
Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Iraq in 2009

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Abstract

This article examines Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq in 2009. Turkey's Iraq policy had been conditioned by mainly security factors. In the last couple of years, however, we have witnessed an increasing use of tools other than security in the formulation of this policy as not only military factors but also trade and other tools of diplomacy have been effectively used by Turkey. The year 2009 witnessed several steps which enabled increasing cooperation between Turkey and Iraq, such as the Iraqi elections. Turkey has continued to develop contacts and start dialogue with different political actors in Iraq and has hosted heads of different ethnic and religious groups in Turkey. An important step that strengthened political and economic relations was the creation of a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council.

Key Words

Turkish foreign policy, Iraq, Kurds, USA, elections.

Introduction

The relationship between Iraq and Turkey is one of the most important

topics in Turkish policy towards the Middle East. During the Cold War era, relations between Turkey and Iraq were cool. During and after the Gulf War, however, contacts between the two countries increased. The power vacuum in the north of the country after the Gulf War created serious setbacks for the Turkish struggle with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and, consequently, Turkish policy towards Iraq was conditioned mainly by security issues. In the last couple of years, however, we have witnessed an increasingly use of tools other than security in the formulation of Iraq policy, as economics and other tools of diplomacy have been effectively used by Turkey.

One of the important turning points in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East in general and towards Iraq in particular was the capture of PKK leader Öcalan in 1999 and the decline in the security threats against Turkey afterwards. After this, attacks against Turkey emanating from Iraq declined and the heated atmosphere of the 1990s cooled. This situation continued until the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US-led coalition forces headed to topple the Saddam Hussein regime. Considering the

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negative outcomes of the Gulf War and the lack of international legitimacy for the invasion, along with the uncertainties about future scenarios after the invasion, Turkey opted for a policy which was different from that of its long-standing ally, the US. The lack of order and stability in the months after the invasion was a source of concern for Turkey. Beside the increasing PKK attacks, the threats against Turkish citizens doing business in Iraq affected Turkish attitudes. More important than all of these was the policy of Turkey against the possibility of a future independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq. But the negative atmosphere between Turkey and Kurdish politicians just after the invasion has been transformed into a positive one in the last couple of years and Turkey has followed a policy in which it has aimed to establish contacts with every actor in Iraq.

Previously, Turkey had refrained from having contacts with Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq, but in order to achieve its foreign policy aims, Ankara started to act in line with the new realities in Iraq. Instead of relying on military means to overcome the threat of terrorism from northern Iraq, Turkey has lately increased its contacts with Arab and Kurdish authorities in Iraq and tried to convince them to cooperate more in the fight against the PKK. In this respect, Turkey's new stance became obvious after 2007.

After the PKK attacks against military posts along the Turkish-Iraqi border threatened to create conditions similar to those of the 1990s, Turkey reacted not only through military means, but also contacted both Iraqi and US authorities to ask for cooperation. Aware of the possible negative outcomes of any Turkish military intervention on the fragile nature of Iraqi politics, Turkey's counterparts partially responded to Turkish demands. In addition to this, new factors influenced Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq; the planned withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011 and Washington's desire to prevent any development that might destabilize Iraq.

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Several steps for increasing cooperation in Turkish relations with Iraq were introduced in 2009.

Although security issues were still an important factor in bilateral relations, their primacy was in decline and factors such as trade were increasingly playing a role in Turkish-Iraqi relations. In terms of political relations, the two countries signed several agreements to strengthen their ties. Beside several high-level reciprocal visits, the establishment of the "High Level Strategic Cooperation Council" laid the groundwork for stable relations and in diversifying bilateral bonds. As a result, in addition to advancements in the spheres of politics and economics, cooperation between the two neighbors in terms of security

matters has worked out better than in the past.

During these visits, issues of politics, economics and security topped the agenda.

As a reflection of the advancements in the security situation of the country, the Iraqi government has had the opportunity to make long-term plans in several policy areas for the future of the country. Turkey has continued to develop contacts and start dialogue with different political actors in Iraq and has hosted leaders from different ethnic and religious groups in Turkey. In this respect, the visits of Shiite leaders such as Mukteda al-Sadr and Ammer al-Hakim have constituted spectacular examples. At the same time, as a reflection of Turkey's increasing profile in the region in the last couple of years, Ankara has played an important role in overcoming the grievances between Syria and Iraq after the bombings in Baghdad in August 2009. All of these developments might be interpreted as examples of Turkish efforts to contribute to Iraqi stability.

