



Turkey's Kurdish Gamble

Nathalie Tocci

Abstract

Turkish policies are currently bolstering the Kurdish Regional Government's drift towards independence, a prospect thought unthinkable in Ankara only a few years ago. Energy politics is an important component of this puzzle, but Ankara's strategic choice can only be understood against the backdrop of Iraq's deepening sectarianization, the unfolding civil war in Syria and the dynamics in Turkey's own Kurdish question. The Turkish government is pursuing a high risk-high gain strategy. A more democratic Turkey, in partnership with the KRG, would be best placed to hedge against the centrifugal sectarian trends afflicting its southern neighbours. However, it is far more likely that Turkey will win its gamble with the support of the European Union.

Keywords: *Turkey / Iraq / Northern Iraq / Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) / Kurdish question / European Union*

Turkey's Kurdish Gamble

by Nathalie Tocci*

Introduction

Relations between Turkey and Northern Iraq have evolved at a breathtaking pace. While up until the early 2000s Turkey was at the helm of efforts to stifle Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, today not only have Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) become prime regional partners, but Turkish policies are de facto bolstering the KRG's drift towards independence. Energy politics is an important component of this puzzle, but alone it cannot explain Turkey's apparent choice in favour of the KRG as opposed to the central government in Baghdad. Ankara's strategic choice can only be understood against the backdrop of Iraq's deepening sectarianization, the unfolding civil war in Syria and the dynamics in Turkey's own Kurdish question. The Turkish government is pursuing a high risk-high gain strategy. Ideally, Turkey would successfully conclude the Imrali peace process with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and proceed with a new constitution that both entrenches individual and minority rights and enshrines the separation of powers. A more democratic Turkey, in partnership with the KRG, would be best placed to hedge against the centrifugal sectarian trends afflicting its southern neighbours. Yet it is far more likely that Turkey will win its high risk-high gain gamble with the support of the only external actor that can positively influence its domestic transformation: the European Union.

1. Turkey and Northern Iraq: The anatomy of a relationship

In the aftermath of the first Gulf war, Turkey became singularly preoccupied with the establishment of an autonomous northern Iraq, which acted as a safe haven for the PKK. Throughout the 1990s, anti-PKK incursions into Northern Iraq were the order of the day. Ankara's driving rationale for its staunch opposition to the creation of a Kurdish state in Iraq was the concern this could fuel secessionism in its own Kurdish-populated regions. Its greatest fears came to pass in March 2003 as America declared war on Iraq. Turkey's primary concern with Iraq's territorial integrity meant that while the post-2003 situation opened the way for greater cooperation with Syria and Iran, which also have sizable Kurdish populations, cooperation with Iraq (and Northern Iraq in particular) struggled to take off. In the post-2003 context Turkey amassed troops on its border with Iraq on several occasions and conducted frequent operations within Northern Iraq against the PKK to signal its intentions.

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Since 2007 there has been a marked improvement in relations between Turkey and Iraq, and in particular with the KRG. Following the transfer of the Iraq dossier from the Turkish military to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,¹ alongside extensive intelligence sharing with the US that allowed Turkish special forces to target PKK training camps in the Kandil mountains, Ankara reconciled with the KRG. As the PKK threat from Northern Iraq waned, the KRG came to be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat for the Turkish state. Since 2007-8 Turkey has accepted Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, opening official ties with the KRG, including a Turkish consulate in Erbil, and the KRG has cooperated in Turkey's fight against the PKK. Stronger political ties both stemmed from and enhanced a burgeoning economic, social and political relationship, epitomized by Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Erbil in 2011 followed by dozens of ministerial meetings since then, to the benefit of both Iraqi Kurds and Turkey's Anatolian tigers. Turkey today represents the KRG's principal economic partner. Whereas in 2010 approximately 730 Turkish firms operated in Northern Iraq, by early 2012 that figure had ballooned to 1,023.

In 2012 this blossoming relationship was propelled to a higher gear. In May last year, Turkey and the KRG agreed to build one gas and two oil pipelines directly from Northern Iraq into Turkey, which would sidestep the central government, bypass the existing Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline controlled by Baghdad and provide Northern Iraq with direct access to global energy markets. Early this year, Erbil authorized crude oil exports to Turkey with the aim of reaching European markets independently of Baghdad. The KRG has already begun the construction of these pipelines, which are in principle set to be operational in 2014. Needless to say, against the backdrop of Iraq's fragmentation, these pipelines would represent a momentous step towards independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraq's Deputy National Security Advisor Safa el-Sheikh Hussein put it starkly: "If oil through Kurdistan goes through Turkey directly, that will be like dividing Iraq".²

What explains Turkey's 180 degree turn on Northern Iraq? Why is the prospect of Northern Iraq's de facto independence no longer dreaded but implicitly supported by Ankara? And what are the implications of Turkey's seemingly strategic U-turn?

