



TURKEY'S CHANGING RELATIONS WITH IRAQ

Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down

Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans

Policy Focus 122 | October 2012





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Published in 2012 in the United States of America by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,
1828 L Street NW, Suite 1050, Washington, DC 20036.

Cover photo: Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iraq president Nouri al-Maliki (courtesy Alsumaria TV).

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1 | Introduction

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2012, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan invited Iraqi leader Nouri al-Maliki to visit Istanbul for his party's upcoming convention, offering a glimmer of hope for bilateral ties that have steadily deteriorated in recent months. Maliki declined, however, citing other travel plans. And so, once again, Turkey's Iraqi guests came not from Baghdad, but from Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This picture is becoming almost commonplace, as the Iraqi Kurds draw closer to Ankara while Baghdad seems to drift further away.

Two regional dynamics have driven this shift. First is the rapprochement between the KRG and Ankara since 2007, initiated by the Kurds as a means of balancing Iranian influence in Iraq and countering Baghdad's centralizing tendencies. To implement this gradual but successful strategy, the KRG offered Turkey various enticements, such as granting major construction projects to Turkish companies (e.g., the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports). For its part, Washington worked tirelessly to promote this rapprochement after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, out of fear of a Turkey-KRG conflict.

The second and more recent factor is regional instability unleashed by the Arab Spring. Ankara is at the forefront of regional opposition to the Assad regime in Syria and has increasingly taken umbrage at Iranian backing for Damascus. Turkey also appears convinced that Tehran has sway over Baghdad. It has therefore come to believe that an Iranian-led Shiite axis is forming to its south, extending from Iraq into Syria. This perspective has led Ankara to look for allies to counter that axis, including the KRG and Iraq's Sunni Arab population.

In addition, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has stepped up its terrorist activities in Turkey, with more than 700 people killed by PKK-related violence over the past fourteen months.¹ In Ankara's view, the Assad regime and Tehran are backing this threat. For example, Turkish deputy prime Minister Bulent Arinc

charged Iran with supporting the August 2012 PKK bombing in Gaziantep,² and reports have leaked of Iranian liaisons with PKK operatives.³ This dynamic is accelerating the Turkey-KRG rapprochement—in particular, Ankara hopes to recruit Erbil in countering the PKK enclave in the Qandil Mountains, adjacent to KRG-controlled territory in northern Iraq.

Meanwhile, these same developments have damaged Ankara's ties with Baghdad. The Iraqi government sees Turkey's direct dealings with Erbil as an affront to its authority, and Ankara's disdain for Maliki has only exacerbated the problem.

The KRG's energy wealth adds another potent ingredient to this mix. Turkey has traditionally viewed Baghdad as the sole interlocutor for energy deals with Iraq, in line with normal international procedures and its reading of the Iraqi constitution.⁴ It continues to emphasize that there has been no change in this policy,⁵ and Turkish energy minister Taner Yildiz maintains that Ankara will seek Baghdad's approval before final agreement on any pipeline deal with the KRG.⁶ Yet this guarantee is uncertain against the backdrop of Ankara's broken relationship with Maliki.

Indeed, these recent business maneuverings could foreshadow a tectonic shift in Turkey's posture toward Iraq. The rapidly shifting regional constellation wrought by the Arab revolutions and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq has battered Ankara's ties with Baghdad. Turkey now faces a host of new challenges, from a resurgent PKK to the crisis in Syria and growing competition with Iran. In this disorderly environment, the KRG is syncing its policies with Ankara's. If this pattern persists, it could spur a rerouting of pipeline flows that matches the broader reorientation of Turkey's strategic relationships with Baghdad and Erbil, with significant implications for U.S. policy.

All in all, Washington's longstanding wish for closer Turkey-KRG ties has come true. While factors such as the souring of Ankara's relationship with Baghdad have spurred U.S. concern that the rapprochement might have worked too well, this dynamic comes with

built-in checks and balances—namely, the KRG's fear of getting too close to Turkey lest it provoke Iran, and Ankara's grave concerns about the fresh PKK campaign along the border with Iraq and Iran. Taking

these elements into account, the Turkey-KRG rapprochement might be reaching a saturation point, though the relationship is likely to remain intimate in the near term.

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2 | The Drift from Baghdad

UNTIL RECENTLY, default support for Baghdad and a structural suspicion of the Iraqi Kurds had been hallmarks of Turkish foreign policy for decades, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq crystallized this outlook. Ankara felt threatened by Kurdish effervescence following the U.S.-led invasion, and a campaign of PKK attacks from Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq added a grim sense of urgency to these concerns. To make matters worse, the Kurds stopped aiding Ankara against the PKK once relieved of the threat from Saddam Hussein. This was a bitter departure from the late 1990s, when Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani helped Turkey counter the PKK in return for U.S. protection from Saddam, provided via Turkish territory and airspace.¹

Turkey responded to the Iraqi Kurds' intransigence with periodic military operations in northern Iraq, striking PKK targets they were unwilling to challenge.² Fearing the rise of Kurdish nationalism, Turkey also sought to undercut their bids for greater autonomy at every opportunity, forging a close relationship with the area's Turkmen community and working to limit Kurdish influence in the contentious Kirkuk region. In response, Barzani—by this point president of the Kurdistan Regional Government—manipulated Turkey's chronic fear of Kurdish separatism by highlighting alleged mistreatment of Kurds in southeastern Turkey.³ As late as 2007, Turkey was blaming the KRG for PKK attacks and threatening economic sanctions against the Kurdish region.⁴ During these tense times, Ankara's animus toward the KRG was so overwhelming that it would not even allow Iraqi Kurdish representatives to enter the country for negotiations.⁵