Political and Economic Relations

In 2009 there were several high-level visits from Turkey to Iraq. Beside the visits of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, both President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan visited Iraq. During these visits, issues of

politics, economics and security topped the agenda. Turkey has tried to develop its relationships with different actors in Iraq in order to protect its political and economic interests in the future, especially after the expected withdrawal of US forces. Beside these visits to Iraq, Iraqi President Talabani, Prime Minister Maliki, and Foreign Minister Zebari visited Turkey, along with the heads of several influential groups in Iraq, such as the Shiite leaders Mukteda al Sadr and Ammar al Hakim.

In March 2009, Iraqi President Talabani came to Istanbul to attend the World Water Forum and to meet with Prime Minister Erdoğan. At this meeting, alongside security issues, steps to be taken to improve relations between the two neighbors and preparations for the visit of Turkish President Gül were discussed.¹ Among the reciprocal visits, the most important was Turkish President Gül's Iraqi visit in March 2009. As a result of a novel Turkish approach towards Iraq beginning in the autumn of 2007, there was a thaw in bilateral relations that allowed for Talabani's visit. Gül subsequently went to Baghdad on 23 March and this was the first visit of a Turkish President to Iraq since Fahri Korutürk's visit in 1976. Security matters, the future of Kirkuk, and economic relations were the primary topics of discussions. On this visit, Gül met with the Iraqi President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Turcuman MPs. The Turkish President also met with the Prime Minister of the

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Neçirvan Barzani, and delivered Turkey's expectations regarding security to Iraqi authorities.²

Talabani supported the Turkish concerns on security and said that there were two options for the PKK; either laying down their arms or leaving Iraq.

During his meeting with President Gül, Iraqi President Talabani supported the Turkish concerns on security and said that there were two options for the PKK; either laying down their arms or leaving Iraq. The Iraqi President said that the Iraqi constitution forbids the existence of armed groups in Iraq; thus, the trilateral commission of Turkey, Iraq and the US would work together to end the existence of the PKK in Iraq.³ Similar declarations from Barzani supported the Turkish position against the PKK. Barzani argued that it was not logical to attack a country and then seek shelter in Iraq. Following these declarations, one of the leaders of the PKK, Murat Karayılan, said that "Talabani is trying to please Turkish generals and we do not believe anymore that Talabani can play a role in the solution of the Kurdish problem. Nobody can derive us from the Kandil Mountains."⁴

The year 2009 also became a period in which the Turkish government increased its contacts with the Kurdish authorities in Iraq. Along with the

Kurdish opening domestically, Turkey's contacts with Kurdish groups in Iraq became frequent and Ankara aimed to curtail possible support there for terrorist activities. In this vein, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu went to Iraq on 11 August and met with Foreign Minister Zebari and other Kurdish officials.⁵ The primary purpose of this visit was for the preparations of a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council between the two neighbors and although security issues were on the agenda during the meetings, Davutoğlu argued that his visit should not be confined to security since Turkey was trying to diversify its policy towards Iraq and with other countries in the region.⁶

The change in Turkish foreign policy and its increasing relations with the Middle East has been covered in the Arab media. Particularly, the economic and security aspects of Davutoğlu's visit were highlighted in Arab newspapers. In Davutoğlu's opinion, increasing bilateral trade was the focal point, whereas in Zebari's opinion, future cooperation between Turkey and Iraq was stressed. In this respect, the parties decided to share intelligence to fight terrorism and to establish a joint command center in northern Iraq.⁷

Another factor that affected Turkish-Iraqi relations in 2009 was the Kurdish opening in Turkey. Although the 'opening process' was an issue of debate in terms of domestic politics, it supported Turkish relations with Iraq, especially

with Iraqi Kurds. The reactions to the opening coming from the Iraqi Kurdish authorities were generally positive. In interviews with the Turkish journalists, President of the Iraqi Kurdish Region Masud Barzani said that they support this process and the solution is possible through peaceful and legal ways.⁸ These developments show that it is not possible to detach issues of domestic and foreign policy completely from one another. Moreover, also in order to have successful foreign policy, one should overcome domestic problems first.

