

# Barzani's Quest for Independence and Why Turkey is against It

UFUK ULUTAŞ

- **What are Turkey's concerns regarding the KRG's independence move?**
  - **What leverage does Turkey have on the KRG?**
  - **What is Turkey's post-referendum game plan?**

The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) and Turkey have maintained close ties in the past decade thanks to burgeoning trade, social proximity, and security cooperation. Turkey has become the KRG's gateway to the outside world and main trading partner, and the old and entangled ties between the two have turned into a mutually beneficial relationship. The KRG, which has been experiencing budgetary constraints due to Baghdad's financial crisis, the drop in oil prices, and its corrupt and nepotistic economy, has often turned to Turkey for oil trade and at times financial support. Although the relationship is mutually beneficial, the KRG's financial sustainability is pretty much dependent on its dealings with Turkey since the former's economy is fully dependent on oil sales through Turkey in the absence of its share emanating from the federal budget. Turkey, in turn, found an unlikely ally in the KRG in trade and security matters. Although its ties with the KRG sometimes put Turkey at odds with Baghdad, Turkey has always emphasized the territorial integrity of Iraq and promoted unity and ulterior Iraqi identity.

What is at stake with the referendum on the KRG's independence on September 25 besides Iraq's territorial integrity and the KRG's stability is the relationship between Turkey and the KRG. Turkey sees the referendum as unconstitutional and illegitimate, inflaming Iraq as well as the whole region, and has asked the KRG to cancel it and begin fresh talks with the central government under the framework of the federal constitution. Turkey's National Security Council warned the KRG against holding the referendum, deeming it a national security threat, and declaring that "all options are on the table." The Turkish Parliament, on its end, renewed a bill allowing the military to intervene in Iraq and Syria if faced with national security threats. As much as Turkey wants to maintain this mutually beneficial relationship, the KRG's quest for independence will bear serious consequences on all parties concerned, and will be a game changer, torpedoing decade-long rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG. Why is Turkey adamantly against the KRG's independence move (read also in favor of the territorial integrity of Iraq) and what leverage does it have on Erbil?

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## Ufuk ULUTAŞ

Ufuk Ulutas is the Director of the Foreign Policy Studies at SETA Foundation and an assistant professor at Social Sciences University of Ankara. He received his BA in Political Science from Bilkent University, his MA in Middle Eastern History at the Ohio State University, and his Ph.D. in International Relations from Yildirim Beyazit University. He studied Hebrew and Middle Eastern politics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and taught at OSU between 2004 and 2009. He is a columnist at *Akşam Daily* and currently hosting a foreign policy-centered TV program at TRT Haber channel. He is the author, most recently, of *The State of Savagery: ISIS in Syria*.

## **TURKEY'S CONCERNS**

Turkey's investment in the KRG until its independence move is indicative of the country's post-nationalistic approach to the dispute. Barzani's insistence on holding the referendum despite overwhelming criticism at home and abroad demonstrates that his strong rhetoric prevents him from taking rational steps. Meanwhile, Turkey has legitimate concerns when opposing Barzani's quest for independence.

## **Independence as an Incubator of Conflict**

Now that war on DEASH is reportedly nearing completion - at least in so far as DEASH is losing its territorial grip in Iraq - Iraq desperately needs physical reconstruction, a new social contract, an economic leap, and relative quiet rather than another conflict. However, based on the position of both Iraqi and regional actors, one would rightly argue that the KRG's insistence on independence would not be taken lightly. In other words, an independent "Kurdistan" would be a source of yet another protracted and unmanageable conflict, sending not only Iraq but also the KRG into turmoil. Key political figures from Baghdad and heads of prominent Shiite groups declared their opposition to the independence move and warned that they are ready to fight for Iraqi territory. Baghdad is currently preoccupied with DEASH and seems not able to exert much energy on another front against the KRG. Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that Baghdad would succumb without a fight to the independence and especially to the claims over disputed territory such as Kirkuk. Turkey assesses that the risk of conflict is high, and that clashes between Baghdad and the KRG or an ethnic strife between Peshmerga forces and Arabs-Turkomans would be suicidal for both Baghdad and Erbil. It will likely trigger internal displacement and refugee flows towards Turkey, which already hosts hundreds of thousands of Iraqi asylum seekers. It will also put Turkey's interests and investments in Northern Iraq at risk, since one of the main conditions that enabled the trade-oriented Ankara-Erbil rapprochement has been the relative calm

and stability in the KRG. Turkey, therefore, simply wants to avoid further conflict exacerbated by ethnic separatism on its doorstep.

