

# Ankara, Erbil, Baghdad: Relations Fraught with Dilemmas

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## Abstract

The triangle of relations between Ankara, Erbil and Baghdad has undergone a real revolution in the last few years. While for the greater part of the 20th century Ankara's partner was Baghdad now it has become Erbil. Indeed, the dramatic change covers various economic, cultural and political spheres. This essay seeks to answer the following questions: What was the nature of the relations between Ankara and Baghdad before the shift? What is the explanation for the change among the three partners of the triangle? What is the role of the US in this change? To what extent are the changes tactical and to what extent strategic? This essay argues that there was a paradigmic shift among all players; that in this shift Turkey appears to be the initiator, the KRG the activist and Baghdad the reactive partner; and finally that all players having had to choose between two evils are now on a horn of a dilemma regarding the possible outcomes of their choice. The state of turmoil in the region, the changing alliances among the different players in the Middle East and the rise of the Sunni-Shi'i divide only serve to accentuate these dilemmas.

**Keywords:** Paradigmatic shift, dilemmas, triangle of relations, the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraqi War, The American withdrawal

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## Ankara, Erbil, Bağdat: İkilemlerle Dolu İlişkiler

### Özet

Ankara, Erbil ve Bağdat arasındaki ilişkiler üçgeni son birkaç yıl içinde gerçek bir devrim sürecinden geçmiştir. 20. yüzyılın büyük bir bölümünde Ankara'nın ortağı Bağdat iken, günümüzde Erbil olmuştur.

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tur. Aslında bu büyük değişim çeşitli ekonomik, kültürel ve siyasi alanları da kapsamaktadır. Söz konusu çalışma şu sorulara cevap aramaktadır: Değişimden önce Ankara ve Bağdat arasındaki ilişkiler ne tür bir yapıya sahipti? Bu ilişkiler üçgenin üç ortağı arasında yaşanan değişim nasıl açıklanabilir? Söz konusu değişimde ABD'nin rolü nedir? Yaşanan değişimler ne ölçüde taktiksel, ne ölçüde stratejiktir? Bu çalışma tüm aktörler arasında bir paradigma değişimi olduğunu; görünüşe göre bu değişimde Türkiye'nin öncü, KBY'nin aktivist, Bağdat'ın ise tepki gösteren taraf olduğunu; ve son olarak da kötünün iyisini seçmek zorunda olan bütün aktörlerin tercihlerinin muhtemel sonuçları konusunda büyük bir ikilemde kaldıklarını savunmaktadır. Bölgedeki çalkantılı durum, Ortadoğu'daki farklı aktörler arasında değişen ittifaklar, ve Sunni-Şii bölünmesindeki artış söz konusu ikilemleri ön plana çıkarmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Paradigma değişimi, ikilemler, ilişkiler üçgeni, 1991 Körfez Savaşı ve 2003 Irak Savaşı, ABD'nin çekilmesi

أنقرة، أربيل، بغداد : علاقات ملينة بالثنائية  
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**المخلص :**

في السنوات الأخيرة خضعت العلاقات الثلاثية بين أنقرة - أربيل - بغداد لعملية ثورة حقيقية.

فبينما كانت بغداد هي الشريك لأنقرة خلال الجزء الأكبر من القرن العشرين ، أصبحت أربيل اليوم هي الشريك لأنقرة. في الواقع أن هذا التغيير الكبير يشمل الميادين الاقتصادية والثقافية والسياسية المختلفة أيضا. إن هذه الدراسة تبحث عن أجوبة للأسئلة التالية : ما نوع بنية العلاقات بين أنقرة وبغداد قبل التغيير؟ كيف يمكن تفسير التغيير الذي حدث بين شركاء المثلث الثلاثة؟ ما هو دور الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في هذا التغيير؟ ما هو مدي التكتيكية والاستراتيجية في هذه التغييرات؟

وتدافع هذه الدراسة عن الرأي القائل بأن هذه التغييرات عبارة عن تغير باراديكمي بين الممثلين جميعهم، وأن تركيا- طبقا لما هو ظاهر- هي الرائدة والاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني هو الناشط أما بغداد فهي الطرف التفاعلي في هذا التغيير وأن جميع الممثلين الذين هم مضطرون لإختيار أحسن السيئات ظلوا - فيما يخص النتائج المحتملة لإختياراتهم- في ثنائية كبيرة . إن الوضع المضطرب في المنطقة، والاتفاقات المتغيرة بين مختلف الممثلين في الشرق الوسط وتفاقم الانقسام السني - الشيعي، كل ذلك يجعل الثنائيات المذكورة في المقدمة.

**كلمات مفتاحية :** تغير الباراديكما، التناقضات، مثلث العلاقات، حرب الخليج لعام 1991، حرب العراق لعام 2003، الانسحاب الأمريكي.