High Level Strategic Cooperation Council

The most important development that affected Turkish-Iraqi relations in 2009 was the establishment of the “High Level Strategic Cooperation Council” and the signature of a protocol on this body during Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan’s visit to Baghdad accompanied by nine ministers. The groundwork for the visit of Erdoğan was laid in Istanbul in September during the preparatory meetings with the participation of the foreign ministers and other members of the two cabinets.⁹ Beside foreign ministers, the ministers of the interior, health, foreign trade, agriculture, energy, environment and transportation from both sides attended the visit to Baghdad with Erdoğan and discussed possible joint projects focusing on areas such as commerce, domestic affairs, agriculture, health, transportation, water, public

works, environment and energy. Following the meeting, there were agreements on the opening of another border crossing between Turkey and Iraq, the railways connection between Basra with Istanbul, the extension of the contract for Kirkuk-Yumurtalık pipeline, and the construction of new electricity wires, all important steps in diversifying bilateral relations.¹⁰

According to one Turkish columnist who attended the visit, in the new era bilateral relations will develop in three stages: first, stability and security in Iraq; second, bilateral cooperation on security issues; and finally, economic interdependence.¹¹ Turkey seemed to be ready to move beyond security in its relations with Iraq. The coverage in the Arab media of the agreements between Turkey and Iraq also did focus not on security issues but on economic cooperation and increasing trade.¹² Bilateral agreements materialized in a very short time in the area of transportation and a train service started to operate between Mosul and Gaziantep in early 2010 following a 100-year break.¹³

Another important development that affected bilateral economic relations came with the permission from the Iraqi Oil Ministry for the export of the oil in the north via a pipeline to Yumurtalık. The Baghdad government refused to recognize oil agreements signed by the KRG and declared that 60,000 barrels of oil per day would be exported from several oil fields in the north and the

marketing of this oil would be done by the Iraq State Oil Marketing Company, not by the Regional Government.¹⁴ The spokesman for the Iraqi Oil Ministry also stressed in the same declaration that the revenue would go to the Iraqi people and that the export of oil via Yumurtalık would increase Iraq's export capacity.

Turkey's focus on economic issues in bilateral relations has been welcomed by the Kurdish officials in Iraq. In remarks about his satisfaction with the new policy of Turkey, Barzani said that they are planning to establish a free trade zone on the Turkish border at Zakho.¹⁵ The year 2009 was also a year in which Turkish investments in northern Iraq increased in terms of value and volume. In order to support commercial relations, the Turkish government took several steps to facilitate business relations with the KRG. At the end of the year, along with Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, State Minister responsible for Foreign Trade Zafer Çağlayan went to Iraq and attended the Turkey-Iraqi Kurdish Region Business Forum in Erbil. At this meeting, it was stressed by the officials that despite the global economic recession, Turkey's exports to Iraq increased by 50 percent in 2009, whereas Turkey's total exports declined by 30 percent.¹⁶

Iraqi Kurdish authorities argued that bilateral relations between northern Iraq and Turkey reached US\$7.5 billion by the end of 2008 and, as a result of the complementary nature of economic relations, it was only natural to have

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better economic relations in the future.¹⁷ In 2009, Iraq continued to be a good market for Turkish products. In terms of bilateral trade, 20 percent of Iraq's imports came from Turkey and Turkish exports to Iraq equaled US\$5 billion at the end of 2009, with a bilateral trade volume exceeding US\$6 billion.¹⁸ Iraq is a rising market for Turkish contractors, which provide important economic input to Turkey. In 2003, the value of Turkish contracting services in Iraq was equal to US\$242 million, and by the end of 2009 this figure reached US\$1.231 billion with 44 projects.¹⁹

The contacts with Erbil represent an important change in Turkish foreign policy. That Barzani, a figure seen by the Turkish public as supporting terrorist activities, was visited by a Turkish foreign minister is a striking example of the change in the Turkish attitude towards the Kurdish question and the change of Turkish policy towards Iraq.²⁰ During his November 2009 visit, Davutoğlu also stopped in Mosul and had meetings with Turcoman officials coming from Kirkuk, Talafer and Tuzhurmatu.

The change in Turkish policy in the Middle East in general and in Iraq in

particular has been closely followed by the public in the countries in the region. Aware of Turkish support for Lebanon, a Lebanese journalist in his column invited Davutoğlu to come to Lebanon to support their efforts in overcoming problems.²¹ Beside these calls, the restructuring of Turkish foreign policy by engaging with Erbil has been recognized by a number of observers. The visit of the Turkish foreign minister to Erbil was described by the Arab media as a “historic” visit and Turkey’s increasing influence in the region was highlighted.²² Turkey’s new approach was welcomed by some people in the region but was also criticized by some other, such as by some of the Turcomans living in Iraq who criticized Davutoğlu’s visit to Erbil given the uncompromising attitude of Barzani on the issue of Kirkuk.²³