Under these conditions, Baghdad was the winner by default in the contest for Turkish support. Even though Iraq's central government had little leverage against the PKK, Ankara remained determined to deepen ties with Baghdad, if only out of a belief that strong central authority would act as a counterweight to Kurdish political ambitions. More broadly, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) was animated by its "zero problems with neighbors" foreign

policy, which espoused deeper ties with Iraq, Russia, Syria, and Iran. This impetus resulted in top-level institutional links with Baghdad, culminating in an October 2009 summit where over forty memoranda were signed on issues ranging from strategic security dialogue to trade and energy cooperation.⁶ Such initiatives quickly increased bilateral trade and set the stage for Turkish firms and investors to capitalize on opportunities next door. For instance, Iraq has become the largest market in the Middle East for Turkish construction firms—in the first six months of 2012, over half of their new planned projects in the region were designated for Baghdad-controlled areas of Iraq.⁷

Yet the political dimension of the bilateral relationship was already showing signs of deterioration by the time Maliki sought reelection in 2010. Over the previous four years, his Shiite-aligned government had pushed for centralization—a policy Ankara had supported in principle until Maliki's rule began to take on a troubling authoritarian bent with sectarian overtones. Accordingly, when the rival Iraqiya bloc won a narrow plurality against him in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Ankara saw an opportunity to strike a more cross-sectarian balance in Baghdad. Iraqiya leader Ayad Allawi was a favorite in Turkey due to his Iraqi nationalist, nonsectarian platform—in fact, Ankara had worked behind the scenes to convince Sunni Arab parties to unite under his banner, building on the close ties it had forged with that constituency since Saddam's fall.⁸

But Ankara's pick would not come out ahead in the negotiations to form a government. With apparent U.S. approval,⁹ the parties struck a deal in November 2010 that left Maliki as prime minister in exchange for power-sharing pledges with Allawi's bloc, most of which Maliki did not honor.¹⁰ In addition to placing Ankara in an awkward position, this formula proved shaky almost immediately, with Allawi's supporters accusing Maliki of failing to hold up his end of the deal.

For Turkey, the final straw came the day after the United States officially withdrew from Iraq in

December 2011, when Baghdad issued an arrest warrant for Sunni vice president Tariq al-Hashimi on terrorism charges.¹¹ After a stay in the KRG and a brief trip to Qatar, the fugitive leader accepted Turkey's offer of refuge. He has since been treated to frequent meetings with the Turkish prime minister, president, and head of intelligence,¹² in addition to a generous security detail.¹³ After Interpol issued a "red notice" aimed at facilitating Hashimi's capture, Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay reiterated Turkey's commitment to protecting him: "At this time Hashimi is our country's guest, and we look after our guests."¹⁴ And in late July 2012, Ankara granted residency permits to him and his entourage, allowing them to settle in for a more permanent stay at the Istanbul apartments.¹⁵

As tensions mounted over the Hashimi crisis, Maliki gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal laying bare the extent to which Iraqi-Turkish ties had been strained:

We welcome [Turkey] to cooperate with us economically, and we are open to them, but we do not welcome interference in political matters...Turkey interferes by backing certain political figures and blocs. We have continuously objected to their previous ambassador's involvement in local politics, and officials have admitted their faults.¹⁶

For Prime Minister Erdogan, who tends to personalize foreign policy issues, Maliki's public accusations were taken as a direct affront. Coming on the heels of the move against Hashimi, these statements set the tone for a worsening spat between the two leaders, with

Ankara accusing Maliki of stoking sectarianism and Baghdad reiterating that Turkey was meddling in Iraq's internal affairs.¹⁷ The acrimony sank to new lows in April, when Erdogan called Maliki "self-centered" and accused him of stirring sectarian conflict.¹⁸ In reply, Maliki denounced Turkey's behavior as that of a "hostile state."¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, in May, protestors in Basra burned the Turkish flag and threatened Turkish commercial operations in Iraq.²⁰ Baghdad has officially apologized for these incidents²¹ and had previously sent envoys to Ankara to mend fences in April.²² Erdogan also extended an olive branch by inviting Maliki to attend the AKP's September 30 convention.²³ But Maliki declined the invitation, and a public rapprochement has yet to occur. In fact, the row hardly abated over the summer and fall, as both sides continued to issue diplomatic complaints and engage in symbolic tit-for-tat conflict. In July, for example, Baghdad accused Turkey of violating its airspace and temporarily barred Turkish aircraft from over-flights, citing "technical problems" as justification.²⁴ Iraqi officials are reportedly losing their patience with Turkey's aerial incursions in pursuit of PKK fighters, and Baghdad is hardening its rhetoric against these operations even as Turkey faces a growing number of PKK attacks from bases abroad.²⁵

Had these problems been restricted to bad blood between the two leaders, efforts to mend fences might have gained traction. But the fissures in the bilateral relationship are embedded in the chaotic regional realignment catalyzed by the Arab Spring and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. In this new state of disorder, Baghdad and Ankara are drifting even further apart.