At the beginning of 2013 a new book was published in Turkey under the title *Yeni Komşumuz Kürdistan (Our New Neighbor Kurdistan)*.<sup>1</sup> This very title represented the revolution that the Turkish-Kurdish-Iraqi triangle has undergone of late. First of all the Turkish author Simla Yerlikaya is not reluctant to use the term Kurdistan which only a few years ago could have sent her to prison in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Second, by referring to Kurdistan, namely the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as neighbor it is implied that this neighbor is no longer the Iraqi state but the Kurdistan entity in Iraq. Presented in this manner, this entity does not seem to pose a threat to Turkey any more but rather present opportunities. Though not an official publication, Yerlikaya's book does reflect the changing approach in the higher echelon of power in Turkey towards its neighbor. While for the greater part of the 20th century Ankara's partner was Baghdad now it has become Erbil. Indeed, the dramatic change covers various economic, cultural and political spheres.

This essay seeks to answer the following questions: What was the nature of the relations between Ankara and Baghdad before the shift? What is the explanation for the change among the three partners of the triangle? What is the role of the US in this change? To what extent are the changes tactical and to what extent strategic? This essay argues that there was a paradigmatic shift among all players; that in this shift Turkey appears to be the initiator, the KRG the activist and Baghdad the reactive partner; and finally that all players having had to choose between two evils are now on a horn of a dilemma regarding the possible outcomes of their choice.

### **The cooling of relations between Ankara and Baghdad**

Historically speaking there was a kind of natural alliance between Ankara and Baghdad. Indeed, Baghdad's relations with Ankara were the smoothest and the least troubled of all its other neighbors. These relations were based on various common denominators: Common economic and geopolitical interests; common internal enemies, namely the Kurds and at the time also external rivals such as Syria and Iran; as well as common ideological and political

1 Simla Yerlikaya, *Yeni Komşumuz Kürdistan*, (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2013).

2 In 1995 a female Kurdish human right lawyer, Eren Kesken, was sentenced to three years imprisonment because she had used the term Kurdistan in one of her articles. Heidi Basch Harod, "Kurdish Women of Turkey: Rewriting Their Historical Legacy". (MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2013).

affinities. Thus, even though the regimes in both countries declared themselves to be secular and opposed to political Islam there was still strong Sunni bonds between the governments of the two states which were led by Sunnis until 2003. In certain periods, the two states also shared a pro-western orientation.

This partnership found expression among other things in Saadbad Pact of 1937 and Baghdad Pact of 1955. Similarly, during the Iraqi–Iranian war (1980–1988) the two parties signed a hot pursuit agreement against the Kurdish Turkish Partiyê Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK). Economically speaking, Iraq and Turkey built the strategic oil pipeline which became active in 1977 and which was the only outlet to Iraqi oil during the crucial years of the war up until 1991. Iraq's total dependence on the Turkish outlet was due to the closure of the pipeline to the Shatt al-Arab immediately at the flare up of the war in 1980 and the closure of the Iraqi-Syrian pipeline by Damascus in 1982. On the whole, economic relations between Iraq and Turkey flourished during the war and were beneficial to both. On the political level, it can be argued that during the 1980s there were also certain affinities between the two governments that reached power by way of a putsch and militarized their societies in one way or another.

The gradual cooling of relations between Ankara and Baghdad began in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war after which at each new phase another building block of the ties collapsed with relations reaching their nadir by 2013. The catalyst for this development was the American two wars on Iraq in 1991 and 2003, however, internal processes in each part of the triangle accounted for the tectonic change.

The first component to be severely hit was economic relations. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Turkey joined the allies in their sanctions against Iraq by closing the strategic oil pipeline to Ceyhan in Turkey. In fact Turkish president Turgut Özal took the initiative by cutting off Iraq's pipeline to Turkey even before President George Bush asked him to do so.<sup>3</sup> This move caused a severe blow to Iraqi economy but it hit Turkey as well. At the same time Turkey allowed for smuggled oil emanating from the KRG to

3 Morton Abramowitz, "Remembering Turgut Özal: Some personal recollections", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No.2, 2013, p.40.

reach Turkey by way of tankers. Even though economically speaking this was far from compensating Ankara for the loss of dividends from the closed Iraqi pipeline, the move nonetheless necessitated direct ties between Turkey and the KRG thus granting the latter certain legitimacy.