Beside Turkey’s increasing contacts with Barzani and with other high-level visits, another important indicator of Turkey’s policy of establishing contact with every actor in Iraqi politics came with the visit of Mukteda al Sadr to Turkey on 2 May 2009. Mukteda al Sadr, an important Shiite figure in Iraqi politics, who was in self-imposed exile in Iran since the large-scale military operation of Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki against his forces in early 2008, came from Iran and met not only with Prime Minister Erdoğan, but also with some other Iraqi figures in Turkey.²⁴

This visit was an important example of Turkey’s new approach in its Iraq

policy. In the past, Turkey had been criticized because of its focus on first Turcomans only, and then later on just Turcoman and Sunni groups in its policy towards Iraq. In the last couple of years, however, Turkey has established contacts with other actors in Iraq. Ankara now feels free to have contacts with actors like Sadr, who has close contacts with Iranian officials. With these contacts, Turkey aimed to gain first-hand information about Iraq before the elections there in 2009, strengthening relations with different groups that might be influential in the elections, and communicating its expectations and views to several actors in Iraq. After his meetings with the President and Prime Minister in Ankara, Sadr said that he was “happy about the role played by Turkey in the region and was awaiting increasing help from Ankara in overcoming the problems in Iraq.”²⁵ From Sadr’s point of view, this visit was important in increasing his influence in Iraq before the elections, since he was welcomed as an important actor in regional politics.

Another important example of this approach in 2009 was the visit of Ammar al Hakim, head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, who replaced his father, Abdelaziz al Hakim, who had died of cancer in Tehran on 26 August 2009. Just a few months after taking over the leadership, Ammar al Hakim visited Turkey in November and met with President Gül and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu.²⁶ In their declarations after

the meetings with al Hakim, both Gül and Davutoğlu stressed Turkey's equal distance from different groups in Iraq, whereas al Hakim said that with its consulates in Mosul and Basra, Turkey had opened up to different groups in Iraq and they are respectful of Turkey's stance on issues relating to Arabs and Muslims.²⁷ Al Hakim also visited Jafaris in Turkey, and his visit to Ankara was important both for Turkey and for Al Hakim to strengthen their positions before the coming elections.

Contacts and meetings with Iraqi officials continued until the end of 2009. At the end of the year, the Iraqi deputy president and member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Adel Abdelmehdi, visited Turkey on 30 December. In his visit, Abdelmehdi met with President Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and discussed the developments in Iraq and the planned elections.²⁸ After the official meetings, Abdelmehdi and Davutoğlu visited wounded Iraqi nationals in hospitals in Ankara who had been taken to Turkey for medical treatment. This development can be interpreted as a sign of the humanitarian dimension of Turkish policy towards Iraq and its desire to fulfill its responsibilities as a neighbor. The same development is also a sign of the multidimensional nature of Turkish policy, since it was no longer based only on security concerns, but also aimed to increase reciprocal human contacts to have stable relations.

This new approach was supported by possible contribution of non-governmental organizations, the so-called 'second track' of policymaking. In this respect, bringing injured people from Iraq to Turkey for medical treatment contributed to the image of Turkey as fulfilling its humanitarian and neighborly duties. In addition, the activities of several Turkish NGOs in Iraq in helping orphans and other people whose lives had been affected by the war has contributed enormously to the image of Turkey in Iraqi society.²⁹ Similar to the policy of the Turkish government to have contacts with every actor in Iraq, Turkish NGOs have copied this policy to a certain extent and carry out their activities not only in areas dominated by Turcomans or Sunni Arabs, but also in different parts of Iraq. This approach has also shown that Turkish government's emphasis upon the territorial integrity of Iraq is also shared by Turkish NGOs.

Another factor that affected Turkish-Iraqi relations in 2009 was the Kurdish opening in Turkey. Although the 'opening process' was an issue of debate in terms of domestic politics, it supported Turkish relations with Iraq, especially with Iraqi Kurds. The Iraqi Kurdish authorities were generally positive about the policy and in an interview with Turkish journalists, Barzani said that he supported this process and that a solution is possible through peaceful and legal methods.³⁰ These developments show that it is not possible to detach issues of domestic and foreign policy completely from one another and

also in order to have successful foreign policy, one should overcome domestic problems first.

Turkey, Iraq and the US signed an agreement to establish a trilateral mechanism to combat terrorism. During Zebari's visit, Turkey and Iraq agreed to establish a 'command center' in Erbil.