2. Is energy the answer?

Energy itself has been cited as a driver of Turkey's strategy. Turkey's growing economy is notoriously energy hungry, with domestic energy consumption rising by 6-8 percent per year. Growing energy imports not only aggravate Turkey's grave current account deficit. They also raise Turkey's dependence on two critical suppliers: Russia and Iran. With respect to both, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had sought to apply his "zero problems with neighbours" mantra. Yet the Arab uprisings have put the spans in the wheels of Davutoğlu's doctrine (with the notable exception of Northern Iraq),

¹ The MFA unsurprisingly has a less securitized approach to Northern Iraq than the military, and greater sensitivity to the political and economic potential to be tapped by cooperative relations with the KRG.

² Peg Mackey, "Iraq official fears split as Kurdish-Turkey oil trade grows", *Reuters*, 19 March 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/19/us-iraq-kurdistan-energy-idUSBRE92I0ZV20130319>.

despite claims to the contrary.³ Simply put, at the regional and global levels, the Syrian quagmire has pitted Turkey, the EU, the US and the Gulf against Iran and Russia. Economic rationale coupled with geostrategic thinking has thus induced Ankara to up the ante in the diversification of its energy supplies. Iraq's oil and gas reserves, many of which are located in the Kurdish north, represent an evident strategic choice. On the one hand, Iraq offers Turkey a high quality and low cost alternative to Iranian and Russian supplies. On the other, Turkey provides Iraq with a corridor for its energy exports to Europe, thus bolstering Turkey's ambition to act as an energy hub.

Yet energy alone cannot explain why Turkey has opted for the KRG, rather than deepening its relations with Baghdad. Arguably, opting for the KRG rather than Iraq as a whole makes for a dubious economic choice. On the one hand, Baghdad's predictable resistance to Ankara's independent dealings with the KRG are imperiling Turkey's broader economic and energy partnership with Iraq. As an indication of this, in December 2012 Nouri al-Maliki's government banned Turkey's national energy company TPAO from bidding for an oil exploration contract. On the other hand, Iraq as a whole has been Turkey's second trading partner, with bilateral trade climbing steeply from USD 2.8 billion in 2007 to USD 10.7 billion in 2012. True, approximately half of this regards Northern Iraq, but the other half should not to be forgotten. Energy, or indeed economics, alone cannot explain Turkey's shift. A broader set of geopolitical and domestic political considerations are at play.

3. The Ankara-Baghdad rift

A first reason explaining Turkey's KRG choice is the deepening rift with the central government in Baghdad. Relations have soured since Nouri al-Maliki's government visibly adopted a sectarian colour, heightened its authoritarian style of governance and increasingly orbited within Iran's sphere of influence. A tipping point in Maliki's sectarian turn, which directly impacted Turkish-Iraqi relations, was the accusation of terrorism against Sunni Vice President Tariq Hashimi in 2011, leading to Hashimi's flight from Iraq and his ensuing trial and death sentence in absentia. More recently, Rafi Issawi, former finance minister and another leading figure of the Iraqi Sunni camp narrowly escaped capture by a force sent by Maliki's government to arrest him. Maliki, for his part, observes Northern Iraq's drift to independence, and faced with a fragmenting country strives to consolidate his own grip over Iraq's Shiites. By doing so and consequently alienating both Sunnis and Kurds, Baghdad is turning Iraq's fragmentation into a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁴ The sectarianization of Iraq is concomitantly alienating Turkey, which increasingly is both treated and behaves as a Sunni power, dissipating the political capital that it had carefully built only a few years earlier.⁵ Unsurprisingly, the third meeting of the High Level Strategic Cooperation

³ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Zero Problems in a new Era", *Foreign Policy* website, 21 March 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/21/zero_problems_in_a_new_era_turkey.

⁴ Henri J. Barkey, "Iraq's great divider", *Los Angeles Times*, 26 March 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/mar/26/opinion/la-oe-barkey-iraq-dissolution-20130326>.

⁵ In the second half of the 2000s, Turkey repeatedly presented itself as a mediator in Sunni-Shiite tensions. A key case in point was its mediation between Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki and Syrian President al-Assad after the 2009 bombings in Baghdad, when the former accused the latter of plotting the attack.

Council between Turkey and Iraq established in 2008 has been pending since 2011. The ensuing Turkish-Iraqi rift is pushing Ankara and Erbil into a tight embrace.