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3 | An Unlikely Entente

PRIOR TO THE UPRISINGS that began to engulf the Arab world in December 2010, Turkish-Iraqi relations fit into a broad regional security architecture that had solidified in the late 1990s. The first pillar in this arrangement was laid down in the 1998 Adana Protocol, in which Syria pledged to cease its support for the PKK.¹ Iran joined the consensus in 2003, going so far as to bomb the PKK camps it had once supported. Tehran hoped that such gestures would improve relations with Turkey and drive a wedge between Ankara and the United States.

Turkey returned these favors by deepening its ties with Damascus and Tehran and staying out of their internal affairs. Thanks to this arrangement, the chaos that consumed Iraq after 2003 did not harm Turkish-Iranian relations or prevent Ankara and Damascus from expanding their economic and social integration. More recently, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad emerged as the dubious victor of Iran's forged 2009 presidential election, Prime Minister Erdogan was among the first world leaders to send congratulations. And in 2010, Ankara conveyed its faith in Iranian goodwill by seeking to broker a nuclear deal and relieve international pressure on Tehran. Meanwhile, relations with Damascus benefited from the personal friendship between Erdogan and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Yet the Arab Spring has demolished the foundations of this consensus. In particular, the bloody crackdown in Syria has prompted Turkey to completely reverse its relationship with the Assad regime, while Iran's active support of its strategic ally in Damascus has put it at odds with Turkey. Even as Ankara sends political and material aid to Sunni rebels in Syria, Iran has deployed military contingents to back Assad's forces.²

The problem of Iranian and Syrian support for the PKK has resurfaced as well. Damascus has apparently resumed its policy of backing the group in order to counter Turkish policies against the regime. In spring 2012, it reportedly allowed some 2,000 members of the PKK's Syrian franchise (the Democratic Union Party, or PYD) to move from the Qandil enclave in northern

Iraq to Syria.³ Recently, Turkish officials blamed Syria for supporting the PKK, reflecting Ankara's view that Damascus now supports the armed group, after an August PKK bombing in the southeastern commercial hub of Gaziantep—a prosperous Turkish-Kurdish city that had previously been spared such violence—raised Ankara's suspicions that Iran and the PKK are colluding to destabilize Turkey.⁴

Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran are engaged in a commercial and political contest in Iraq that has intensified and taken on unmistakable sectarian hues since the 2011 U.S. troop withdrawal. Turkish policymakers increasingly subscribe to the notion that Iraq's leader is falling under Iran's sway. Former Turkish foreign minister Yasar Yakis—a seasoned diplomat who represents the secular foreign affairs establishment but is also a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party, a movement with Sunni Islamist roots—recently argued that Tehran is bent on establishing a chain of pro-Shiite states stretching from Iran to the Eastern Mediterranean.⁵ For Ankara, the implications of such a policy are clear: an Iran-backed Shiite crescent would block Turkish influence to the south and promote a sectarian political model inimical to Turkey's interests. Baghdad's reluctance to come out forcefully against Assad has been interpreted as an indicator of where it stands in this new alignment,⁶ as have reports that Iraq is helping Iran skirt international sanctions.⁷

The perception that Prime Minister Maliki is pursuing a pro-Shiite, Iranian-backed agenda has inhibited Turkish ties with Baghdad and prompted Ankara to reevaluate its stance on the Kurdistan Regional Government. This reversal bodes well for the Iraqi Kurds, who are looking for a counterweight to Baghdad at a time when their erstwhile guarantor, the United States, is reducing its role in the country.

Signs of Ankara's shift first became public in June 2010, when KRG president Barzani visited Turkey for the first time in six years.⁸ Ankara established a consulate in Erbil shortly thereafter,⁹ and diplomatic traffic has been on the rise ever since. Yet the stirrings of

a new policy were evident as early as fall 2007, at least behind closed doors: although Ankara continued to criticize the KRG in public at the time, it was also secretly engaging the Kurds and authorizing Turkish officials to meet with the KRG leadership.¹⁰ This dialogue improved mutual understanding even as Turkey carried out periodic military incursions into northern Iraq in pursuit of PKK fighters. Indeed, the two parties had come a long way from the years immediately following the U.S. invasion, when KRG leaders repeatedly demanded that Ankara stay out of northern Iraq and accused Turkey of bringing “chaos” to the country.¹¹

Today, amid Turkey’s ongoing tensions with the Iraqi government, the nascent relationship between Erbil and Ankara has grown into an undeclared entente against Baghdad. Turkish Foreign Ministry officials have been shuttling regularly to Erbil for consultations with the KRG, and without making stops in Baghdad (for a timeline of these trips and other developments, see the appendix).¹² Maliki’s administration has criticized these visits as “unauthorized” and chafed at what it regards as intrigue against the central government.¹³ KRG officials have in turn made a series of highly publicized trips to Turkey, further emphasizing the shift in tone.