The most important development that affected Turkish-Iraqi relations in 2009 was the establishment of the "High Level Strategic Cooperation Council" during Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Baghdad following preparatory meetings in Istanbul in September.³¹

Security Issues

After the terrorist attack against the Aktütün military post on the Iraqi border in the autumn of 2008, Turkish concerns about border security increased again and the future policies of Turkey towards Iraq became focused on ensuring stability in bilateral relations. Here, being aware of the negative outcomes of relying only on military tools, Turkey continued its contacts with Iraqi and US authorities to reach a solution. In 2008, Turkey, Iraq and the US signed an agreement to establish a trilateral mechanism to combat terrorism. During Zebari's visit, Turkey and Iraq agreed to establish a 'command center' in Erbil.³² This command center is just a small bureau

and became operational in February; however, through this Turkey, Iraq and the US aimed to coordinate their efforts against the PKK with the participation of military and intelligence personnel from the three countries.³³ This shows that steps are being taken to effectively coordinate efforts of the three countries against the PKK and that there is a policy of rapprochement with the Kurdish government in Iraq which means that Turkey has realized that without the contribution of the Kurdish authorities it will be very difficult to find a permanent solution for PKK terrorist attacks.

Within the framework of the trilateral mechanism, another meeting took place in April 2009 in Baghdad. The Turkish side was represented by Interior Minister Beşir Atalay and steps taken in the three months prior to that meeting in fighting terrorism were discussed, along with the measures to be taken by the Iraqi administration to end the presence of the PKK in Iraq, and it was agreed to close PKK-related parties and organizations in Iraq.³⁴ Contacts between Turkey and Iraq continued, including at the military level. Turkish Deputy Chief of General Staff Hasan Iğsız and Iraqi Deputy Chief of General Staff Nasir Abadi signed an agreement covering "cooperation in military issues in terms of education, technical and scientific matters and sharing of secret documents in case of need."³⁵ In this way, military cooperation between Turkey and Iraq was not confined to the struggle against terrorism but was extended to other

areas. The third meeting of the trilateral mechanism was at the ministerial level and took place in Turkey. At this meeting, the Turkish delegation was headed by Interior Minister Atalay and the Iraqi delegation was headed by National Security Minister Şirvan al Vaili. Turkish demands concentrated on issues such as the closure of the Makhmur Camp, deployment of more Iraqi soldiers to the Iraqi-Turkish border, handover of PKK terrorists to Turkey, and intelligence sharing.³⁶

Meetings of the trilateral mechanism to combat the PKK continued and at the end of the year, Turkish Interior Minister Atalay, along with a number of MPs from the governing party, went to Erbil to attend a security meeting. The aim of these MPs was not to attend the official meeting on security but to get the support of Kurdish figures in Iraq for the Turkish government's Kurdish opening. Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat, MP from Adana, met with Masud Barzani in Selahaddin and informed him about the steps taken by the Turkish government and asked for his support for the process. In response, Barzani said that they supported the initiative and believed that the policy would be successful.³⁷

There had been bilateral and trilateral security mechanisms in the past to overcome the terrorist threat emanating from Iraq; however, these mechanisms were not successful. We can say that the steps taken in 2009 were more successful than before due to the cooperation

mechanism established between Turkey and the US after Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Washington in November 2007. In Washington, Turkey argued that the US was responsible for security in Iraq as it is the main occupying force and that the US should fulfill its responsibilities. According to US officials, the main reason behind the increasing American cooperation with Turkey was the advancement of the security situation in Iraq.³⁸ In line with the positive developments in different parts of Iraq beginning in 2007 and continuing on into 2008, according to US sources, the US concentrated on problems in northern Iraq.

Turkey's assurance that it would maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq, Ankara had the chance for better cooperation from Iraqi figures in overcoming Turkish security concerns.

Another important development that brought results for Turkey's counter-terrorism efforts was the advancement of Turkey's relations with different groups in Iraq, especially with the Kurds. With the improvement of relations with the Sunni and Shiite groups in Iraq and Turkey's assurance that it would maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq, Ankara had the chance for better cooperation from Iraqi figures in overcoming Turkish security concerns. The same was also true for the Kurdish groups in Iraq.

Turkey declared during its cross-border operations that the target was PKK terrorists and not the authority of the Kurdish groups in Iraq; Turkish forces then acted in line with this declaration. Consequently, the attitude of the Kurdish groups towards Turkey started to change. The main reasons for the change in the atmosphere between Turkey and Kurdish authorities in Iraq were the following: the limited duration of the Turkish cross-border operations against the PKK, the utmost caution shown for the protection of civilians during the operations, and, more importantly, Turkey's engagement with the Kurdish authorities in Iraq to keep them informed about Turkish intentions.

