



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 89 (1029), 27 September 2017 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski ● Bartosz Wiśniewski ● Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dynier ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Justyna Szczudlik ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan

Karol Wasilewski

Although the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is one of Turkey's closest partners, Ankara disapproved of this week's independence referendum. Yet, Turkey did not take actions that would have forced the Iraqi Kurds to postpone or cancel the vote. That suggests Turkish politicians' stance on the referendum was dictated by domestic political considerations and will harden only if the situation with Iraqi Kurdistan constitutes a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity.

Iraqi Kurdistan in Turkey's Foreign Policy. Turkish authorities usually approach the topic of Iraqi Kurdistan with caution, stemming from worries that any independence movement may spread to Turkish territory, with its 15 million Kurds. However, the Justice and Development Party (AKP)—which has ruled Turkey since 2002—has adopted a flexible approach towards the Kurdish question, and that has enabled a turnaround in relations between Turkey and the KRG. Since 2008, their relationship has developed quickly, especially visible in their economies. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of Turkish companies in the north of Iraq mushroomed quickly (from around 500 to 1,500). Turkish exports to the territory grew—in 2013, Iraqi Kurdistan became Turkey's third-largest export market when viewed separately (67% of Turkey's total exports to Iraq). According to the Turkish Ministry of Customs and Trade, Iraq is Turkey's second-largest export market (\$7.5 billion in 2016), and most Turkish goods flow to Iraqi Kurdistan. At the same time, Turkey is the KRG's biggest economic partner.

Another sector where cooperation between Turkey and the KRG has been developing very fast is energy. Turkey's growing need for energy, which had been expanding at a pace of 6-8% yearly, forced Turkish decision-makers to increase energy imports and look to diversify suppliers, and the KRG served both aims. However, a breakthrough moment in their energy collaboration took place in November 2013 when an agreement was signed that resulted in Turkey's brokering of oil from Iraqi Kurdistan to international markets (via the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline). This is how the Turkish government—while officially voicing support for a unified Iraq—contributed to strengthening the KRG's independence from the central government in Bagdad and is one of the reasons for the bad state of relations between Turkey and Iraq in recent years.

Yet, the rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG also has had a political angle. Iraqi Kurds play an important role in Turkey's regional strategy as a buffer against Iran's growing influence in Iraq. Relations with the KRG have also been important within Ankara's Kurdish policy. Turkish authorities have been trying to strengthen KRG President Masoud Barzani's image as leader of all the Kurds. This has stoked an intra-Kurdish rivalry between Barzani and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a declared terrorist group. He has been an important partner for Turkey in diminishing the influence of both the PKK in Iraq's Sinjar province and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. Barzani accused the PYD of cooperation with the Assad regime in Syria and shares the Turkish authorities' opinion that the party is just the Syrian branch of the PKK. Moreover, Turkey's close relations with Barzani played an important role in Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political strategy ahead of the constitutional referendum in April 2017. The Turkish

president needed some Kurdish voters despite an intensive anti-terrorist campaign aimed at the PKK and amid growing nationalistic rhetoric. There were many signs that Erdoğan aims to launch a similar strategy going into the next presidential and parliamentary elections (November 2019).

Turkey on the KRG Referendum. The independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan posed a serious dilemma for Turkish politicians. When deciding their stance on the vote, the decision-makers had to consider their close relationship with the KRG on the one hand and the referendum's potential consequences on the other. As a result, their approach towards the referendum was inconsistent.

Turkish politicians voiced objections toward the vote. Their arguments pointed to, most of all, worries about further destabilisation of Iraq and fears of spreading the separatist tendencies among Turkish Kurds. Furthermore, their objections were heightened after the Iraqi Kurds decided to include Kirkuk in the referendum (it is a multi-ethnic city and inhabited by Turkmens). Despite their concerns, the Turkish politicians did not take any actions to try to make President Barzani change his decision to hold the referendum. Neither did they decide to close the Habur Border, nor narrow economic cooperation or stop the flow of oil through Turkish territory. This behaviour raised some doubts about the Turks' real intentions. KRG officials, for example, argued that they consider the Turkish decision-makers' declarations to be rather domestic political instruments, the aim of which is to respond to the outcry amongst the nationalist constituency that form an important part of Erdoğan's support.

There were some other elements that served the argument about the Turkish decision-makers' inconsistent approach. First, their rhetoric aimed at the referendum was quite mild, especially in the beginning, when they voiced displeasure rather than a warning to the Iraqi Kurds. Second, Kurdish organisations promoting the independence referendum in the KRG to the Turkish public remained operating freely in Turkey. Third, sometimes the English version of statements published by Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were different than those in the pro-government Turkish press that "cited" them. Fourth, Ankara toughened its stance only a week before the referendum. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım said then that Turkey was treating the referendum as a "national security issue," and President Erdoğan declared that the country would consider sanctions on the KRG if the referendum took place. However, eventually the only element of pressure on the KRG was a military drill on the border with Iraq that began on 18 September. Turkish authorities' declarations that another instrument of pressure would be revealed on 22 September remain unfulfilled. All that has raised suspicion that the Turkish politicians' approach towards the referendum was an element of a political strategy aimed at maintaining both nationalist and Kurdish voters at the same time.

Conclusions and Prospects. Turkish politicians' stance on the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan has been motivated primarily by domestic political considerations. Fears of spreading separatist tendencies to the Turkish Kurds and Iraq's further destabilisation influenced it to a lesser extent. The decision then to take a stance unfavourable to the Iraqi Kurds probably stems from the assumption that Turkey-KRG ties have an asymmetric character. Iraqi Kurdistan's authorities need to maintain their close cooperation with Turkey if they want to maintain their territory's economic development.

The Turkish decision-makers' behaviour shows they had a huge problem remaining consistent, though. That stems from the strong relations they have been cultivating with the KRG, and especially with Barzani, in recent years. Without a doubt, the Turkish authorities realise they will need the Kurdish leader's support both to constrict PKK influence and to maintain Kurdish votes in Turkey. At the same time, in light of the government's political alliance with nationalists, which plays an important role in President Erdoğan's political plans, the authorities cannot be seen to support Barzani's independence endeavour.

Under these circumstances, one may expect that after the referendum, the Turkish stance on the KRG will remain inconsistent. It is likely the Turkish authorities will try on one hand to exert pressure on the Iraqi Kurds to postpone declaring independence and on the other, to abstain from imposing the most painful sanctions on the KRG. Yet, the durability this course will depend primarily on two factors. First, Barzani's future influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, and second, on the development of the situation in and around northern Iraq.¹ Turkey's stance towards the KRG will most certainly toughen if Iraqi Kurds unilaterally declare independence or there are ethnic clashes in the north of Iraq.

¹ P. Sasnal, "Context and Scenarios after the Referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan's Independence," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 87 (1027), 22 September 2017, www.pism.pl.