

The Ottoman Experience in Mosul, Then and Now

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The ruthless Ottoman Sultan Selim I, best known as Selim the Grim, conquered Mosul with Kurdish assistance in 1517. The Ottomans remained in control for four centuries until it was lost in the aftermath of the First World War.

Now, 500 five hundred years after the conquest of Mosul, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become nostalgic for the greatness of the Ottoman Empire. The region's geopolitics have provided an opportunity for Turkey to contemplate reasserting influence over Mosul and ensuring that Ankara will have a more powerful say in the fate of the multiethnic province after it is cleared of the Islamic State.

During the reign of the Ottomans, today's Iraq was divided into three administrative provinces: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. However, what is striking are the historical similarities between the first Ottoman venture in Northern Iraq and today's deployment of Turkish troops in Bashiqa and other areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. In neither case did the Turks fight their way into Kurdish heartland!

In the 16th century, the Ottoman army did not wrest control over Kurdistan through military campaigns, but through diplomacy and the agreement of the Kurdish nobles who gave allegiance to Selim the Grim and acknowledged Ottoman suzerainty. The architect of this arrangement was a skilled Kurdish diplomat named Idris Betlis who convinced 25 Kurdish princes to renege allegiance to the Safavids in favor of Istanbul.

Selim appreciated Betlis's power of diplomacy and gave him leeway to make whatever arrangements necessary in order to win the "hearts and minds" of the Kurdish chiefs. Thus, the Kurdish princes in Diyarbakir, Amedya, Soran, and other areas of Kurdistan welcomed the Ottoman Army and helped defeat the Safavids in the military campaigns of the 16th century. Additionally, the prince of Soran and the prince of Cizre seized control over Kirkuk and Mosul in the name of the Ottomans and pushed Safavid Shiites away.

Whether destiny or strategy, in December 2015 Turkey deployed a regiment of 150 troops, plus tanks and other advanced weapons, to Bashiqa in Nineveh province. The number of troops has reportedly increased to 500 as of mid-October, which brings the total number of Turkish troops in Northern Iraq to 2,000.

Baghdad and Ankara have conflicting statements over the deployment of the Turkish troops. Iraq insists that the Turkish troops are there without the consent of the Iraqi government. But Ankara dismisses this claim, saying Turkish troops were deployed last year at the invitation of the Iraqi government to train Sunni and Kurdish forces in preparation for fighting ISIS forces.

The Kurdish Peshmerga forces cooperate and coordinate with Turkish troops in the area. Kurds have cleared large swathes of territories in Nineveh province from ISIS, mostly in the east.

As Ankara and Baghdad continue to spar, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has chosen silence as its policy. The Kurdish thinking is that as long as the neighboring capitals are in conflict with one another, the status of the KRG is politically protected and consolidated, and Kurds can get concessions from all sides.

Arguably, the KRG has lost its long-standing status as kingmaker in Baghdad. However, the Turkish-Iraqi rift has provided a historical opportunity for the KRG to reemerge as a powerful regional player and influencer between Baghdad and Ankara.

Masoud Barzani is the only politician at the moment to enjoy good relations with both Erdogan and Abadi. Thus, he can be a mediator to cool down the tension between both countries. In the meantime, Kurdistan's geostrategic position and the deployment of Kurdish forces on the Iraqi border have insulated Turkish and Iraqi forces from one another, preventing potential engagement between those forces.

Despite the complexity of today's domestic and regional politics, like the 16th century Ottomans the Turks appear to have come at the invitation of Barzani, whose relationship with Erdogan has remained unshaken despite disturbing events in Turkey's own Kurdish areas. In the last five years, the Iraqi Kurds have swapped dependency on Baghdad with dependency on Ankara by building an independent Kurdish pipeline to Turkey. The Kurdish president now visits Ankara more than he does to Baghdad. This comes at a high risk, because a change of heart or power in Ankara could have fateful consequences for Iraqi Kurds. The July 2016 coup in Turkey, if successful, would have left the KRG with no option but to be at the mercy of Baghdad.

Some seventy years after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Ankara was prepared to take action in the hope of exerting influence in Mosul. During the Desert Storm Operation to push the Iraqi army out of Kuwait in 1991, Turkey became wary that Mosul and Kirkuk would fall under control of the Kurds. Because of this, former Turkish president Turgut Ozal asked for a military plan to thwart any attempt by Kurds to seize control over such territories, should Iraq fall apart.

Through the 1990s until now, Turkey has not hesitated to invoke protecting the Turkmen minority in Iraqi Kurdistan, Mosul, and Kirkuk to exert its influence in Kurdish affairs and check the power of Iraqi Kurds. With the ascendancy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Ankara has at last gradually shifted its draconian policy towards Iraqi Kurds and followed more closely in the footsteps of Selim I, albeit with inconsistencies and hesitation, as evidenced by Ankara's refusal to assist the KRG as ISIS approached Erbil in 2014.

Despite the current flirting between Iraqi Kurds and Erdogan, Mosul is where the Kurdish dream for independence and Turkish ambition for influence collide. For Erdogan to be successful projecting Turkish power over Mosul, the best policy would be that of Selim I, where Kurds were real partners in the Empire. Most importantly, the Turkish president has to come to terms with the Kurds in his own country. A double standard policy will backfire.



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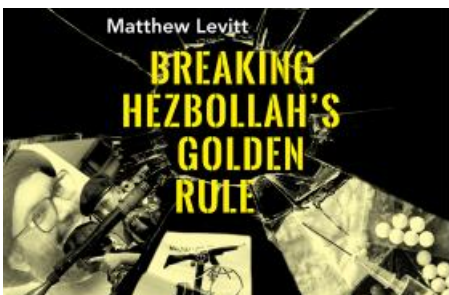
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