical alliances for Iran, became an open target for the Iraqi regime. Simultaneously, Kurds in Iraq lost their political and military gains on Baghdad government within short time. Although Iran does not want to help the Iraqi Kurds, but they dramatically became more dependent on foreign powers supports.

Impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Bilateral Relations Between the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds

The Kurds in Iran welcomed the collapse of the Shah's regime in 1979, and they also applauded the return of Khomeini to Iran from exile. In the early days of the revolution, the Kurds were very pleased with the Khomeini leadership, not necessarily because of their aim to be citizens of an Islamic Republic, but mostly due to their hatred towards the Shah's regime. Many of Kurds were happy with the KDPI's slogans of "democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan" (McDowall, 2007: 261). However, the expectations of the new regime and the Iranian Kurds were significantly different. Since Iran's government was weak in the beginning of the revolution, Kurdish peshmerga defeated the Iranian forces and the government asked for negotiations in order to have time to reorganize itself in the Iranian Kurdistan region against the separatist groups (Ahmedi, 2018: 213). After Khomeini came into power, Kurdish opposition groups rebelled in the Kurdistan Province of Iran, the

new regime sent Iranian troops and the newly founded Revolutionary Guards to the Kurdish region. The battle between the Iranian officials and the Iranian Kurdish dissidents continued for a few years, both inside and outside of Iran's territory. However, Iranian intelligence assassinated several Kurdish opposition leaders, such as Abdurrahman Qasimlo, Sadegh Sharafkandi, Fattah Abdoli, and Homayoun Ardalan, in Vienna and Berlin in 1989 and 1992 (Slavin, 2007: 164). The new Iranian cleric regime, just as with the previous regime's effort, was determined to not allow any separatist ethnic or regional groups to weaken the territorial integrity of the country.

Sunni Kurds were mostly confronted with sectarian problems with the Islamic regime in Iran. The regime destroyed Sunni Mosques, humiliated Sunni Muftis, and controlled the Kurdish Sunni media in Iran (Mabon, 2013: 133). After the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Kurds turned towards Saddam Hussein in Iraq for support. However, many Iraqi Kurdish political and fighting groups supported many demonstrations and uprisings in Iran against Khomeini before the war. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Saddam used the Kurdish guerilla groups against the Iranian frontlines and they played a significant role in the war (İzzeti, 2005: 268). Against the new cleric regime, apprehension rose over the minority regions like Kurdistan in Iran, because of the lack of authority in the early days of the revolution. However, the newly founded Iranian regime managed to control revolts and protests due to the division and competition within the Iranian Kurdish groups, such as the nationalists, Shiites, Sunnis, and Marxists.

The peak of these horrible relation was in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which continued for eight years without any real winners. This fight broke out and continued because of the shadow of unresolved border disputes, Shatt al Arab (İzzeti, 2005: 34). In the wake of the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia faced a serious threat by Iran, which targeted its domestic Shia community and regime. When the war broke out between Iran and Iraq this presented to Saudi Arabia a unique opportunity to stop the Iranian revolution exports and supported Iraq through other Gulf countries (Vassiliev, 1998: 972). The Kurds were the most important player in this struggle for many years. Iran and Iraq both supported rival domestic Kurdish groups to diminish their rival.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam decided to wipe out Kurdish-controlled cities in northern Iraq because of their willingness to fight against Baghdad with the assistance of Iran. This operation, called Anfal, its symbolization of systematic attacks on the Kurds, started and destroyed many cities, towns, and villages within a short time using the Iraqi army. This tragedy created appropriate opportunity for Iranians to resist and they moved into northern Iraq. The Iranian army and Kurdish guerillas controlled many places in Iraq territory, including Halabja, where after a short time, Saddam dropped chemical bombs and killed thousands civilians (Polk, 2006: 135). Two sides inciting their own Kurdish population and army groups

launched fire at each other's borders before the war started. During this time, Kurdish militia groups were not only used by Iran, but Saddam also generously supported the KDPI's operations inside of Iran. The Iranian regime moved to help Iraqi Kurds and hosted thousands of them in Iran for a few years, and supplied medical treatment to those who were wounded.

