

Analysis

July 11, 2014

Summary: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gains have put the impending political crisis in Iraq on international agenda. Turkey has also found itself at the center of this rapidly unfolding story, once again highlighting its critical position in the region. In line with its search for deeper engagement and multi-dimensionality, two main pillars of its foreign policy, Turkey has so far eschewed a containment policy and sustained its proactive involvement in the region. Despite some isolationist calls for disengagement following the advance of ISIS, Turkey will most likely maintain a selective engagement policy.

Turkey Navigates Iraq in the New Middle East

by Şaban Kardaş

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gains have put the impending political crisis in Iraq on international agenda. Turkey has also found itself at the center of this rapidly unfolding story, once again highlighting its critical position in the region. The crisis overall reiterates the challenges to Turkey's Middle East policies. Though its initial forays into the region under the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) governments took place in favorable conditions, Turkey has since been exposed to the rising tide of instability and risks unleashed by the turmoil, and new developments in Iraq underscore this. In line with its search for deeper engagement and multi-dimensionality, two main pillars of its foreign policy, Turkey has so far eschewed a containment policy and sustained its proactive involvement in the region. Despite some isolationist calls for disengagement following the advance of ISIS, Turkey will most likely maintain a selective engagement policy.

A Retrospective Reading of the Current Crisis

From Turkey's perspective, the way Iraq has been ruled for the last few years has to be revisited to understand

the crisis' root causes. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's policies have largely undone the gains of the post-2006 U.S. strategy, dealing a heavy blow to the chances Iraq had to find a path toward a unified future around the framework provided by the current constitution. Ankara has been warning that Maliki's quest for the monopolization of power alienated not only the Sunni Arabs and Kurds, but also other major Shiite factions. The nascent state-building process was interrupted by his personalization of governance. The resulting governing vacuum enabled different local actors to develop their parochial solutions at the expense of national unity.

Here, the United States also bore a large share of responsibility, if not for its role in Maliki's selection for the first term, but definitely for his second term and the unwillingness or inability to exercise leverage over him since the withdrawal of U.S. forces. At a minimum, the United States had failed to heed warnings that several of Maliki's policies pursued were having divisive effects. To deepen the problem of absent U.S. leadership, U.S. acquiescence to the rising Iranian clout in the country and Tehran's instrumen-

G | M | F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS
BRUSSELS • BELGRADE • ANKARA
BUCHAREST • WARSAW



Analysis

talization of Baghdad in its extended proxy war in Syria also undermined Iraq's fragile foundations.

Turkey and the Crisis in Iraq

Turkey made the correct assessment of the situation in Iraq but could not muster the wherewithal to prevent it from developing. Turkey's Iraq policy has been based on supporting its territorial integrity and assisting in state-building. Turkey also grew concerned about the rising specter of sectarian politics in the region triggered by the Syrian conflict. The proxy wars pursued by Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria had been increasingly engulfing Iraq. Turkey had limited success in its quest for a more determined international response to the Syrian conflict. At the same time, some of Turkey's initiatives have been viewed skeptically by other stakeholders, as the critics argued its relationship with certain actors, such as the Kurds, might have the opposite effect to what was intended.

The evolution of Turkish policy after the Gulf War of 1991 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 shows a great deal of adjustment. Iraq has emerged as major security challenge for Turkey since 1991. Worried about the security risks posed by the instability on its southern borders, Turkey viewed an Iraqi unitary governance structure as the most essential requirement of maintaining that country's territorial integrity. In response to the changing conditions on the ground, however, Ankara acted pragmatically and has moved away from a categorical rejection of any form of administrative autonomy.

The U.S. invasion in 2003 unleashed ethnic and sectarian centrifugal forces that made Turkey's opposition to an embryonic Kurdish state more challenging. Ankara called for national reconciliation and integration of Sunnis and Kurds into the Iraqi mainstream. After its initial resistance to a federal Iraq, Ankara came to acknowledge the nascent government structures in Iraqi Kurdistan and, since 2007-08, the ties between Ankara and Erbil have seen a dramatic improvement. When the position of the Sunnis within the new Iraq came to the fore, Ankara again worked to use its leverage to dampen their discontent. Turkey was thus instrumental in the post-2006 U.S. counter-insurgency strategy in Anbar Province. It reached out the Sunni tribal leaders to integrate them into the mainstream political processes. Similarly, in the run-up to the 2010 elections, Turkey spearheaded the more inclusive al-Iraqiyya bloc,

which emerged victorious from the ballot box. Though Maliki was selected to form a government for a second term after a long bargaining process, Turkey still supported that power-sharing arrangement, given its preference for Iraq's stability.

