

# Yesterday's Enemies, Tomorrow's Friends?

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Articles & Testimony

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## **Rapprochement with Turkey may not lead to outright independence for the Kurds. But in the new Middle East, the borders between the Kurds and Arabs will be more real than those between the Kurds and Turkey.**

**W**hen I visited Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2007, my host, a leading Kurdish official, asked me when Turkey was going to invade the KRG. Today, the world has seen a 180-degree shift, and the question now is if the KRG will cut ties with Baghdad and seek to shelter under a Turkish umbrella, and if the Syrian Kurds could follow suit. The recent developments in Iraq and Syria have transformed those countries' politics irrevocably, and with that, the relationship between Turkey and Kurds throughout the region.

Iraq today eerily resembles Syria, a country torn apart by civil war, sectarian conflict and, more importantly, jihadist-led insurgency. The Kurds in northern Iraq and Syria are pivoting towards their erstwhile enemy, Turkey, to ensure the virtual independence that they have been able to seize.

## **A NEW ERA**

**A** new Fertile Crescent is in the offing: the Iraqi and Syrian borders may remain formally intact, but Turkey will become the patron of Iraq and Syria's Kurdish enclaves. Turkey has thus far been indifferent to the jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. However, following the spread of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) control from Syria into Iraq and the group's attack on its consulate in Mosul, Ankara has come to a painful conclusion that it has a jihadist problem on its doorstep. For the Turkish government, having the Kurds as a buffer between the jihadists and their territory could be the best remedy to address this problem. Turkey is prepared to take both the KRG and the Syrian Kurds, who have declared three autonomous regions in that country, under its wing in an effort to form a cordon sanitaire against ISIS.

ISIS is, perhaps, the closest thing to an existential threat Turkey has faced in decades. ISIS differs from Al-Qaeda due

to its territorial ambitions. ISIS and Al-Qaeda share ideologies, but their strategies are different. Al-Qaeda is a fleeting international organization with no clear goal of establishing a permanent territorial base, an intentional measure which gives the group a mercury-like ability to avoid capture. ISIS, on the other hand, is similar to the Taliban, a territorially based organization. Turkey's worst nightmare is a state similar to 1990s Taliban-led Afghanistan that will harbor and foster terrorist movements a stone's throw away from the country's largest cities. For Turkey, the ISIS threat raises concerns of a potential "Talibanistan" to its south. This trumps all other treats -- nobody wants to border a Taliban-style state. As a result, Ankara views the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq as an indispensable buffer against ISIS.

Turkey will, accordingly, support Iraqi Kurdistan which is already closely integrated into the Turkish economy. In 2007, the Kurds pivoted towards Ankara in order to counter a newly assertive Baghdad. Turkey reciprocated, sending merchants, airlines, and consumer goods into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds now opt to sell their oil through Turkey, bypassing Baghdad to the benefit of Ankara.

It will be no surprise to see further economic rapprochement, including potential measures such as new oil deals, a free trade agreement, visa-free travel, and de facto adoption of the Turkish Lira by the KRG in the near future. Turkey is also likely to back the KRG militarily and politically.

Turkey is so comfortable with the KRG that my sources in Ankara say that Turkish officials encouraged the KRG to take control of Kirkuk on June 12. For many years, Ankara had objected to the prospect of the Kurds' annexation of Kirkuk, an oil-rich and multi-ethnic city contested between Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmens (the Turks' ethnic kin). The Turkish fear was that with Kirkuk's oil under its control, the KRG could march to autonomy, a step that could reignite nationalist ambitions and among Kurds in southeastern Turkey.

Now, the threat of ISIS has changed the Turkish stance on Kirkuk: when the KRG's Peshmerga moved in to occupy Kirkuk, Ankara did not utter a word. In fact, it advised the Kurds to take the city to prevent it from falling into the hands of ISIS. Turkey feels so threatened by ISIS and is simultaneously so comfortable with the KRG that it even encouraged the Kurds to take Mosul. The KRG wisely did not follow this advice due to the fact that, unlike Kirkuk, Mosul is a predominantly Arab city and a KRG takeover of that town would have almost certainly made the Kurds occupiers of a hostile population.

With Kirkuk under its control, the KRG's increased oil riches will bind Turkey and Iraq's Kurds further together. Turkey's decade-plus long economic growth is threatened by the country's huge current accounts deficit, two-thirds of which is due to energy imports. Cheap Kurdish oil has the potential to make Turkey energy independent, fueling its growth further.

Turkey shares interests with Kurds in Syria as well. The Kurdish troops in that country are the only force, Assad's regime included, that has been able to defeat ISIS on the battlefield. The Syrian Kurds may not have oil to offer to the Turks, but they do present Ankara with a degree of 'strategic depth' by keeping ISIS away from its doorstep.

The Syrian Kurds need Turkey, too. Currently, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an outgrowth of the Turkish-Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), dominates the Syrian-Kurdish opposition. The PKK and PYD have similarly strong secular tendencies; both oppose ISIS and its uber-conservative, totalitarian ideology. The PYD-PKK controls three Kurdish exclaves in northern Syria, all of which are flanked by ISIS to the south and Turkey to the north. The Syrian Kurds depend on Turkish support as a lifeline for survival.

Having, at times, allowed the jihadists to cross freely into Syria, Ankara now realizes it must take a more measured approach towards ISIS, an organization that has the potential to do more than just bite the hand that once fed it. Once Turkey secures the release of dozens of its citizens held hostage by ISIS, Ankara will likely start combating ISIS with its regional allies, the Kurds, in earnest. This will cement Ankara's ties to the Syrian Kurds, and could eventually

result in a relationship similar to that which currently exists between Turkey and the KRG.

The security logic driving Ankara's Kurdistan policy is simple: Together, the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds guard around 90 percent of Turkey's 805-mile-long (1,296-kilometer-long) border with Iraq and Syria, providing a wall against ISIS infiltration.

## THE PRICE OF SECURITY

**H**owever, Turkey cannot become best friends with the region's Kurds without making peace with its own Kurdish population.

Enter the ongoing peace talks with the PKK. Ankara has granted the Kurds additional rights regarding their language, the official acknowledgement of which has long been seen as a threat to Turkish nationalism. The Turkish government now funds the use of the Kurdish language in different forums -- from universities to city governments -- in southeastern Turkey where the Kurds dominate demographically.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has a personal stake in this as well, due to the upcoming August elections. In the recent March 30 nationwide local polls, his party received 43 percent of the vote and the support of the pro-PKK Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), who received 6.5 percent of the March vote, and so could clinch Erdogan the presidency.

On June 26, Erdogan declared a new "reform package" on the Kurdish issue that calls for official talks between Ankara and the PKK. If these negotiations are successful, Erdogan has promised to provide amnesty for the thousands of PKK fighters. The Turkish leader will try to entertain the desires of Kurds living in Turkey while building even deeper ties with those living outside. Turkish domestic politics and international relations have therefore turned Ankara's one-time enemies into attractive partners.

Taking advantage of the collapse of central authority in Iraq and Syria, Turkey will also make advances into Iraq and Syria's Sunni areas. Left to their own devices without significant economic development, these regions will remain desolate and may become hotbeds of radicalism in a similar way to Afghanistan, which remains an incubator of the Taliban. In light of this, Washington will support this foray, just as it has supported the Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement.

In contrast, Ankara's attempts to woo the Sunni Arabs to its side may end up being a tall order. Turkey is losing the Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria even if it has hitherto acted as their patron. In Syria, Turkey has thrown its support behind the Sunni insurgency to oust the Assad regime. Initially, this development brought the Sunni Arabs under Turkey's sphere of influence. Subsequently, Ankara's Syria policy morphed into Ankara's Sunni Arab policy.