The awareness of both Turkey and the Kurdish authorities in Iraq about the need to work together for the future of Iraq after the planned withdrawal of US troops from Iraq has played an important role in the rapprochement between the two sides. After scheduling the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, the KRG had several problems with Prime Minister Maliki and realized that better relations with Turkey were in their best interest. According to a report about the relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and the central administration in Baghdad, prepared by the International Crisis Group in July 2009, despite several problems, many Kurdish leaders perceive Turkey as the most important ally in the region.³⁹ Given the influence of Iran on the Shiite groups in Iraq and concerns about its intentions for Iraq, there is an

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interest in cooperation both for Turks and the Kurds in Iraq. Therefore, in case of a possible problem with the central administration in Baghdad, Turkey may act as an important outlet for the Kurds to have contacts with the outside world.

The Kurds in Iraq were in an advantageous position just after the invasion as a result of their cooperation with the US. However, they were faced with the danger of losing this influence, especially after the central administration in Baghdad increased its power and strengthened its authority in different parts of the country and relations between Baghdad and Erbil became tense. Along with the inclusion of Sunni groups into political life and the decline in the expectations for an independent Kurdish state, accompanied by economic benefits, it is only natural that the Kurds of Iraq should pursue a policy of friendship with Turkey instead of one of enmity.⁴⁰

Turkey's Mediation Efforts between Iraq and Syria

In the past, Turkey had pursued a policy of isolation from regional issues; however, in the last couple years we have seen a policy of increasing engagement in the Middle East. Turkey believes that regional stability and security directly

An example of Turkey's increasing influence and efforts to play a role in the solution of regional problems came in August 2009.

affects its security. Nearly ten years ago, Turkey was on the brink of war over Syria's refusal to expel Öcalan and needed Egyptian mediation. Today, however, Ankara increasingly plays an active role in the solution of regional problems. This role of Ankara is closely followed by the states in the region and their media. For example, Saudi newspapers have drawn attention to Turkey's efforts to calm the tense situation between Syria and Iraq.⁴¹ Most Arab commentators have seen the efforts of Turkey as an example of its new policy and followed it with interest. Although most of the time this interest is in positive terms, there have been some concerns about the increasing activism of Turkey in the Middle East. In particular, some former members of the Baath Party were jealous about the important role Turkey, a non-Arab country, was playing in the solution of an Arab issue and voiced these criticisms with references to Turkey's imperial Ottoman background.⁴² However, even in these criticisms (beside the concerns about Turkey and its historical legacy), there were also praise since Turkey has continuously rejected arguments of 'neo-Ottomanism'.

An example of Turkey's increasing influence and efforts to play a role in the solution of regional problems came

in August 2009 after the two bombings in Baghdad that targeted the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where 95 people died and around 600 were wounded. When the Iraqi government blamed former Baath members residing in Syria, relations between Iraq and Syria became tense.⁴³ These attacks could be interpreted in different ways. First of all, the reputation of Prime Minister Maliki, who was successful in the elections in the early months of that year because of his image as a powerful figure that could bring order and security to the country, was damaged after these attacks. Second, these twin attacks on the two ministries made it clear that even the heavily guarded 'Green Zone' was not secure enough. This fact was a serious blow to the image of Maliki, who had tried hard to build his reputation over the years. Consequently, Maliki argued that the perpetrators of the attacks were supported by Syria and claimed that he had information about meetings of Syrian intelligence agencies with former Baath members and other extremist Sunni groups, and they were unhappy about the Syrian policy of accommodating these people.⁴⁴

Iraqi security officials said that significant numbers of al Qaeda members are infiltrating into Iraq, and an important part of the security problem in the country is caused by these people who were carrying Syrian passports, and that hundreds of these people had been captured by the Iraqi security forces.⁴⁵ The Syrian response to the allegations

that came just after the bombings and continued for some time was to reject the arguments by saying that their country was sheltering 1,200,000 Iraqi refugees and these allegations were politically driven.⁴⁶

The friction between Syria and Iraq did not decline after the reciprocal statements but instead increased. At this point, in order to find a solution to the problem, and to overcome tensions between the neighbors which threatened the fragile balance in the region, Turkey entered the scene. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu visited Baghdad and Damascus to listen to the arguments of both sides and to try to mediate between them. Davutoğlu first went to Baghdad, had meetings with the President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister to try to understand their position on the issues. While Iraqi officials had given the names of two Baath members and demanded that Damascus hand over these people, the Syrian side rejected the allegations.⁴⁷ Davutoğlu made it clear that the aim of Turkey was to contain the issue and to build trust between the two capitals.⁴⁸ One of the most important issues for Turkey was the danger of losing the gains in its fight against the PKK that it had developed with good relations in the region. Referring to Turkey's struggle with terrorism, Davutoğlu said to the Baghdad administration that "in the past you did not respond to our concerns about terrorism, but now you should realize that cooperation is necessary against terrorism", and to Damascus he

said that "without peace with Baghdad, we cannot have peace in the region; be serious and candid towards Iraq."⁴⁹ These calls of Davutoğlu are reflections of Turkish expectations that solutions to regional problems can be found within the region.

The political tension between Iraq and Syria made several issues clear.

Iraq and Syria did not change their positions over the bombings and tensions remained high for some time. Then, Ankara invited representatives of both countries to Turkey. The Iraqi delegation, headed by Deputy Undersecretary of the Iraqi Interior Ministry General Hüseyin Kamal, came to Ankara.⁵⁰ Iraqi Government spokesman Ali Debbağ said that this delegation brought to Turkey proof that the attack was carried out by the people who are living in Syria and have connections with al Qaeda.⁵¹ In this framework, another effort to reconcile the positions of Syria and Iraq was the meeting of Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian foreign ministers, along with the Secretary General of the Arab League, in Istanbul. In these meetings, a breakthrough was not achieved but both countries made their arguments at the level of foreign ministers.⁵²

The Iraqi government aimed to internationalize the issue by calling on the UN Security Council to investigate the bombings. Contacts between Syria

and Iraq continued after the Istanbul meeting with the help of Turkey and another meeting of the ministers was hosted by Davutoğlu in New York. Davutoğlu said that “they continue to build confidence for the solution of the problem and their aim is to reach a solution before the internationalization of the problem.”⁵³ Although a concrete result was not achieved from these meetings, the progress satisfied both sides, and tensions have since decreased.

Solutions to regional problems are crucial for the construction of the peace that Turkey aims to establish with its foreign policy.

The political tension between Iraq and Syria made several issues clear. First of all, although Iraqi security concerns are in a decline, stability is still fragile and terrorist groups in Iraq have the ability to continue their activities. Second, besides the historical distrust between Iraq and Syria, the Baghdad administration has concerns about Baathists and suspects that Damascus is using Baathist groups against Iraq. Third, Turkey should expend a great deal of effort to protect the stability in the region.

Some commentators have argued that Turkey has exaggerated the efforts of its mediation in its foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, spent unnecessary energy for these efforts, and that the states in the Middle East do not see the

Turkish role as important.⁵⁴ Criticisms about the energy spent by Turkey might have some value; however, it should be kept in mind that the Turkish efforts are not only for sake of being an actor in regional politics. Solutions to regional problems are crucial for the construction of the peace that Turkey aims to establish with its foreign policy. By playing a role of mediator, arbitrator or facilitator between Iraq and Syria, between Israel and Syria, or on the Iranian nuclear issue, Turkey is serving its own foreign policy interests. In the last couple of years, Turkey has developed a special strategy to increase its trade with neighbors and consequently Turkey’s trade with neighboring countries increased eight-fold between 2000 and 2007. With the help of its foreign policy, Turkey is in a way aiming to serve its own economic interests.⁵⁵ This policy of the government in foreign policy is described by some academics as the “rise of the trading state.”⁵⁶ In order to continue these commercial activities, naturally, a secure and peaceful environment is required.

Local Elections in Iraq

The local elections in early 2009 in Iraq were an important turning point from the standpoint of stability in Iraq. The elections took place on 31 January in 14 provinces of Iraq (other than the provinces of the Kurdish region, namely Duhok, Erbil and Sulaimaniah, and also Kirkuk due of the problems about the status of this city). The State of Law

coalition headed by Prime Minister Nuri Maliki had great success. Turnout was higher than in the 2005 elections and Turkish observers participated in the monitoring process along with other international observers.⁵⁷ The common conclusion about the results of this election was that Iraqi people opted for the unity and integrity of the country.