## **The PKK Factor**

Iraq is in ruins after years of invasion, war and terror. The American invasion opened Pandora's box and accentuated ethnic-sectarian conflict. The main beneficiaries of this conflict have been terror organizations and sectarian militias. As far as the national security of Turkey is concerned, the main threat emanating from Northern Iraq is the PKK, which exploits ethnic strife, fills power vacuums, and expands under chaotic circumstances. Despite the overly argued binary between Barzani and the PKK, Barzani has done very little so far against the PKK's influence and activity in the KRG region. Post-independence circumstances would force Barzani to face existential challenges from internal rivals and external foes simultaneously. An independent Erbil led by Barzani would be more fragile and conflict-prone than an autonomous Erbil, opening up venues for the bolstering of the PKK's stature and the increase of its activities. It is unlikely that Barzani would be willing or able to prioritize curtailing the PKK's influence in Northern Iraq. Therefore, the potential Baghdad-Erbil conflict as well as ethnic tensions between the Arabs, Turkomans and Kurds would provide the PKK with the golden opportunity to expand its control over Sincar, parts of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah and establish itself as an ever-stronger power broker in KRG politics. The PKK, which has gained experience by filling the power vacuum in Syria, would implement the same strategy in Iraq, and link the territories it currently controls in Syria with the ones in Iraq logistically, economically and even politically. Turkish policy makers argue that despite the rivalry between the PKK and Barzani, the PKK would be one of the main beneficiaries of the independence as the terror group is well-suited to fill the power vacuum and benefit from the rising tensions and conflict in Northern Iraq.

### **Proxy Wars and Overreliance on Barzani's Political Survival**

Pro-independence pundits in Turkey and elsewhere argue that a Barzani-led Kurdistan would likely turn into a Turkish proxy state due to the newly emerging state's high level of dependence on Turkey. Many regional and global actors - including but not limited to the United States, Iran, Israel, and the U.K. - currently maintain influence over KRG's politics and economy through certain personalities, political movements or economic enterprises. An independent Kurdistan would trigger an even tougher regional and global rivalry and even proxy wars over Northern Iraq. Whoever leads the state would have to find a balance between global and regional patrons, and it is very unlikely that the state would become a proxy of a single foreign actor. One of Turkey's main constraints in its relationship with the KRG is the fact that its ties with the Regional Government is predominantly through Barzani, although it maintains ties with other actors as well. Turkish interests would be at risk in the likely scenario of Barzani's departure from the seat of the presidency, and the rise of the anti-Barzani coalitions of Goran, elements of the PUK and the PKK. One should be reminded that one of the reasons Barzani insists so much on holding the referendum is to salvage his political power eroded by long-lasting political battles, financial constraints and social upheavals. The fact that even a unifying cause such as independence caused opposition and disputes among Iraqi Kurds indicates that post-independence politics would not be easy for Barzani - even if he becomes the person to deliver the promise of independence to Iraqi Kurds. As much as it is nationalistic, KRG politics are overly fragmented, tribal and pragmatist. Turkey, therefore, does not want to be a part of a proxy war over Northern Iraq and invest on a project which would potentially slide under the influence of other regional and global actors, disenfranchising Turkish economic and security interests in the region.

### **Dangers of Belated Nationalism**

Barzani's quest for independence is a nationalistic separatist project which is driven mostly by sentimental arguments rather than a rational and nationally agreeable exit plan. While the referendum itself is under heavy criticism by almost every actor in the region and the world, Barzani's insistence on including "disputed territories" such as Kirkuk in the referendum is indicative of his ill-judgment. Nationalistic separatist projects in the Middle East have brought nothing but catastrophe to the region and its people in the last century. Further divisions accentuate already heightened ethnic-sectarian tensions and pave the way for conflict and strife. Belated nationalisms such as the one propagated strongly by Barzani would be detrimental to the well-being of the pluralistic society in the KRG, and disenfranchise large ethnic groups such as Arabs and Turkomans. Turkey has always supported the territorial integrity of all regional countries, even Syria despite showing open hostility towards the rule of Assad. Many in Turkey read the Kurdish separatism in Iraq as the first sequence of a larger project, upsetting Turkey's social cohesion and territorial integrity. Turkey is neither Iraq nor Syria, both striking examples of failed states, and, therefore, the territorial integrity of Turkey is not under question as much as some would like to think. However, nationalist and separatist projects imposed on Turkey's doorstep would definitely have repercussions inside Turkey either by encouraging a small number of chauvinistic separatists led by the PKK or by creating a vicious circle of battling nationalistic fervors. In other words, in the end, nationalist separatism and chauvinism would neither empower the Kurdish people nor any other ethnicity, but only endorse terrorist organizations such as the PKK. Turkey does not envisage an Iraq divided among Arabs, Kurds and Turkomans, or Sunnis and Shiites. Further divisions create weak and failed states, and weak and fragmented states at Turkey's doorstep are not favorable to the country's security paradigm.

## **TURKEY'S GAME PLAN**

Turkey's position vis-à-vis the KRG's independence is clear and well-elucidated. As written above, Turkey values its ties with the KRG and wants to maintain them; however, Turkey stands against nationalistic separatism and further divisions in Iraq and elsewhere. Nationalistic separatism and unilateral steps are deemed incubators of conflict which would eventually be exploited by the PKK in Iraq and Syria, as well as in Turkey. Hence, based on the decision taken by the NSC and the bill approved by the National Assembly, Turkey readies itself for a set of sanctions and preemptive measures to either prevent the KRG's independence or minimize its negative impact on Turkey. It is important to note that some of these measures are being discussed and coordinated with Baghdad and Iran. Turkey will avoid resorting to these measures as much as possible; however, depending on the KRG's further moves, these measures would unfold in stages.

