

Is the Turkey-Iran Rapprochement Durable in Iraq and Syria?

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August 24, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

The recent meeting between Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the Chief of Iran's Armed Forces, was not only a historic first since the 1979 Iranian revolution but also most critical in shaping the future of contesting policies of the two regional powers in Syria and Iraq. Turkish diplomatic sources perceived the meeting as "a milestone in bilateral relations," after several years of embittering exchanges due to the Syrian civil war. It was not long ago that Iranian-made drones killed four Turkish soldiers in northern Syria, and the Iranian-backed Iraqi Badr organization warned Turkey not to take military steps in Iraq's Tal Afar – which, otherwise, "will be the cemetery of Turkish soldiers." The weakened state capacity in both Syria and Iraq has facilitated the two rival powers' expansion of influence and, most interestingly, they blamed each other in a sectarian language – an unprecedented development in modern Turkish-Iranian relations.

Behind the recent rapprochement are several factors, including (1) the Trump Administration's aggressive Iran policy that culminated in the Gulf crisis and, thus, pushed Ankara and Tehran closer together; (2) Turkey's increasing frustration with Washington over the Syrian Kurds; and (3) the upcoming Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum that highly disturbs Tehran.

Counterbalancing western influence has long been an important dynamic to define new Turkish policy under Erdoğan. Turkey's frustration with the Trump Administration's policies – combined with an increasingly anxious Iran due to threats from Washington and Riyadh – led both regional powers to see

each other as a kind of safety valve, once again. And whatever the outcome of the current attempt at a thaw between Iran and Saudi Arabia, relations between Ankara and Tehran will always have their own separate dynamics.

Given the historical nature of the Turkish-Iranian rivalry, however, the two regional powers will need further assurances to overcome years of deep bilateral mistrust in Syria and Iraq. The fluctuating nature of Kurdish politics in both countries will be a significant factor in shaping the course of Ankara-Tehran relations. Other potential disruptive issues are not scarce. Indeed, the post-Islamic State (IS) vacuum in Iraq's Sunni heartland will be the first serious test for these relations. Of particular concern for Turkey is the future of the ethnic and sectarian composition of Turkmen towns such as Tal Afar and other Sunni cities liberated from the Islamic State.

The Kurdish Question

The Kurdish issue has long been a key feature of Turkish-Iranian relations, and thus, grasping the dynamics of intra-Kurdish politics is useful to analyze the recent rapprochement between the two countries. President Erdoğan mentioned the possibility of joint military action with Iran against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been at war with Turkey since 1984. Although the PKK's Iranian offshoot, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), is considered a terrorist organization by the Islamic Republic, the

clashes between PJAK and the regime ended in 2011 when the Syrian uprising began. Since then, the PKK has carefully avoided escalating tensions with the Assad regime and its patron in Tehran, and in return, Iran has eschewed labeling the PKK's Syrian affiliates – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) – as terrorist outfits. In a major shift, Iran's ambassador to Turkey recently stated that the Islamic Republic considers the PYD and YPG terrorist groups.

In fact, Iran's policy toward the PKK was never consistent. In 1999 – the year the PKK held its annual congress in Iran's Urmia – Turkey bombed militants inside Iranian territory and triggered a diplomatic standoff with Tehran. Iran's support of the PKK decreased after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, when both Ankara and Tehran became concerned about the consequences of emboldened Iraqi Kurdish aspirations. Nuances also matter here. Ankara has long utilized its good relations with the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and President of Iraqi Kurdistan Masoud Barzani to curb the influence of the PKK; on the other hand, Iran has long supported Barzani's rivals in Iraqi Kurdistan, mainly Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Movement for Change (Gorran). During the civil war between Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK in the mid-90s, Turkish and Iranian military forces had periodic incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan, waging a proxy war. In the past decade, the rise of the KDP as the ruling elite has provided Ankara a strong hand in managing intra-Kurdish politics.

