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# Turkish Foreign Policy and the Kurdistan Regional Government

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the Kurdistan Region's increasing significance for regional politics, including its role in Turkish foreign policy. It also discusses Turkey's foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) since its creation and describes the stages the relations Ankara and Erbil have undergone since the 1991 Gulf War. Four different phases of Turkey's foreign policy practice towards the KRG are pinpointed in this paper. Conclusions are also drawn concerning the KRG's increasing role in a possible transformed post-Assad political setting and what this means for the regional balance of power, especially if the Kurds of Syria succeed in achieving autonomy. Finally, the study's theoretical implications are also highlighted, considering its relevance in current international relations literature.*

## Key Words

Turkish foreign policy, KRG, Kurds of Syria, PKK, Baghdad, Sunni-Shia divide.

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## Introduction

This paper analyses Turkish foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and examines the overall importance of the Kurds of Iraq since the establishment of the first Kurdish *de facto* state entity in May 1992 in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War in 1991.<sup>1</sup> A couple of decades earlier, no one could ever have imagined that we would be discussing Turkish foreign policy towards the Kurdistan Region or even a change in favour of the KRG, let alone the current transformation in the regional balance of power with the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis which is currently in progress. The future and the role of Syria are highly important as they are key factors in the creation of the post-Assad environment in Syria, and subsequently the entire regional political setting. Considering the rise of sectarianism in the broader Middle Eastern region, it seems that future alliances will be framed by the Sunni-Shia discourse. Within this context, I will explain the growing importance of

Turkish relations with the Kurds of Iraq since the creation of the KRG in 1992.

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The contribution of this research is not limited to its empirical findings through content analysis of reports and articles on similar subjects- as there are hardly any books addressing this case study- as well as newspapers and interviews with both Turkish and Kurdish political figures in both the Kurdistan Region and Turkey. Furthermore, the dearth of literature on relations between Turkey and the KRG is a very contemporary matter, and the subject's theoretical implications is also of great importance as it is situated within the broader puzzle of the interaction between state and non-state actors in international relations.

The main works on this particular topic that have been published so far concentrate on Turkish foreign policy towards northern Iraq seen through the prism of Turkey's Iraqi foreign policy perspective, Turkey's Kurdish perspectives,<sup>2</sup> or on Turkish-Iraqi relations in connection to the Kurds

of Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are few up-to-date scholarly works on the bilateral relations between Turkey and KRG.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, I will demonstrate the changes in this relationship, its regional effects as well as the influence of the KRG's and the PKK's (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, the Kurdistan Workers Party) foreign policies on Turkey's foreign policy, and how these influences have formed the Turkish government's attitude towards the KRG in particular and the region in general. Finally, a theoretical reflection of the study's empirical findings will be also raised.

## The Genesis: The Origins of Turkish-KRG Relations

The formation of the KRG as the result of Iraqi withdrawal from the north on account of the "no-fly" zone that prevented Iraqi air forces from operating above the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel was an accidental outcome of the US, British, French and Turkish collective humanitarian plan to protect Iraq's Kurdish population. The US-backed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 688 (5 April 1991) which called on Iraq to end the suppression of its Kurdish population, and Turgut Özal's support for the creation of the "Safe Haven" in April 1991 did not only aim at averting a second refugee crisis (following the "Anfal campaign" of

1988 and the Kurdish uprising of March 1991) on the Turkish and Iranian borders on the heels of Second Gulf War, but also to obtain US permission to operate in the north of Iraq and to pursue PKK rebels in exchange, a Turkish policy in place until today.<sup>5</sup>

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There is thus a certain irony in Turkish foreign policy having contributed to the renaissance of Iraq's Kurds through "Operation Provide Comfort" (renamed "Operation Poised Hammer" in 1997 and later "Operation Northern Watch"). The formation of the KRG not only sowed the seeds for the post-Saddam era, but also facilitated US plans for transforming the Middle East through the Greater Middle East Initiative in November 2003, and signalled the emergence of Iraq's Kurds as a regional equaliser in the democratic change which the Middle East is currently undergoing, especially since the KRG's empowerment after 2005.

This very first stage of Turkish- Kurdish relations, which came about as a result of Turkish support for the creation of the KRG in the early 1990s with the deployment of 100,000 troops along the Iraqi-Turkish border and the approval of the US's plans to attack Saddam from Turkey's Incirlik air base on 18 January 1991,<sup>6</sup> along with the closure of the Kirkuk Yumurtalik pipeline between Turkey and Iraq on 8 August 1990, and the Turkish embargo on trade with Iraq reflect Turkish policies towards the Kurds of Iraq rather than towards the KRG as an entity, and hence were subsumed within Turkey's overall Iraqi policy.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Özal's Kurdish policy at that time aimed to restore Turkey's external relations as the way out of the country's isolated position and to increase Turkey's economic and cultural domination, which was founded on Özal's principle of "Turkism", which had the goal of preventing any negative impact on the agenda of Turkey's Kurds caused by Iraq's Kurdish claims, and on sustaining a strong US- Turkish partnership given the importance of Turkey's integration with the West, as well as to maintain the status quo for fear of the repercussions that potential regional imbalances might have on the Turkish economy and integrity. Turkish policies towards the Kurds of Iraq should also be examined within Özal's foreign policy objectives to control his country's borders with Iraq

and to upgrade Turkey's regional role.<sup>8</sup> Thus Turkey's intervention in regional politics immediately after the Second Gulf War as a mediator in a search for a solution to Iraq's Kurdish refugee crisis resulted in the strengthening of the geostrategic importance of the state, which is at the crossroads of Asia, the Caucasus and Europe, especially in terms of US foreign policy in the post-Cold War system.