4. The Syrian quagmire

Second and related is Syria's spiraling violence, which has both heightened centrifugal sectarianism in the region - in which Turkey and Iraq sit on opposite sides of the fence - and consolidated the drive for Kurdish independence. With Syria's Kurds being granted free reign in the north by al-Assad's forces, the dominant Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) now threatens to become a PKK safe haven. Some believe that it is no wonder that 2012 was the deadliest year in the struggle between the PKK and the Turkish state since the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. Within this context, Ankara has sought to contain the PKK challenge by consolidating its influence over the KRG. By deepening relations with Northern Iraq, Erdoğan has at the very least sought to prevent Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish secessionism from merging, giving rise to a pan-Kurdish irredentism that might sooner or later engulf Turkey's southeast too. At most, Ankara has relied on its Iraqi Kurdish ally Massoud Barzani to play into Syrian Kurdish political dynamics by swaying power away from the PYD and towards the less Turkey-hostile Kurdistan National Council within the KRG-promoted "Supreme Kurdish Committee" in Syria. Hence, whereas Iraq's sectarianization is bringing together Turkey and the KRG by default, Syria's conflagration is uniting the two by Turkish design.

5. Turkish-Kurdish reconciliation and Turkey's constitutional challenge

Third and finally, the deepening Turkish-KRG relationship cannot be understood in isolation from Turkey's domestic Kurdish question. After the ill-fated Kurdish Opening (later redefined as a Democratic Opening) in 2009, Turkey's Kurdish question took a sinister turn. The Democratic Opening came to an abrupt close with the political flop of the operation to return a small group of Kurdish refugees and PKK affiliates from Iraq in September 2009, the banning of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) in December 2009 and the intensification of arrests of Kurdish activists involving alleged members of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK). By early 2013, close to 8,000 persons, including politicians, mayors, journalists, publishers, writers and academics had been arrested, despite the lack of evidence of their involvement in acts of violence. The security situation was also aggravated, with over 700 deaths in 2012.

Alongside this, since the third electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in June 2011, the Turkish domestic political scene has been dominated by debates over a new constitution. The constitution-making machinery was set in motion within the Turkish Grand National Assembly, in which a Constitutional Conciliation Commission including three members from each of the four political parties represented in parliament - the AKP, the centre-left CHP, the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish BDP - was meant to agree on a draft by consensus. Yet in Turkey's climate of acute political polarization, the prospects for agreement on a draft were effectively nil. Two inter-locking cleavages separate the four parties: a first regarding the separation of powers and civil-military relations, pitting the AKP against the CHP;

and a second on citizenship, governance and rights, including questions of secularism, decentralization and identity, where the lines of division run between the AKP and CHP as well as between the MHP and the BDP.

In view of the predictable lack of consensus, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan declared that the government would single-handedly draft a new constitution and present it to a popular referendum. In doing so an AKP-crafted constitution would seek to further empower the presidency, which Erdoğan himself vies for, aiming to run and win next year's first direct presidential elections. Many in the opposition are up in arms, not unjustifiably fearing that transforming the country into a full-blown presidential system would further endanger the already compromised separation of powers without necessarily enhancing the effectiveness of government. The snag in Erdoğan's grand design is that the AKP does not have the parliamentary numbers to go it alone. The AKP is five seats short of the 330 seat majority required to put the draft constitution to popular referendum. And seeking agreement with the CHP and MHP on a presidential system is a lost cause.

It is here that Turkey's Kurdish challenge and the Prime Minister Erdoğan's presidential ambitions dovetail. In a nutshell, the AKP government seeks to kill two birds with a stone: to pacify the Kurdish question by negotiating an end of violence with the PKK and with the BDP a constitutional solution to the Kurdish question comprising enhanced citizenship and language rights and territorial autonomy; and in return, receiving BDP support for a presidential system. With the support of the independent BDP parliamentarians, the AKP would have sufficient votes to put its draft constitution to the people, in which it would hope to repeat the success of its 2010 referendum on constitutional amendments.

The strategy has won a first critical victory. In March 2013, on the occasion of the Kurdish Newroz celebrations, Öcalan called upon the PKK to retreat from Turkish territory and lay down arms. The next day the PKK unilaterally declared a ceasefire and eight Turkish hostages held by the PKK were released. The significance of this move cannot be downplayed. Yet the final die in the arduous road towards reconciliation has not been cast and many are the pitfalls along the way. Prime amongst these is what the AKP is actually willing to concede in terms of Kurdish individual and collective rights in the new constitution and whether these will meet the BDP-PKK's red lines. Linked to this is the question of how precisely a presidential system that entails a heightened centralization of power will sit alongside Kurdish claims for decentralization. Some informally raise the specter of a division of the spoils, where the AKP would be the unquestioned leader of western and central Turkey, leaving the Kurds in control of the southeast. At the current juncture all speculations are fanciful at best, while what is crystal clear is that the space for manoeuvre of an AKP-BDP/PKK deal that would also pass the test of a popular referendum - despite the resistance of both nationalists concerned about granting Kurdish rights and democrats concerned about a weakened separation of powers - is exceedingly narrow.

