

Analysis

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Summary: Baghdad and Ankara have recently drifted apart due to domestic dynamics in Iraq and changing regional parameters. In domestic terms, the U.S. withdrawal ended the Shia and Kurdish alliance and revealed the tensions that were postponed by the U.S. policies. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's quest for centralization and nation building clashed with the Kurdish regional government's position to keep its federal rights. Since Turkey encourages secular politics in Iraq and moved closer to the Kurds due to security concerns, Maliki regarded both moves as a challenge to his power and position. In the region, the Syrian crisis has polarized countries depending on their support for either Assad or the Syrian opposition. In this brief, the changing dynamics of Turkey-Iraq relations over the last five years are examined.

Turkey-Iraq Relations: From Close Partners to Adversaries

by Mehmet Yegin and Hasan Selim Özertem

After a short-lived honeymoon, Turkey has been facing serious challenges with the neighborhood to its southeast. Previous close relations were based on economic cooperation and a quest for stability, but the recent popular movements in the Arab streets precipitated a rupture in this policy when Turkey turned its back on authoritarian neighbors and sided with the Arab streets for a healthier long-term relationship.

The repercussions of this change in policy have been manageable for Ankara in its relations with countries farther away from Turkey such as Libya. But among the nearer authoritarian administrations, Syria being the most striking example, the change has created outrage directed toward Turkey. Iraq is also gradually becoming more problematic for the long term due to domestic dynamics in Iraq and developments in the larger region. Notwithstanding Turkish efforts to reach out to all segments of the Iraqi people and diversify its foreign policy tools, Nouri al-Maliki's power grab in the country and support for the authoritarian regimes in Syria and Iran have brought bilateral relations to a precarious position. In this brief, the changing dynamics of Turkey-Iraq

relations over the last five years will be examined.

The Early Phase: Reconstruction of Dialogue Channels

Turkey attempted to prevent the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq with last minute diplomatic efforts. The Turkish government feared a possible fracture of Iraq and resulting deepening instability on its border. Turkey maintained its support for Iraq's territorial integrity after the United States removed Saddam Hussein from power.

Indeed, Turkey is not a country that would benefit from the Iraqi government's collapse. Yet, criticisms that Turkish foreign policy in Iraq was shaped by its security concerns were partially true.

Turkey has pursued a multilayered policy toward Iraq. Turkish businessmen and contractors have already built informal channels between the two countries while Ankara keeps formal channels open. This approach paved the way for a further expansion of relations in the second half of the 2000s. In this context, Mesut Ozcan, Deputy Chairman of the Center for



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Strategic Research under the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues that Turkey began to rely more on diplomacy and economic relations starting in 2009 and expanded its dialogue with leaders of different ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. In other words, Turkey has begun to perceive Iraq as a land of opportunities instead of as a threat from the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) issue.

Turkish engagement with Kurdish and Shia groups in Iraq broke barriers as well, even though Turkey has been relatively timid in its rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds than with Shia groups. First, Turkey avoided official contacts with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and chose to utilize second-track contacts. Unofficial meetings with the KRG were followed by the initiation of official relations, marked by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu and Massoud Barzani meeting in Erbil and Ankara. Consequently, Ankara opened a consulate in Erbil in July 2010.

Furthermore, Turkey contacted Shia leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim, and Ali al-Sistani directly. Meetings between Shia leaders and Turkish leaders took place in both Turkey and Iraq. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, and vowed that “I am neither a Sunni nor a Shia, I am a Muslim” in Baghdad. This statement was crucial since it indicates Turkey’s desire to develop a new rhetoric without sectarian references.

The Second Phase: Ankara-Baghdad Divergence

Turkey wanted Iraq to leave behind ethnic and sectarian divisiveness, so Ankara took a political risk and chose to support Iyad Allawi’s al-Iraqiya rather than Maliki’s State of Law Coalition, with its lingering sectarian tones, in 2010 elections. Even though Allawi received the majority of the votes, he failed to establish a government despite having two more representatives than the State of Law Coalition in the Parliament. The Iraqi governmental crisis ended with

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Maliki preserving his position as the prime minister at the end of nine months of political uncertainty. This result hampered the process of the secularization of Iraqi politics. Additionally, Turkey’s support for Allawi chilled Baghdad-Ankara relations.

Maliki has started to consolidate his position. Apart from being the prime minister, he currently also holds the posts of ministers of defense, interior, and national security himself. Maliki has also substantiated his position in Baghdad through the judiciary.

As the U.S. troops started to withdraw in December 2011, the political arrests started to take place. When the withdrawal was complete, this process accelerated due to the emerging power vacuum. The Tariq al-Hashimi, Saleh al-Mutlaq, and Raffie al-Issawi cases are notorious among these politically motivated prosecutions. In opening lawsuits against the deputy president of Iraq, the government’s top-ranking Sunni Arab official, Maliki accused Hashimi of, among other things, plotting to assassinate him. Hashimi left the capital for first Erbil, then Qatar, and then to Turkey for political protection. Meanwhile, he was sentenced to capital punishment in Iraq five times.