The second building block suffered a blow as a result of the Kurdish uprising, *serhildan*, in the aftermath of the war in 1991 and the concomitant withdrawal of the Iraqi army from the Kurdish region. These two moves brought the Iraqi Kurdish problem to the very door of Turkey. For one thing, as a result of the uprising about half a million Iraqi Kurds flocked to the Turkish borders in an attempt to find refuge in Turkey from the Iraqi army. For another, the withdrawal of the Iraqi army suggested that Iraq was no longer the master of the common borders between the two countries which meant that Ankara had to deal directly with the KRG in order to avert the spillover effects of these developments into Turkey. The direct dealing with the KRG was all the more pressing since the upheavals in the region enabled the PKK to further enlarge its bases inside the Iraqi Kurdistan region while they also helped enhance ties between Iraqi and Turkish Kurds. Little wonder then that Turgut Özal, the Turkish President at the time, was behind the idea of a safe haven for the Kurds of Iraq which allowed for the return of the Kurdish refugees to their home but at the same time gave birth to the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

The Gulf war of 2003 and the rise of the Shi'is to power in Iraq, caused gradual estrangement between the governments of Ankara and Baghdad. This was no coincidence as at almost one and the same time the two governments which came to power had unambiguous religious inclinations. Thus, for the first time in modern history the two governments in Ankara and Baghdad had conflicting world view on Islam: The AKP government in Turkey was Sunni and the government in Baghdad was led by the Shi'i majority. The Turkish journalist Semih Idiz described the new development saying that Turkey was witnessing Islamization and Sunnification of its foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> The fact that this trend coincided with the Islamiza-

4 Özal's policy fit in well with his opening towards the Kurds of Turkey. For Özal's being "the forerunner of the Kurdish issue", see, Cengiz Çandar, "Turgut Özal twenty years after: The man and the politician", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15., No.2, 2013, pp.32-34.

5 Semih Idiz, *Al Monitor*, 3 March 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/akp-sunni-foreign-policy-turkey-sectarianism.html>

tion and Shi'ization of Iraq's foreign policy turned the estrangement between the two parties almost inevitable.

It was true that as late as March 2011 Erdoğan came on a visit to Iraq which included Erbil, Baghdad and Najaf. Though the visit to Najaf was indeed unusual for a Sunni Muslim leader, it still did not manage to bridge the growing gap between the two governments in Ankara and Baghdad. Nor did the policies of Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, make relations any easier. Maliki's growing authoritarian tendencies and his ongoing policies to isolate the Sunni community and marginalize the Sunnis in his coalition government only increased the Sunni-Shi'i divide between Ankara and Baghdad. Adding fuel to the fire was Erdoğan's support in the 2010 Iraqi elections to al-'Iraqiyya, the Sunni list, against that of al-Maliki. Erdoğan went on to give refuge to one of the leaders of this party, Tariq al-Hashemi, against whom the Maliki government issued death punishment. This is another example of how Turkey initiated certain moves against the central government in Baghdad to which the latter was mainly reactive.

The two other developments which accelerated the pace of estrangement between Ankara and Baghdad were the upheavals in Syria which started in March 2011 and the final withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq at the end of 2011. Following the withdrawal of the American forces there started a strong competition between Ankara and Tehran to fill the vacuum left by the US. And while Iran deepened its penetration into the Arab part of Iraq, Turkey did so in the Kurdish part. Furthermore, due to religious affinities between the Iraqi and Iranian governments there was for the first time in decades a shift in Iraqi world view and orientation. While until 2003 Baghdad looked at Ankara as a kind of strategic depth against Shi'i Iran, now Baghdad began to view Iran as a strategic depth for facing a hostile Sunni neighborhood which was reluctant to grant real legitimization to a Shi'i-led government.

It seems, however, that the major factor that put Ankara and Baghdad at geopolitical loggerheads were the upheavals in Syria. While Ankara became the pioneer in seeking to oust its erstwhile ally Bashar al-Asad from power, Baghdad joined the Iranian wagon by allying itself with the Syrian Ba'th regime. Here too, the sectarian divide played an important role. While Ankara granted all out support to the Sunni Syrian opposition, Baghdad facilitated support to

the Alawite government in Damascus with its pro-Shi'i tendencies. A Shi'i Iraqi minister even went as far as to declare that the support which Turkey granted to the rebels in Syria was tantamount to a declaration of war on Iraq because the sectarian struggle in Syria might spill into Iraq and endanger it as well.<sup>6</sup> This shift in discourse and practice is all the more ironical since after the 2003 Iraqi war it was Syria who was the main exporter of terrorist activities into Iraq.

To sum up, all these parameters demonstrate severe erosion in the Baghdad-Ankara relationship which shifted the weight of Turkey's foreign policy priorities towards Erbil. Meanwhile, deep changes have taken place in the KRG too which have facilitated Turkey's dramatic shift.

