

Roots of the Rift between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan's PUK

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Brief Analysis

The tensions between Turkey and the PUK are not new, though recent actions by both sides have exacerbated the situation despite shared economic interests.

Turkey has [closed](https://apnews.com/article/turkey-closes-airspace-northern-iraq-fed60161ca136e59bb5f5c038e4d14e9) its airspace to planes taking off from and landing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) Sulaymaniyah governorate, citing the "intensification of PKK" activity in the city and airport as the reason behind the closure, which is expected to last until July 3. Two days after closing its airspace, a drone strike [executed](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/04/08/iraq-warns-turkey-after-attack-on-airport-in-sulaymaniyah/) in the vicinity of Sulaymaniyah Airport targeted a convoy that included Mazloum Kobani Abdi, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and three U.S. military personnel. Although Turkey remained silent in the aftermath, all signs point to Ankara being behind the attack.

Both the decision to close the airspace and the attack are believed to be Turkey's reaction to the recently increasing contacts between the Sulaymaniyah-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the U.S.-backed SDF, a significant portion of which are made up of the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). PUK leader Bafel Talabani's recent interactions with the SDF and comments about Kurds in Turkey—both understood in Ankara as signals that the PUK is growing closer to the PKK—have strained relations with Ankara. Therefore, the PUK is now under significant pressure from Ankara, with no short-term hope for normalization.

Relations have soured between the two parties since former PUK leader Jalal Talabani's death in 2017. When the PKK [kidnapped](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/09/pkk-sulaymaniyah-kurdistan-iraq-turkey-spy.html) two Turkish intelligence agents in Sulaymaniyah in August 2017, Turkey [closed](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-shuts-down-office-of-talabanis-party-expels-representative-117171) the PUK's Ankara office and expelled Bahruz Galali, a 17-year representative of the party in Turkey. Nor is flight suspension a new response; the KRI's 2017 independence referendum [prompted](#)

<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/18667-Turkey-announces-end-to-ban-on-Sulaimani-Airport>) Ankara to impose suspensions on flights from Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Erbil flights began again in March 2018, but the embargo on Sulaymaniyah flights was extended until October 2019 due to Ankara's claims that the PUK was supporting PKK activity in the KRI. Moreover, the flights were only resumed after then-President of Iraq and former PUK member Barham Salih intervened.

In October 2018, the Ankara-Sulaymaniyah route finally reopened after Qubad Talabani, the KRI's deputy prime minister and Bafel's brother, **closed** (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/30112018-amp>) the PKK's political office in Sulaymaniyah. Other signs of an attempted normalization appeared several years later. In March 2021, for example, Hakan Fidan, head of Turkish intelligence, **reportedly** (<https://twitter.com/abdullahawez/status/1507341350013968389?s=20&t=iKWZ1wknK-WxPpEPne3p8A>) hosted a PUK delegation in Ankara. Lahur Sheikh Jangi—co-chairman of the PUK who was removed from the party in 2020 due to a rivalry with his cousin Bafel—has **claimed** (<https://nrttv.com/En/detail6/37>) also **claimed** (<https://nrttv.com/En/detail6/37>) that Turkey was involved in his removal from the party.

Yet Turkish action in the KRI has continued to be a major strain on relations. Conducting anti-PKK military operations in northern Iraq, Turkey seeks to increase pressure on the PKK and prevent it from launching attacks in Turkish territory. However, the approach adopted by the PUK, which is usually more tolerant towards the PKK than the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—the KRI's largest party—has prompted friction with Ankara. For its part, the PUK has expressed outrage at the repeated drone operations and **assassinations** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iraq/.premium-with-shake-up-in-kurdish-party-iran-s-influence-in-iraqi-kurdistan-gets-a-boost-1.10036710>) allegedly carried out by Turkey in Sulaymaniyah.

Intensified Contact with the PKK

During Turkey's operations in Iraq and Syria to create a safe zone in December 2022, Bafel **met** (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/201220221>) with SDF and PYD officials in northern Syria along with U.S. General Matthew McFarlane, commander of the Coalition Forces in Iraq and Syria. Bafel's trip not only served to strengthen ties but also to isolate his rival and former PUK co-chair Lahur Jangi, who had frequent contact with the SDF and PYD and was seen as indispensable for Syrian Kurds.

The deepening of PUK-SDF relations became even more apparent at the end of March with a **helicopter** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/iraqi-kurdish-authorities-hand-over-remains-syrian-kurdish-elite-forces-mystery>) crash in Duhok. The crash killed at least nine SDF members, including a senior commander of the SDF's anti-terrorism unit, who were on their way to Sulaymaniyah. The helicopter is said to have been **bought** (<https://www.shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/Turkey-accuses-PUK-of-providing-French-helicopters-to-terrorists>) by the PUK with the help of Washington during the Iraq war. In a message of condolence to the SDF after the crash, Bafel said "The PUK is proud of the glorious history that the CTG (PUK's Counter-Terrorism Group) struggled alongside Rojava's CT units to protect Kurdistan." This long history, along with an ideological alignment, shared tensions with the KDP, and a desire to be a figure in transnational Kurdish politics have all contributed to the PUK's growing interest in this relationship. Likely concerned that this helicopter trip was a sign of deeper relations to come, Ankara's decision to close its airspace—in addition to the alleged attack—are efforts to break the Rojava-Sulaymaniyah connection, at least temporarily.