Thus the first phase of the relations between Turkey and the Kurds of Iraq has as its starting point Turkey's *ad hoc* policy of protecting the Kurdish north against Baghdad during the absence of a united Kurdish front in Iraq *vis-à-vis* inter and intra Kurdish conflicts that culminated in a four-year civil war between 1994 and 1998. This shows that we can hardly talk about a structured and institutionalised Turkish foreign policy towards the KRG, at least not until the unification agreement between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) on 21 January 2006.

Ankara's determination through its unsuccessful reconciliation efforts in the "Ankara Process" in October 1996 to take on the role of the mediator in the KDP-PUK rivalry between May 1994-September 1998 over tax revenues, power, land and differing opinions as to the most effective policy to deal

with Saddam, a process that ended in the "Washington Agreement" (17 September 1998) between Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, further confirms this argument and also reveals "Ankara's fears that the PKK might have taken advantage of the vacuum of power".<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Turkey's interest in maximising its regional influence and exerting control in the north, thereby endangering the political monopoly of the United States in the region and finally resolving Iraq's Kurdish issue for its own benefit, reveals the importance of the Kurdistan Region for Turkish foreign policy. This benefit could have been the annexation of the northern oil-rich regions of Iraq or a federation with the Turkmen and the Kurds in Iraq under Turkish auspices based on Özal's policy of "neo-Ottomanism".<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Turkey's first large attack against the PKK on 10 October 1992 was said to have been encouraged by "Saddam supplying the PKK with weapons" and by "the KDP and the PUK- Iraq's main Kurdish parties- fearing that Abdullah Öcalan intended to take control of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq".<sup>11</sup> However, this does not imply that all sides were not playing one against the other for the facilitation of their own foreign policy goals. Turkey's then policy towards Iraq's Kurds was identified by instant alliances in the same vein as prior to the 1990s when one Kurdish group was played

against the other, just as it was up to the end of the 1990s.

Indeed, Turkey's relations with KDP was encouraged by an alliance between Syria, Iran, the PUK and the PKK<sup>12</sup> against the KDP, which led to an Iraqi-KDP coalition (31 August 1996)<sup>13</sup> with a succession of Turkish operations, namely in 1992, 1995 and 14 May 1997 when Turkey stationed 50,000 troops in the north of Iraq against the Syrian-backed PKK.<sup>14</sup>

### *The “PKK Factor” in Turkish Foreign Policy*

Turkey's PKK confrontation policy, which has continued until the present time, demonstrates an unaltered Turkish strategy to eliminate the PKK's power on the one hand, and on the other to prevent the PKK from becoming a determining factor in the formulation of Turkish foreign policy, including its strategy towards the Kurds of Iraq, a position Turkey has held since the Özal era.

The emergence of the PKK from 1984 onwards as pivotal agent in the implementation of Turkey's Middle Eastern foreign policy was evident in the “Frontier Security and Cooperation Agreement” (February 1983) between Turkey and Iraq, which provided for operations against armed groups on

each other's territory as well as in a series of other agreements such as the “Border Security and Cooperation Agreement” (October 1984), and a “Security Protocol” between Ankara and Baghdad that allowed raids on the PKK encampments in northern Iraq. The capture of Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya, Nairobi, on 15 February 1999, directly after the “Washington Agreement” was agreed to, which was followed by Ankara's constant disregard of his plea from August 1999 onwards for a political solution to the Kurdish issue,<sup>15</sup> are indicative examples of the increasing importance that the PKK bears in Turkish politics in view of its growing strength in the aftermath of the Third Gulf War (2003) and its further empowerment since the eruption of the crisis in Syria.

Yet, the heart of Turkey's “PKK issue” today lies in the reluctance of the Turkish bureaucracy to find a political solution to the Kurdish issue unless the PKK lays down its arms, as well as the PKK's unwillingness to shift its policy from a militaristic approach towards the politicisation of its struggle unless constitutional guarantees are granted to the Kurds. In a statement regarding his commitment to a new round of talks with PKK, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said “There is a military dimension, a security dimension which is separate and will

