

Turkey, the US and the KRG: Moving Parts and the Geopolitical Realities

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ABSTRACT

In a remarkable turnaround, Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government have recently emerged as close partners in a region increasingly characterized by uncertainty. They share a discomfort with the centralizing inclinations of Baghdad's current government, a stake in seeing an end to the PKK's campaign of violence, and a preference for greater unity between the various forces opposing the Assad regime in Syria. Their economies are increasingly interlocked, and the KRG's emergence as a significant producer of energy is of benefit to both parties. Furthermore, the Ankara-Erbil relationship is one that serves Washington's regional interests and perspectives well. However, serious differences remain. Iraqi Kurds still aspire to incorporate Kirkuk, and support greater autonomy for the Kurds of Turkey and Syria too. Turkey's support for Erbil could unintentionally help produce greater Kurdish autonomy throughout the region. This article explores some of the possible ramifications of the burgeoning Ankara-Erbil relationship.

Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), one of the two leading Iraqi Kurdish parties that have carved up the governing of the KRG between them, recently asserted once again that the time for Kurdish self-determination might be drawing close. He cited the factional infighting in Baghdad and the disregard there of Iraq's constitution, not least with regard to the resolution of the disputed territories around Kirkuk. A referendum in oil-rich and majority Kurdish-inhabited Kirkuk that was supposed to have been held in 2007 has been put off indefinitely by Baghdad. The expectation is that a referendum would confirm the desire of a majority of the region's inhabitants to be incorporated into the KRG. For Barzani, Baghdad's undemocratic, sectarian, centralizing and unconstitutional behavior were encouraging a reconsid-

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eration of the Kurdish commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity and federative structure.¹ Over the years, Barzani has repeatedly referred to his aspiration for an independent Kurdish state.² The informal referendum held in the KRG in 2005, which produced a more than 95-percent vote in favor of independence, suggests that Barzani accurately represents Iraqi Kurdish public opinion.

Of course, it is possible that Barzani's comments were little more than an attempt to appease public sentiment among Iraqi Kurds. They might also be interpreted as an attempt to squeeze concessions from Baghdad, especially as the remarks were uttered in the midst of a major wrangle with the Iraqi government

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over payments for oil extracted within KRG territory but that is exported via the Baghdad-owned pipeline that runs from Kirkuk to Ceyhan in Turkey. As a result of the disagreement, the KRG in Erbil cut off the supply of oil extracted in its territory for export

via this route. To enable the companies operating within its territory to sell the oil they are now extracting, Erbil is conducting a cut-price trade in oil trucked largely into Iran.³ Barzani's threat of a referendum on independence also came in the midst of a crisis in the delicate sectarian power-sharing arrangements on which stable government in Iraq rests. Iraq's Shia prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, had served an arrest warrant for Tariq al-Hashemi, Iraq's Sunni deputy president, on terrorism charges, as part of what looked like a wider marginalization of Sunni participation in the government. Al-Hashemi fled to the KRG, which is beyond the reach of the Baghdad authorities and which refused to hand him over, and from there he has travelled to Istanbul as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. But Barzani's comments also serve as a reminder that Iraqi Kurds continue to aspire for self-determination, that they have kept alive their claim over Kirkuk, and that their relationship with Baghdad remains fragile. There are few grounds for assuming any of this will change much with the passage of time. Indeed, with time the KRG's relationship with Baghdad seems likely to become more rather than less distant.

Turkey and the KRG

It is noteworthy that Barzani's comments provoked barely a murmur from Ankara. In fact, in April, just weeks after he made the comments, he was given the red carpet treatment during a trip to Turkey, and met with the republic's president, prime minister, foreign minister and intelligence chief. This contrasts with the fury with which Barzani's pro-independence comments, and declara-

tions of the Kurdish claim on Kirkuk, were once greeted in Ankara. The deep Turkish unease at the very existence of the KRG, which could be a precursor to a sovereign Kurdish state, the impact this could have on Turkey's own unsettled Kurds, and the belief that the KRG was enabling cross-border raids into Turkey by Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters based in the Iraqi Kurdish mountains, have in the past all fed Ankara's hostility. The enlargement of the KRG's territory to incorporate oil-rich Kirkuk was also a Turkish "red line", as it was feared this could vastly improve the viability of an independent Kurdish state.