Yet the most serious break from protocol came in August 2012, when Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu made a surprise visit to the contested city of Kirkuk—again, without a stopover in Baghdad—to meet with Iraqi Turkmen political groups. This was the first time Ankara had dispatched a foreign minister to Kirkuk in over three decades, and it sent a clear signal that Turkey is prepared to violate convention in support of its interests in Iraq. Needless to say, Baghdad loudly protested the visit, even appointing a parliamentary committee to condemn Turkey’s action.¹⁴ The

committee complied by recommending restrictions on Turkish business activities in Iraq. And in September, Baghdad threatened to cut Turkey out of the country’s promising economic opportunities by suspending the issuance of operating licenses to Turkish firms.¹⁵

These fissures have also been manifest in Turkey and Iraq’s approach to the Syria crisis. Ankara has watched with apprehension as Syria’s Kurds become more politically active, raising the prospect of a new front for the PKK—a credible worry given that Syria is the only other regional country in which the PKK has recruited significant numbers of Kurds.¹⁶ Barzani has used Turkey’s concern to aggrandize his own position as a powerbroker. In July, he brought the main Syrian Kurdish factions together in Erbil, where they forged an agreement in which the PYD renounced its prior support for the PKK.¹⁷ He has since claimed that he is training Syrian Kurdish fighters for the ostensible purpose of preserving order in a post-Assad Syria.¹⁸

These moves showcased Barzani’s Kurdish clout. Previously, the PYD had refused to join the Syrian uprising or the country’s broader Kurdish opposition, organized under the Kurdistan National Council, yet the July agreement united the KNC and PYD.¹⁹ And at Barzani’s request, the PYD also reportedly pledged to stop fighting Turkey, focusing instead on the struggle to unseat the Assad regime.

From Turkey’s perspective, these developments make Barzani a key ally in shaping the Syrian Kurdish opposition. Particularly important for Ankara, he has positioned himself as a counterweight to prevent the PKK from establishing roots in a post-Assad Syria. In contrast, Baghdad has been accused of siding with Assad and Iran during the crisis.²⁰ Tellingly, Turkey’s main Iraqi interlocutor throughout the Syrian uprising has been Barzani, not Maliki.

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4 | The Future of Turkey-KRG Ties

ANKARA'S EXPANDING engagement with the KRG is a strategically significant maneuver that could cement a new regional alignment, especially if Barzani continues to steer the Syrian Kurds toward the Turkey-KRG axis. Yet the relationship is not without obstacles.

First, Ankara still harbors some mistrust of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the two are not in sync on every issue. After all, even the deepest regional shifts do not change the fact that PKK camps continue to operate in KRG territory. For its part, the KRG appears to be sensitive about moving too close to Turkey for fear of provoking its heavyweight neighbor Iran.

Another potential impediment is the KRG's desire for Ankara to launch a dialogue with the PKK—a tall order amid the current Turkish political scene. Prime Minister Erdogan plans to enter the country's first-ever direct presidential election, scheduled for 2014. Given the results of the most recent national election—the 2011 parliamentary race, in which his Justice and Development Party won only 49.5 of the vote—he will likely feel compelled to burnish his nationalist credentials in order to muster more support. This fact, along with the dramatic spike in PKK violence, makes Turkish dialogue with the group nearly impossible.

Nevertheless, leaders on both sides are beginning to favor closer ties. Privately, Turkish officials relate that if Baghdad strays far enough from Turkish interests, Ankara may decide to “take Kurdistan under its wings.”¹ The KRG agrees—Barzani himself has reportedly suggested this sort of adoptive relationship.² As Baghdad acquires new F-16 fighter planes from the United States, this pledge could be put to the test. Barzani has voiced his fears that Baghdad could use these aircraft against the KRG in the future.³ Both Kurdish and Turkish officials suggest that Ankara would be ready to defend the KRG if Baghdad moves with force to challenge Kurdish autonomy.⁴

For Ankara, this is a highly unconventional stance—Turkish policy has long been geared toward foreclosing the possibility of a more independent Kurdistan. Yet

as the KRG relationship matures, and as Syria unravels along potential ethnic fault lines, Turkish attitudes have become more nuanced.

In particular, Ankara is cognizant of the KRG's growing economic dependence on Turkey, which is a strong inducement for Erbil to work within Turkish parameters. According to Kurdish officials, Turkey is the KRG's main business partner—trade volume is \$7.7 billion,⁵ and 80 percent of Kurdish consumer imports come from Turkey.⁶ These figures are reflected in the ubiquitous presence of Turkish goods and shops in Erbil, where Turkish is reportedly spoken widely in business and retail circles.⁷ The economic relationship has taken a sharp upward turn since 2010, when an estimated 730 Turkish firms were operating in northern Iraq.⁸ By April 2012, KRG trade minister Sinan Celebi counted 1,023 such firms, more than from any other country.⁹ The KRG has actively fostered this groundswell, offering generous tax incentives to Turkish firms, sometimes amounting to tax exemption for their first five to ten years of operation.¹⁰ In addition, Ankara and Erbil recently agreed to open two additional border crossings to ease the flow of people and products.¹¹

For the KRG, economic logic alone is enough to justify such a policy. After all, Turkey is in many ways a better option than Baghdad as a gateway to the global economy. At the same time, this commercial relationship underlines the fact that Kurdistan's economic stability and consequent political success are highly contingent on Turkish goodwill. Given this fact and the KRG's perceived threat from Baghdad, it is safe to say that the Iraqi Kurds have more incentive to get along with Turkey than ever.

From Turkey's perspective, the benefits of a stronger relationship with the KRG are growing as well. As described in the previous chapter, Turkey enjoyed a stable *modus vivendi* with Syria and Iran before the Arab Spring, but in the wake of the uprisings, these neighborly relations have turned adversarial. The most immediate consequence of this shift is that

Ankara now faces the prospect of PKK sponsorship from multiple neighboring states, particularly Syria. Allying with the KRG gives Turkey a means of preventing the emergence of another hostile Kurdish entity next door.