As in Syria, however, the rapid deterioration of the situation on the ground exposed the limits of Turkey's influence, as it had limited leverage to reverse the course of Baghdad's divisive policies by itself. But it was still able to make important inroads. Having seen the failures of the Iraqi administration in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal, Ankara has openly criticized Baghdad's mistakes, which drew a wedge between the two countries. When Maliki moved to marginalize Sunni politicians, Turkey maintained dialogue with them and even extended protection to Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi when Maliki sought to persecute him. Turkey also sought to bolster ties with the remaining Sunni actors in the system such as the Nujayfis, and opened a consulate in Mosul. Turkey's engagement with the Kurds also empowered that group, helping build northern Iraq economically, which has been the key to its political stability. Turkey, for instance, supported the Kurds' interpretation of the Iraqi constitution regarding the export of oil produced in the areas controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

The Way Ahead and Challenges for Turkey

The instability to Turkey's south will incur some economic costs and put strains on its security. From the immediate concern of saving its citizens to the attacks on the Turkmen-populated areas in Iraq, Turkey now has to work within a new reality of deepening instability along its southern borders. ISIS' advance poses a common threat to many actors, so the discussions have focused on possible international and regional cooperation in fighting this new development. Turkey is critical to this struggle.

However, the fight against ISIS will be complicated by many factors, and Turkey's possible involvement will depend on the collective response. First, defining the target will prove difficult. So far, consensus has emerged among analysts that a loose coalition of ISIS with former Baathists and Sunni tribes has led to the recent advances, and as such we are confronted with a new uprising. If this analysis is correct, a purely military response will be ineffective and a more comprehensive long-term strategy that involves regaining



Analysis

the Sunni population's support and rethinking Iraqi politics is essential.

Secondly, Maliki's role in the current crisis will be a consideration in international reactions. While Maliki seeks *carte blanche* for Iraq's counter-offensive, including military assistance from the West, it will be important to exert constraints on the way the fight against ISIS is conducted. If fighting the current threat is mishandled, it can continue to feed the very same Sunni resentment that has led to the current crisis. The risk of a broader inter-communal conflict around sectarian or ethnic identities, then, will be imminent. Turkey, for its part, warns against sliding into an all-out sectarian war, though its ability to prevent one remains questionable.

The military struggle against ISIS will require strengthening and reorganizing the Iraqi army, putting the undoing of its politicization and thinking about ways for its professionalization back on the agenda. Also, the process of government formation in the wake of the 2014 parliamentary elections might be used as an opportunity to have a fresh look at the problem of governance and state-building. In this process, moreover, there will have to be checks against opportunistic behavior such as turning temporary advances into permanent gains, as in the Kurds' military moves in the disputed territories.

In the short run, the Iraqi army might be capable of defending Baghdad, but pushing back ISIS and regaining control over the Sunni territories will prove difficult. If the military threat can be contained, the critical variable in the medium to long term will be whether the Sunni tribes can be convinced once again — after their bitter experience post-2006 — to work with the central government in Baghdad. In such a scenario, Turkey might potentially be instrumental in reaching out to the Sunni leadership and the Kurds. Ankara acknowledges the demands of Iraqi Kurds for self-determination but it will likely curb their pro-independence rhetoric and urge them to work within a unified Iraq. It reiterated this position during KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's visit to Ankara recently. A recent meeting in Istanbul, where Sunni tribal and religious leaders from Iraq distanced themselves from ISIS but also called for recognition of their plight, is another example of the unifying role Turkey can play in Iraq.

The failure to address these short-term military threats and long-term national reconciliation needs may lead to Iraq's division. Turkey will probably do its best to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity, but given the severity of the crisis, achieving this outcome will depend on a multitude of factors, most notably the willingness and ability of the Iraqi actors and external stakeholders to deter the short-term security challenges and reinvigorate the foundations for long-term unity.

About the Author

Dr. Şaban Kardaş is an associate professor of international relations in the Department of International Relations at TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara. He is also the president of the Ankara-based think tank, ORSAM.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey.