

The Good Rapprochement: Why Obama Will Praise Erdogan

Nov 30, 2009



Articles & Testimony

What will U.S. President Barack Obama and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan discuss when they meet in the White House on Dec. 7? There is going to be some give and take on a variety of issues, including Iran. But both leaders will agree on Iraq.

Ever since coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government in Ankara has come under fire for pursuing rapprochement with the wrong international partners. The AKP has faced criticism for warming up to Sudan and Iran, whose authoritarian and anti-Western regimes contrast with Turkey's political system. Yet, another rapprochement the AKP has pursued deserves praise: The party has painstakingly built ties between Ankara and Baghdad, and improved relations with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG. Mr. Erdogan should expect praise from President Obama for holding Iraq's and the KRG's hands, and for helping the Iraqis emerge from the trauma of the war and rebuild. What is more, in a region wrought by win-lose thinking, the improvements in Turkish-Iraqi ties nurtured by the AKP serve as a sign that at least part of the Middle East is open to win-win politics.

The most symbolic sign of Turkish-Iraqi rapprochement is the opening of two Turkish diplomatic missions in Iraq, respectively in Basra and Arbil. A Turkish consulate was opened in Basra recently, and another mission is scheduled to be opened in Arbil soon.

These two missions serve as a sign that Turkish-Iraqi and Turkish-KRG ties have come around. Only two years ago, I was getting calls from frantic journalists asking whether the Turkish military was going to invade Iraq. Today, it is Turkish diplomats and businessmen who are doing the invading.

One reason driving this change has been the shift in Iraqi Kurds' evaluation of their strategic environment. Between 2003 and 2006, when a majority of Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs fought against the United States, the Iraqi Kurds were a significant ally for Washington in Iraq. This equation earned the Kurds American backing in Baghdad. In due course, the Kurds achieved many gains, such as recognition of the KRG as a federal entity.

That situation, however, changed after 2006. First, the United States co-opted the Sunni Arabs through the Awakening Councils. Then, Washington made peace with the Shiite Arabs. The new relationship with both Arab groups allowed the United States to zoom out from Baghdad and see the big picture in Iraq. Washington realized that if the Iraqi state is to function, its modus operandi must continue to satisfy the Arabs, who constitute the vast majority of Iraq's population.

Hence, the United States started to back the Arabs over the Kurds on several crucial issues. In February 2007, Washington pressured the Kurds until they agreed to a hydrocarbon law favorable to the Iraqi Arabs and the central government. The United States dealt a second blow to the Kurds on the Kirkuk issue. Washington pressured the Kurds to drop their insistence on carrying out a referendum in Kirkuk by the constitutionally mandated deadline of Dec. 31, 2007. The referendum would have annexed oil-rich Kirkuk to the KRG, fulfilling a Kurdish dream.

These U.S. actions convinced the Kurds, perhaps somewhat prematurely, that America had abandoned them in favor of the Iraqi Arabs. This rationale forced the Iraqi Kurds, already fearful of Iran's influence in Iraq, to turn to their remaining neighbor: Turkey.

The KRG's turn towards Ankara brought the Iraqi Kurds into closer cooperation with Turkey against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. In the 1990s, the Iraqi Kurds helped Ankara against the PKK when Turkey helped them. At this time, Ankara provided the Iraqi Kurds with access to U.S. military protection against Saddam. After Saddam was removed in 2003, the Iraqi Kurds shortsightedly concluded that they did not need Turkey anymore. This calculus precipitated four years of KRG foot dragging on the PKK issue. That ended in 2007. Within the background of their new security environment, the Iraqi Kurds decided that they still needed Turkey and that they were better served by building a long-term relationship with Ankara.

Enter the AKP. The party utilized this strategic opening, building ties with Iraqi Kurds. At the same time, the AKP was smart enough to also cultivate good ties with non-Kurdish Iraqi factions. In due course, Turkey emerged as an honest broker inside Iraq, enjoying good ties with Kurds and Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites alike.

Subsequently, the KRG and Turkey have built strong ties, extending from Iraqi Kurdish commercial contracts awarded to Turkish companies, to likely pipeline and energy deals between Turkey and the KRG, to close contact between Turkish and KRG intelligence officials. Meanwhile, Turkey has become a force to reckon with inside Iraq, from Arbil in the north to Basra in the south.

Turkey's rapprochement with Iraq and the KRG has been quite smart. Iraq is more stable today thanks to Turkey. Ankara enjoys unprecedented political and economic power inside Iraq, and moreover, it has managed to align the Iraqi Kurds along its policy of countering the PKK.

Furthermore, the AKP's rapprochement with Iraq has earned it brownie points with the Obama administration. Since the administration wants to wrap up the Iraq war while ensuring the nation's future stability, Turkey's constructive involvement in Iraq has made Ankara an asset for President Obama ahead of Erdogan's Dec. 7 Washington visit. The Turkish-Iraqi-KRG rapprochement is indeed a win-win case. That is rare indeed in the Middle East, and this is one reason why Erdogan should expect some praise from President Obama.

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