In the long term, then, Turkey-KRG ties may depend on the political alignment of Syria's Kurds post-Assad. The prospect of a Syrian Kurdistan with a menacing PKK/PYD presence is looming on Turkey's radar, and Damascus has caught on to that fear, giving the PKK ample room to operate inside Syria. In doing so, the regime is sending a message to Ankara: "Help the opposition, and you might as well be helping the PKK build a second Kurdistan in your backyard." By working to prevent this outcome, the KRG can become a valued asset for Turkey. In contrast, if the PYD were to seize Syrian territory after Assad's ouster and use it as a base to attack Turkey, it would spark reprisals from Ankara and likely dampen Turkey-KRG relations.

In fact, the PKK issue could adversely affect the relationship even apart from developments in Syria. The recent surge in PKK attacks has made 2012 the deadliest year in Turkey since 1999, when Ankara captured the group's erstwhile leader, Abdullah Ocalan. As a result, public anger is becoming a compelling factor for the electorally minded ruling party. Given the KRG's inaction against the PKK, Turks may deem the Iraqi Kurds complicit in the group's violence. Despite lying inside KRG territory, the PKK's Qandil enclave is not under Erbil's control, yet many Turks ignore this detail because of their ingrained attitudes toward Iraqi Kurdistan.

To be sure, exchanging Baghdad for the KRG is not an ideal arrangement for Turkey—under normal conditions, Ankara would prefer strong ties with the Iraqi government. For starters, Turkey's economic

relationship with Baghdad is too important to be jeopardized lightly. A large portion of Turkish trade and investment is conducted in areas under central government control, and the Iraqi economy offers a promising mix of size and growth potential unmatched by other Middle Eastern neighbors. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the Iraqi economy will grow an average of 9 percent annually through 2017,¹² and the Turkish business community's active postwar engagement has put it in position to gain substantially from this trend. Although some Turkish firms may be urging an open-door policy with the KRG at the moment, Ankara will not want to risk getting locked out of Iraq's wider economic opportunities in the long term.

At the same time, the deterioration of Turkey's ties with Baghdad is at least partly attributable to the animus between Erdogan and Nouri al-Maliki. Accordingly, if Maliki were to lose the next election (currently slated for 2015), it would likely have a positive impact on Turkish-Iraqi relations.

Despite this prevailing uncertainty, Ankara still believes that its basic interests are best served by a unified Iraq. The Arab Spring has forced Turkey to countenance alternatives to Baghdad, but its core policy continues to value a stable and strong Iraqi authority. Neither the personal rancor between Erdogan and Maliki nor Ankara's fear of Shiite ascendance in Baghdad has changed this fundamental belief. Yet as long as the KRG and Baghdad remain in contention over Iraq's future, and as long as the threat of a PKK-run entity in post-Assad Syria persists, Turkey will continue to favor close ties with the KRG and Barzani. The complex interplay of these forces will define the context of Ankara's policies in Iraq for some time to come, potentially foreshadowing fundamental shifts in Turkish-Iraqi ties.

Notes

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5 | The Oil Angle

ON AUGUST 21, 2012, private Turkish firm Genel increased its stake in the KRG's oil and gas fields, announcing its plans to become the largest energy player in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹ The deal, which drew objections from Baghdad,² speaks volumes about Turkey's transformed ties with the KRG and the central government. Only a few years ago, Ankara refused to work with the Iraqi Kurds and supported Baghdad's authority as a matter of firm principle. Today, the opposite is true: Ankara deals directly with and often favors Erbil at Baghdad's expense.

Iraq's immense energy wealth is a key part of these shifting alignments. Ankara has long regarded Iraq as an energy partner—during the 1980s, up to 1.6 million barrels per day of crude oil transited the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline (ITP) between Kirkuk and the Turkish port of Ceyhan. That trade was discontinued under sanctions stemming from the 1991 Gulf War, however, and has only come back online in the past few years. Today, the pipeline is in great need of repair, with a much-reduced maximum capacity (700,000 b/d) and even smaller actual daily flow through Turkey (400,000 b/d or less).

Furthermore, despite Prime Minister Maliki's pledges to send 15 billion cubic meters of natural gas to Turkey's transit network,³ Iraq has strongly signaled that domestic electricity production is the priority for its massive gas reserves, not export to Europe. The government has also shown enthusiasm for efforts to send gas west to Jordan⁴ and south to Kuwait. Economic considerations aside, the political troubles with Ankara could push Baghdad to continue flirting with such options.

Even as the hydrocarbons trade with Baghdad languished, the KRG launched its own program of exploration with international oil companies (IOCs), offering them lucrative production-sharing agreements with equity participation that the more nationalistic central government eschewed. The result was a groundswell of exploration in the KRG, with crude production rising to nearly 200,000 b/d.

Furthermore, preliminary estimates placed the area's oil reserves at more than 40 billion barrels (25 percent as large as southern Iraq's, and about 15 percent the size of Saudi Arabia's), with likely additional reserves as yet undiscovered. Significant gas reserves were found as well.

For constitutional and geostrategic reasons, Baghdad declared the contracts in the north illegal and threatened action against the IOCs involved, including Exxon-Mobil, Chevron, Total, and Gazprom. The Iraqi constitution requires the passage of new laws regulating oil revenues and hydrocarbons in general, and such legislation could ease the spat between Baghdad and Erbil. So far, however, the two sides have not come to a final agreement on the specifics.