Compared to the shifting Syrian context, possible Turkish-Iranian cooperation against the PKK is more likely in post-IS Iraq, especially in Qandil and Sinjar regions of northern Iraq. Worried by a potential joint military action, the PKK-backed local administrative council of Yazidis declared that they oppose the Kurdish independence referendum and have sought the United Nations' approval for "democratic autonomy" for the Yazidi minority in Iraq. In Sinjar, the hostilities between the PKK and the KDP Peshmerga reached their peak since the PKK's 2014 operation to save Yazidis from IS, thereby gaining a steady stronghold. Such tensions also increased Turkey's military alliance with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), exposed through the Turkish airstrikes in Sinjar. If the PKK-linked militia, the Sinjar Protection Units (YBS), escalates tensions over the upcoming referendum in September, Iran's policy will be tested: Tehran may choose to watch without taking sides between the KRG and PKK, or alternatively, may cooperate with the KRG to reassure Ankara. Southern areas of Sinjar have already been under control of the Iraqi Shia militias. Moreover, Ankara and Tehran will likely reassure each other with some level of intelligence sharing about Iraq's borders that goes beyond the competition between the Kurdish groups.

In Syria, the Turkey-Iran rapprochement may have some implications for both, as well as for the Kurds at least, but with severe restraints. Turkish sources hint that there is movement toward a preliminary Tehran-Moscow-Ankara agreement over Turkey's military operation in the western Kurdish enclave in Afrin, whose

location is separate from the eastern contiguous Kurdish cantons. In return, Turkey may use its leverage over Syrian rebels to compel them to withdraw their forces from certain areas in the south and to cooperate in the Idlib region.

Competition over Iraqi Kurdistan

Ankara and Tehran's competition over the future of Iraqi Kurdistan is especially significant. A joint declaration after the recent meetings stressed how both Turkey and Iran disapprove of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence. A closer look, however, illustrates a critical nuance. Ankara is especially resentful about a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories, where it watches Kurdish expansion with concern. For Turkish authorities, Kirkuk is a Turkmen city that has deep historical ties with Turkey. Unlike Iran, however, Turkey's strong economic ties with Iraqi Kurdistan – specifically, a volume of trade that reaches 8.5 billion dollars and continues to increase – cause Ankara to be careful in approaching the KRG's demand for autonomy. KRG officials, therefore, are considering postponing the referendum in the disputed territories.

Compared to Turkey, Iran has more reasons to be worried about Kurdish independence in Iraq. First, Tehran fears that an independent Erbil will be under heavy influence of the United States and Turkey, and thus, may pursue a confrontational policy against Iran. It is likely that an independent Kurdistan may reach an agreement with Washington to host a permanent American military base – an idea

that is propagated by some top-level generals in the US Army. Under such a scenario, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) may regard Erbil as a national security threat. Second, militant Kurdish groups, namely the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and Komala, have returned to arms and launched attacks in Iranian Kurdistan in recent years. Given that these groups' leadership is based in Iraqi Kurdistan and PDKI has strong historical ties to President Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, Tehran perceives Kurdish aspirations for independence as provocative. For example, Yahya Safavi – a former IRGC commander and a top advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei – warned the KRG against interfering in Iranian affairs by enabling arms transfers to Kurdish militants via third parties. Third, Iranian Kurds have strong historical and cultural ties with Iraqi Kurds – unlike Kurds in Turkey and Syria who speak Kurmanji, a group of northern Kurdish dialects. Thus, an independent Kurdistan in Syria may have a mobilizing effect among Turkey's Kurds, while an independent Kurdistan in Iraq has the potential to disturb Iran's relations with its large Kurdish minority population, which is seven million strong.

Sectarian Fears

The challenge of overcoming sectarian fears in Iraq's disputed territories will be among the first serious tests for the Turkey-Iran rapprochement. Despite raising eyebrows in Baghdad, strong historical ties and Turkish irredentism color Ankara's perception of Mosul and Tal Afar. Turkey still harbors deep

anxiety about the current grievances by Sunni Arab and ethnic Turkmen in Mosul's surroundings and the potential of demographic engineering. Ankara's fears are not baseless, indeed. The Iraqi government recently admitted that a special unit of the security forces – the Interior Ministry's elite Emergency Response Division – committed abuses against civilians during the Mosul campaign.