Turkey's once menacing policy of keeping the KRG at arms lengths has melted away in recent years. Turkish

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Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's October 2009 visit to KRG's President Massoud Barzani in Erbil paved the way for a still-ongoing and intense round of diplomatic visits and diplomacy between Turkey and the Kurdish "quasi-state". Ankara also decided to open a consulate in Erbil, as did the US soon afterwards. The growth of cross-border trade predated the improvement in the political relationship between Ankara and Erbil, and dates back at least to the lifting of sanction on Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The KRG now accounts for half of Turkey's trade with Iraq, which is Turkey's second largest trading partner after Germany. Tens of thousands of Turkish citizens work or have established businesses in Kurdish Iraq, many of them Turkish Kurds.⁴ This shift in the Turkey-KRG relationship might reflect little more than a change of style in Turkish foreign policy, and constitute an expression of Davutoglu's "zero problems" and dialogue-based approach to neighborhood diplomacy. It might also be a function of the diminished scope enjoyed by Turkey's once hard-line General Staff to pronounce on foreign policy issues. Then too we should take account of the importance given to trade by Turkey's current government as an instrument of Turkish soft power.

Perhaps some time had to pass before Ankara could reconcile itself to the truth that, in some form or another, the KRG is here to stay. Ankara has also come to recognize that prospects for its ongoing domestic struggle with the PKK would be enhanced by Erbil's cooperation. In his April trip to Turkey, Barzani again called for the PKK to end its armed campaign, promised to pressure the PKK to end its cross-border raids into Turkey, and declared that he "will not allow the PKK to prevail in the region"⁵—all music to Ankara's ears, although

it was hardly the first time the Turks have heard such utterances from Iraq's Kurdish leaders. In fact, it is not at all clear that the KRG's *peshmerga* are

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about to be deployed against the PKK in northern Iraq. Both the PKK and Turkey's pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) immediately warned Barzani against involving himself in Turkey's Kurdish problem on behalf of Ankara, and sought to downplay the impact his intervention

might have.⁶ Ankara is presumably hoping that it is Barzani's words that will most resonate with disaffected Turkish Kurds.

Barzani was received with comparable fanfare in Washington a few days prior to his trip to Turkey. The tone and content of the visit suggested that Washington's commitment to its Iraqi Kurdish friends remains intact. With the US's decision of late 2007 to give Turkey the green light to conduct cross-border raids in pursuit of the PKK—an option much resorted to by Ankara's armed forces during the 1980s and 1990s, but denied in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq—and with its military withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, Erbil's fear that it had been deserted by Washington was real. However, it is now evident that the KRG remains valued in the US as a rare friendly face in a frequently hostile region. Given its alliance with Washington and its reliance on US technology and intelligence in the fight with the PKK, this too constrains Ankara's options with respect to its relationship with the KRG. There is little doubt that Washington's preference is for reduced tension and increased cooperation between Ankara and Erbil.

A Region of Moving Parts

Both Ankara and Washington continue to profess their commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity and federal structure, as indeed do KRG officials, and those numerous Kurds with Iraqi government positions in Baghdad. Indeed Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, who doubles as secretary-general of northern Iraq's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), said in an April 2012 interview in response to a question about the prospects of independence for Kurdish northern Iraq, that although "I don't think there is anything impossible in the world, but in the near future, I don't see any possibility for this". Furthermore, he argued that "not only is independence not possible, but also now it is in the interests of Kurdish people to remain within the framework of Iraq".⁷ He has a point. The KRG remains financially dependent on its 17-percent share of Iraq's centrally allocated

oil revenues, it benefits from the ability of Kurds in the Baghdad government to curtail any centralizing excesses, its independence would be fiercely opposed by its powerful neighbors on whom it is dependent for trade and investments, and its internal governance is at the mercy of a fragile KDP-PUK power-sharing arrangement that has led to corruption and disillusion on the part of many of the KRG's inhabitants.