In 2011, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, Baghdad agreed to export between 100,000 and 175,000 b/d of KRG oil in the ITP, but this was little more than a stopgap—the parties still differ on how to compensate the Kurds (and thus the IOCs) for their production costs. The ongoing payment dispute, which had stifled deliveries for months, was partially resolved following Washington's low-profile overtures; oil from northern Iraq has begun to flow to Baghdad, with deliveries slated to reach 200,000 b/d by the end of 2012.⁵ Yet these arrangements may not endure in the difficult political conditions that continue to prevail.

Consequently, the KRG has been looking at Turkey as an alternative to Baghdad for its energy exports. The central government views this as not only an affront to its sovereignty, but also a potential harbinger of Kurdish independence. Combined with the KRG's large *peshmerga* military forces and contiguous territory, an independent revenue base from energy exports would provide the final ingredient for independence or, at the very least, more extensive autonomy.

Ankara maintains that it has no intention of supporting such aspirations, but Turkish firms have been actively winning oil contracts in the KRG. And in May 2012, Energy Minister Taner Yildiz appeared in public

forums with his KRG counterpart as the latter laid out ambitious plans for pipeline construction to Turkey. Although Yildiz did not endorse these plans, his very presence spoke volumes. Meanwhile, Baghdad is threatening to cut the generous oil subsidy that keeps the KRG afloat financially.

Regardless of how these specific disputes are resolved, Turkey clearly has a major stake in the KRG's hydrocarbon future. As long as the political basis of the Turkey-KRG relationship remains solid, any effort by Baghdad to rein in Erbil's oil ambitions will run into a wall of Turkish resistance.

Notes

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6 | The U.S. Role

DISCONCERTED ABOUT the erosion of Baghdad's authority over Iraq, the United States has quietly attempted to put the brakes on Kurdistan's convergence with Turkey. In May 2012, for example, Washington took notice when Ankara and Erbil seemed to stand shoulder-to-shoulder as the KRG announced an ambitious hydrocarbons agenda.¹ And when the prospect of military confrontation between Baghdad and the KRG arose in July, Washington sought to temper what it feared could become a disastrous confluence of forces pulling Iraq apart.

But Ankara's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds need not be regarded in such dire tones. Although Turkey-KRG ties have reached a level unimaginable a few years ago, the relationship appears to have built-in checks and balances. Unless Iraq fractures and Turkey responds by allying with the KRG against Baghdad, the rapprochement is already nearing its saturation point. In other words, it is a strong relationship, but also one that is likely to remain where it is barring open conflict between Baghdad and Erbil.

Notes

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APPENDIX

Timeline of Turkey-Iraq Relations

The Baghdad Years and Trouble with the KRG

February 2003: Nechirvan Barzani—a KRG official and nephew to Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani—visits Ankara. Authorities attempt to keep the visit out of the public eye.¹

March 2003: Turkey draws criticism from U.S. officials by sending troops into northern Iraq to combat PKK fighters.²

October 2003: Nechirvan Barzani forcefully criticizes Turkey's presence in northern Iraq, accusing Ankara of bringing "chaos."³

December 2005: Turkish foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu invites Iraqi Sunni leaders to Ankara and urges them to participate in upcoming Iraqi elections.⁴

May 8, 2006: Iraqi Sunni leader Tariq al-Hashimi makes a private visit to Turkey, meeting with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul.⁵

August 2006: Erdogan and Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki speak on the phone concerning the PKK. Maliki assures Erdogan that he will stop PKK operations emanating from northern Iraq.⁶

April 2007: KRG leader Masoud Barzani threatens unrest in southeastern Turkey if Ankara continues to oppose Kurdish interests in Kirkuk. Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), telephones Erdogan to express his regrets over the statement.⁷

August 2007: While serving as head of the Iraqi Islamic Party, Tariq al-Hashimi accuses Maliki of malfeasance and claims that he is unconstitutionally expanding the powers of the various ministries under his control.⁸

August 2007: Amid increasing PKK attacks, Maliki visits Ankara and Iran for talks on security cooperation. He balks at signing a major strategic agreement, preferring to compromise on a narrower memorandum of understanding. Although Maliki pledges to combat the PKK presence in Iraq, reports from the meetings suggest that Erdogan is not convinced Baghdad will come through.⁹

October 2007: As the PKK crisis continues, an Iraqi delegation travels to Ankara for "make or break" talks on cooperation against the group. By this point, however, Turkey believes that Maliki will be unable to impact the situation. In addition to sending only minor officials to welcome the Iraqi delegation, Ankara lodges the ministers in a police guesthouse rather than a five-star hotel, as would be expected for a state visit.¹⁰ Kurdish officials are barred from entering Turkey for the talks.

July 2008: Erdogan makes his first official visit to Baghdad, and the first such visit by a Turkish prime minister in eighteen years.¹¹ He is accompanied by the ministers of foreign affairs, trade, and energy.¹² The leaders agree to establish a Supreme Council for Strategic Cooperation to provide an institutional basis for bilateral efforts.