### **Evolution in the Kurdish camp**

While the 2003 War severely destabilized the central government in Baghdad, brought to the surface the Sunni-Shi'i divide and wrought havoc to the economy, different dynamics were at work in the KRG where a quasi state has been emerging. Analyzing the political system in Iraq, political scientist Aram Rifaat suggested that in that country there were two quasi states, the Kurdish and the Iraqi one, with the main difference between them being that the former lacked recognition which the latter did have. Regarding the quasi state, Rifaat mentions four major elements characterizing such entity: a process of nation building; militarization of the society and the establishment of an army independently from the existing state; weakness of the state which brings about a change in the balance of power between itself and the quasi state; and finally the existence of external patronage.<sup>7</sup>

Examining these criteria it is doubtful that one can talk about Iraq as a quasi state, rather it is a failed state. However, the Kurdish entity certainly fits this model because the four elements do exist there. The nation-building process has been accelerated since the 2003 War including all the trappings of an independent entity

6 *Hurriyet Daily News*, 27 February 2013. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/rebel-win-could-spread-war-iraq.aspx?pageID=238&nid=41979>

7 Aram Rifaat, "The Kurdish and Iraqi Counter-Quest for Nationhood and the Transformation of Iraqi Kurdistan into a Quasi-State" (PHD Thesis, University of Adelaide, 2012), pp. 226-231.

both on the political level such as an independent parliament and government and on the symbolical level such as an anthem and a flag. Regarding the criterion of militarization the KRG has turned the guerrilla force, the peshmerga, into an army with some 200,000 soldiers<sup>8</sup> and heavy arms which included “a large fleet of Russian-made warplanes left from the Saddam era”<sup>9</sup> as well as tanks which were taken as booty from the two wars of 1991 and 2003.

The weakness of the central government needs no elaboration. Suffice it to mention that Baghdad has lost control altogether on the Kurdish region even though the system is a federal one.<sup>10</sup> Thus, on paper Iraq is still the sovereign in the Kurdish region but in practice it is not. The weakness of the Iraqi government was demonstrated in its recent call on the KRG to hand over the warplanes and tanks at its disposal if it wanted to remain “within a united Iraq”. However, not only did the KRG ignore the call but it even went on to purchase new weapons.<sup>11</sup>

As to patronage it is quite paradoxical that in the last few years Turkey has assumed the role of patron of the KRG or may be better said its main lifeline. Seen from a historical perspective this region which represented the vilayet of Mosul under the Ottomans was indeed naturally linked to the northern part of the Ottoman Empire and the Jazira rather than to the vilayet of Baghdad and Basra.

In addition to the four criteria mentioned by Rafaat one should add two other important ones which highlight the autonomous disposition of the KRG, namely foreign relations and economy. Even though foreign relations should have been the exclusive domain of the central government, in the unique federative system which has evolved in Iraq the Kurdish region is conducting its own foreign relations almost independently from Baghdad. This is evident in the consulates which many countries have established in Erbil and which function as embassies in all but name.<sup>12</sup> The frequent visits

8 *Kurdnet*, 17 January 2011. <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/1/state4537.htm>

9 *Press TV*, 29 April 2012. <http://www.presstv.com/detail/238746.html>

10 Illustrating the loss of Iraqi sovereignty over the Kurdish region are the checkpoints which serve as a kind of border line between the Arab and Kurdish part.

11 *Press TV*, 29 April 2012. <http://www.presstv.com/detail/238746.html>

12 There are 31 such representations in Erbil. For its part the KRG has 15 representations in various countries. <http://dfr.krg.org/p/p.aspx?p=37>

of the President of Kurdistan Mas'ud Barzani to different countries including the US and Russia where he is being accorded a welcome of a head of state, is another indication of this autonomous status. The same is true for all the other Kurdish officials who have become persona grata in many of these countries. Similarly, many countries and companies feel at greater ease to cut deals with Erbil rather than with Baghdad because the KRG is more stable, prosperous and secure. In the case of certain Arab countries the antipathy towards the Shi'i-led government in Baghdad adds another incentive for maintaining relations with the Kurds.

The economic realm is even more intriguing because of the huge oil and gas resources which were found in Kurdistan region and which turned them into the main bone of contention between Erbil and Baghdad. The KRG's independent policy is evident in its deals with various firms and companies which more often than not bypass the central government's injunction. Even more dangerous from the central government point of view is the new pipelines which are being built in full steam in the KRG and which, when completed, may grant the KRG economic autonomy and thus accelerate the pace of political independence.

### **Turkey's changing conceptualization**

Under the AKP government which first came to power in 2002 there were dramatic changes in this party's perception of the Kurdish issue in Turkey which in turn had its repercussions on Ankara's ties with the KRG. And vice versa, the dramatic changes in the KRG had repercussions on the domestic Kurdish issue in Turkey, moving Ankara to articulate a new policy towards the Kurds.<sup>13</sup> Generally speaking, the domestic Kurdish issue has always been an important component of Turkish foreign policy but in the last decade this factor was accelerated significantly so that the domestic Kurdish issue became intertwined with the external one in a way that they cannot be separated any more. Anyway, the changing paradigm in Turkey's approach to the KRG can be summarized as follows: while in the past the KRG was perceived as part of Turkey's internal Kurdish problem in the last few years the KRG came to be perceived as a partner to the solution.

