



Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds' Bid for Statehood

By Galip Dalay

Many factors influence Turkey's policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, held on September 25 in defiance of warnings from the Iraqi government and many of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s international partners. Firstmost is Turkey's default position of supporting the territorial integrity of the countries on its southern and southeastern borders. The fact that Kurds almost uninterruptedly populate the belt lying along these borders is one of the main motivations for Ankara to uphold the principle of territorial integrity in its neighborhood so tenaciously. For instance, while any irredentist claims among its Middle Eastern neighbors cause alarm and consternation in Ankara, the same does not apply to its western neighbors. The breakup of Yugoslavia caused little concern — to the contrary, Turkey welcomed the new states. In fact, when the Kosovo provisional government unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008 without even holding a referendum, Turkey was among the first group of countries extending recognition to this new state. The major difference in Turkey's lax approach to state break-up along its western borders and its alarm when it happens along its southeastern borders is due to Turkey's ever-present Kurdish issue.

The “Golden Era” in Turkey–KRG Relations

However, for a while Turkey's default position appeared to be changing, particularly toward the Iraqi Kurds. The thaw in Turkey–KRG relations occurred around 2008. Besides the de-securitization of the Middle East, from Turkey's perspective, and the Kurdish issue, burgeoning economic and trade ties between Turkey and the KRG were major

contributors to a positive turn in relations. In fact, by 2009–2010 Iraq featured among Turkey's top three trading partners. The partnership received a further boost when Turkey sought to resolve its domestic Kurdish issue through peaceful and political means. Despite some interruptions, this policy continued between 2009 and 2015. The sectarianization of the politics of the region and the power of Shia parties and Iranian influence in Baghdad further cemented relations.

During this period, personal bonds between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and KRG President Masoud Barzani appeared to be solid. The level of economic, energy, and political interdependence between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan reached significant levels. Needless to say, that this was an asymmetric interdependence with the KRG more reliant on Turkey. In fact, this created concern in regional capitals like Baghdad and Tehran as well as in Washington. Turkey has been the Iraqi Kurds' gateway to the rest of the world, playing a crucial role in helping Erbil lay the foundations for economic independence from Baghdad. When pro-Iranian former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki cut Iraqi Kurds' share — 17 percent — of the national budget, the KRG tried to make up for this loss by independently selling its oil onto the international market. Despite the opposition of the Iraqi central government, Kurdish oil flows to international markets through Turkey, a major step toward economic sovereignty. During times of economic difficulty, Turkey has also provided much-needed economic support to Iraqi Kurdistan. These



developments generated questions as to whether Turkey had changed its position on the Iraqi Kurdish aspiration for statehood.

Likewise, during the fight with the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Iraqi Kurds effectively acquired most of the territories that were designated as disputed between the central government and Erbil, and which were supposed to be resolved according to Articles 119 and 140 of the Iraqi constitution by no later than December 31, 2007. The more ground ISIS has lost, the more Kurds have recovered what they consider to be part of a projected Kurdistan — claims disputed by the Baghdad government. The KRG has expanded its territory by more than 40 percent as a result of the fight against ISIS. Meanwhile, Turkey has either kept silent or offered low-key criticism of the Iraqi Kurds' territorial expansion. On the top of this, Turkish officials — starting with Erdoğan — changed their discourse over Kurdish ambitions for statehood, which they framed as “an internal Iraqi affair” only two years ago. Many, including the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, interpreted this as Turkey's tacit acquiescence to Iraqi Kurdish independence.

The Independence Referendum: A Stress Test of Relationships

Yet, these expectations proved to be ill-conceived, as Turkey has gradually ratcheted up its opposition toward the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. To scuttle this move, Ankara has pursued, though very belatedly, a policy of active diplomacy. Turkish government officials have paid visits to Iraqi Kurdish counterparts at the foreign minister and chief of intelligence levels to dissuade them from proceeding with this move. Ankara has also engaged with Iran and the Iraqi central government.

However, Turkey's diplomacy was stillborn for two reasons. First, it came too late. Barzani has been voicing his intention of holding an independence referendum for more than a year, and the KRG set the date for the independence referendum on June 7. Turkey embarked on an active diplomacy to dissuade the Kurds from holding the referendum only weeks before the set date of September 25. At this stage, it was no longer palatable for the Iraqi Kurdish

leadership, and particularly Barzani, to accept this demand in terms of domestic political consideration. If accepted without any meaningful concessions from the Iraqi central government (which were not forthcoming), this would have significantly weakened Barzani domestically.

Second, Turkey's plea for the postponement of the referendum was not accompanied by a viable alternative offer either. Though Turkey voiced its readiness to mediate between Erbil and Baghdad on what it framed as legitimate Kurdish demands, it did not put forward any viable and concrete proposal to settle the dispute.

But the question that was on many observers' mind was the following: Given the nature of very close relationships between Ankara and Erbil over the past decade, why has Turkey been so opposed to the Kurdish independence referendum and prospect of Kurdish statehood?

Turkey's Concerns over Kurdish Statehood

First, with the breakdown of the Kurdish peace process within Turkey and the subsequent urban warfare that took place in 2015–2016, the Turkish government began once again securitizing the Kurdish issue, alongside the Middle East as a whole. The AK Party government has done its utmost to change perceptions of the Middle East in Turkey. For a long time, the Middle East was largely regarded through the prism of a security threat. It was seen as the geography of Kurdish separatism, “Islamic radicalism,” and backwardness. Upon coming to power, the AK Party has gradually de-securitized these perceptions of the Middle East through economic engagement. Domestically, this has been accompanied by a new approach to Kurds and the Kurdish issue: adopting a more political and civilian approach rather than a security one.

In recent years, we have witnessed the reversal of this politics of de-securitization, both toward the Middle East and the Kurdish issue. The breakdown of state authority in Iraq and Syria, the rise of extremist groups, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)'s territorial gains in

Syria and Iraq, and the pressure that this has put on Turkey's border and internal security has culminated in a change of approach to the Middle East.

Moreover, the AK Party's alliance with the nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) and its leader Devlet Bahçeli in the run-up to Turkey's April 2017 referendum on an executive presidency seems to have had a significant impact on Turkey's foreign and domestic policy. President Erdoğan and the AK Party are determined to hold onto this alliance in the run-up to Turkey's three fateful elections in 2019. The implication of this — accompanied by the new type of statism that is prevailing in Ankara — would be a regressive “Bahçeli effect” on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. Given the centrality of the Kurdish issue to the political identity of the MHP, it is plausible to argue that in no policy area will the impact of this alliance be felt as strongly as it is on the Kurdish issue and the government's approach to the Kurds outside of Turkey.

As the referendum date approached, the positions of regional and international actors became clearer. At the regional level, Iran and Turkey have emerged as the most vocal opponents of the independence referendum, whereas Israel has become the only vocal proponent of Kurdish independence. Turkey has allied itself with Iran and the Iraqi central government on this issue. Moreover, while some actors tellingly spoke out, for others it was their silence that was notable. Gulf countries have mostly kept quiet on this issue. Saudi Arabia's Minister of State of Arabian Gulf Affairs (and former ambassador to Iraq) Thamer al-Sabhan visited Barzani and offered to mediate between Erbil and Baghdad. This regional picture sheds light on post-Arab Spring regional issues and realignments. The fact that Israel is publicly supporting Kurdish independence and Gulf Arab states are not opposing it seems to be further strengthening the Iranian and Turkish opposition to the independence referendum. This reflects the regional divide that has become more evident with the Qatari crisis. In fact, the recent thaw in Turkish–Iranian relations has been facilitated not by shared interests, rather by shared concerns. The rise of the Kurds of the region tops the list of shared concerns. The same logic applies to the pro-Qatari positions of Turkey and Iran during the Gulf crisis.

Both countries distrusted the intentions of the Gulf Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The above-mentioned factors have formed background for forceful Turkish reactions to the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. Besides strong rhetoric, Turkey has tried to express its dissatisfaction with the referendum through several other means. The Turkish Armed Forces launched exercises September 18 outside the town of Silopi, which sits less than 10 kilometers (6 miles) from Turkey's border tripoint with Syria and Iraq. Turkey's leadership also sent messages that diplomatic, economic, and security measures, which are yet to be specified, would be implemented if the referendum was not cancelled. Turkey even agreed with Iran and Iraq to consider taking “coordinated counter-measures” against the KRG's bid to hold the independence referendum at a trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in New York. However, none of these warnings have dissuaded the Iraqi Kurds from holding the referendum on September 25. Results suggest a high turnout rate (over 72 percent) in the referendum and overwhelming support (over 92 percent) for the independence bid. Turkey has continued to stress that it will take measures if the KRG does not back up on its bid for independence even after the referendum. Erbil's next move remains to be seen.

All this has demonstrated that despite the difficulty of the relationship that it has with Baghdad, Turkey still values the territorial integrity of Iraq more than its close ties with Erbil. The challenge that Turkey faces is that the KRG is well on the way to statehood, though gradually. As the Iraqi Kurds' state-building process has taken an evolutionary form thus far they will continue on the same path toward statehood, for the Iraqi Kurdish leadership has constantly emphasized that holding a referendum will not translate into an immediate declaration of independence. They favor a years-long process negotiated with Baghdad for the declaration of independence. Sooner or later, Ankara will face the real prospect of an independent Kurdistan across its southeastern border. Turkey will be best served if it develops a clear, coherent, sustainable, and working policy on the question of Kurdish statehood in the Middle East.

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