

Analysis

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Summary: The problems between the Iraqi central government and Turkey are due to several factors: Ankara's stance against Maliki's bid for the post of prime minister after Iraq's elections, Turkey's protection and hosting of Hashimi, Turkey's close relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the conflicting approaches of Turkey and Iraq regarding the situation in Syria.

Turkey's Iraq Challenge

by *Hasan Kanbolat*

Introduction

In the days of the Ottoman Empire, the military Mehter Band would process one step backward and two steps forward in its ceremonial march. It was slow, but steady progress. In contrast, recent relations between Ankara and Baghdad have followed a pattern of two steps backward and one step forward.

Ankara offered an olive branch to Baghdad by inviting Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to the ruling AK Party's fourth Congress, which was held in Ankara on September 30, 2012. Nevertheless, the fact that the former general secretary of the Iraqi Islamic Party, Tariq al-Hashimi, whom the Baghdad government had condemned to death and to whom Turkey provided protection, was also invited and that he received great attention in the congress, increased the tension between Turkey and Iraq once again. On October 1, right after the congress in which Maliki had declined to participate, Baghdad made a surprise move, demanding the evacuation of four Turkish military bases that had been deployed in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region for 16 years. The Iraqi government also announced that it would no longer allow Turkey's pursuit of the Kurdistan Workers Party

(PKK) in Iraq. The military bases are quite important for Turkey, particularly in terms of monitoring activities of the PKK. On December 4, 2012, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız, who was on his way to the Kurdistan-Iraq Oil & Gas Conference in Erbil, was denied entry into Iraq and his plane had to land in Kayseri, Turkey. This brief provides the background of this deterioration of relations.

The Recent Past of the Tension between Ankara and Baghdad

The problems between the Iraqi central government and Turkey are due to several factors: Ankara's stance against Maliki's bid for the post of prime minister after Iraq's elections, Turkey's protection and hosting of Hashimi, Turkey's close relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the conflicting approaches of Turkey and Iraq regarding the situation in Syria.

During Iraq's March 2010 elections, Turkey actively supported the Iraqiya List led by Iyad Allawi rather than Islamic Dawa Party led by Nouri al-Maliki on grounds that the Iraqiya List, composed of 20 political parties, was more inclusive and secular than the Islamic Dawa Party, which was



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largely a Shiite block. While Allawi himself is a Shiite, there were Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, and Turkmens on the Iraqi List as well.

It took nine months to form the new government in Iraq and during this time, Maliki felt that Ankara did not want him to be reelected as prime minister. When the government was formed in December 2010, Maliki was reelected and Allawi's Iraqiya List became the opposition party. Since then, problems between Turkey and Iraq have increased dramatically.

After his reelection, Maliki continued to consolidate his control. When first elected, Maliki was, ironically, one of the weakest politicians in the country. He had no tribal support nor did he have a charismatic personality. He was actually elected prime minister of Iraq precisely because he was politically weak. However, in time he has become the strongest politician in the country. During his first term, he took control of the army and intelligence. Later, he gained the support of not only the Shiite groups, but also Sunni Arabs, especially major Sunni Arab tribes living together with Kurds in the regions close to Kurdish-populated areas. During his second term, he has started to eliminate his opposition. By this time, the Iraqiya List had already started losing public support due to corruption, failure to offer real solutions to daily problems, clandestine agreements with Maliki to derive personal economic and political benefits, and internal struggle. Maliki saw this as an opportunity to convert several politicians from Iraqiya to his own party. One of his opponents, Hashimi, had to leave the country and seek refuge in Turkey.

Maliki's last move was forming new military units to maintain the security of the Disputed Territories.¹ He created military forces directly affiliated to the prime ministry under the name of "Tigris Operations Command" in order to "fight against terrorism" in Salahaddin, Diyala, and Kirkuk. By deploying these troops in the Disputed Territories, Maliki increased his power and gained the support of Sunni Arab tribes in these regions.

Maliki's efforts prompted Turkey to assume a critical stance based on its new values-based foreign policy approach in the region. For example, it protected and hosted Hashimi until December 2012, provoking Maliki's furor.

¹ Disputed territories of Iraq are regions defined by the article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq, notably Kirkuk, northern Mosul, Tal Afar, Diyala, Tuz Khurmatu, and Salahaddin.

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Disputed Territories

The Disputed Territories in Iraq are those that Erbil wants to include within the political borders of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, over Baghdad's objections. Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Christians, and many minority communities live in the Disputed Territories. For instance, the Shabak people, who live in approximately 60 villages around Mosul, speak the Shabak language, as well as Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkmen among themselves. Most are Alawite-Bektashi, and one of their sacred scriptures includes directives from Hajji Bektash Wali, who was the founder of the Bektashi order in Anatolia. Some of the Shabaks attend the memorial ceremonies for Hajji Bektash Wali in Ankara, Turkey, each August. The Disputed Territories also include communities identified with Christianity, Yezidis, and various other beliefs, as well as Turkmen-speaking North Caucasians, who were settled in the region by the Ottoman Empire and who have adopted the Turkmen identity.

Iraqi Kurds include the Disputed Territories on their maps of Kurdistan and want to have them officially added, in part because of the oil and gas resources, particularly between Erbil-Kirkuk and Erbil-Suleymaniya. These territories would also add volume and depth to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in geographical terms. Despite ethnic diversity, these regions are heavily populated by Kurds. Moreover, the Kurdish population in these territories has increased after the fall of the Baath regime through ongoing organized settlement. The distance between Kirkuk and Erbil is noticeably shrinking.

How Can the Problem of Disputed Territories Be Solved?

The partition of Iraq has been discussed since 1991. Baghdad and Erbil are increasingly moving away from each other politically. Iraqi Kurdistan wants to become independent by integrating the Disputed Territories within its borders. But the question of the Disputed Territories has been deliberately postponed because neither side is able to impose its position on the other, yet.



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In accordance with the Iraqi Constitution, any provincial council can decide to become an autonomous or federal district. If then approved by the Council of Ministers of Iraq, such a decision is submitted to the Higher Electoral Commission for a referendum. If the majority vote in the referendum is supportive of autonomy, the Iraqi Parliament decides whether or not to grant autonomy, presuming there is no violation of the Iraqi Constitution. In short, it is easier to get blood from a stone than to gain autonomy for a province in Iraq.

Nevertheless, there have been some attempts to establish federal districts in the past. The provincial councils in Diyala, Salahaddin, and Anbar, where the Sunni Arab population is in majority, approved a proposal for autonomy, but did not submit their decision to the government. Although there was a demand for autonomy in Basra, Meisan, and Diqar, all of which have Shiite Arab majorities, their provincial councils have never taken such a decision. While Basra is unhappy with sharing its oil revenue with the rest of Iraq, and there are arguments in favor of autonomy there, this has been prevented for now.

While Baghdad, concerned with micro-splits, is against such efforts for autonomy, Erbil does not want the independence of “Kurdistan,” with only three provinces either. The Iraqi Kurdistan Region desires full independence only with the Disputed Territories included in its borders. This is an end that Baghdad would never accept and that could lead to a military conflict. On the other hand, neither Baghdad nor Erbil has any appetite for military conflict. Instead they use the tension to consolidate their political power in their own territories. It is also unlikely that the United States would allow open conflict between Erbil and Baghdad. Therefore, it seems like this problem will linger, along with bombing attacks and assassinations, the perpetrators of which are an open secret.

Against this backdrop, Ankara’s decision to forge closer ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government and engage Erbil directly is another reason for tension with Maliki.

The differences between Turkey and Iraq over the conflict in Syria is another source of tension. While Turkey openly calls for regime change in Syria and actively supports opposition groups, Iraq allegedly supports the regime of Bashar al-Assad and facilitates the shipment of weapons from Iran to Syria.

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The fact that the sectarian aspect of the civil war in Syria has been brought more to the fore affects the approach of the central Iraqi government, which is under the Shiite control, on Syria. The Maliki government perceives the victory of opposition in Syria as a victory of Sunni bloc in the region, and believes that this possible victory will affect the internal balances in Iraq in favor of Sunnis. It might be suggested that the Maliki government has perceived a greater threat recently following uprisings that broke out in Sunni-populated areas such as Anbar, Mosul, and Seladdin. The fact that Turkey is strongly supporting the uprising in Syria escalates the tension between Ankara and Baghdad. The Maliki government wants to prevent any possible support to Syrian rebels from Sunni-populated areas of Iraq by trying to control the borders. On the other hand, Turkey provides a great deal of support for the Syrian opposition on its border region.

The Syria issue is leading to an escalation of sectarian conflicts both in the country and in the region. This situation is forcing the Maliki government to more closely cooperate with Iran, a country with which the government already has a close relationship, and act against countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which support the Sunni. An Iraq that is closer to Iran means further exacerbating existing problems with Turkey.

Conclusion

The instability caused by the current revolutionary environment in the Arab world poses serious challenges for Turkey.



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The violent conflict in Syria seems to be the most important of these challenges. However, the conflict with Baghdad could turn out to be much more explosive for Turkey. Meanwhile, the United States is trying to sustain good relations with both the central Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The difference between the approaches of the United States and Turkey toward Iraq has so far not been a major challenge between those two countries. However, closer dialogue between them on this issue is still necessary to avoid difficulties in the future.

About the Author

Hasan Kanbolat completed his undergraduate degree in economics at Ankara University and his master's degree in history at Istanbul University. He worked in ANKA News Agency, TİKA (The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency), the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and ASAM (Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies). He is currently the director of Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) and Center for International Relations and Politics (UPAM). In addition, he is a regular columnist in *Today's Zaman* and *Türkiye* newspapers.

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