However, Washington's and Ankara's shared embrace of the KRG should be set against the background of their increasing discomfort concerning a range of developments in the broader Middle East region. These factors are increasingly shaping the prospects and regional weight of the KRG. They include Tehran's difficult behavior, the dramatic unfolding of events in Syria, the dubious prospects for a stable Iraq, the slow and stuttering revival of Iraq's energy industry, the KRG's relatively dynamic approach to the development of its energy resources, and Turkey's domestic Kurdish issue. Each actor is entangled in a complex web of moving and interlocking issues and developments through which Ankara, Washington and Erbil in particular each find themselves tightrope walking. Furthermore, the behavior of each of them in turn could generate unforeseen and unwanted outcomes. It is the unpredictable march of events more than the considered machinations of diplomats that are setting the pace and determining the region's agendas, and this applies to the prospects for the KRG too.

This is amply illustrated by the fact that Ankara's recent and courageous investment in improving its relationships with its immediate neighbors appears to have failed, for the time being at least. For example,

Turkey has sought to shore up Baghdad partly in order to minimize the scope for Iraqi Kurdish independence, stabilize Iraq and its environment, as well as to counter Iranian influence. In the wake of the 2003 invasion, Ankara was instrumental in coaxing Sunni participation in Iraq's post-Saddam political system, and cultivated relationships with all the country's factions with the aim of encouraging power-sharing, good governance, economic reconstruction and stability. Ankara and Baghdad established a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2008, and bilateral trade grew apace. Yet, despite these efforts, by January 2012 Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki was condemning Turkey's "interference" in Iraq's affairs after Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Er-

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dogan had warned him against stoking sectarian divisions in the country with his attempted arrest of al-Hashemi. The war of words between Baghdad and Ankara continued to deteriorate, particularly once al-Hashemi was granted protection by Turkey. Al-Maliki described Turkey as “hostile” towards Iraq and accused Ankara of pursuing a sectarian agenda.⁸ For his part, al-Hashemi declared that “hopes for early political solutions no longer exist” in Iraq.⁹ Turkish “zero problem” diplomacy had collided with Iraq’s fractious and sectarian politics and with other geopolitical realities.

While it is not clear that al-Maliki can retain his grip on Iraq’s parliament as he progressively upsets each of its factions in turn, there is little doubt that his control of key Iraqi state institutions has tightened. He appears intent on the cen-

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tralization of power, as do most of his possible successors. Indeed, it is al-Maliki’s centralizing tendencies that has prompted Barzani’s attacks on him. Although Iraq’s shifting internal alliances and intense power struggles

are ongoing, and any given constellation of forces at any given moment is likely to be transient, there is little reason to assume that the task of assembling coalitions in Baghdad that are inclusive of its sectarian and ethnic groups is likely to become easier in the future. Iraq’s Sunni provinces might also edge toward greater autonomy from a Shia-dominated and centralizing Baghdad. This might turn out to be a temporary response to al-Maliki’s confrontational behavior, but temporary and transient constellations might provide opportunities and give impetus to more enduring alterations in the country’s political arrangements. Actions beget reactions. The omens for the consolidation of Iraqi democracy and the establishment of stable governance are not good, and a Shia-dominated Iraq’s increasing ties to Iran are unmistakable and possibly irreversible.

For Turkey and the US these are not welcome developments, although as yet both seem reluctant to draw any definitive conclusions. The US had hoped to leave behind an intact, politically stable, economically developing and friendly Iraq. This prospect appears to be receding, and Washington might eventually be obliged to reconsider its expectations in Iraq. Erbil on the other hand is a friend to the US, a neighbor and significant trading partner for Turkey, and finds its interests as a minority in Iraq increasingly overlapping with those of Iraq’s Sunni Arab groups, as seen by Barzani’s support of autonomous arrangements for Iraq’s Sunni provinces.¹⁰ Uncomfortable developments in Baghdad serve to increase the value of Erbil to both Ankara and Washington. The embrace of the KRG is underpinned by an essentially unarticulated sense that, given Iraq’s and the wider region’s turmoil, it might be advisable to keep all options open.

Prior to the Syrian uprising, Turkey had warmly embraced the Assad regime, perhaps inadvisably given its poor human rights record and Washington's disapproval. Bilateral trade mounted, visa-free travel arrangements were put in place, and a host of other political, security, economic and social agreements were signed. A High Level Strategic Cooperation Council between Damascus and Ankara held its first ministerial meeting in October 2009. However, Ankara's frustration at its inability to persuade Damascus to adopt a reformist and inclusive approach, the regime's fierce crackdown once opposition showed its face, and the trickle of refugees across the Syrian border into Turkey, pushed Ankara towards support for what it now saw as the aspirations and rights of the Syrian people. Turkey has since taken a lead role in calling for the removal of the Assad regime. It has sponsored the Syrian National Council (SNC), which seeks to present itself as a Syrian government-in-exile, and hosts it in Istanbul. It is also a leading light in the largely western Friends of Syria group of countries. Yet at the time of writing the Assad regime is clinging to power. It might not fall, even if its survival is accompanied by a more or less intense and persisting violent conflict in Syria. Nor is the composition and nature of any successor regime at all clear.

Iran has stood by its ally in Damascus, while al-Maliki too has expressed his sympathy for the Assad regime. A Tehran-Baghdad alignment has emerged in the region which includes the Assad regime—for the time being at least. On both the Syrian and Iraqi issues, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have entered the fray on the opposing side. Thus, this Tehran-Baghdad axis is pitted in opposition to a Turkey-Gulf Arab coalition. Ankara's agreement last year to host early warning radar facilities as its contribution towards a NATO ballistic missile defense shield, widely seen as directed primarily at Iran's

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growing missile threat, was badly received in Tehran, although Ankara's reluctance to implement tougher sanctions against Iran has rectified some of the ill-feeling generated. Nevertheless, given the largely Alawite makeup of the Syrian regime, and the essentially Sunni nature of the opposition, and the fact that Iran and Turkey found themselves on the side of their Syrian co-religionists has—rightly or wrongly—been interpreted as suggesting that a sectarian undercurrent is now evident in regional diplomatic alignments. Given the Sunni roots of Turkey's ruling party, and the sense of exclusion felt by Turkey's substantial Alevi population, regional sectarian tension could have unsettling domestic repercussions in Turkey too. Needless to say, Washington's inclinations are towards

Turkey and the Gulf Arab states. Again, Turkey's brave attempts at conciliatory diplomacy in the region have hit the buffers of the region's unpredictability and underlying tensions. And again, the KRG appears more as friend than foe.

Barzani: Ankara's Favorite Kurd?

Iraqi Kurds are mostly Sunni, and the KRG's governance is secular. At minimum this can seem to reinforce the Ankara-Erbil axis against al-Malaki's Baghdad. Indeed, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani recently declared Turkey to be a "strategic partner" for Erbil, and its relationship with Ankara is more constructive than the one it has with Baghdad. However, the KRG is also Kurdish. Yet a convergence of developments has, in the most paradoxical of ways, converted this fact into something of an asset in Ankara's eyes, if only temporarily and tactically. President Massoud Barzani seems to have emerged as Ankara's Kurdish leader of choice, with respect both to the PKK and the wider region. For example, worried by the prospect of Kurdish secession in the context of Syria's turmoil, Ankara has sought to enlist him in its endeavors to persuade Syrian Kurds to commit themselves to the SNC.¹¹

Syria's minorities—Christians, Kurds and others as well as Alawites—are generally suspicious of the Arab nationalist and Muslim Brotherhood strands that appear to be dominant elements in the opposition to the Assad regime. Syria's numerous Kurdish factions have come together to form a Kurdish National Council (KNC), which has as its key demand the establishment of a Syrian federation that would include an autonomous Kurdish region. However, most of the squabbling elements that make up the SNC lack sympathy with this goal, which does not enhance the susceptibility of Syrian Kurds to Barzani's blandishments. In any case, at a conference held in Erbil in January 2012 Barzani expressed his support for the Syrian federation idea.¹² Thus far, the KNC has kept its distance from the SNC. However, Syrian Kurds are almost as divided as the SNC, and although their plight under the Assad regime has been a far from happy one, some appear to distrust the SNC as much or more than they distrust Assad.

This is certainly true of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has stayed aloof from the KNC and is usually seen as Syria's PKK offshoot. Assad has hinted at a brighter future for Syrian Kurds should his regime emerge intact from the current turmoil.¹³ Furthermore, the Damascus regime—in the form of Bashar al-Assad's father Hafiz—has a track record of supporting and sheltering the PKK in its struggles against Turkey. This protection was only removed in 1998, as a result of Ankara's threat to end it forcibly. The PKK's offices in Damascus and its camps in Lebanon were closed down and PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was expelled. There are now suggestions that Damascus has resuscitated its support



Photo: REUTERS, Ümit Bektaş

President of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region Massoud Barzani is welcomed by Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu upon his arrival at the Turkish Foreign Ministry in Ankara.

for Turkish Kurds, in retaliation for Ankara's support for the SNC.¹⁴ There are reports that around 2,000 PKK fighters have been moved from northern Iraq to the Syrian border with Turkey. As it is reckoned that as much as a third of the PKK membership is of Syrian Kurdish origin,¹⁵ Ankara is obliged to take this threat seriously, and it has tasked Barzani to try to marginalize the PKK's role in Syria's intra-Kurdish politics.

It is also worth noting that the KRG has recently played a pacifying role with respect to Iran's Kurdish troubles. Since 2004 Iran, like Turkey, has been in a struggle with Kurdish fighters operating from Iraqi Kurdish territory, in the form of the Party for Life and Freedom in Kurdistan (PJAK). Like the PKK, it was able to concentrate its operational base in northern Iraq once the Saddam regime was overthrown. It is usually regarded as an offshoot of the PKK, although PJAK does not have the level of support inside Iran that the PKK undoubtedly enjoys in Turkey. Like Ankara, Tehran is inclined to believe that the KRG facilitates the presence of these Kurdish separatist groups on its territory, or at least that it could do more to suppress the operational freedom they enjoy there. Iran also suspects that the PJAK is sponsored by the US as a means of destabilizing the Iranian regime. Certainly as the US withdrawal from Iraq approached during

the autumn of 2011, PJAK seemed to be on the lookout for a political settlement with Tehran. This presumably eased the task of the KRG officials who helped negotiate the first ever ceasefire between PJAK and Iranian forces, which came into effect in September, after Tehran's security forces had intensified their campaign against PJAK during the summer of 2011.¹⁶

Although no doubt welcomed in Ankara, which has closely cooperated with Iran against the PKK/PJAK threat from northern Iraq, the ceasefire might also have served as a reminder that Tehran, like Damascus, has a track record of exploiting Turkey's difficulties over its Kurdish issue and of engagement with Iraqi Kurds. Last summer's intensification of the Iranian military onslaught might well have been seen in Erbil as a sign of things to come once US military protection was removed. The KRG would now need to tread more carefully in its relationships with its neighbors, and Barzani's cooperation with Ankara and indeed Tehran must be seen in that context. The KRG's role in negotiating the ceasefire also reinforced the growing sense that it is gradually taking on

the mantle of pan-Kurdish authority and leadership, even if it is motivated as much or more by the need to preserve what Iraqi Kurds have than any concern for the plight of fellow Kurds elsewhere.

However, Barzani is not about to emerge as Ankara's puppet on the wider regional Kurdish issue. Barzani and the wider KRG leadership might well work to unite Syrian Kurds, to bring them closer to the SNC, and

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seek to marginalize the PYD/PKK, all of which mirror Ankara's requirements of him. The KRG certainly wishes to minimize the PKK's provocations against Ankara and Tehran launched from KRG territory, especially now that US forces have been removed, and to see an end to Turkey's bombing and commando raids against the PKK on KRG territory, which Washington helps facilitate. However, Barzani still seems hesitant about deploying overwhelming force against the PKK. Iraqi Kurds in general and the *peshmerga* in particular would not be sympathetic to any such measure against their Kurdish kin. It has long been a Turkish demand that KRG authorities take military steps to expel or weaken the PKK fighters based in northern Iraq, and the Iraqi Kurdish failure to comply has for just as long been a source of frustration to Turkey. From Ankara's perspective, Washington has appeared reluctant to seriously pressure the KRG leadership on this issue.

Nor should it be overlooked that, for all his necessary and instinctive capacity for short-term political machination on behalf of the KRG and his position in it, Barzani is after all a Kurdish nationalist. He has often reiterated his—perfectly realistic—view that Turkey’s Kurdish problem can only be resolved by dialogue and by some degree of autonomy for Turkey’s Kurdish provinces, and this remains his position and that of the US. In Barzani’s heart, and in the hearts of most Iraqi Kurds, if not always in his short-term tactics, he believes that what Iraqi Kurds have, Syrian and Turkish Kurds should also have, even if at this juncture he is disinclined to put his neck out for it. The establishment of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish entity on Turkey’s borders alongside the Iraqi Kurdish entity Ankara is already obliged to accommodate would seriously expose the inconsistencies in Turkey’s overall approach to the Kurds and will surely undermine its endeavors to keep its own Kurds firmly in the Turkish fold. In any case, in addition to the role as pan-Kurdish interlocutor that Ankara—and Washington—might wish him to adopt, Barzani is also an advocate and may increasingly become a facilitator of greater pan-Kurdish links as Erbil hosts a growing number of pan-Kurdish gatherings. Ankara’s policy of supporting Barzani in the hope that he will marginalize the PKK thus carries considerable risk. Although the Iraqi Kurdish leadership might meet with resistance from many of the region’s non-Iraqi Kurds and not least the PKK, Ankara’s promotion of the idea that Kurds are best placed to speak to Kurds in the region could well turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, with unforeseeable consequences.

The energy nexus is arguably the most important factor that will determine the future of Erbil-Baghdad and Erbil-Ankara relationships

Turkey’s Domestic Kurdish Problem

While developing a close economic and political relationship with the self-governing Kurds in northern Iraq, Ankara remains unwilling to contemplate a federative arrangement for Turkey’s own Kurds. For all its recent softening of the restrictions on minority language broadcasting and other measures, the AKP government still seems more inclined to fight rather than negotiate with political expressions of Kurdish identity. It continues to attach considerable priority to the conduct of a military campaign against the PKK, and it cannot quite bring itself to embrace the BDP as an acceptable political interlocutor for Turkish Kurds. In recent months, the number of arrests and detention of Kurdish political activists in Turkey, including members of the BDP leadership and of the Na-

tional Assembly, have rocketed and now runs into the thousands. Furthermore, there are few signs that the new constitutional arrangements that are currently being drawn up in Turkey will produce anything even remotely approaching a federation. The ruling AKP is in favor of constitutional citizenship rather than “Turkishness”, but it is against communal self-determination for Turkish Kurds. Indeed, it hopes for assimilation, and in its own electoral approach in Turkey’s southeast the AKP stresses the economic interests and shared religious and social values that it believes the country’s ethnic Turks and Kurds have in common.

Yet Kurdish identity is a fact in Turkey as in Iraq. Kurdish disgruntlement in Turkey predates the formation of the PKK, the establishment of the KRG in the early 1990s, or the overthrow of Saddam in 2003. There are few good reasons to believe that a military campaign against the PKK will ever succeed, and even if it did the disaffected Kurdish diaspora throughout Turkey and abroad could easily switch the axis of violence. Turkey’s Kurdish issue already has a significant global dimension, through the activities and lobbying of the Kurdish diaspora

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in Europe and beyond, and through the west’s human rights concerns with respect to their Turkish ally. Indeed, in April a BDP delegation travelled to Washington to present its case, and was met by senior state department officials.¹⁷ The BDP, as with each of its banned predecessors,

does not require any real or imagined links with the PKK in order to campaign for some kind of Kurdish self-determination and self-rule in Turkey. Barzani is happy to call for an end to PKK (and Turkish state) violence, but he also calls for serious talks with Kurdish political representatives. On the core issues relating to Turkey’s Kurdish problem, Ankara and Erbil remain significantly apart.

The Energy Nexus

The energy nexus is arguably the most important factor that will determine the future of Erbil-Baghdad and Erbil-Ankara relationships. The KRG’s finances are highly dependent on its share of Iraq’s energy-derived national revenue. However, this dependency has not led to a decrease in tensions between Erbil and Baghdad. Although Iraq’s oil exports have been on the increase in recent months, for political, bureaucratic, and infrastructure reasons oil production remains lower than forecast. Companies are consequently developing cold feet, and Iraq’s oil production forecasts are being constantly revised downwards. The KRG’s hope is that it will increasingly be able to rely on earnings from newly developed oil

and gas fields within its own territory, the proceeds of which it insists belong to the KRG in line with its own legislation dating back to 2007. Baghdad disputes Erbil's right to adopt this approach, and has threatened to blacklist any energy company that does business with the KRG from bidding for contracts in Iraq's southern fields. It recently implemented this threat by excluding Exxon from a tender in Iraq's southern oil fields in retaliation for Exxon's surprising decision in November 2011 to sign an oil and gas exploration agreement with Erbil. Indeed, the dispute between Erbil and Baghdad over energy sharing arrangements has led the Kurdish bloc in Iraq's parliament to help obstruct the adoption of a federal energy law, thereby providing a further drag on the resuscitation of Iraq's energy industry.

The KRG has signed almost 50 production sharing contracts, but with mainly small energy companies, some of them Turkish, attracted by the generous terms on offer. The more optimistic estimates of oil reserves put the KRG on a par with Nigeria or Libya, but the KRG's problem is how to export this oil, which is now being extracted in a number of locations in the region. The pipeline from Kirkuk into Turkey belongs to the central government in Baghdad, and the proceeds of any oil exported through it go into Baghdad's coffers. Erbil's resort to trucking oil across its borders as a consequence of its payments dispute with Baghdad cannot serve as a long-term export solution for the KRG, although with rising oil production the KRG's independent revenue-producing capacity stands to increase. Erbil's problem is made worse by the lack of a developed refining and storage capacity of its own. For the land-locked KRG to truly shake off its financial dependence on Baghdad, it needs to both better develop its oil and gas reserves and explore alternative export routes. In May 2012, Ankara and Erbil announced their intention to construct oil and gas pipelines from the KRG into Turkey, although Ankara remains coy about the precise details.¹⁸ From Turkey's perspective, such an arrangement serves to pressure Baghdad, offers a hedge against its relationship with Baghdad in the longer term, taps into its aspiration to emerge as an energy hub, provides an amelioration to Turkey's current over-reliance on Iran and Russia, and gives it a means to control Erbil.

The KRG's scope for autonomy would be enhanced still further if it could acquire Kirkuk, the centre of Iraq's second biggest oil field. The Kirkuk field

Although Baghdad and Ankara appear to hold most of the cards in their respective relationships with Kurds, the Kurds for their part have the capacity to affect the region's stability and economic well being, and that of its component states

mostly lies just outside the KRG zone but is largely controlled by its ruling parties, is heavily populated by Kurds and claimed as Kurdish territory. Ethnic tensions in the city, the surrounding countryside, and other disputed territories of mixed demographic makeup remains high. US troops did much to keep the peace between Kurds and non-Kurds in these areas. In their absence, the risk of direct confrontation between the Kurdish security forces and those of other ethnic groups or the federal government is serious.¹⁹ If Iraqi Kurds ever had the opportunity to seize Kirkuk for themselves, it was in 2003 in the immediate aftermath of the US-led invasion. US pressure and Turkish antipathy combined to ensure this opportunity was lost. As time elapses it seems reasonable to assume that Baghdad's security forces will enhance their capacity to deny any forceful acquisition of Kirkuk by the Kurds. Yet without a referendum the KRG cannot acquire it by peaceful means. However, Baghdad will also find it impossible to develop Kirkuk or to ensure intercommunal peace in the face of Kurdish opposition. BP's recent expression of interest in reviving the Kirkuk oilfields is very much at the mercy of the Kurds, who are well placed to sabotage any initiatives from which they are excluded.²⁰ This will slow and even obstruct any development of the Kirkuk field, to the detriment of all parties, including Turkey. Although Baghdad and Ankara appear to hold most of the cards in their respective

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relationships with Kurds, the Kurds for their part have the capacity to affect the region's stability and economic well being, and that of its component states. While Kurdish aspirations for self-determination cannot be met in the face of determined opposition, the desire for stability

and progress of others in the region can equally be undermined by disaffected Kurds. Ankara and Baghdad, and others in the region and beyond, are obliged to take into account that the Kurds too hold some cards.

Turkey's Options

Will Turkey's opposition to Kurdish sovereignty hold indefinitely and in all conceivable circumstances? What if the Iraq to which the KRG is federated edges towards anarchy or hostility towards Turkey, or even just fails to move forward sufficiently? What if a revived but unfriendly Iraq seeks to sabotage the KRG, perhaps in alliance with Iran, or grab Kirkuk, perhaps leading to a Kurdish-Arab civil war on Turkey's doorstep? What if the KRG leadership, frustrated with Baghdad's political dysfunctionality and despairing at its unwillingness to ad-

dress the Kirkuk issue, signaled its intention to finally break away from an Iraq that could do little to prevent it, perhaps taking Kirkuk with it, perhaps in alliance with the region's Turkmen?²¹ Of course, there are many potential twists, turns and complications that would attach to any of these scenarios and perhaps render them infeasible in the eyes of many, but it is similarly difficult to imagine the current status quo extending into the indefinite future.

The KRG is a major trade outlet for Turkey, a potential source of energy, and is currently the least hostile Middle Eastern neighbor Turkey has. Should Ankara bring itself to recognize that the challenge of Kurdish identity politics is not going to evaporate, the Iraqi Kurdish example, and the contribution it might be induced to make, could offer a peaceful way forward for Turkey. A federal Turkey, Iraq and Syria, in an open region in which self-governing Kurdish entities can freely interact with each other but not formally unite, might offer a viable long-term solution to Kurdish dissatisfaction and the regional instability it generates. In any case, Iraqi Kurdistan cannot avoid dependence on Turkey, for trade and even for its security. Even a fully sovereign "Kurdistan", however constituted, would remain highly dependent on Turkey. Oil and gas pipelines that could transport energy into Turkey and bypass the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipelines would increase that dependency still further, but it would decrease Kurdish—and Turkish—dependence on a possibly unfriendly and unstable Baghdad. It is perhaps also worth noting that the newly established Turkish Republic sought to have northern Iraq incorporated into its own borders. It lost the argument, but Turkish claims to northern Iraq have been voiced sporadically ever since.²² There have also been unconfirmed reports that CIA chief David Petraeus raised the possibility of independence for the KRG with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan.²³

To make these observations is not to propose them as desirable outcomes. But there are four hard truths confronting Turkey, each of which may continue to prove difficult to fully digest, let alone embrace. The first is that whether through violence or political demands, Kurdish identity politics will continue to challenge Turkey's domestic harmony. Indeed, ethnic identity politics is a global phenomenon, and there seems to be no good reason why Turkey should have remained uniquely immune to it. Secondly, it is unlikely any time soon to be defeated or ameliorated significantly either by military means or via dreams of assimilation. Third, Kurdish identity is not the deliberate creation of the in-

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ternational community. However, acute international awareness of it, regionally and beyond, is now an inescapable reality that is similarly unlikely to simply evaporate. Fourthly, Kurdish self-rule is now a fixed feature of regional political arrangements, for now in Iraq and possibly soon in Syria too. Politicians are characteristically drawn towards or preoccupied by short-term considerations, but they live in a world of long-term underlying and deep seated phenomena. It might be helpful to consider Turkey's Kurdish challenges in this light. Can Turkey's political class keep long-term challenges at bay by short-term tactics and for how long? Can they hope to obstruct or deflect the underlying logic with which they are confronted, or do their short-term policies serve only to deepen the long-term trends?

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