In Iraq too, Ankara reached out to the Sunnis following a change in direction. During Iraq's parliamentary elections in 2010, Turkey supported Iyad Allawi's coalition, a pan-Iraq list of both Sunni and Shi'ite candidates. When Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki won and broke with Ankara to protest Turkish support to his opponents, Turkey subsequently pivoted to become the protector of that country's Sunni Arab community. To this end, Ankara utilized its existing reach into the Sunni community, a result of Ankara's opposition to the Iraq war in 2003 that had made Erdogan popular among Sunnis. Turkey then went on to develop intimate political and economic ties with the Sunni Arabs in northern and western Iraq, becoming a benefactor and drawing the ire of Maliki, who was already upset due to Turkish rapprochement with the KRG.

Despite its initial successful foray into building links with Sunni Arab communities in Iraq and Syria, Turkey has recently lost some ground among both due to the backfiring of its permissive attitude towards border-crossing jihadists. ISIS has been spreading the message that Turkey's societal values, as well as its ties with the United States and NATO, are anathema to Muslims. Although Ankara sees little chance of these arguments gaining traction,

Turkey's leaders will no longer ignore the growing ISIS presence in Syria and Iraq. The group has put muscle on its bones and now threatens foreign targets in the Fertile Crescent: the first of which being Turkey's consulate in Mosul.

Ankara needs to come up with an effective strategy to combat ISIS influence among some Sunni Arabs. At the same time, it needs to use its key strength -- its phenomenal economic growth -- to economically penetrate the Sunni Arab areas of Iraq and Syria before ISIS takes over both regions entirely. If Turkey plays its cards right, Sunni Arab urban centers in northern Syria and Iraq could become the forward stations of Turkey's zone of influence.

In carrying out its Sunni Arab outreach, Turkey will have to strike a delicate balance between its dealings with the Kurds in both countries and not upsetting nationalist Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria. Too-intimate ties between Ankara and the Kurds have a potential pitfall: they could drive some Sunni Arabs towards an anti-Turkish and anti-Kurdish Arab identity and gravitate towards ISIS.

In this regard, the KRG has a problem as well. With Kirkuk under its belt, the KRG is now truly multiethnic -- with Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmens, and others. So far, the KRG has acted as "a state by the Kurds and for the Kurds," ignoring its small yet diverse ethnic communities. Now, the KRG has a real diversity problem, and it must find a way to transform itself from an ethnic movement with nationalist ambitions to a quasi-state that must accommodate more than just one group within its borders.

Turkey has a democracy challenge as well. Ankara must navigate contentious terrain in order to address Kurdish nationalist aspirations at home while serving as protector and thus fostering them in Iraq and Syria. Erdogan will usher in greater emphasis on Kurdish self-rule and rights in Turkey. Kurdish support will prove helpful towards Erdogan's presidential ambitions, and eventually benefit the AKP in 2015's parliamentary elections. The latter would open the path for constitutional amendments that could result in a presidential system in Turkey with Erdogan at the helm.

Erdogan is not known for his liberal tendencies, nor is he famous for his embrace of Kurdish nationalism. It is conceivable that after securing election victories in 2014 and 2015, "President Erdogan" could go back on some his promises to the Kurds. For their own part, Turkey's pro-PKK Kurds do not like Erdogan much. Socialist and leftist in orientation, they abhor Erdogan's strait-jacket social conservatism.

Any political deal between Erdogan and the pro-PKK Kurds could also be undermined by factions on both sides. One risk, in this regard, is the hardline camp within the PKK that elevated many of its members to the group's leadership in a 2013 shuffle of the PKK's upper management. The ties between Ankara and the Turkish Kurds could be the soft, vulnerable underbelly of the broader Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement.

Even with these risks, a new Fertile Crescent has been born, with a de facto Turkish-Kurdish union, flanked by simmering civil wars and jihadist presence to the south. Rapprochement between Turkey and the Kurds may not lead to outright Kurdish independence, but it is almost certain that in the new Middle East the borders between the Kurds and Arabs will be more real than the borders between the Kurds and Turkey. A day may come when Kurds will need visas to go into Iraq and Syria and only ID cards to enter Turkey. The Turks and Kurds have become good friends in the Middle East and there is, probably, no going back.

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*<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power> (Potomac Books). ❖*

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