As the military offensive turned to Tal Afar – once an Ottoman garrison city, and now with a population of 200,000 Turkmen – Turkish officials have made frequent declarations that the city should be handed over to its Turkmen "owners" after liberation, and that Turkey would never allow the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – also known as the Shia militias – to enter Tal Afar. Washington's recent approval of the PMF's spearheading role in the Tal Afar operation caused outrage in the Turkish media. Pro-government dailies depicted the PMF as not only entirely "Iran-backed" but also as a group of bandits with "an ill-famed past as human rights groups have long accused them of being involved in extrajudicial killings, abuse, and the theft or destruction of property in areas from which they drove out Daesh." Given that the PMF is accepted as part of Iraq's legitimate security forces, a perception gap among the Turkish and Iranian audiences widens.

The looming threat of the PMF has led Ankara to train a rival militia consisting of thousands of Sunni Arabs – al-Hashd al-Watani – in the Iraqi town of Bashiqa. The militia is largely supported by Atheel al-Nujaifi, the governor of Nineveh before the IS invasion. Turkey also deployed its own military personnel, estimated

at 500, in Bashiqa, which escalated tensions in the past year. The Baghdad government considers the presence of Turkish troops a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, repeating its need for "imminent" removal after the victorious Mosul campaign. Turkey's response is likely to depend on the central government's relations with influential Arab families, such as the Nujaifis, to reconstruct Mosul as a multiethnic city. An Iraqi court issued an arrest warrant for al-Nujaifi, the former governor, due to his role in allowing Turkish troops inside the Iraqi borders and for allegedly spying for the Turkish military.

Implications for Washington

The durability of Turkish-Iranian cooperation depends on Washington's policy for post-IS Syria and Iraq. The rapprochement of the two regional powers stems from overlapping anxieties rather than strong shared interests. The Trump Administration's mismanagement of the Gulf crisis has fueled such anxieties in Ankara and Tehran that they have cooperated to defend Qatar against the Saudi-led campaign. Souring relations with NATO over the past few years make Turkey's President Erdoğan fear that western-backed international pressure could make Ankara the next target.

Unless the United States plays the role of arbitrator for renewed peace talks between Turkey and the PKK, Turkish fears of Kurdish separatism may prevail in shaping its priorities, and therefore, may push Ankara closer to Tehran and Moscow. Since Russia's involvement in the Syrian war in 2015, Turkish

foreign policy has changed dramatically. As late as November 2015, Turkish officials were trying to find a way forward to negotiate with the Syrian Kurds by separating the PYD – the political wing of the PKK in Syria – from the YPG forces. In the words of Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu at the time, the PYD should be seen as “a [political] party just like the [People’s Democratic Party],” which is a legal pro-Kurdish party in the Turkish parliament. The derailment of Turkey’s peace process with the Kurds led to the downfall of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s neo-Ottoman vision and the rise of Eurasianist bureaucrats within the Turkish state apparatus. Turkey’s turn to Russia and Iran is now strengthened by new contracts to develop Iranian oil and gas fields as well as to acquire the S-400 Russian missile defense system.

Washington also is in a unique position as a potential arbitrator and as the only actor with some level of influence over all competing Kurdish groups. In post-IS Iraq, US diplomatic leadership may better serve stability in the disputed areas than pursuit of establishing a military base – which would provoke both Turkish and Iranian antagonism.

Moreover, and in order to lessen sectarian tensions in Iraq, the United States may capitalize on its improving relations with Baghdad to facilitate a better framework for reconstruction efforts in Mosul and other liberated Sunni towns. Such stabilization efforts will not only strengthen the Baghdad government over Iran-backed Shia militias but also ease tensions between Turkey and Iraq in the long run.