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<sup>13</sup> For the Kurdish angle see, Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Paradoxically enough, in its deeds and misdeeds the AKP government contributed immensely to the establishment and flourishing of the KRG. By not permitting the allies to attack Iraq from its lands in 2003 Ankara enabled the KRG to seize this golden opportunity to consolidate its quasi state and put itself on the regional and international map. First, the KRG managed to develop open relations with external powers most importantly the Americans. Second, it proved its loyalty and prowess when it helped occupy the northern part of Iraq and later also in establishing the new Iraqi government. Similarly it proved its importance to the US in comparison to Turkey and forced the latter to accept the KRG as a *fait accompli*. Indeed, the AKP's approach became now the old dictum: "if you cannot beat your enemy, join him."

Concurrently there were important changes vis a vis the Kurds in Turkey itself. In its drive to weaken the military and win the Kurdish vote, the AKP initiated a new approach to the Kurdish issue which was not based solely on military means.<sup>14</sup> The "Kurdish opening" of 2009 which purported to solve the Kurdish issue by peaceful means was just this program. It seems that it was no mere coincidence that the "Kurdish opening" in Turkey coincided with the new opening towards the KRG. Ankara's double track policy was meant to marginalize and neutralize the PKK at home while also using the KRG's good will in order to contain the PKK whose bases are in the KRG. However, while the internal track failed to materialize at least until 2013 the external one succeeded beyond expectations. While until 2008 Turkey perceived the Kurdish entity as a great danger to itself, from that period on Ankara began to tilt towards the KRG at the expense of Baghdad. In other words Turkey forged an unwritten alliance with the KRG while dropping the historical close relationship with Baghdad.<sup>15</sup> An illustration of this shift were Mas'ud Barzani's visits to Turkey in three consecutive years 2010, 2011 and 2012 where he was accorded a reception of a head of state and not that of a tribal leader as before.<sup>16</sup> Thus within one year from 2007-2009

14 For an early stage of AKP's experimentation with the Kurdish issue see, Rabia Karakaya Polat, "The AKP and the Kurdish issue: What went wrong?", SETA, *Policy Brief*, May 2008, No. 14.

15 It should be noted though that MIT started secret contacts with the KRG already in 2006 but they came to fruition only in 2009.

16 One indication of the close relationship is Barzani's participation in the AKP Congress on 30 September 2012 where he delivered a speech. *National Turk*, 3 October 2012. <http://www.nationalturk.com/en/applause-for-kurdish-leader-barzani-at-akp-congress-condemned-by-turkish-opposition-26421>. On the other hand, Maliki declined to participate. *Today's Za-*

there was a dramatic shift in the relations from near eruption of military conflict between Turkey and the KRG to one of understanding and close relationship. A Turkish commentator described the change saying: "In the past, Turkey and Barzani had very different relations, but today they meet as two close allies."<sup>17</sup> Another commentator had this to say on the new role of Barzani: "Some time ago he was considered as a local bandit. Now he is considered as statesman."<sup>18</sup>

### Turkey's motivations for the shift

Economic interests were the first trigger for the change and only later were they followed by geopolitical ones. Over time the KRG managed to attract Turkish entrepreneurs whose vested interests in the region turned them into the best advocate for strong relations with the KRG. More importantly the rich oil and gas resources in the Kurdistan region were so attractive to the Turkish government that it was willing to sign agreements with the KRG including for the building of two oil pipelines and one gas pipeline from the KRG over the strong objection of Baghdad. A government whose main pillar of power was economic success did not find it so difficult to change partners especially when in the unstable Arab part of Iraq such relations were far from promising. Thus, within a few years Turkey became the main player in Iraqi Kurdistan using soft power as its main tool for increasing its influence in the region.<sup>19</sup> Numbers speak for themselves: 60% of all the companies active in the KRG are Turkish, employing 50,000 Turks.<sup>20</sup> The volume of trade between Turkey and the KRG reached \$ 9 billion in 2012 equaling that between Turkey and Iran.<sup>21</sup> In this sense there is a shift in the roles of Turkey and Iran who was the Kurds' patron during the 1970s and 1980s.

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man, 2 October 2012. [http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani\\*.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani*.html). Barzani came earlier in April of that year to Turkey where he met the highest officials in the state.

17 *Today's Zaman*, 18 April 2012. <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277894-krq-leader-barzani-visits-turkey-as-alliance-with-iraqi-kurds-deepens.html>.