June 12, 2009: Hashimi announces Iraqi government plans to resolutely combat the PKK presence in the north, and to develop elite fighting units for this purpose.¹³

October 2009: Erdogan and other top ministers visit Baghdad for joint cabinet meetings focusing on bilateral strategic cooperation.¹⁴ The parties sign forty-eight agreements on a wide variety of topics.¹⁵

Falling Out with Baghdad, Moving Closer to the KRG

June 2005: Emre Taner is named chief of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT). Throughout his five-year tenure, he develops unofficial dialogue channels with the Iraqi Kurds.¹⁶

March 2007: The Turkish National Security Council, a body headed by top military and civilian leaders, gives the go-ahead for meetings with the KRG leadership.¹⁷

October 2008: Ahmet Davutoglu and envoy Murat Ozcelik meet with Barzani in Iraq. It is the first high-level visit with Barzani in four years.¹⁸

March 2009: Jalal Talabani visits Turkey, where he calls on the PKK to lay down its arms or be expelled from Iraq.¹⁹

October 2009: During Erdogan's visit to Baghdad, Hashimi remarks that the Iraqi government "regards with understanding" the Turkish parliament's resolution to approve cross-border operations in Iraq.²⁰

April 2010: Davutoglu (by this point Turkey's foreign minister) meets with Ayad Allawi to discuss the results of Iraq's March parliamentary elections. Allawi's Iraqi-yah faction had emerged with the most seats; Davutoglu congratulates him and emphasizes Turkey's commitment to a pluralistic Iraq.²¹

June 3, 2010: Barzani makes his first trip to Turkey in six years. He pledges "all efforts" to stop PKK violence.²²

September 2010: Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari criticizes neighboring countries for trying to dominate Iraq's internal politics.²³

September 13, 2010: Hashimi meets with Omer Celik, the deputy chairman of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), to discuss recent developments in Iraq.²⁴

October 2010: The Iraqi government creates a parliamentary committee to increase economic relations with Turkey.²⁵

October 2, 2010: KRG energy minister Ashti Hawrami announces that northern Iraq is prepared to contribute up to 60 billion cubic meters of natural gas to the energy hub at Ceyhan, Turkey.²⁶

October 12, 2010: Turkey opens a consulate in Erbil.²⁷

October 21, 2010: Maliki visits Turkey to secure Ankara's support in breaking the stalemate at home, where a new government had yet to be formed since the March elections.²⁸ The visit follows stops in Syria, Jordan, Iran, and Egypt.²⁹

November 7–8, 2010: Foreign Minister Davutoglu travels across Iraq, meeting with major stakeholders individually to promote the formation of a government.³⁰ During the trip, a deal is reached allowing Maliki to remain prime minister.³¹

November–December 2010: Reactions to the Maliki deal in the Turkish and Iranian press reflect Ankara and Tehran's divergent views. Turkey's Zaman calls Maliki's victory a setback for Turkey and its Sunni allies. Yet Iran's Press TV praises Maliki for his outreach to all stakeholders and calls rival Allawi a secularist with an "ethnic-based" approach to politics.³²

January 2011: Davutoglu travels to Baghdad to meet with Maliki.³³

March 30, 2011: Erdogan tours Iraq to convey Turkey's commitment to nonsectarian, inclusive politics. After stopping in Baghdad, he visits Najaf, becoming the first Sunni leader to pay respects at the Shiite shrine. He then becomes the first Turkish head of state to visit Erbil.³⁴

March 2011: Turkish deputy foreign minister Feridun Sinirlioglu visits Erbil without stopping in Baghdad.³⁵

November 2011: Ankara amends legislation to allow the transport of oil using road and rail, creating the legal foundation for limited hydrocarbons trade with the KRG.³⁶

December 3, 2011: In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, Maliki accuses Turkey of meddling in Iraq's internal affairs.³⁷

December 19, 2011: The day after U.S. troops officially withdraw from Iraq, Baghdad issues an arrest warrant for Hashimi on terrorism charges.³⁸

December 20, 2011: Hashimi denies the allegations in a nationally televised speech from Erbil, where he remains out of reach of the Iraqi Security Forces.³⁹

January 14, 2012: Sinirlioglu visits Barzani and other KRG leaders without stopping in Baghdad.⁴⁰

January 16, 2012: Baghdad confronts Ambassador Yunus Demirer regarding Turkish accusations that Maliki is stoking sectarian tensions.⁴¹ Ankara responds by summoning Iraqi ambassador Abdul Amir Kamil Abi Tabikh over Maliki's accusation that Turkey is meddling in Iraq's internal affairs.⁴²

March 5, 2012: Davutoglu meets with Allawi in Ankara to emphasize the importance of reaching consensus under constitutional rules.⁴³

March 28, 2012: Erdogan visits Tehran for talks on Iran's nuclear program and Syria.⁴⁴ Following a tense meeting, the prime minister's rhetoric hardens, and he later accuses Iran of acting "insincerely" on regional issues.⁴⁵

April 1, 2012: The KRG cuts oil supplies to the Baghdad-controlled pipeline network over a dispute on compensation and contract terms.⁴⁶

April 1, 2012: Following the first "Friends of Syria" conference, Baghdad comes out strongly against arming the rebels opposing the Assad regime.⁴⁷ Maliki directly criticizes Persian Gulf countries that have already done so and condemns regional involvement in Syria's internal affairs.⁴⁸

April 4–6 2012: Maliki sends an envoy to mend ties with Turkey. Although the envoy reportedly receives a positive reply, open rapprochement does not follow.⁴⁹

April 19, 2012: After meeting with Barzani, Turkish officials accuse Maliki of stirring sectarian tensions.⁵⁰