Later, there was the emergence of the de facto Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the wake of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the following first Gulf War in 1990–1991. The war resulted in security challenges, not only for Iraq, but also for Iran and Turkey (Entessar, 2018: 73). In March 1991, the Kurdish groups revolted against Saddam and took control of a few cities in northern Iraq. However, within a short time, the Iraqi forces advanced and took back control of the Kurdish captured territories by intensive air and land operations. As a result, many people died, Kurdish villages were destroyed, and approximately 1.5 million Kurds fled to Iran (Entessar, 2010: 158). After the First Gulf War, Kurds gained autonomy in Iraq while Iran expressed some concerns. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam created some opportunities for Iran and the Iraqi Kurds. International sanctions were imposed by the USA on Baghdad's government. The cross borders between Iran and northern Iraq became a significant gateway for the smuggling of goods into of Iraq by Kurdish smugglers. Since then, the smuggling of goods or oil from Iraqi borders to Iran has continued (Mustafa, 2016: 4). This border trade supported the KRG, not only economically, but also politically and strategically. Iran also benefited a great deal from this tactical mobility, especially during the heavy embargo days.

According to Hunter, Iran is also a country that has been deeply affected by its own geo-strategic location, as it is on the strategical crossroads of major regional population movements, and on the route of past and present imperial enlargements. This natural significance has affected its daily religious, political, linguistic, and cultural composition until today's Iran (Hunter, 2010: 17). The Kurds split into many groups and feudal tribes, which worked together to overcome common enemies, but they generally competed with each other. This intra-Kurdish competition allowed external powers to have the opportunity to use this case for their conjectural interests. For example, during the civil war (sibling rivalry or "Brakuji" in Kurdish) between the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Iranian regime backed Jalal at-Talabani's PUK. Talabani allowed many Iranian Revolutionary Guards to enter Iraq, both attacked Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which drove Barzani to seek Turkey's help (Polk, 2006: 165). For Iranian politicians some Kurdish groups have been utilized as a suitable proxy power to his rivals' in Iraq or Turkey while other Kurdish groups perceived as a threat for national interests of Tehran.

New Positions of the Kurds in Iraq and Reflections on their Relations with the Iran

Iran decided to establish relationships with both the Iraqi central government and the KRG due to socio-political and economic reasons. Simultaneously, Iraq and Iran opened several diplomatic offices alongside the capital embassies, the KRG also had representative offices in Tehran serving as a de-facto embassy, and Iran had a consulate in Erbil in order to improve political and economic ties. However, the biggest problem between Iran and the KRG remained some source of tension. Iranian Kurdish army groups, such as the KDPI and Komala and Free Life Party (PJAK), attacked Iranian officials inside Iran from the area controlled by the KRG. Erbil also accused Iran of supporting Ansar Al Islam's Sunni Kurdish fundamentalist armed group to fulfill military operations and de-stabilize the cities of the KRG (Entessar, 2018: 74-75). However, Iran has continued to improve its relationships with the KRG leaders at top official levels over the last few decades. Iran has also sought to prevent the KRG from becoming closer with Turkey in order to increase Tehran's influence in there. Moreover, Iran has the potential to destabilize the KRG by closing its borders and inciting rival political or army groups against Erbil (Romano, 2015: 90).

In the beginning of 2003, the Iraqi Kurds had the great chance to overcome the obstacles that they have faced since 1918. After the US intervention in 2003, Saddam's regime was toppled and Iraq's administrative system changed to become a federal structure, and the Kurds gained a federal status as a result of Washington's military intervention in Iraq. Iran was not happy about this new situation and accused the Kurdish opposition groups of attacks against Iran from the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq (Slavin, 2007: 163). The political scene of Iraq changed dramatically after the 2003 invasion with the US troops on the ground, so Iran under these new circumstances realized that the first foreign policy and security priorities ought to be towards Iraq. Simultaneously, Tehran's influence has visibly increased in Iraq with different Shia groups (Laoutides, 2016: 100). However, Iran began to see itself as besieged by the USA, not only from Afghanistan's side, but also from Iraq's. Since the USA's official offensive discourse on Iran, security concern in Tehran have increased against the USA. Hence, Iraqi Kurds as the closest ally of Washington in Iraq today, became a primary aspect for Iran.