18 *Voice of America*, 18 April 2012. <http://m.voanews.com/a/179182.html>

19 On Turkey's soft power see, Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The possibilities and limits of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10. No.2, 2008, pp.41-54.

20 By 2010 it was reported that 3200 Turkish firms were active in various areas in the KRG. *Today's Zaman*, 6 July 2010. [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=215263](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=215263)

21 *Today's Zaman*, 2 October 2012. [http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani\\*.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani*.html)

Linked to this is the geopolitical consideration. The stable and prosperous Kurdistan region is now performing as a kind of buffer zone between Turkey and the turbulent Arab part of Iraq. It is also a kind of safety valve against the spread of Shi'ism into Turkey. No less important, the fact that it is Irbil and not Baghdad which is controlling the common border with Turkey turns the KRG into a more important partner for security cooperation along the border and beyond.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the latent and sometimes open competition between Turkey and Iran on spheres of influence in Iraq and elsewhere in the region made the contiguous KRG a natural choice for Turkish influence.

The vision of so-called neo-Ottomanism which was promoted by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu fits well in the new policy of engaging the KRG. Generally speaking this ideology sets to encourage engagement with regions which had been previously under the Ottoman Empire and indeed Davutoğlu was the mastermind behind the opening toward the KRG.<sup>23</sup> Davutoğlu came on a "historic" visit to the KRG in October 2009 where he declared that Turkey could serve as a bridge to Europe for the KRG while the KRG could serve as a gateway to the Gulf for Turkey.<sup>24</sup> In a way this Turkish move for "integrating" the KRG appears as a vindication for the loss of Mosul vilayet to Iraq back in 1925.<sup>25</sup> Ironically enough, the KRG appears to be the only region where the other pillar of Davutoğlu's foreign policy architecture, the "zero problems with the neighbors", is being realized.

Then there was the religious-ideological consideration. As the Sunni-Shi'i divide between Ankara and Baghdad continued to deepen, the religious affinities with the Sunni Kurds made them appear more reliable or pliant partners than Baghdad. A Turkish professor Tayyar Arı maintained that "especially after Maliki's policies in Iraq, it became compulsory for Turkey and the KRG to be in close contact. Maliki's insincere attitude towards Sunnis led Turkey to take more

22 During Mas'ud Barzani's visit to Turkey in April 2012 the two parties discussed common security issues. *Today's Zaman*, 18 April 2012. <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277894-krq-leader-barzani-visits-turkey-as-alliance-with-iraqi-kurds-deepens.html>.

23 The Kurds label it "Mr. Davutoglu policy". *Today's Zaman*, 6 July 2010. [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=215263](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=215263)

24 Kurdistan Regional Government, 31 October 2009. <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?r=223&l=12&cs=02010100&a=32216&cs=010000>.

25 Interestingly, the term "integration" is used by the Turkish but not the Kurdish side reflecting the divergent outlook of the two parties regarding the relations between them.

initiatives towards the Sunni issue.<sup>26</sup> A symbolical reflection of this approach was that Ankara and Erbil cooperated in granting safe haven to Tariq al-Hashemi. It seems therefore that Ankara had to choose the lesser of two evils and in that point of time Erbil appeared the right choice.

Still, of all the other considerations that of the internal Kurdish one tipped the balance in Turkey's decision to open up towards the KRG. The fact that Ankara initiated the opening towards its own Kurds and the KRG simultaneously speaks for itself. For one thing, the KRG appeared a factor that may help contain or rather pacify the Kurds of Turkey. Cengiz Aktar described Barzani's role saying that the Turkish government was trying "to subcontract the solution of its own Kurdish problem to him."<sup>27</sup>

Indeed the KRG, especially President Mas`ud Barzani has assumed an important role in the mediation between Ankara and the PKK in the new phase of the peace process which started in early 2013.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, contributing its own crucial part to the AKP-PKK deal the KRG agreed to the withdrawal of PKK militants to its own region. This move was vehemently opposed by Baghdad which regarded it as an infringement on its sovereignty and a further boost to the KRG's independent foreign policy activities. However, its warning that the withdrawal would threaten Iraq's security and stability went unheeded and the withdrawal took place over Baghdad's objection as had happened in other cases in the past.<sup>29</sup> Iran too was totally opposed to the Turkish-Kurdish peace process for three reasons: First, it feared that the peace process would inspire its own Kurds. Second, that a bolstered PKK in the KRG would bolster Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê ((PJAK), the Kurdish Iranian opposition group which is related to the PKK and which has its bases in the KRG too. Third, that the PKK would assist the emerging Kurdish autonomous enclave in Syria. It was even reported that at a certain point Iran offered military assistance to the PKK if they remained in

26 *Today's Zaman*, 18 April 2012. <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-277894-krq-leader-barzani-visits-turkey-as-alliance-with-iraqi-kurds-deepens.html>.