Another example of stronger ties came in the form of a letter from Cemil Bayik, a founding member of the PKK, to a meeting of political parties in Sulaymaniyah's Dokan district in January. The **letter** (<https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/221220222>) addressed Bafel, saying that "more national unity is needed in this process." Although the PUK gives the impression of dealing with the SDF rather than the PKK—the former is an official ally of the U.S. coalition forces, whereas the latter is designated as a terrorist group by Turkey,

the United States, and the EU—Ankara perceives these actions as clear signs of the PUK looking to deepen relations with the PKK via Syria. Shortly after the drone attack, Fidan reportedly hosted the PUK's Qubad Talabani and the party's delegation in Ankara, where Fidan expressed (<https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/middleeast/110420231>) Turkey's displeasure with "the PUK's relations with the SDF and the PKK."

Bafel as a "Servant of Kurdish Politics"

Seeking to establish the PUK as an alternative to the dominance of the KDP in the KRI political sphere, Bafel is eager to be seen as influential in regional Kurdish geopolitics, hence the party's closer ties with the SDF. During his visit to northern Syria, he emphasized the "Kurdish question" and described the PUK as a "servant of Kurdish politics." He wants to be seen as a Kurdish leader involved in numerous regional processes and negotiations.

As such, Bafel frequently refers (<https://twitter.com/mehmtalaca/status/1643006417496944643?s=20>) to making peace between Turkey and the PKK after their 40 years of war. He also released (https://twitter.com/Esta_English/status/1638160755404013570?s=20) a video message for the Nowruz celebrations in Turkey's Diyarbakir, a Kurdish-dominated city, in which he urged for unity among all Kurds and called for the release of jailed Kurdish leaders in neighboring countries.

Jalal Talabani, Bafel's father, is remembered in Ankara as a leader who maintained constructive relations and played a mediating role for the Kurds in Turkey. It is clear that Bafel, who constantly refers to the role of his late father, desires the same influence for the PUK under his direction. After visiting northern Syria, Bafel even met with the leader of the Turkey-backed Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF), Hasan Turan, as a gesture of good faith to Ankara. Nevertheless, Ankara largely considers Bafel's statements on peace and jailed Kurds as interference rather than mediation.

No Reconciliation on the Horizon

Turkey believes that the balance of relations between the KDP and PUK can be a counterbalance to Baghdad, and as a result, Ankara does not wish for the situation in the KRI to deteriorate such that one party decisively wins out over another. Moreover, the complete exclusion of the PUK would only advantage Baghdad and Tehran, making the total dissolution of PUK-Ankara ties unlikely. In a call (<https://twitter.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1640394715257356311?s=20>) with KRI President Nechirvan Barzani in February, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan allegedly advised Barzani to resolve the existing disputes with the PUK. He later shared the same message with both the KDP and PUK.

However, Ankara expects the PUK to completely distance itself from the PKK for any further normalization of relations to take place. They want PKK members in Sulaymaniyah to be handed over, and the PKK's activity in the city to be stopped. Furthermore, Ankara may also pressure the PUK to reconsider its increasingly close ties with Iran.

Of course, there are several obstacles. First and foremost, the PUK is likely hoping to use their rivalry with the KDP and tensions with Turkey to their advantage in KRI politics, an effort reinforced by the PUK's closer relations with Baghdad. On the other hand, while Turkey has significant leverage over the KDP, specifically in the regards to the Habur Border Gate and oil exports, it should not expect such strong leeway with the PUK.

Instead, Turkey's relationship with the PUK should be centered on the issue of natural gas, as a significant amount of gas that Ankara hopes to purchase from the KRI is located (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iraq/.premium-with-shake-up-in-kurdish-party-iran-s-influence-in-iraqi-kurdistan-gets-a-boost-1.10036710>) in PUK-controlled areas. Both sides have a shared economic interest in improving ties—especially after Turkey shut off the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the only outlet for the KRI's oil—so if Ankara wishes to expand its influence over the PUK, it must first develop an economic relationship with the party over natural gas while

respecting the party codes that make the PUK different from the KDP.

In addition, Turkey should keep in mind the potential necessity of PUK mediation if Ankara ever hopes to pursue future peace processes with the Kurds, particularly Syrian Kurds. Like many Kurdish political organizations, the PUK is driven by a sense of Kurdish nationalism that inevitably links them to groups like the SDF. Ankara must understand these dynamics and adapt its expectations and decisions accordingly. Acting without understanding the PUK's position means a serious misreading of regional Kurdish politics. ❖

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