In 2004, the PJAK received some support from varied Kurdish groups in Iran. After the killing of Shivane Qadri in July 2005, in Mahabad, by Iranian Pasdaran, protests sparked throughout the Kurdish provinces in Iran. In fact, 100,000 Iranian soldiers were deployed there because of the PJAK attacks on the Iranian forces in Siahkuh after a month. This event affected relations between Iran and the KRG as well, because after these protests, the Kurdish oppositions started to display KRG flags (Beeman, 2007: 3). Iran and the PJAK tried to achieve ceasefire but were unsuccessful. The PJAK also admitted to receiving financial and arms support by the

KRG in this stage. The clashes between Iran and the PJAK continued until 2013 (Laoutides, 2016: 97). The PJAK is still the most dangerous threat for the Tehran regime because of the possibility for them to increase and effect ethnic and sectarian conflicts in Iran. The PJAK also has ontological links with the PKK and PYD, which are direct threats to the integrity of Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, as Pan Kurdish movements in the Middle East.

Iran does not only have a problem with the PJAK in Iraq, but also has a serious problem with the US presence in Iraq. On January 2007, US troops raided an Iranian Liaison Office in Erbil, captured two Pasdaran members and five mid-level diplomats, sent them to the US prison in Iraq, and did not permit the KRG security forces to take them from the US officials. Barzani condemned them and demanded the immediate release of the Iranian officials (Entessar, 2010: 169). On the other hand, according to Richards,

“since 2003, following the fall of their opponents in Baghdad and with new found autonomy and increasing security and stability, the Iraqi Kurds have gradually, but discernibly, strengthened relations with Iran. The affairs did not start auspiciously. Unsettled by the participation of the peshmerga in the US-led invasion of Iraq, and worried that PJAK would find a safe harbor in Iraqi Kurdistan from which to redouble its campaign against Tehran, Iran angered the Iraqi Kurds by flouting territorial sovereignty and shelling Peshmerga positions in Iraq” (Richards, 2013).

Iran gained some advantages in the Middle East and influenced many countries, including some pro-Western allies as well, such as the KRG after 2010. On the other hand, Tehran’s influence increased in Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria and other Shia existence countries in the region.

The Arab Spring Regional Crisis in the Middle East and Iran’s Approach to KRG

Since December 2010, Arab demonstrators rose up against dictator rulers across the Middle East and North Africa. They demanded more accountability, and clearness and anti-corruption attempts in the Arab World. In a short time, many leaders who were holding the government and state were overturned in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen (Angrist, 2013: 1). The KRG, as a de-facto state, has an independent decision mechanism in Iraq. After Obama’s speech on withdrawing from Iraq and focusing on the Asia Pacific, regional allies of the USA realized that Washington would not deal with military engagements and interventions in the Middle East. During the Arab Spring in particular, the US reluctance over the intervention in Syria and not stopping Iran from spreading its influence in the region was criticized by regional allies of the USA.

Although Iran improved its pragmatic approach towards the Iraqi Kurds in order to improve economic and political relations, Tehran adopted more ideological

politics towards its own Kurds with the denial of their autonomous status at home. The ethnic politics of Iran showed the huge paradox between its priorities inside and outside of the country (Laoutides, 2016: 93). On 25 October 2013, the Iranian regime executed two Kurdish activists. Protests were held in Erbil in response to the Iranian regime and the Kurdish masses supported the PJAK in front of the Iranian consulate in Erbil. On 30 October 2013, Adel Murad, a founding member of the PUK, frankly voiced his support for the Iranian involvement in Iraq, over the Turkish or Saudi involvement. Simultaneously, the anxieties increased between the KDP and PUK over the status of Iran in the KRG, and evoked the domestic conflicts (Birakuji) that broke out after the Kuwait War in Iraq among the Kurds (Richards, 2013). However, the Iranian officials had more influence on the late Jalal Talabani, the former leader of the PUK and former Iraqi president. In 1983, Iran supported Talabani economically and militarily against Saddam (Nader, Hanauer, Allen & Scotten, 2016: 117). Iran has continued to cooperate with the PUK more than with any local political group in the KRG to date.

The Iranian and Iraqi governments signed a memorandum of understanding concerning Iraq's exports of Kirkuk's oil to Iran, but the KRG did not accept this agreement. The argument by the KRG was that unilateral decision on Kirkuk oil fields violated Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution and it also broke the agreement between Baghdad and Erbil (Ali, 2017). In May 2014, the Department of Foreign Relations in the KRG summoned the Iranian consulate in Erbil to condemn the official Iranian consulate statement of, "Iran as the true great home and motherland of the Kurds" and the "Kurdish language as a dialect of the Persian language". Soon afterward Barzani visited Ankara as a geopolitical response to Iran's aggression (Nader, Hanauer, Allen & Scotten, 2016: 120). However, this crisis did not affect their relationship, and in August 2014, bilateral trade reached USD 4 billion annually; hence, the two sides agreed to improve commercial relations with trade and energy ties. Time was a turning point for both sides, and Iran became second largest trade partner of the KRG, after Turkey (Ali, 2017: 7).