Maliki also pursued centralization policies, mainly in energy and security, to expand Baghdad’s control while trimming the federal powers of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Taking advantage of the existing ambiguities in the Iraqi constitution, the regional government had signed contracts for energy development projects with international companies. Being uncomfortable with these moves by Erbil, Baghdad tried to intimidate the companies by putting them on a blacklist that prevents further bidding for energy projects.

Moreover, due to a dispute regarding payments between Baghdad and Erbil, oil exports from the KRG were suspended in the summer of 2012. At the same time, Turkey has begun to trade with Erbil, with trucks carrying Kurdish oil to Turkish ports in return for refined oil from Turkey. Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh issued a stern warning to Turkey about the oil trade, calling it illegal. Later, Baghdad canceled Turkish oil company TPAO’s contract in southern Iraq.



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Beyond energy issues, the Maliki administration started to pressure the KRG to put Peshmerga (armed Kurdish) forces under the Iraqi army's control. This controversial issue was not a problem during the post-war reconstruction period because Maliki chose to turn a blind eye to the issue when the Kurds were aligning with him. Not surprisingly, Erbil did not welcome this new development, particularly when Baghdad started to claim that it is not constitutionally possible for the federal government to release funds for Kurdish troops.

The debate on the formation of Iraqi security forces is not limited to Baghdad's structural concerns. Trying to expand the control of the federal government, Maliki argues that the Iraqi army has a constitutional right of presence, whether it is in Basra in the south or Zakho in the north. To this end, Baghdad formed the Tigris Operations Command in the summer of 2012, in large part to increase military control in Kirkuk, which is a disputed area. Kirkuk holds 10 billion barrels of oil reserves, but its status was not legally defined in the 2005 constitution. Rather, parties agreed to decide its status after a census, which has been delayed since then.

Rat Race in Kirkuk

The Kirkuk issue, which for a while was in limbo, has gained prominence on the political agenda following Maliki's pursuit of centralization at the expense of federalism. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Maliki held a cabinet meeting in Kirkuk in May 2012 to show that the city is under Baghdad's control. While the majority of the population in Kirkuk is thought to be Kurdish, the majority of Iraq's Turkmen population is also thought to live there. In this regard, Turkey is very sensitive toward the developments in Kirkuk.

Following Maliki's visit, the Kurds wanted to move closer to Ankara. Davutoğlu visited Kirkuk with Barzani in August 2012. In response, Maliki sent Iraqi troops within 30 kilometers of Kirkuk, which further increased the tension in the country. Maliki's policy of using the Iraqi army this way caused more concern for the Kurds when Baghdad signed weapons deals with the United States to buy F-16 jet fighters and Abrams tanks. The Peshmerga forces have only mechanized vehicles that were inherited from Saddam's regime.

Authoritarianism Abroad: Maliki's Support for Assad

Along with domestic tensions after the U.S. withdrawal, the Syrian crisis became another rupture in Turkey-Iraq relations. Popular movements in the Arab world changed character when they reached the borders of Libya and Syria. Both Bashar al-Assad and Muammar Gaddafi chose to face their publics' demands with hard power. Assad also succeeded in obtaining the political and military support of Russia, Iran, and to some extent China. Maliki rhetorically got in line with Iran and Syria on the issue. In political terms, Maliki also warned the Syrian opposition of "sabotaging" the Syrian state.

Joost Hiltermann, the International Crisis Group's deputy program director for the Middle East, argues that Maliki's tone is linked to his close stance with Tehran. Maliki is also accused of turning Iraq into an Iranian artery, facilitating the transit of logistical support and weaponry to Syria. Thus, while the extent may be debatable, Maliki has positioned himself with the authoritarian regimes. Like Assad, Maliki portrayed Turkey as a foreign threat, promoting propaganda that depicts Turkey as being opposed to Arab interests. Furthermore, the PKK's activities have become more irritating for Turkey when Iraq became a member of the informal coalition supporting Assad, along with the PKK.

In fact, Baghdad's close relations with Tehran have recently begun to feed the perception in Turkey that a strong axis between Iraq and Iran based on sectarian division is being built in the Middle East. The Iraqi prime minister's criticisms of the Erdoğan administration move Turkey closer to Erbil and further away from Baghdad. Recent examples such as the canceling of a Turkish oil company's contract and the preventing of Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz's plane from landing in Iraq further fed this impres-

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sion. There are even claims that Maliki is pushing for the Turkish ambassador to leave Baghdad.

To conclude, Ankara and Baghdad have recently drifted apart due to domestic dynamics and changing regional parameters. The current situation serves the interests of neither Turkey nor Iraq. Good will moves on both sides have fallen short with respect to bringing a substantial change to the stagnant relations. While Iraq is entering an unnecessary dispute with a country that has interests in it becoming united and prosperous, Turkey is losing a pivotal actor in the delicate balances of the Middle East. In this regard, both parties should find ways to reactivate their channels of dialogue for their bilateral interests.

About the Authors

Hasan Selim Özertem and Mehmet Yegin are researchers at an Ankara-based think tank, International Strategic Research Organization (USAK). Özertem's areas of interest are Turkish politics, energy security, and foreign policy. Yegin's areas of interest are Turkish politics, Turkish-American relations, and security.

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