

## The Turkish PM's visit to Iraq: A New Turn in Relations?

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**Abstract:** After critical statements were exchanged between Turkish and Iraqi politicians over the last quarter of 2016, the New Year began with the visit of a Turkish delegation to Baghdad and Erbil led by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. The tension between the two neighbors was eased through bureaucratic and political contact made prior to the visit. Security issues dominated the agenda, with particular reference to ISIL and PKK. The 'Bashiqa Issue' is not completely resolved but there is now better communication between the two neighbors in addressing one another's concerns. The need to decrease tension and focus on problems in the region has pushed the two countries together, and this visit is a positive step given regional security challenges and the need for closer economic cooperation between Turkey and Iraq. Long-standing bilateral problems may not be overcome by this visit alone, but the channels of communication are now open to discuss them.

TURKISH PRIME MINISTER BINALI YILDIRIM VISITED IRAQ on January 7-8, 2017, along with several ministers.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this visit, both Turkey and Iraq made positive statements in attempts to overcome their differences and to focus on bilateral cooperation. The visit took place in the wake of a phone conversation between Turkish President Erdoğan and Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi on December 30.<sup>2</sup> Following this phone conversation, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi stated that "we cannot accept the PKK using Iraqi soil to launch attacks against Turkey. Neither does our constitution allow such things."<sup>3</sup> Hence, both sides worked to clear the ground in advance of the visit.

During the visit, the two sides mainly discussed security issues, but also covered the economy, education and agricultural matters. The declaration that resulted stressed their joint position in the fight against terrorism and respect for the territorial integrity of both countries.<sup>4</sup> After the Baghdad meetings, the Turkish delegation went to Erbil, where the Turkish Prime Minister visited the Peshmerga front against ISIL and several of his ministers visited the Bashiqa military post and met with the Turkish soldiers there.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to this visit, relations between Turkey and Iraq had undergone two years of strain for several reasons: the presence of the PKK in Iraqi territory and Turkish concerns about increasing PKK activity across Iraq, concerns about sectarianism following the Mosul operation, the presence of Turkish troops training locals to fight against ISIL at the Bashiqa military post and the fear of a possible Turkish incursion into Mosul in case of a sectarian conflict there. With this visit, both sides demonstrated their intentions to decrease tensions between the two countries and to focus on the much-needed fight against terrorism. It is too early to see any direct outcomes from this visit, but

we can say that both capitals have chosen to directly engage with one another this time instead of talking via the media.

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#### **Bilateral and Regional Background of the Visit**

The visit of Prime Minister Yıldırım to Baghdad and Erbil can be interpreted as an example of the desire of Turkey and Iraq to overcome bilateral differences and cooperate in their struggle with the many challenges in the region. Bilateral relations between Turkey and Iraq were strained in the second half of 2016 mainly due to Bashiqa military post. Turkey relocated some of its troops in the KRG to the Bashiqa region in order to train the people of Mosul to fight against ISIL and to prevent the PKK upping its levels of activity in areas close to the Turkish border. Turkey has argued that the presence of Turkish forces in Bashiqa is intended to aid in the fight against ISIL through training local forces to combat ISIL. The Iraqi government, on the other hand, has interpreted the presence of these forces as a breach of sovereignty and demanded the withdrawal of these forces.<sup>6</sup>

The Prime Minister was accompanied by several ministers in an attempt to show the diversified nature of bilateral relations and

also to encourage Iraqi counterparts to join Turkey in enlarging the scope of existing relations. The fight against ISIL is high on the agenda for both countries. The Turkish-led Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria is a sign of the Turkish determination to eliminate the ISIL threat to its interests. ISIL has targeted Turkish citizens many times and become an important security threat for Turkey over the last couple of years. Baseless arguments that Turkey has supported ISIL or not done enough to fight it ended with these measures taken by Turkey within and beyond its borders. Ongoing operations in northern Syria have also demonstrated how determined Turkey is to eliminate this threat as currently Turkey is the leading actor in terms of ground operations against ISIL in the region. This has effectively answered the arguments against Turkey made by certain Iraqi political figures in the past.

Beside the ISIL threat—and possibly more important than it—the PKK threat is on Turkey's agenda in both its foreign policy and its policy towards Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi's statement before Yıldırım's visit is a positive step in answering Turkey's expectations of the Baghdad administration. Despite earlier claims about the financing and armament of some PKK affiliate groups by officials,<sup>7</sup> Iraqi authorities made it clear that they do not want their territory to be used to carry out terrorist attacks against neighboring countries.<sup>8</sup>

#### **The ISIL Threat**

There are several reasons behind the recent thaw in relations between Turkey and Iraq. First of all, the threat of ISIL unites the two countries. The operation to liberate Mosul started in the fall of 2016 and went well for some time. Current conditions, however, are not that promising. Given the loss of Iraqi forces and ISIL resistance inside the city, there are estimates that it may take three to six months to defeat ISIL in Mosul.<sup>9</sup> Some



people even argue that the operation may stretch out for up to two years. From this point of view, it is in the interests of the Iraqi government to make common cause with Turkey in this fight.

In a shift from the policies pursued by the Baghdad government prior to the capture of Mosul by ISIL, the Abadi government is trying to take into account the concerns of local people and the other countries of the region. Tensions between Turkey and Iraq remained high throughout the fall of 2016 due to concerns about the operation against ISIL in Mosul. Turkey's concerns were mainly related to the sectarian tone of some Hashd al-Shaabi members' declarations about Mosul, the danger of a refugee influx due to sectarian conflict in Tal Afar after the defeat of ISIL and the presence of PKK members in the Sinjar region. In response to these Turkish concerns, Iraq was mainly worried about the presence of Turkish soldiers at the Bashiqa military post and the possibility of a Turkish military operation in northern Iraq similar to Operation Euphrates Shield in Syria. In order to overcome the Iraqi concerns on this issue, Turkish bureaucrats visited Baghdad in October and discussed possible solutions with their Iraqi counterparts.<sup>10</sup> After this and other meetings between Turkish and Iraqi politicians, the level of tension between the two neighbors began to decrease.

Economically, Turkey and Iraq need each other. Iraq has represented an important market for Turkish products for many decades. Turkish contractors and businesspeople were very active in Iraq for many years. Before ISIL's capture of Mosul and the decline in oil prices, Iraq was the second largest foreign market for Turkish products after Germany. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Iraq at the end of 2013 was \$12 billion.<sup>11</sup> Over the last two years, however, Iraq's security and economic problems have caused a decline in these figures, and Turkish exports to Iraq in

2016 were about \$7 billion. Security problems and budgetary difficulties have also led to Turkish construction companies withdrawing from different parts of Iraq.

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From the point of view of Iraq, trade with Turkey is beneficial as well. Turkish products are competitive with their European counterparts in terms of quality and are sold at reasonable prices. Logistical ease also makes Turkish products highly accessible to the Iraqi market. Years of war and sanctions during the Saddam era, continuing instability after the fall of Saddam, the emergence of ISIL and the fight against it have all badly damaged the country's infrastructure. Turkish construction companies carried out projects across Iraq including sports stadiums, new residential areas, and electricity generation projects. The Iraqi people have relied on Turkish companies for even basic services. The references in the joint declaration to the Turkish contribution to the rebuilding of Iraqi infrastructure show the level of Iraqi expectations in this field.<sup>12</sup>

The decline in oil prices and budgetary constraints, along with the costs of fighting ISIL, have led to the postponement or cancellation of many projects in Iraq. Although the Iraqi government has increased oil production to nearly 4 million barrels a day, this revenue is not enough to pay off government debt and start new infrastructural projects for electricity generation and rebuilding cities. These challenges mean that the Iraqi government and local companies have not been able to pay Turkish companies and these companies



have decreased their levels of operation in Iraq.<sup>13</sup> This is true not only for the central administration, but also for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

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#### **The Visit to Erbil**

The second day of Prime Minister Yıldırım's visit was spent in the KRG. Like relations with Baghdad, relations with Erbil have also been very much affected by security challenges and economic hardship. Fighting with ISIL and refugees escaping ISIL-controlled territory have created a huge burden on the budget of the KRG, which has simultaneously been seriously hit by the decline in oil prices.<sup>14</sup> In considering both the security and economic challenges, this visit to the KRG has also enabled the two sides to discuss mechanisms of cooperation. The presence of the PKK in the KRG and lately in Sinjar is one of the main security problems for Turkey in Iraq. The Turkish Prime Minister visited the Peshmerga, while Turkish ministers visited Bashiqa military post.

In terms of security problems, ISIL and the PKK are enemies of both Turkey and the KRG. In that regard, we can talk about cooperation between Ankara and Erbil. The presence of PKK in Sinjar is creating a security threat to Turkey, but at the same time, it is also a problem for Barzani's KDP. Despite this, it can be argued that the KDP is not in a position to do everything it can to evict the PKK from the KRG due to possible criticism that it is acting against the interests of fellow Kurds, and also using the PKK as a card with Turkey.

The PKK legitimized its presence in Sinjar with the failure of the KDP Peshmerga to protect the Ezidi minority against ISIL. The performance of the Peshmerga in Sinjar in 2014 damaged the image of the Peshmerga. With the waning of the ISIL threat, some of the people of Sinjar have begun questioning the PKK's ideology and methods. Despite these arguments, it is too early for a dramatic change in the security environment in Sinjar. A military operation against PKK affiliate groups in Sinjar by the KDP Peshmerga or the Iraqi army is unlikely under current conditions. A more realistic option is convincing Ezidis to begin cooperating with the Peshmerga. Despite Turkey's pressure to end the PKK presence in Sinjar, it may take some time to convince KDP, Baghdad and the Ezidis of that need.

#### **Division within Iraq and Challenges for Turkey**

From Turkey's perspective, one of the most important challenges in Iraq is the fragmented nature of the country, both in terms of society and political actors. Beside the difficult relationship between the central administration and the KRG, differences among the different ethnic and sectarian groups in both the Iraqi central administration and the KRG are leading to hard choices for Turkey in its Iraq policy. Any policy pursued by Turkey will appease some segments of Iraqi society while alienating others.

Shia Arabs constitute the majority of the population of the country, and they mainly live in the center and south of the country. They are united in terms of protecting their political and economic advantages against other groups in Iraq. Despite this, there have been disagreements among different Shia Arab groups in terms of their ideological and economic positions. This division makes it more challenging for Turkey to devise a policy towards Shia groups in Iraq.



There is even deeper division among Sunni groups. ISIL has benefited greatly from this situation. The post-Saddam environment presented few options to leading Sunni politicians: to leave the country, be assassinated, or cooperate with the leading groups. These problems of leadership and unity are still valid for the Sunni Arabs in Iraq.

Iraqi Kurds also aim to protect their political and economic advantages in the post-Saddam period and seek to advance towards independence. Despite the attractiveness of this aim, the emergence of ISIL has created a serious security problem for the KRG. In addition, the decline in oil prices and the limitations of exporting oil independently of Baghdad have created an undesirable situation. This environment has made the schism among the different Kurdish groups in the KRG obvious. Just like Baghdad, Erbil is also struggling with domestic divisions and economic challenges.

The Turkmen have also been affected by the advance of ISIL in Iraq since 2014. Their territory has been ravaged by ISIL and by operations against ISIL. The abovementioned division within different ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq is also true for the Turkmen minority. The emergence of ISIL and the fight against has also created a sectarian rift among the Turkmen.

Given this fragmented picture in Iraq, it is not easy for Turkey to devise policies to satisfy different groups in the country. Within such an atmosphere, Turkey is prioritizing its own security interests in the region. In addition, despite the negative economic environment, Turkey is also trying to protect its trade with Iraq. Regional conditions and domestic instability have led to problems in terms of cooperation between Iraq and Turkey in the spheres of security and the economy. Now we see these efforts to end this era and initiate a

new one are likely to provide more promising outcomes.

***Security and economic challenges are pushing the two countries towards one another, and dialogue among their politicians will be positively reflected at the societal level in both countries.***

In conclusion, the visit of Turkish Prime Minister to Iraq was another step towards decreasing tensions between the two countries. However, the disagreements between these countries cannot be overcome with a visit alone. Iraqi officials' criticism of the visit by Turkish ministers to Bashiqa military post shows this. Some of these disagreements continue to affect bilateral relations. The joint declaration made during the visit, however, states that both capitals are aware of the need to work together against terrorism and to refrain from the blame game. Security and economic challenges are pushing the two countries towards one another, and dialogue among their politicians will be positively reflected at the societal level in both countries. A negative atmosphere among political figures had led to negative perceptions on both sides. The scale of the problems in Iraq and the region will definitely lead to other problems between Ankara and Baghdad in the future. But for the time being, this visit has signaled the intentions of both sides to talk to one another to overcome these problems.



**Endnotes**

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Senior associate fellow, Özcan received his B.A. in Political Science and International Relations from Marmara University in 2000 and his M.A. in 2002 from the same institution. He completed his PhD at Boğaziçi University in 2007. He studied at St. Antony's College, and Oxford University with the Jean Monnet Master Scholarship for one year in 2005-2006. For a short period of time in 2009 Özcan was a visiting scholar at Kuwait University's Department of Political Science. He continues to teach at Istanbul Sehir University on a part-time basis. Dr. Özcan served at the Center for Strategic Research (SAM) as the Deputy Chairman between 2011 - 2013 and as the Acting Chairman between 2013 and May 2014. He is currently the Director of Diplomacy Academy at MFA. Özcan is the author of three books including: Harmonizing Foreign Policy: Turkey, the EU and the Middle East. He also works on the editorial boards of Insight Turkey, Divan, and Perceptions journals. Research Interests: Turkish Foreign Policy, Middle Eastern Politics and Iraq.

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