In the wake of the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Iraqi territory, Iran not only supported the US ally, Kurdish Peshmerga militia, with arms and advisories, but also the Shia-led Iraqi national army, Mehdi Army of Muqtada Sadr, and other Shia-led mass army groups in Iraq against the ISIL (Karataş, 2021: 3; Saikal, 2016: 26). Iran backed Kurdish fighters with weaponry and intelligence information, which the western countries had not provided them with in order to fight against the ISIL. As stated by President Barzani, "Iran was the first state to help us and it provided us with weapons and equipment" (Middle East Eye, 2015). The support of Iran was vital for the Iraqi Kurds to protect themselves from the ISIL attacks. This also created suitable opportunities for Iran to increase its interests and influence in the KRG and all of Iraq.

On 22 June 2015, the PUK and Gorran (Movement for Change) invited the Iranian Consulate General in Erbil for a meeting and simultaneously, the PUK and Gorran tried to offer a draft law about the restriction of presidential power and suggested for presidential election in the KRG. The party of Barzani, the KDPI, did not attend this negotiation and protested their attempt and the Iranian's influence over the PUK and Gorran. Barzani also described this event as a coup attempt. These developments led to a possible confrontation between the KDP and the PUK (Duman, 2015). The advancement of the ISIL towards Erbil gave Iran an appropriate opportunity to penetrate into the KRG, as it had in other parts of Iraq. Since then, Iran has had long-term policy towards the pro-Barzani and anti-Barzani groups in the KRG. Iran preferred to engage with all groups in the KRG and announced that it supported Barzani, despite his policies against Iran and close relationships with Turkey (Mustafa, 2016: 6).

Simultaneously not only did Iranian politicians back the leadership of Barzani, but the leader of the Quds Forces; Commander Qassem Soleimani also backed Barzani's position in Iran, despite the critique of the PUK leaders (Berman, 2016). Moreover, there was division in the KRG about the Iranian Nuclear Deal with the P5+1 states. While some of the officials and experts believed that it would increase the influence and interests of Iran in the KRG, others believed that the deal would bring some opportunities and stability to the KRG and Kurdish people in the Middle East (Salih, 2015). The rapid advance of the ISIL terrorists in Iraq gave the Kurds, who had the desire to gain independence, more of a chance than they had ever had in the history of the Middle East. The Iraqi Kurds were able to gain control of some disputed areas again, such as the oil city of Kirkuk (Cengiz, 2014).

Independence and the Kurdish Referendum in Iraq and Iran's Response

In June 2017, in the wake of Barzani's announcement that the Kurdish independence referendum decision would be held on September 25, this brought various reactions from different kind of Iranian officials. Many of whom urged them to give up the referendum decision and encouraged them to maintain Iraq's unity and territorial integrity. Some officials, such as Ahmad Khatami, Tehran's Friday Prayer Imam, said that an attempt to hold an independence referendum in Iraq implied the wish of the USA to create a second Israel in the Middle East. Iran also talked with Turkey, a significant neighbor of the KRG, to undertake common policy against Erbil and they started mutual official visits (Sinkaya, 2017). While Iran allied itself with the PUK in KRG on many points, relations with the Gorran Party also grew fast with Iran against the KDP.

Iran has other concerns over Kurdish independence in Iraq. Iran's two regional rival countries, Turkey and Israel, could possibly benefit and gain the most leverage over an independent Kurdistan against Iran's geopolitical influence. As for Barzani, he also argued that this referendum would bring a de-jure proclamation of Iraq's

present division among the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds. He also called upon the regional and international community leaders to support his independence program (Vatanka, 2014). Iranian officials responded to this attempt toughly and criticized Barzani's decision to support the idea of the dismemberment of Iraq. Tehran's concern over the Kurdish independence decision, was its probable effects on the Iranian Kurdish armed opposition groups, which were located in Iraq, to encourage them to gain autonomy in Iran's sovereign territories (Nader, Hanauer, Allen & Scotten, 2016: 102).