continue... but beside this there is [also] a diplomatic, socio-economic and psychological dimension". Thus Ankara's Kurdish policy today appears trapped in a Catch-22 situation.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond any doubt, the AKP's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, the Justice and Development Party) rise to power in 2002 has opened a new page not only for Turkish politics but also for Ankara's Kurdish policies. The "Kurdish Initiative" in 2009 was followed by the Oslo talks the same year between the PKK and Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MIT, *Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*) that "negotiated three protocols on how to settle the Kurdish cause in Turkey as well as the stages for a political solution" had a positive effect on the progress of Turkey's relations with the KRG, as will be discussed further.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, "the negotiations were cut suddenly during the 2011 June elections and the arrests of approximately 8,000 BDP [*Partiya Aştî û Demokrasiyê*, Peace and Democracy Party] members that followed" stifled any chance for a political solution henceforth.<sup>18</sup> The AKP seems to have a long way to go in its battle for Turkey's further reformation in view of the stalemate in current Kurdish-Turkish talks, and the institutionalisation of substantial changes still waiting to be fulfilled. Cross-border operations in Iraq and the government's intention to lift the immunity of nine BDP deputies

show the state's resistance to move on with the necessary structural changes so that a compromise can be achieved between both sides.<sup>19</sup> "Turkey's fears for a potential establishment of a *de facto* Kurdish state or the PKK's empowerment in the case of a settlement in Iraq's Kurdish cause"<sup>20</sup> has nowadays become an unambiguous reality, especially after the Turkish meddling in the Syrian crisis. Only when this is accepted can Ankara move forwards with the completion of its Europeanisation and democratisation processes.<sup>21</sup>

The Iraqi War in March 2003, following the 9/11 attacks, and the role of Iraq's Kurds as a strategic US ally for the implementation of the US policy of "regime change" in Baghdad, along with the KRG's stabilisation as a semi-independent state entity, found the Kurdish movement at large particularly active, while Turkey's policy on its own Kurdish issue appears connected to developments in the Kurdistan Region *vis-à-vis* the rising power of the KRG as influential regional actor.

## Turkey's Foreign Policy towards the KRG (2003-2007)

The aftermath of Saddam's overthrow marks the second stage in Ankara's relations with the KRG, a time identified

by a deep crisis of confidence, the empowerment of the KRG, and the onset of its *de facto* independence that sowed the seeds for the third transformation of Turkey's relations with Iraq's Kurds into an official, direct and institutionalised relationship from 2008 onwards, unlike the occasional Turkish-KDP interactions of the past.

Turkey's refusal to ally with the United States; the "Sulaimaniya incident"<sup>22</sup> on 4 July 2003, which has been described as the "worst crisis of confidence [between Turkey and the KRG]"<sup>23</sup> by General Hilmi Özkök; Turkey's parliamentary approval on 17 October 2007 for a military strike against PKK rebels in Iraq (which took place on 2 December 2007); Kurdish demands for the "normalisation" of Kirkuk according to Article 140 (§2) *via* a referendum (initially planned for 15 November 2007); and later on Turkish threats on 27 April 2007 of a potential military intervention into the Kurdistan Region based on a so-called "midnight memorandum" not only reflected Turkey's domestic problems *vis-à-vis* the AKP's struggle to stabilise its power and control the country's military apparatus given an unsuccessful "electronic" coup- among other events- but also Ankara's fears of the further empowerment of the KRG in the event of the potential incorporation of the oil-rich region of Kirkuk immediately after the fall of Saddam and its desperate wish to keep the Kurdish issue in Turkey in check.

Indeed, a series of events that revealed the consolidation of the KRG's autonomous status and even further its independent foreign policy practice alarmed Ankara to the extent that Erdoğan declared in 2007 that;

"I met with the Iraqi President and Prime Minister. I won't meet with any tribe leader... I won't meet with Barzani or someone else", and that the "KDP supports PKK".<sup>24</sup>

Turkish foreign policy's hostile attitude towards the KRG was stimulated by a US Congressional bill (FY2008, HR 1585, September 2007) that recognised Iraq's federal structure and the Kurdish region as legal entities, and the KRG's independent contracting of oil deals with foreign (including American) companies enshrined into its own Regional Petroleum Law, and ratified on 6 August 2007.

The discovery of new oil fields, such as Tawke, Taq-Taq, and the Barsarin-Sargelu-Alan-Mus (BSAM) reservoir, among others, have today extended the KRG's activities so that we can now speak of about 50 oil and gas contracts signed by the Kurdish government in addition to Baghdad's acceptance of settling oil payment disputes only recently with foreign companies working in the Kurdistan Region,<sup>25</sup> whereas the KRG's regional and international recognition- which does not necessarily pass through the UN- has been reflected in

its constant interactions given the US president's first invitation to President Massoud Barzani on 25 October 2005, which are all indicators of the KRG's stable and independent regional role and Iraq's Kurds "self-existence" within international relations.<sup>26</sup>

## Turkey's Foreign Policy towards the KRG versus Baghdad: The Impact of Change

The year 2008 was a breakthrough and momentous time for Turkish-Kurdish relations given the Turkish government's official recognition of the KRG in deeds rather than in words.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the first direct high level meeting (1/05/2008) between the KRG and Turkey was held in Baghdad on 1 May 2008, where KRG's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and Turkey's Special Envoy for Iraq Murat Özçelik, together with then chief foreign policy adviser Ahmet Davutoğlu, decided to put aside their differences. Both sides discussed areas of cooperation in both economic and political fields, including an agreement to find a peaceful solution to the PKK issue.<sup>28</sup> Thereafter, the positive effect of Erdoğan's 2009 Kurdish Initiative on Turkish foreign policy towards the KRG was shown when Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu met with KRG President