27 *Voice of America*, 18 April 2012. <http://m.voanews.com/a/179182.html>

28 The new Kurdish process has emboldened the Kurds in Turkey so that in a conference in Diyarbakır in June they referred to themselves for the first time as "North Kurdistan". *Radi-ka!l*, 16 June 2013.

29 Ibrahim Karagül, "Maliki ve PKK korkusu," *Yenisafak.com.tr*, 10 May 2013, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/yazarlar/IbrahimKaragul/malikinin-pkk-korkusu/3762>

Turkey.<sup>30</sup> But this did not work either and the PKK began to fulfill their part in the agreement by withdrawing to the KRG.

With the eruption of upheavals in Syria and the establishment of Kurdish autonomy there in the summer of 2012 the KRG assumed another role in the Turkish perception, namely a possible pacifier of that region as well or as a balancing power to the influence of the PKK there. Even before the takeover, Mas'ud Barzani's visit to Turkey in April of that year centered on the topic of the Kurds of Syria and their possible moves in what they described as post-Assad Syria. In fact Turkey was wary that the Kurds of Syria would declare autonomy or even independence.<sup>31</sup> An indication of these worries was the visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to the KRG immediately after the July 2012 takeover of the Kurdish region in Syria by the Kurds.<sup>32</sup>

All in all the KRG's acceptance of the PKK militants to its region and the role it has been playing in pacifying the Kurds in Syria may in the longer run prove as a balancing tool against possible future Turkish encroachment on the KRG. In other words, its new regional role may grant the Kurds a card vis-à-vis Turkey.

### The American ambiguous role

For the greater part of the twentieth century the US kept aloof from the Kurdish issue in Iraq, one of the main reasons for which was the American unwillingness to antagonize Turkey, its main ally in the region. For indeed the US was extremely sensitive towards Ankara's apprehensions of the Kurdish issue not just at home but in the neighboring countries as well which threatened to have spillover effects on the Kurds in Turkey.<sup>33</sup> Another reason was that the American administration has always prioritized the integrity of the nation-states that had emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War over any other ethnonational consideration. However, developments on the ground in Iraq forced the US

30 Lara Vergnaud, *Middle East*, 9 May 2013. <http://blogs.blouinnews.com/blouinbeat-world/2013/05/09/iraq-rejects-pkk-withdrawal-but-lacks-leverage/>

31 *Voice of America*, 18 April 2012. <http://m.voanews.com/a/179182.html>

32 It should be noted that PM Erdoğan threatened to intervene there "since those terrorist formations would disturb our national peace". *The Kurdish Globe*, 31 July 2012. <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=E2564C82CB3871AD1E5DA4801448F156>

33 It was this consideration that moved the US to keep secret its symbolical support to the Kurds of Iraq in the years 1972-75. See Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012) pp.76-78.

to change its policies, though not its strict concepts. The erosion in the American policy started in the 1991 Gulf War when it decided to establish a “safe haven” region for the Kurds from which then emerged the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. From that time onwards the US became enmeshed in the Kurdish issue in Iraq, prioritizing this time the ethnonational group over the Ba`thi Iraqi state with which it was in a state of war. However, the main turning point in the American policy towards the Kurds took place in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi war in which the Kurds played a pivotal role in the liberation/occupation of Iraq. The Kurds were rewarded by having been granted a leading role in the formation of post-Saddam Iraq as well as with the entrenchment of their autonomy. This American policy towards the Kurds conflicted with its two other concepts, namely preserving the integrity of the nation-state and assuaging Ankara’s fears regarding the spillover effects of the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq on the Kurds in Turkey. Accordingly, in a policy of eating the cake and having it too the US continued to advocate the integrity of Iraq while further empowering the KRG, as well as playing the pacifier between the KRG and Turkey.

This American ambiguous stance is indeed one of the greatest ironies of the unfolding situation in the Turkish-Kurdish-Iraqi triangle. While for the greater part of the last two decades the United States had played the role of pacifier between Ankara and Erbil, in the last few years it has changed its approach by 180 degrees.<sup>34</sup> Now Washington is trying to put brakes on the ever extending relations between Ankara and Erbil warning both of closer relations. However, while the administration continues to stick to the idea of a unified Iraq, a growing number of voices in American think tanks do encourage the administration to change course and support an independent Kurdistan.<sup>35</sup>

The main cause for the official American stance is that it found itself now between the Turkish hammer and the Iraqi anvil: between Turkey which is one of its closest allies in the region and Iraq whom Washington had hoped to turn into a strategic asset and a model of democracy for all the Arab states. Put differently, the American ad-