According to the Iranian official foreign policy, Iraq should remain unfragmented, because the disintegration of Iraq will create some problems in favor of Iran in the Middle East. First, the loss of a strategic and influencing ally, as intact Iraq. Second, an independent Kurdistan will likely be closer and much more dependent on Turkey than Iran. Third, an independent Kurdish state may easily turn rebellious Iranian Kurds against Tehran (Gourlay, 2016: 122–123). A unified Iraq will increase Iraq's ability to control balance and influence in the region. While in the case of the divided Iraq, within three regional parts, this will increase the expenditures of Iran and the Sunni provinces will create more problems. Also, Iran fears dealing with remapping of the Middle East, because of the instability affect it will have on the Iranian territory (Marashi, 2014).

Consequently, Iran inexorably opposes the idea of any independent Kurdish state in Iraq. Mainly, Iraqi Kurds have ethno-cultural and linguistic historical links with Iranian Kurds (Kechichian, 2014). During the independence referendum process, not only were economic relations affected, but also the political and security relations. Iran imposed an economic embargo on the KRG and helped Iraqi forces against Peshmerga in order to remove them from disputed lands, such as Kirkuk and some oil fields (Hawramy, 2017). The current circumstances and possible division in Iraq has not only been a concern for Iraq, but also for Iran, Turkey, and Syria, because they are sharing the same ethnic problems and ambitions of independence causes a threat on their borders.

In the wake of the failed Kurdish independent referendum, Iran pushed Abadi to move closer to the Kurds and also decided to reopen the land borders in order to resume trade with the KRG, which is vital, not only for Iran, but also for the Iraqi Kurds. Both sides normalized relations and opened new chapters for future relations (Hawramy, 2017). During the 4th Economic Conference in Erbil, Nechirvan Barzani, the Prime Minister of the KRG, mentioned that the two sides had solved their disputed issues and sought to improve relations again. He also pointed out that annual total trade between Iran and the KRG reached USD 6.5 million. He also said that the sides tried to reach a decision to open a free trade zone at the Parwez Khan border crossing with Tehran (Ali, 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, it showed that the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds have tactical relations rather than strategic relations with each other. However, these relations are highly variable and fragile depending on the specific conjuncture. Before the establishment of the KRG, bilateral relations somehow occurred regarding their competition over Baghdad. After the 1958 coup, Iran established its Iraqi Kurdish policy as a useful instrument in order to harm the Baghdad's regime. In the same way, Baghdad's government used the Iranian Kurds to weaken Tehran not only before but also after the revolution. This paper demonstrated that the Kurds were the first to be sold out as pawn in order to sit at the diplomatic table and negotiate over between Iran and Iraq. Therefore, it can be said that bilateral relations between Iran and Iraqi Kurds are far from being long-term and stable.

Iran paid close attention to the KRG after 2003 because of the delamination of the separatist Kurds in the region and to improve economic and political relations. Although, Iran has primarily had deep links with the Shia groups in Iraq, but also Tehran has had fluctuating relations with the Iraqi Kurds for many years. As for the KRG, it has maintained the neutral policy between Iran and its regional and global rivals in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and the USA. Since the KRG has a long cross border area and growing economic ties with Iran, it is not willing to be part of the attrition war in the region. However, under some crisis periods, such as the presence of the PJAK in the KRG and the independence referendum attempt have greatly damaged the relations and trust of the actors with each other. As discussed in the study, the constant foreign policy of Iran towards Iraq is to maintain its territorial integrity and restrain separatist movements from dividing Iraq into ethnic and sectarian areas. Iran wishes to see the KRG as an autonomous unit within Iraq, and even semi dependent on Iran, but not as a fully independent state. If the case of an independent Kurdistan comes true, it will bring vital problems to Iran and encourage other separatist ethnic and regional groups towards the partitioning of Iran. Consequently, Iran would like to try to penetrate Kurdish groups in Iraq and wish to use their presence not only in favor of Iran's interests but also against Tehran's regional rivals' influence in Iraq. Therefore, it is more accurate to define Iran-Iraqi Kurds relations on tactical, pragmatic and temporary levels in the regional politics.

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Destek ve teşekkür

Çalışmada herhangi bir kurum ya da kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır.