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## **Turkey and Iraq: Soft Power, Hard Power**

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The latest attacks on Turkish forces by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the large scale military response, raised anew a number of questions pertaining to Turkey's relations with the authorities in Baghdad and regarding the various dimensions of the Kurdish question as a whole. In order to properly address the subject, the larger context of Turkish-Iraqi relations must be laid out, including developments during the past year.

The visit of Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan to Iraq in March 2011 marked a new effort to promote dialogue with Iraq's various political, ethnic and religious factions. Speaking to the Iraqi Parliament, Erdoğan stressed the importance of Iraqi unity and Turkish-Iraqi relations. Later, he met with the spiritual guide of Iraq's Shiites, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Before departing, the Turkish delegation visited Erbil, the seat of the Kurdish Regional Government, where they participated in the festive openings of Erbil International Airport, the Turkish Consulate-General, and two large Turkish bank branches. Turkey's increased contacts with Iraqi political forces in general, and particularly its rising profile in the premoninantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq, indicate the continued importance of Iraqi territorial integrity to the Turkish government, as well as Turkey's desire to build a relationship with the KRG. It also signaled a change in Turkey's perception of the region.

Turkish FM Ahmet Davutoğlu explained his government's vision thusly:

Turkey's vision of the Middle East] encompasses the entire region: It cannot be reduced to the struggle against the PKK [the Kurdish Worker's Party, which has conducted a violent insurgency against the Turkish state for almost three decades]....Turkey can use its unique understanding of the Middle East, and its diplomatic assets, to operate effectively on the ground...[and] it will continue to strive for regional integration, in the form of security and economic cooperation.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Davutoğlu stressed the importance of using soft power to enhance Turkey's standing in the region. It views itself as Iraq's gateway to Europe and the world, and Iraq as one of its own gateways to the Middle East.

Turkey's major objectives in Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Husayn's regime in 2003 have been the preservation of the country's territorial integrity, national unity, and reconciliation; the creation of a workable democratic system; determining the status of the contested, multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk in a way that will promote reconciliation; reconstruction and economic development; and the elimination of the PKK from northern Iraq, the primary base of its operations. Acting to promote Iraqi national reconciliation, Turkey brought together Iraqi Sunni Arab party representatives and the US Ambassador in December 2005, thereby contributing to Sunni Arab participation in the political process. In addition, Turkey provided training programs in building democratic institutions and processes for Iraqi politicians representing a cross-section of ethnic and sectarian communities.

To that end, Turkey maintains active diplomatic representation in Iraq, with a Turkish embassy in Baghdad and three Consulates General in Mosul, Basra and Erbil. Erdoğan's visit to Iraq in July 2008 was the first visit to Iraq by a senior Turkish official in 18 years. It was then that the two governments established the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys\\_zero\\_problems\\_foreign\\_policy](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys_zero_problems_foreign_policy)

High Level Strategic Cooperation Council to build cooperation in the political, diplomatic, cultural, security, military, economic, and energy-related spheres.<sup>2</sup>

Politics and economy are closely intertwined in Turkish-Iraqi relations. While economic agreements between the two countries have long been in place, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq marked a new phase in Turkish-Iraqi economic relations. The abolishing of the embargo on trade with Iraq and the necessity for post-war reconstruction has enabled Turkish companies to take an active part in the Iraqi economy. The volume of trade between Iraq and Turkey during 2010 was worth more than 7.3 billion dollars—up from 941 million dollars in 2003. Six billion dollars worth of the trade between the two countries in 2010 consisted of Turkish exports to Iraq,<sup>3</sup> an immense increase—over 700 percent—since 2003. Iraq's exports to Turkey, worth 1.3 billion dollars in 2010, consisted mainly of crude oil and fuel. Once the Free Trade Agreement (signed July 2008) is fully implemented, it will reduce taxes and further strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries. Turkish business activities are concentrated in Iraq's northern, predominantly Kurdish region not only because of the region's relative security, but also because Iraqi Kurds, familiar with Turkish consumption patterns, have created an open and efficient market for Turkish companies. Moreover, more than 500 companies in the region are owned by Turkish entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup> The increasing demands of Turkish businessmen for easier access to the region have resulted in Turkish Airlines expanding its operations to new destinations in Iraq, including Basra, Najaf and Sulaymaniya.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the countries' bilateral trade relations, Turkey has made humanitarian contributions to Iraq since the 2003 war. At the August 2003 Madrid Donors Conference, Turkey pledged 50 million dollars for Iraqi reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> In 2009, Turkish NGO contributions to the Middle East reached almost 140 million dollars, with Iraq receiving the most aid (51.33 million dollars' worth)—even more than Palestine, which received 48.2 million dollars.<sup>7</sup> Turkey also provides Iraq with much needed electricity.

Turkish ministries and NGOs have also been involved in cultural and educational projects in Iraq. In 2009, 645 Iraqi students were educated in Turkish schools;<sup>8</sup> 30 Iraqi Turcoman teachers received training in Turkey; and a Mosul University delegation visited TOBB and Bilkent Universities, where they signed a Memorandum of Understanding on academic cooperation in 2007.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, security concerns remain paramount, as in the absence of a strong state authority the northern region has remained a safe haven for the PKK. Turkish policy towards Iraq in the 1990s was formulated primarily from a security perspective, specifically the struggle against the PKK, and the concern that Iraq's possible disintegration would lead to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state that would ultimately threaten Turkey's territorial integrity. This policy was reflected in numerous Turkish military operations in the region. Overall, since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Turkey has focused more on employing its soft power to advance its goals in Iraq, while not entirely eschewing the use of force.

Turkey's socio-cultural influence on Iraqi Kurds is consistent with the Turkish government's 2009 'democratic opening' initiative for Turkey's own large Kurdish population, which enabled the establishment of a state-run Kurdish TV channel and Kurdish language institutes at some state universities. The initiative generated an unprecedented public discussion of the Kurdish issue. Similarly, while Turkey hoped its relations with Iraqi Kurds would help marginalize PKK operations, the 'democratic opening' was expected to help solve Turkey's own Kurdish question and isolate the PKK. Likewise, just as Turkey's policy towards Iraq's northern region is based on the expectation that increased socio-economic welfare will prevent instability and PKK attacks, the Turkish government is now officially committed to improving the economic conditions and expanding the socio-cultural rights of Turkey's own ethnic Kurdish citizens. However, the democratic opening initiative has largely stalled, due to a variety of actions by both the PKK, which felt threatened by the move, and the Turkish authorities, who were not fully committed to the declared policy.

Turkey also demonstrated diplomatic flexibility and engaged in bilateral relations with KRG, notwithstanding the fact that Turkey always viewed the KRG with reservations, owing to its organic ties with the PKK. Nonetheless, there are clear limits to Turkish-KRG cooperation, so long as the PKK remains based in the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://store.tika.gov.tr/yayinlar/kalkinma-yardimi/KalkinmaYardimlariRaporu2009.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-contributions-to-iraq.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-contributions-to-iraq.en.mfa)

KRG's territory and continues to carry out armed operations in Turkey. Summer 2011 was an especially violent one: more than thirty Turkish soldiers were killed during July and August in Turkey's southeastern provinces in PKK attacks. In response, on August 17, the Turkish military initiated a bombing campaign against PKK camps in Iraq's Kandil Mountains. According to the Turkish General Staff,<sup>10</sup> 100 PKK members were killed and more than 80 others wounded in the air strikes. PKK attacks, which included the kidnapping of civilians, continued in September. On October 5, the Turkish Parliament authorized military action against the PKK camps in Northern Iraq for another year. The PKK returned the "favor" on October 19, killing 26 soldiers in Hakkari, along the Iraqi border. It was one of the deadliest attacks in three decades of conflict. However, this time, unlike on previous occasions, the Kurdish Regional Government officially condemned the attack against the Turkish forces.<sup>11</sup> Just prior to the air and land retaliatory strikes against the PKK in both Turkey and Iraq, Ankara urgently invited the vice-chairman of the KDP and the former KRG President Nachirvan Barzani to Turkey. Barzani joined his Turkish interlocutors in condemning the attacks, while also emphasizing that these attacks should not harm the Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> Official statements by the parties and meetings indicated that diplomacy is also in action this time.

Turkey still has major security concerns about Iraq. Even so, the Turkish government believes that this should not prevent the KRG, and Iraq as a whole, from strengthening their relations with Turkey. Yet, there are limits, some of which are closely related to the Kurdish Regional Government's approach to the PKK. As the latest round of violence demonstrates, the situation on the ground is anything but calm.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.tsk.tr/10\\_ARsIV/10\\_1\\_Basin\\_Yayin\\_Faaliyetleri/10\\_1\\_Basin\\_Aciklamalari/2011/BA\\_13.htm](http://www.tsk.tr/10_ARsIV/10_1_Basin_Yayin_Faaliyetleri/10_1_Basin_Aciklamalari/2011/BA_13.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government Press Releases, 19 October 2011

<http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?nr=223&lngnr=12&smap=02010100&anr=41938>

<sup>12</sup> TRT News, 20 October 2011 <http://www.trt.net.tr/Haber/HaberDetay.aspx?HaberKodu=48a16f81-f615-4a83-a853-dbae10d6a498>

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