These local elections were important from the standpoint of domestic politics since local assemblies have a say over the budget of the governorates and the elections of governors. Turnout was high even in places like Ramadi, where turnout in the 2005 elections was just 2 percent, and it was generally accepted that the improvement in the security conditions played a crucial role in electoral participation.⁵⁸ The election results showed that people, regardless of sectarian differences, were not happy with their local governors. Similar to the characteristics of local politics all over the world, the Iraqi people also voted based on the services provided by the local officials, not just according to ethnic or sectarian factors.⁵⁹ Another significant outcome of the Iraqi local elections was the decline of the religious parties. Prime Minister Maliki was successful with his image of a strong man, who had secured the unity and integrity of the country with operations against the Mahdi Army of al-Sadr and protected the rights of not only the Shiite groups but also of

the whole of Iraq. It has been argued, however, that the decline of the religious parties and the use of state resources for Maliki's party were factors behind the success of the prime minister in the election.⁶⁰

Another important result of this election was related to the high turnout of Sunni voters. In the 2005 elections, as a result of a boycott of the election by the Sunni groups, the Kurdish parties were successful in governorates like Ninova (Mosul). This time, however, Sunni groups participated in the elections and the Kurdish parties lost their advantageous positions. The transfer of the administration of some governorates from the Kurdish parties to the Sunni parties and decline of religiously-motivated parties were interpreted as signs of a desire for centralization and a demand for a unified Iraq.⁶¹

Another important political development in Iraq in 2009 was the elections for regional parliament and president of the Kurdish region in July that resulted in the success of the Goran (Change) movement in the Sulaimaniah region. There were 24 parties and 2.5 million voters who participated in the elections and the average turnout was around 74 percent. In city centers such as Erbil, Duhok and Sulaimaniah, this figure was above 90 percent.⁶² The biggest surprise of the election was

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the arrival of the Goran movement, a breakaway party from the PUK, as a new actor in the politics of the region. The Goran movement argued that the Kurdish region was badly administered, with widespread bribery and corruption, saying that the Kurdish region was being governed like a 'Soviet republic' with no independent judiciary and no democracy.⁶³ The rhetoric of the opposition focused on the status of newly-moneyed people, heavy reliance on oil resources and mismanagement of the oil revenues by the followers of Barzani and Talabani.⁶⁴ With this opposition, Goran got the support of a significant number of people and won 28 out of 111 seats with 23 percent of the total votes. Of these MPs, 19 came from Talabani's stronghold, Sulaimaniah. Christian groups in the region were also satisfied to a large extent with the results of the elections.⁶⁵

The emergence of a new actor in the Kurdish region, along with the KDP, PUK and religious parties, was seen as a sign of democratic development and this new environment should have an effect on the policy of Turkey towards Iraq. Some commentators have argued that the existence of dynamic public

opinion other than clan-based structures in the Kurdish region was a sign of a new democratic process and the Turkish approach towards the region should relax.⁶⁶ Some other commentators have interpreted the election results as proof that no government can remain in power in a democratic environment and from now on the parties will follow policies to not antagonize neighboring states.⁶⁷

In this paper, it was argued that the Kurdish opening in domestic politics and the Turkish decision to engage with all actors in its Iraqi foreign policy has positively affected Turkish-Iraqi bilateral relations. In addition to the change in Turkish policy, several factors were important in the moderate policy pursued by the Kurdish administration towards Turkey. Clearly, the KRG has moderated its stance towards Turkey since it has to act carefully domestically. In addition to that, the Kurdish administration's positive response to Turkey's new stance shows that it was aware of the danger of directly opposing Turkey after the planned US withdrawal.

Conclusion

Developments in 2009 have proved that Iraq is already preparing for the post-occupation period. The overall advancement of security conditions, the functioning of democratic institutions in the local elections, the steps taken towards the stabilization of the economy, and the improvement of relations with

Turkey attest to this. The most striking development in Turkey's policy towards Iraq was the steps taken by Ankara to end the dominance of security issues in bilateral relations and the diversification of bilateral ties. In the area of security, thanks to the functioning of cooperation mechanisms with the US and Iraqi officials, better results have been achieved in comparison with the past. Here, Turkey's engagement with the Kurdish authorities in Iraq has played an important role as well.

An important step that strengthened political and economic relations was the creation of the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council. Here the aim was to create economic interdependence and to solidify grounds for diversified relations. Turkey's trade relations with Iraq improved greatly in 2009 and despite the global economic crisis, Turkish

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exports to Iraq increased by 50 percent that year. Beside the improvement in political and economic relations, Turkey has acted as a mediator between Iraq and Syria. With several high-level reciprocal visits, Turkey's relations with Iraq have increasingly had a multifaceted nature. Turkish businessmen have become important actors in Turkish policy. The Kurdish initiative in Turkey has positively affected relations with Iraq, especially with the Kurds of northern Iraq. Another important indicator of the changes of Turkish policy towards Iraq was Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's visit to Erbil and his meeting with Masud Barzani. In doing so, Turkey continued its engagement with different actors in Iraq and took an important step to overcome reciprocal prejudices and develop more stable relations.

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