## **Economic-Political Pressure**

Economy and politics are very much intertwined in the KRG, and the political power of local actors is conditioned upon their ability to deliver economic sustainability. In this sense, Turkey's economic and political measures will be interrelated. Although the NSC statement regarding KRG independence does not include specific sanctions and measures, it is not hard to guess that the KRG's oil export through Turkey and its key imports from the country, as well as the non-recognition of decisions taken by the KRG and the closing or restricting of the Habur border post will be the mainstays of Turkey's measures.

The KRG's economic survival is strongly linked with oil exports through Turkey either by pipelines or trucks. The oil trade between Turkey and the KRG is a lucrative business, and both parties have benefited from it. Hence, the suspension of the oil trade would not only hurt the KRG but also Turkey. However, while it is indispensable for the economic survivability and therefore political viability of the KRG, the same is not true for Turkey. Turkey would face up to the

economic loss in order to pressurize the KRG into canceling a move that poses a direct threat to Turkish national security. Habur, on the other hand, is the lifeblood of Northern Iraq as it is the main entry point of the majority of goods and products into the region. The closing or restricting of the border post will not only create social pressure on the KRG but will also cut another of its revenue sources as it creates a sizable revenue from the border trade. Turkey, which is against the impact of sanctions on ordinary people elsewhere, would be careful, however, not to penalize the latter through such sanctions. Lastly, the considerable economic enterprises and investments inside Turkey of pro-independence KRG individuals might be a part of the sanctions, increasing the pressure on the policy makers in Erbil.

Another casualty of the rift would likely be the KRG representation office in Ankara and the Turkish consulate in Erbil. Both parties would prefer keeping the diplomatic channels open through the consulate and the representation office, but in the case of going forward with the independence move at the expense of ties with Turkey, the diplomatic representation in Erbil would be either closed down or downgraded, while the KRG representative would be asked to leave Ankara.

## **Preemptive Security**

Although Turkey would like to see economic and political measures persuade the KRG leadership not to follow up with the referendum, Barzani may have reached a point of no return by setting the bar high and raising people's expectations without explaining to them the likely dire consequences of such a move. Turkey perceives two main threats emanating from this move: ethnic conflict and chaos, and the PKK's increased activity in Iraq. Both are deemed as national security threats and necessitate defensive and preemptive action along the border areas.

The NSC has recently stated, "Turkey reserves all options arising from bilateral and international agreements if the KRG holds the referendum." The statement alludes to two agreements. The first is the Anka-

ra Agreement of 1926 between Turkey, Iraq and the United Kingdom regarding the settlement of the frontier between Turkey and Iraq. The agreement delineates the border between the two countries, includes financial stipulations, and regulates the status of the inhabitants (mostly Turkomans) of the territories ceded to Iraq. The KRG's independence, however, radically changes the Turkish-Iraqi border, annulling the Ankara Treaty. The fact that the agreement would no longer be intact, according to Ankara, gives it the right to question the Turkish-Iraqi border. Furthermore, Turkey is presented with new responsibilities in protecting the well-being of the aforementioned inhabitants of the territories ceded to Iraq with the Ankara Agreement. The second agreement is the Border Security and Cooperation Treaty of 1983 between Turkey and Iraq, giving Turkey the right to strike 10 km within the Iraqi territory. Turkey has conducted military operations, mostly against the PKK, based on this treaty and in the likely scenario of an increasing PKK activity post-referendum and/or post-independence, Turkey would take both defensive and preemptive action in this strip of land.

Turkey's most likely military action would aim at curbing or eliminating the PKK in the Turkey-Iraqi border area. This would require intensified military action in the Iraqi territory which would eventually end up creating some sort of buffer zone along the border with a special focus on Qandil and Sincar areas. For a long time Turkey has wanted to expand its military operations in Northern Iraq in coordination with the Peshmerga, but despite supporting the an-

ti-PKK operations in theory, the Peshmerga did little in helping Turkey to tackle the PKK terrorism that originated in Northern Iraq. Under the new conditions and the scenario of potentially changing borders opening up venues for the increased operational capability of the PKK in Northern Iraq, Turkey would undertake decisive military action, leading to permanent solutions in the border areas.

### WHAT NOW?

Undoubtedly Turkey sees the KRG's independence move and its regional consequences as a threat to its national security. In a bid to preserve close ties with the KRG, Turkey will continue to pressurize Erbil through diplomatic or economic channels, and through political and even military measures, to ensure that the regional government respects the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq. One should expect Turkey to step up with the aforementioned measures starting with the political and economic ones, and resorting to military measures if the threat level increases. Turkey will do its best to make sure that these measures will not impinge upon the well-being of the ordinary people in Northern Iraq, namely, among others, the Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans. Despite sharing an anti-referendum position with Iraq, Iran and the United States, Turkey has its own unique position and priorities. Although some sorts of a cooperation is possible between Turkey, Iraq and Iran, Turkey's game plan differs from those of the above countries and is tailored to Turkey's own priorities and national interests.