Massoud Barzani on 31 October 2009 as well as in the first historic meeting of President Barzani with Turkey's prime minister on 4 June 2010. In turn, "PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the first Turkish premier to visit [the Kurdistan Region]... [on March 2011] since Iraq was created"<sup>29</sup>; a series of regular visits then followed.<sup>30</sup>

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Turkey, Iraq, the KRG, and the US also established a Trilateral Mechanism to develop cooperation with a view of eradicating the PKK in Iraqi territories.

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"This change was not easy" and it took a while to happen as "Turkey might not have been ready to accept that Baghdad would not have full control of the area and was dealing only with Baghdad until 2003. Therefore there was no direct interaction [between Ankara and KRG] for a certain time". "At first, Turkey tried to deal directly with Baghdad through the establishment of consulates in Mosul and Basra [2008-2009]"<sup>31</sup> and "the signing of 48 various agreements and MOUs (memoranda of understandings) in November 2009 pertaining to energy and other economic issues",<sup>32</sup> as part of the effort to establish the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2009, an initiative to expand further bilateral



relations. In 2008, Turkey, Iraq, the KRG, and the US also established a Trilateral Mechanism to develop cooperation with a view of eradicating the PKK in Iraqi territories.

A series of variables explain the shift in Turkish foreign policy in favour of the KRG which seems to override Turkish relations with Baghdad, especially after the US military withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, which resulted in the fourth stage of their relationship.

## Turkey's Foreign Policy and the KRG Since 2008

The sectarian dispute in Baghdad between Shiite Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and the Sunni opposition from 2011 onwards has diminished Iraq's political role in the region while Al-Maliki's steady approach towards Tehran has probably made "Turkey realize that the Kurdistan Region is a safe place to deal with as part of Iraq because the people who control the borders in terms of trade and commerce were the Kurds" according to the head of the foreign relations of the KRG.<sup>33</sup> The intensification of the disputes between the central government and the KRG over varying issues including differences on how to run foreign policy,<sup>34</sup> the management of the hydrocarbon resources in the north of the country,

and the legality of oil contracts awarded by the Kurdish government to major oil companies, such as ExxonMobil (confirmed in February 2012), Chevron, the English Gulf Keystone, Total of France, Gazprom of Russia, and Turkish Genel Energy, which Baghdad rejected as illegal, has brought Ankara closer to Erbil.<sup>35</sup> In addition, "the doctrinal approach of Turkey's regional policy"<sup>36</sup> based on a sectarian discourse *vis-à-vis* differences between Al-Maliki's Shiite-led government and Erdoğan's Sunni Islamic discourse remind us of the long lasting rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavids empires that seems to be coming to the forefront once again. Ankara's accusations that Al-Maliki monopolises power by suppressing Sunni Arabs and other groups while at the same time protecting Tariq Al-Hashemi, Iraq's Sunni vice president who was charged with terrorism in his own country on 19 November 2011, stands in comparison to Al-Maliki's allegations of Turkey's "hostile" regional policies and its direct interference in Iraqi affairs in view of Davutoğlu's official visit to Erbil and afterwards to Kirkuk on 1-2 August 2012 to discuss Syrian Kurdish affairs with Kurdish leaders, without prior notification to the Iraqi foreign minister, events which led to Devlet Bahçeli (chair of Nationalist Movement Party) being denied a visa to visit Kirkuk by Baghdad.<sup>37</sup> All these developments

have brought Ankara closer to the KRG and point to the direction which Iraqi-Turkish relations are currently heading.

### *The Role of the KRG in AKP's Foreign Policy Strategy*

The current volatile political setting in the Middle East *vis-à-vis* the Arab Spring that has swept the Arab world and left few countries unaffected, including “the Kurdish issue which gave it a regional dimension because the Kurds are now collaborating more closely than before”,<sup>38</sup> Turkey’s policy of showing that it can play a key role in the formation of the post-Assad era through its meddling into the Syrian crisis and the worsening of Turkish-Iraqi relations from 2012 onwards counter to the exercise of KRG’s *de facto* independence regarding various oil and gas contracts signed by the Kurdish government over Baghdad’s objections not only raises the Kurdistan Region’s importance as an energy hub for oil and gas imports to the Turkish markets, but also signifies Baghdad’s gradual isolation, and the onset of a strategic partnership between the KRG and Ankara that runs in parallel with Turkey’s Iraqi foreign policy.

Significant developments towards the strengthening of relations between Ankara and Erbil can be seen in the Turkish motto for “full social and economic integration with the KRG”,<sup>39</sup>

the Turkish request for Barzani’s mediation for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey during his visit to the US, which when combined with the Kurdish leader’s meetings with Kurdish representatives from Syria who have recently gained control over Kurdish-populated cities along the Turkish border, as well as with leaders from the main Syrian opposition group (the Syrian National Council, the SNC, on 30 July 2012), plus the recent oil and gas pipeline deals signed in May 2012 between Ankara and the KRG have led to a direct exchange with Turkey for the first time with the aim to build a dedicated oil pipeline with the capacity to transmit 1 million barrels per day (bpd) of oil between KRG and Turkey by August 2013, along with an expansion of the existing Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline shipping crude oil from Basra by 2014.

Indeed, the Kurdistan Region is a major market for Turkish exports.<sup>40</sup> According to the Turkish Consul General in Erbil,

There are about five Turkish banks, 17 Turkish schools, 600 Turkish construction companies, [and] 17,000 Turkish citizens permanent residents in Erbil, direct flights are also operating daily between the KR and Turkey, a fact which has boosted tourism while the overall trade volume between Turkey and Iraq is about US\$12 billion, while more than 70% is with the KRG, let alone that more than half of the foreign companies registered in the KR are Turkish. Turkey enjoys massive economic benefits from a

closer economic cooperation with the KRG whose current budget approaches US\$13 billion.<sup>41</sup>

The Turkish rapprochement with the KRG should be also examined within the scope of the AKP's governance. Davutoğlu's "Strategic Depth" doctrine that he developed in 2001 as regards the Turkish role in the Middle East is primarily based on Turkey's strategic interests in peace, stability, security, and prosperity in its neighbourhood, applied through tools of soft power, such as the economy. Undoubtedly, Turkey's influence has grown in the Middle East under the AKP's rule. Ankara's "Strategic Depth" policy "requires [Turkey] to engage with the countries with which [it] share[s] a common past and geography in a way that will promote... shared interests and create a mutually beneficial framework for cooperation and dialogue".<sup>42</sup> The strengthening of the economic ties between Ankara and the KRG has given rise to Turkish investments of about US \$16 billion dollars in the Kurdistan Region. The opening of the Turkish Consulate in Erbil in 2010, Ankara's realisation of the economic opportunities that a prosperous Kurdistan Region can offer, together with the role the KRG can play in the Kurdish issues of Turkey and Syria, is revealing of the importance of the KRG as a strategic regional player.

"Turkey realized that in order to have good relations with Baghdad you need

to have good relations with KRG. But having good relations with Baghdad does not necessarily mean that you have good relations with the KRG and Turkey has understood the importance of the KR being politically and economically strong", argues Falah Mustafa.<sup>43</sup> The KRG's stability, given its oil wealth and the increased foreign investment, against the power struggle between Shia and Sunni Arab political factions in Baghdad, and ultimately the AKP's realisation that the KRG's foreign policy needs to be considered in the coming regional changes in which Ankara is heavily involved, including the need of KRG's cooperation in various regional crises, explain the expansion of the Turkish-KRG security and diplomatic relations and the interaction of strategic and economic interests.<sup>44</sup>

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Thus, Turkey's close cooperation with the KRG appears important as its

foreign policy seems to have been left with not many options, especially after its involvement in the Syrian crisis. The failure of Davutoğlu's "zero problems with the neighbours" policy, which aimed at "the transformation of our neighborhood, into a friendship and cooperation basin"<sup>45</sup>- a traditional goal of Turkish foreign policy- and a desire for an independent foreign policy detached from the US juggernaut given its split with regional strategic allies, i.e. Israel and Iran, as well as with Syria, has raised the Kurdish factor as a guarantor of the regional balance of power considering the Kurdish leadership's close cooperation with the rest of the Kurdish movements.<sup>46</sup>

The AKP's foreign policy that has favoured Erbil at the expense of Baghdad, combined with the latter's fear for the future of the country's oil-rich disputed areas in a post-Assad settlement, is evident in the July 2011 announcement of Iraq's Defence Ministry of the formation of the Tigris Operational Command to be in charge of security issues in the Diyala, Kirkuk and Salahaddin governorates, which include most of the disputed areas.<sup>47</sup> Baghdad's worries were also highly reflected in the incident of the deployment of the Iraqi army forces on 23 July 2012 at the Rabia border between Syria and Iraq. On its side, KRG officials have also understood Turkey's importance "as protector of the region and a partner country (we) share

the same border with that constitutes the best bridge to build a mutually beneficiary relationship [through which] we can reach Europe *vis-à-vis* the current problematic status in Iran and Syria".<sup>48</sup>

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Considering that Ankara's internal politics and its meddling in any regional crisis as part of its foreign policy has left the country with few substantial regional allies, there is a need for a Kurdish policy that runs in parallel with Turkey's Iraqi policy.

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Currently, the settlement of Kirkuk's status and the PKK's resorting to violence are considered the chief sticking points in the development of "solid, robust and sincere KRG-Turkish relations" as described by the Turkish Consul General in Erbil.<sup>49</sup> Yet both sides have agreed to cooperate and "Turkey has understood that the KRG does not facilitate the PKK in the border-controlled areas".<sup>50</sup> However, there are still voices in the Turkish opposition claiming that "the KRG does not do its utmost toward the eradication of the PKK"<sup>51</sup> and that "the Kirkuk question with its Turkmen population are elements that can be factors of close ties or division".<sup>52</sup>

Turkey's foreign policy today has to deal with both internal and external open fronts. Internally, incidents such as CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, the Republican People's Party) Deputy Mahmut Tanal's criminal complaint to the top prosecutor's office to close the AKP and open proceedings against the prime minister for interfering in the judiciary,<sup>53</sup> and Metropoll's survey showing that 60% of Turkish citizens support Abdullah Gül's candidacy for the presidency and that 51% favour Gül compared to the 23% who prefer Erdoğan reveal domestic tensions and the struggle Erdoğan faces to maintain his power.<sup>54</sup> Also, the Syrian crisis has definitely created a vacuum of power that the PKK is currently filling. This means that any political settlement of the Kurdish issue in Turkey as a regulatory factor of Kurdish politics in Syria would be for the benefit of Turkish politics. The AKP's Kurdish Initiative in 2009, which constituted the basis of the Kurdish-Turkish dialogue, appears the only green light at the moment that could end the long period of Kurdish waiting.<sup>55</sup> Only then could Turkey's foreign policy dogma of "peace at home, peace in the world" be achieved. "The idea that Kurdish unity has grown in the region and that President Barzani seeks to lead this process" is general among Turkish political circles. According to CHP's Deputy Chairman, "This tells us

that Turkey should take quicker steps and more consistent ones to resolve its Kurdish issue through democratic means [even though] a perfect solution that meets the needs of all sides does not exist".<sup>56</sup>

Considering that Ankara's internal politics and its meddling in any regional crisis as part of its foreign policy has left the country with few substantial regional allies, there is a need for a Kurdish policy that runs in parallel with Turkey's Iraqi policy. The Kurdistan Region is a bordering neighbour and thus important for Turkish security interests that require a stable Kurdish north for Ankara's economic progress, which is the main instrument of its soft power foreign policy, while the Kurdistan Region's increasing role in a transformed post-Assad political setting could potentially raise the KRG to the status of the only stable Sunni neighbouring ally for Ankara against Iran, Iraq and Syria, especially if the Kurds of Syria succeed in achieving autonomy and thus expand to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>57</sup>

## Turkish-KRG Bilateral Relations in the Context of Regional Conflicts: Towards a Theoretical Framework

Turkish relations with the KRG were initiated at the beginning of the

post-Cold War period. The Turkish contribution to the creation of the first Kurdish *de facto* state entity as the first stage of the Turkish-Kurdish interactions were primarily *ad hoc* policies towards the Kurds of Iraq in the form of humanitarian aid rather than a structured Turkish policy towards the KRG as an entity. This was the case not only because of the lack of a united Kurdish front in Iraq given the inter and intra Kurdish conflicts, but also due to the intention of Turkish foreign policy to control the north of Iraq, to avert any major refugee crisis on the Iraqi-Turkish borders, to stifle Turkey's Kurdish movement's aspirations given the long-lasting struggle of the Kurds in Iraq for self-determination, and finally to find an opportunity to combat PKK rebels by exerting control in the north. In addition, Ankara's objectives favoured Iraq's territorial integrity and stability. Therefore Turkey's policy towards the Kurds of Iraq was subjugated to its Iraqi foreign policy, rather than being allowed to develop relations of mutual respect and interest with the KRG.

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**Davutoğlu's new and more open foreign policy facilitated this re-orientation and resulted in the recognition of the KRG as a federal unit in Iraq.**

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The Turkish stance towards the Kurdistan Region remained unaltered throughout the 1990s. Turkey's intervention in solving Iraq's Kurdish crisis in 1998 shows its determination to take on a leading role in regional politics as is the case today, thereby preventing the PKK from taking advantage of a potential power vacuum and keeping at the same time both Iraq's Kurdish issue and its own Kurdish problem in check. Opportunistic alliances with the KDP against other Kurdish groups further explain Turkey's policy towards the Kurds of Iraq at that time.

The AKP's rise to power in 2002 and the consolidation of the Kurdish autonomous status in Iraq as an indispensable US ally- regardless of its non-state status- in its Iraqi policy of "regime change" altered the regional balance of power in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi War. The Iraqi War, the official recognition of the KRG in the 2005 Iraqi constitution, and the 2006 unification of the Kurds after the internal conflicts of the past obliged Turkish foreign policy to deal with the KRG as a stable and considerable regional player. Davutoğlu's new and more open foreign policy facilitated this re-orientation and resulted in the recognition of the KRG as a federal unit in Iraq. AKP's invitation to President Barzani to attend its fourth convention on 30 September 2012 is illuminating.

Initially though, Erdoğan's struggle to control the military and maintain his domestic power, together with an instant freeze in US-Turkish relations following the war, eroded relations between Ankara and Erbil. The increasing stabilisation of the KRG and the development of an independent foreign policy did not only raise fears on the Turkish side but also worsened relations to the extent that Turkey threatened the KRG with an intervention in 2007 following Kurdish claims for the settlement of the status of Kirkuk as provisioned by the Iraqi constitution. This second phase of Turkish foreign policy towards the KRG from 2003 to 2007, this time as a solid entity, was marked by Ankara's reluctance to recognise the new status of federal Iraq, and the Kurds were perceived as source of regional instability.

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**At the beginning of 2012, the US withdrawal from Iraq saw the expansion of relations between Turkey and the KRG into a strategic alliance as the fourth shift of their relations.**

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From 2008 to 2011, Turkey's relations with the KRG underwent a third rapid transformation. The traditional Turkish foreign policy goal of expanding its political influence regionally through

the use of soft power as dictated by the country's economic interests opened up lines of communication which resulted in an official, direct and institutionalised relationship between Ankara and the KRG from 2008 onwards. Even more, this transformation into an interaction with political and economic dimensions as the third phase of their relations was extended dramatically in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011.

At the beginning of 2012, the US withdrawal from Iraq saw the expansion of relations between Turkey and the KRG into a strategic alliance as the fourth shift of their relations.

There was a marked change in Erdoğan's discourse from his 2007 statement that "I met with the Iraqi President and Prime Minister. I won't meet with any tribe leader... I won't meet with Barzani or someone else"<sup>58</sup> versus his 2010 speech expressing his determination "That [we] will build a very solid bridge in bilateral relations between Iraq and Turkey and between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey especially. We [Erdoğan and Barzani] will be in touch. The two countries also engage in economic cooperation. We will act together on energy and infrastructure". This change is an example of the transformations that the regional political pattern is currently undergoing.<sup>59</sup>

Turkey's steps to build relations with the KRG were not only the result of the KRG's increasing power as a strategic US ally and that it is an oil-rich region. Turkey's realisation that Baghdad would not have full control of the KRG, the importance for Kurdish foreign policy of having a stable neighbouring country and for a link to Europe, combined with America's interest in encouraging the KRG to "continue improving its relationship and coordination with Turkey" as well as with Baghdad so that "Iraq can take its rightful place as a major oil-producing country"<sup>60</sup> for the preservation of the regional status quo are among the factors that explain the Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement. The role of Iraq's Kurdish leadership in the negotiations for the political resolution of the Kurdish issue in both Syria and Turkey, not to mention its mediation in alleviating the PKK-Turkish conflict, combined with Erdoğan's preference for a Sunni leadership against Tehran and Syria, can all effectively explicate Turkish foreign policy's positive reorientation towards the KRG while showing its importance for Turkish politics.

Most importantly, Turkey's large energy demands and its need for the KRG's oil reserves; the failure of Davutoğlu's 'Strategic Depth' doctrine for an independent foreign policy with zero problems with the neighbours; the ambivalent political climate in Baghdad

and the American interest in keeping Ankara and Erbil together as potential allies, apart from Israel, against a Shia axis given the undefined formation of the power relations in a post-Assad era constitute a series of considerable determinants that further show the implications of Turkish relations with the KRG on the regional balance of power.

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**The KRG is no longer a problem for Ankara and it is now a valuable regional ally in the upcoming transformed regional political setting.**

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What is noticeable today is the rise of a Turkish policy in favour of the KRG quite independent from Ankara's Iraqi policy. Undoubtedly, the KRG is no longer a problem for Ankara and it is now a valuable regional ally in the upcoming transformed regional political setting. Yet, the stability of Turkey's relations with the KRG will also be determined by a series of factors such as Turkey's internal balance of power; the public's acceptance of this relationship; the role of the KRG as a mediator in the PKK issue; the actual political resolution of Turkey's own Kurdish issue within a certain period of time; and finally whether a potential amelioration in the relations between Baghdad and Ankara



might prove inversely proportional to the Turkish-Kurdish relationship.<sup>61</sup>

Traditionally, Turkey has wanted to maintain its regional power and further maximise its regional influence. Ankara seems to have realised that stable relations with the KRG are in its benefit, devoid of the taboos of the past when the Kurdistan Region was perceived as source of instability. Besides that, Erdoğan's decision to meddle in the Syrian crisis has further fired up the Kurdish issue in a sense that a potential overthrow of Assad could empower the Kurdish movement overall, strengthen the Sunni

front in the Middle East, and weaken Tehran's regime. Such developments in combination with Turkey's deteriorating relations with most

of the regional state powers make the Kurdistan Region politically and economically important for Turkey, so a strategic alliance with KRG appears imperative since the road to Baghdad seems to pass through there. Thus, the PKK's strengthening after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, the rise of the KRG's importance as a stable regional ally, the American interest in keeping the regional *status quo* in its favour, Turkey's hostile relations with Israel and Syria as well as its antagonistic relations with Iran, the rising of the Kurds and the

institutionalisation of their status are key factors in Turkish and US foreign policies against a Shia-led coalition in the region.

Finally, the interaction between Turkey and the KRG also has a theoretical dimension. Inadequate attention by the international relations discipline to the interaction between states and newly emergent non-state actors adds a conceptual reason for addressing this particular case study. This interaction clearly shows that non-state actors have an increasingly important and direct

role in international relations (and not just on states' foreign policies), as seen by the impact of the KRG's foreign policy practices on this

interaction, but also on regional politics within the KRG's operations with state entities on regional and international levels since 1992.<sup>62</sup> Thus, foreign policy no longer seems to be among a state's privileges as the very concept of power has been expanded. The same can be also argued about non-state groups such as the PKK.

On this basis, I would argue that current theories are unable to explain the subject of this paper given their unilateral overemphasis either on the role of structural factors or on international

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**Foreign policy no longer seems to be among a state's privileges as the very concept of power has been expanded.**

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actors, such as the states, at the expense of non-state actors in interpreting the function of the international system, and subsequently there is a satisfy scholarly demand for a coherent theory that takes into account not only the role of structures and agents in the formation of the foreign policy decisions, but also for a theory that elevates the relations between state and non-state actors in international relations.<sup>63</sup>

Whereas most international relations theories have been useful in explaining specific international phenomena and offering solutions to various problems that arose during the era of their emergence, their main inadequacy is the lack of consideration of the interaction between state and non-state actors as they argue in favour of the superiority of states while ignoring the dramatic role that non-state actors can play.<sup>64</sup> For instance, realists and liberals focus on state actors, the effect of the structures and national interests, while constructivists emphasise the role of ideas and how actors, in particular states, affect and are affected by the structures. Likewise, even though neoclassical realism can explain the interaction between the internal and the external that is seen in foreign policy making, still it is confined to state actors following the tradition of the earlier realist schools of thought.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, both liberals, who overemphasise the role of non-state actors but are still

limited to transnational corporations and international institutions of an economic nature, and neo-liberals appear to be restricted to structural explanations of the states' policies.

## Conclusion

Thus the existing paradigms cannot provide an adequate explanatory framework since the constitutive element of such frameworks is the state. They have also fallen into the same trap of either being constrained by particular premises and thus applying their ideas everywhere regardless of context, time or space and confining themselves to endless critiques.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, critical theories and meta-theories have posed important challenges to mainstream international relations, but the often excessive zeal for contradicting orthodoxy and structural and state-centric explanations, meant they failed to transform International Relations into a coherent and applicable theory.<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, while the literature on non-state actors has increased considerably in the past decade, most of it seems focused on accounts of their status rather than on their relations. Neither current literature nor the main schools of thought within the international relations seem to go far enough to be able to cover relations between states (such as, for instance, Turkey and non-

state actors such as the KRG or PKK) either empirically or theoretically. If and when they do so, their focus is confined to the role played by non-state actors and specifically to their increasing importance in international relations, according to scholarly narratives of their status and perspectives.<sup>68</sup> Thus, international relations remains constrained by the way they focus either on one or another agency, rather than viewing such interactions as a two-way process.<sup>69</sup> Thus far, the analyses of the interplay between state and non-state actors that exist today have either remained at a general level or have limited themselves to how states perceive and behave towards non-state actors, or occasionally the other way around.<sup>70</sup>

I have therefore raised the need for a more general analysis instigated by the subject matter under scrutiny and to this end suggested a model that conceives of international relations as a complex field of multidimensional interrelations between and among actors at the local, sub-state, trans-state, state, regional and global spheres. In particular, it draws attention to the role-both direct and indirect-that is played by non-state

actors, though without *a priori* favouring either type of actor. The model also recognises the interactive importance of the material and the ideational in the mutual shaping of structures and agents in this multidimensional interactive set of dynamics. In my theoretical “map”, then, I have used a conceptual “model”, which could be further elaborated in detail in another paper that views international relations as “multidimensional interrelations”, takes into account the triptych of IR, foreign policy and politics as parts of a unified whole, and stresses the need for international relations to move away from mere inter-state explanations whereas the role of structures (whether ideational or material) is central to the interplay between state and non-state entities (other than the economic actors overemphasised by the current literature) that are pursuing their own interests.<sup>71</sup>

The article has demonstrated thus on the one hand the impact that non-state actors, such as the KRG, have on Turkey’s foreign policy, and on the other, showed that states’ foreign policy can also be affected by, and interacts with, non-state entities.

## Endnotes

- 1 In this article, the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) is referred to as the First Gulf War; Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait (1990–1991) is called the Second Gulf War; while the US invasion of Iraq (2003) is referred to as the Third Gulf War.
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- 29 Interview by the researcher with Consul General of the Republic of Turkey Aydın Selcen, Erbil, May 2012.
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- 45 Interview with Ahmet Davutoğlu.
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- 68 Daphne Josselin, “Back to the Front Line; Trade Unions in a Global Age”, in Daphne Josselin and William Wallace (eds.), *Non-State Actors in World Politics*, London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- 69 See, Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, p. 247.
- 70 Josselin, “Back to the Front Line”, pp. 4- 5.
- 71 See, Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, p.253.