April 20, 2012: During a visit to Ankara, Barzani remarks that he will not tolerate the PKK exercising authority in the KRG, and that if the group continues on the path of violence, it will have to "bear the consequences."⁵¹

April 20, 2012: Maliki claims that Turkey is behaving like a "hostile" state.⁵²

April 22, 2012: Erdogan responds to Maliki's accusation by stating, "Shiites in Iraq that I am in contact with also complain about Maliki's rule. One of the Shiite leaders in the country, I won't give his name, has made a statement to me, saying, 'Maliki has surmounted Saddam Hussein in dictatorship.'"⁵³

April 23, 2012: Maliki visits Tehran; Turkish officials keep a wary eye on the meeting.⁵⁴

April 23, 2012: The Iraqi Foreign Ministry summons the Turkish ambassador to convey Baghdad's displeasure at perceived interference in domestic affairs.⁵⁵

April 24, 2012: Erdogan and Turkish intelligence chief Hakan Fidan meet with Hashimi.⁵⁶

April 30, 2012: Baghdad confronts the Turkish ambassador over Erdogan's remark that Maliki was exhibiting "self-centered" behavior.⁵⁷

May 7, 2012: At a meeting with Turkish businessmen and journalists, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani remarks that Erbil views Turkey as a "strategic partner," not just a "neighbor."⁵⁸

May 11, 2012: Maliki criticizes Turkey again: "We do not want to be enemies with any country, whether it be Turkey, Iran, America, Saudi Arabia, or any other country. However, recent events and Turkey's statements do not accord with the principle of mutual respect."⁵⁹

May 15, 2012: Genel Energy, the premier Turkish investor in northern Iraqi hydrocarbons, announces plans to acquire new stakes in the KRG.⁶⁰

May 17, 2012: Nechirvan Barzani visits Ankara, where he meets with Erdogan, Gul, and Davutoglu.⁶¹

May 18, 2012: The KRG begins preparations for a pipeline that will make it possible to transport oil directly from northern Iraq to Turkey.⁶²

May 18, 2012: Iraq complains to the Turkish ambassador that the consulates in Basra and Mosul are engaging in activities outside their diplomatic purview.⁶³

May 19, 2012: Protestors gather in front of the Turkish consulate in Basra. They demand that Tariq Hashimi be returned to Turkey, and a group of protestors burn a Turkish flag.⁶⁴

May 21, 2012: The KRG announces a wide range of prospective energy export arrangements with Turkey. It also agrees to cooperate with Ankara on energy development.⁶⁵

May 25, 2012: Baghdad reiterates that all energy deals with Turkey must be approved by the central government, rendering recent KRG agreements unconstitutional from its perspective.⁶⁶

June 2012: Masoud Barzani forms a coalition to oust Maliki with a no-confidence vote.⁶⁷

June 9, 2012: Following on Genel Energy's coattails, Turkish business mogul Mustafa Koc announces plans for major investments in northern Iraqi oil and other sectors.⁶⁸

June 11, 2012: Jalal Talabani's office claims that he has been holding meetings with the PKK to encourage a ceasefire.⁶⁹

June 19, 2012: Maliki asks President Obama to stop Exxon from executing its exploration deals with the KRG.⁷⁰

June 21, 2012: Over Baghdad's strident opposition, Ankara begins preparing for direct crude imports from northern Iraq via tanker trucks.⁷¹

June 23, 2012: Foreign Minister Zebari voices Iraq's concerns about developments in Syria.⁷²

June 29, 2012: Iraq attends Syria contact group meetings in Geneva, joining UN Security Council member states and several Arab countries (e.g., Qatar).⁷³

July 10, 2012: Various Syrian Kurdish factions visit Erbil, where Masoud Barzani urges the two main blocs—the Kurdish National Council and the Democratic Union Party—to unite against the Assad regime and refrain from aligning with the PKK.⁷⁴

July 15, 2012: Iraq again warns Turkey over its KRG oil deals, which it regards as illegal. According to Baghdad, Turkey is “participating in the smuggling of Iraqi oil...and this issue will affect relations between the two countries, especially the economic ones.”⁷⁵

July 17, 2012: Iraq warns Turkey about violations of its airspace, saying its radar has detected Turkish warplanes crossing the border.⁷⁶ Shortly thereafter, Iraq closes its airspace to Turkish passenger flights, citing technical problems with its radar system.⁷⁷

August 7, 2012: After visiting Erbil, Davutoglu makes a surprise trip to Kirkuk. It is the first such trip by a Turkish foreign minister since 1976.⁷⁸

August 15, 2012: Maliki publicly expresses his desire to repair relations with Ankara. Yet he also characterizes Turkey's direct relations with the KRG as improper and claims that Ankara did not inform Baghdad of Davutoglu's plans to visit Kirkuk.⁷⁹

August 15, 2012: Baghdad refuses to issue a visa to Turkey's Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli, who had planned on visiting Kirkuk.⁸⁰

September 9, 2012: Hashimi is sentenced to death in absentia.⁸¹

September 10, 2012: Hashimi publicly denounces the sentence and calls on his constituents in Iraq to oppose the decision.⁸²

September 19, 2012: Erbil and Baghdad reach an agreement that Iraqi oil minister Ashti Hawrami claims could lead to deliveries of up to 200,000 barrels per day by the end of 2012.⁸³

Notes

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