34 In his first visit to Turkey in April 2009 President Obama called for closer Turkish cooperation not only with the central government in Baghdad but also with the Kurds. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 8 April 2009. [http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/090408\\_turkey\\_update.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/090408_turkey_update.pdf)

35 See for example Michael Rubin’s article quoted in *Press TV*, 14 May 2013. <http://www.pressstv.ir/detail/2013/05/14/303540/us-preparing-for-iraqi-kurds-to-split/>

ministration has been endeavoring to balance between equally failing models of democracy which it had hoped to export to the Arab world: that of post-Saddam Iraq sponsored by President George W. Bush and that of Turkey's AKP sponsored by President Barak Obama.<sup>36</sup>

And while Turkey has softened on the idea of a unified Iraq paying it mere lip service, Washington continues to hope and work for this elusive target. Clearly for all the support which the Kurds had granted the United States, Washington does not want to be perceived as the one which had split Iraq. However, for all of the American endeavors and warnings Ankara and Erbil are going their own way building pipelines which might change the geopolitical map of the region. This development is yet another symptom of the weakening clout of the US in the region as a whole. Its withdrawal at the end of 2011 only served to accentuate this weakness.

### Conclusion

The tectonic changes in the region changed the balance of power within the state system as well as between the state system and the Kurdish subsystem. On the whole all the players are on a horn of a dilemma. As far as Baghdad is concerned if it puts too much pressure on Erbil for toeing al-Maliki's line it might push it to declare independence, if it does not it might lose the support of Shi'is and Sunnis who look with anxiety at the vanishing dream of a unified Iraq. As to Baghdad-Ankara relations they are in such a fragile state that should Baghdad strain them further it might push Turkey to increase its support to the KRG even to a point of supporting independence. Such Turkish stance, however, while might be beneficial economically and strategically can sow the seeds of Kurdish separatism in Turkey. Erbil too has its own dilemmas. On the one hand it needs Turkey as its most likely outlet to the sea. On the other hand a too close relationship with Ankara might risk it becoming a Turkish satellite, loose economic assets in Iraq and expose itself to Iranian threats and manipulations. Already now Iran warns Erbil against forging close relations with Ankara or thinking about

36 For Obama's view of Turkey as a model for the Muslim world, see: Ariel Cohen, "Obama's best friend? The Alarming evolution of US-Turkish relations", *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, BESA, No.100, pp. 16-18. For the failing models see, Ofra Bengio, "Are Iraq and Turkey models for democratization"? *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. XIX, No.3, Summer 2012, pp.53-62.

independence.<sup>37</sup> Nor is the US more comfortable with its choices. American oil companies, Turkey and growing number of states and companies seek to do business with the KRG far from Iraqi control but if Washington gives them the green light it will help break Iraq. In fact, however the US is no longer in a position to decide either way.

As to the question if these changes are tactical or strategic I tend to think that they are strategic because of the economic interests involved, the deepening Sunni-Shi'i divide and the sweeping changes in the geopolitical map in the region. The paradigmatic shifts are also very apparent. Turkey's changing stance towards the KRG can be summed up as follows: While the KRG was considered as part of the Kurdish domestic problem in Turkey, now it is considered as a partner to the solution. As for Iraq while in the 20th century it perceived Turkey as its strategic depth against Iran, after the 2003 War the Shi'i-led government in Baghdad perceives Iran as its strategic depth against a hostile Sunni neighborhood which includes Turkey as well. Regarding the Janus-faced Kurds, in the last twenty years they have been distancing themselves from their Iraqi past while accelerating their movement towards a Turkish oriented future.

The Middle East is now in a state of flux. The upheavals which have engulfed many countries in the region, including its closest neighbors Iraq and Syria did not stop at Turkey's doorstep but came to include it as well. The Taksim-Gezi Park demonstrations which were unleashed in Turkey at the end of May 2013 may prove to be a watershed not just for the future Turkish-Kurdish relations but for the very structure of alliances and axes in the Middle East. The old Turkish-Iraqi alliance has collapsed and so did the decade long Turkish-Iranian-Syrian axis, leaving Turkey with only the KRG as an ally of sort in the Fertile Crescent. If and when Assad's regime falls Turkey might want to further strengthen its relations with the KRG as a counterbalance to probable growing Iranian penetration into Iraq.

The great Arab poet of the tenth century, Al-Mutanabbi, wrote in one of his poems: "The winds blow not to the liking of the ships". Indeed this metaphor suits wonderfully the situation in the Middle East. The winds of change are so strong that the governments in these states cannot but wait patiently until the storm is over. Survival is the name of the game.

37 Pakistan Defense, 17 February 2013. <http://www.defence.pk/forums/middle-east-africa/235610-iran-iraq-s-kurds-don-t-think-about-independence-closer-ties-turks.html>

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