It is against the backdrop of the Turkish Prime Minister's gamble that Northern Iraq fits in. Within this high risk-high gain gamble, Erdoğan needs all the support he can garner. And with Syria ablaze, the KRG is the most critical partner both to ensure that the PKK ceasefire holds and that Kurdish secessionism in Turkey's southeast is kept at bay.

6. Turkey's dilemma and Europe's silence

Many Turkey-watchers observe this unfolding drama with mixed feelings. There is jubilant hope for a long-sought resolution of Turkey's Kurdish conflict. The historic significance of Turkey's rapprochement with Northern Iraq, of a definitive end to the three-decade long cycle of state-PKK violence, and of a new civilian constitution cannot be overstated. Yet there is also acute fear of all this is taking place within an increasingly centralized political system displaying sinister signs of authoritarianism, against a regional backdrop of sectarian fragmentation in neighbouring Syria and Iraq. The paradox is that both trends are proceeding hand in hand.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? No magic wand solution appears in sight. Ideally, Turkey would successfully conclude the Imrali peace process and approve a new constitution that both entrenches individual and minority rights and enshrines the separation of powers. A more democratic Turkey would be best placed to hedge against the centrifugal sectarian trends afflicting its southern neighbours.

However, it is difficult to imagine how Turkey will exit its dilemma alone. Externally, the only actor that has ever had decisive influence on Turkey's democratization is the European Union. While the United States is infinitely more relevant than the EU as regards the broader regional security dynamics, it has traditionally been far more marginal in Turkey's domestic reform process. Turkish reformers still vividly remember that it was under the EU's impulse that Turkey engaged in the most radical and at the same time consensual reform of its political system, including, among others, the abolishment of the death penalty, the eradication of torture, the expansion of the freedoms of expression and association, and the legalization of the use, broadcasting, and private education in Kurdish. While recognizing that the principal impulse in Turkey's political reform process today is domestic, Turks and Kurds of a variety of political stripes recognize the value the EU political anchor once had. That anchor today seems lost. Not only as a result of Turkey's moribund EU accession process, but also because "Europe" - including both the EU and the European Court of Human Rights - have taken a back seat on the Kurdish issue as the Kurdish struggle has increasingly shifted from the quest for group as opposed to merely individual rights.⁶

The EU today has no voice in the intricacies of the Imrali process, Turkey's constitutional talks and its regional relations. But notwithstanding the growing disenchantment of Turkish public opinion, the EU still has a potentially powerful sway over the country's overall political dynamics by both setting the standards of Turkey's democratization and providing a joint roof under which diverse political forces can converge. Moving forward, dim rays of light shine on the horizon and should be capitalized on in order to reignite a virtuous dynamic between Turkey and the European Union. French President François Hollande's lifting of the veto over one accession negotiation chapter, Germany's appreciation of the need to re-dynamize EU-Turkey ties, the prospects for a re-launched Cyprus peace process after Nicos Anastasiadis' election in Cyprus, the Cyprus bail-out and the potential dynamics

⁶ Dilek Kurban, "To Europe and Back: The Three Decades of Kurdish Struggle in Turkey", in *Global Turkey in Europe. GTE Policy Brief*, No. 7 (March 2013), <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=869>.

brought about by Eastern Mediterranean gas could all converge to unblock paralysis in Turkey's accession talks.

Much, of course, will depend on how the EU will ultimately exit from the deepest crisis in its history. Here too, it is not unthinkable that in a renewed European Union, with a more tightly integrated core, graduated forms of membership would be possible.⁷ So long as such an arrangement emerges as the product of mutual choice and not of imposition, it may end up suiting several current and future members, of which Turkey would be part. Were such a dynamic to be ignited, the chances of Turkey winning its Kurdish gamble and emerging from it as an unambiguously more democratic country able to positively influence developments in its turbulent neighbourhood would be infinitely higher than in the current predicament.

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⁷ Nathalie Tocci and Dimitar Bechev "Will Turkey Find its Place in Post-Crisis Europe?", in *Global Turkey in Europe. GTE Policy Brief*, No. 5 (December 2012), http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE_PB_05.pdf.



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