

**Turkey’s Emerging Dichotomy between Erbil and Sulaimaniyah,
Iraqi Development Road Project and the Fight Against the PKK**

**Türkiye’nin Erbil ve Süleymaniye Arasındaki Yükselen Karşıtlığı,
Irak Kalkınma Yolu Projesi ve PKK ile Mücadele**

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ABSTRACT

The vast literature on Turkish foreign policy has long discussed Turkish policymakers’ policy preferences and initiatives vis-à-vis the Iraqi Kurds without making much of a distinction among various Iraqi Kurdish actors. Although Turkish political leaders built closer relations with certain Iraqi Kurdish actors than others from time to time, there has not been a major policy variation toward different political actors of Iraqi Kurdish politics until recently. However, especially from the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum onwards, it has been possible to observe an increasing level of divergence between Turkey’s attitude and discourse vis-à-vis the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), two major political parties of the Iraqi Kurdish politics. While Turkey’s cooperation with the KDP in the struggle against the PKK has significantly increased in the past few years, Turkish officials’ uneasiness regarding the PUK ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) has been more and more apparent. This paper provides an account of Turkey’s changing attitude and discourse about the KDP and the PUK since 2017 within the context of the ongoing discussions about the Iraqi Dry Canal/Development Road project as well as Turkey’s fight against the PKK.

Keywords: Turkish foreign policy, Iraq, KRG, Development road

ÖZ

Türk dış politikasına yönelik ortaya çıkmış geniş literatür, farklı Iraklı Kürt aktörler arasında pek bir ayırım yapmaksızın, Türk politika yapıcılarının Irak Kürtlerine ilişkin politika tercihlerini ve girişimlerini uzun süredir tartışmıştır. Her ne kadar Türk siyasi liderleri zaman zaman bazı Iraklı Kürt aktörlerle diğerlerinden daha yakın ilişkiler kurmuş olsa da, yakın zamana kadar Irak Kürt siyasetinin farklı siyasi aktörlerine yönelik olarak Türkiye açısından büyük bir politika farklılığı yaşanmamıştır. Ancak özellikle 2017 Irak Kürt bağımsızlık referandumundan itibaren Türkiye’nin Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi (KDP) ve Kürdistan Yurtseverler Birliği (KYB) karşısındaki tutum ve söylemleri arasında giderek artan düzeyde farklılıklar gözlemlenmek mümkün olmuştur. Türkiye’nin PKK ile mücadelesinde KDP ile işbirliği son birkaç yıldır önemli ölçüde artmışken, Türk yetkililerin KYB’nin PKK ve YPG ile olan bağlarından duyduğu tedirginliğin düzeyi giderek yükselmiş ve daha belirgin hale gelmiştir. Bu makale, Irak ile Kuru Kanal/Kalkınma Yolu projesine ilişkin devam eden tartışmalar ve Türkiye’nin PKK ile mücadelesi bağlamında, Türkiye’nin 2017’den bu yana KDP ve KYB’ye yönelik değişen tutum ve söylemlerini ele almaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Türk dış politikası, Irak, IKBY, Kalkınma yolu

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1. Introduction

Turkish policymakers have always been vigilant about the developments in northern Iraq. Since the early days of the Iraqi Kurdish search for autonomy and independence, they have been concerned that Turkey might also experience similar developments due to its own Kurdish population. These concerns especially increased from the early 1980s onwards when the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency initiated its terrorist attacks on Turkey.

Throughout the 1990s, Turkish policymakers were uneasy about the PKK presence in northern Iraq. As the PKK gained a freer hand on the Qandil Mountains after the 1991 Gulf War, cross border military operations into northern Iraq became one of the major pillars of Turkey's counterinsurgency strategy vis-à-vis the PKK.

These developments gave rise to a significant number of academic studies on Turkey's policy toward northern Iraq in the 1990s. These early studies on the subject mainly discussed to what extent Turkish strategy of acting with the United States-led international coalition against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and of actively engaging with the Iraqi Kurds at the end of the war could be considered a continuation of the traditional Turkish foreign policy of avoiding taking sides in Middle Eastern conflicts. On this matter, while some researchers (Mango, 1992; Aykan, 1996: 344, 1998: 65; Criss, 1997) argued that Turkish foreign policy during the Gulf Crisis and the Gulf War reflected the country's long-established balanced policy of being a valued member of the Western bloc and maintaining good relations with neighbors, others (Hale, 1992; Robins, 1991, 2003a, 2003b; Sayarı, 1992, 1997) asserted that this active foreign policy went beyond the contours of traditional Turkish foreign policy. Although most of the above-mentioned studies attributed a central role to then President Turgut Özal and his preferences in shaping the foreign policy decision-making process during the Gulf crisis and the Gulf War (Sayarı, 1992, 1997; Ataman, 2002; Robins, 2003; Laçiner, 2009), others emphasized the pressures and limitations that Özal faced from the General Staff as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in putting his foreign policy vision into action (Hale, 1992; Aykan 1996, 1998; Gözen 2000, 2004).

Another round of studies about Turkey's northern Iraq policy emerged in the mid-2000s. Especially from 2007 onwards, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) governments, under the leadership of Prime Minister and then President Tayyip Erdoğan, initiated efforts to improve relations with the Iraqi Kurds. This policy was devised within the background of the ongoing U.S. War in Iraq and the newly accepted Iraqi constitution of 2005,

which created an autonomous Kurdistan region. During this period, the academic studies on the subject explained Turkey's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds based on various factors, including the country's growing economy and energy needs, the AKP initiative to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means, shifting civil-military balance of power in Turkish politics, and the role of political leadership, especially then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's preferences. Following the Syrian uprisings in 2011, the rise of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing People's Protection Units (YPG) as a key actor in the Syrian conflict also became one of the debated factors shaping Turkish foreign policy toward the Iraqi Kurds (See Özcan, 2010, 2011; Sarı Ertem, 2011; Barkey, 2010, 2011, 2015; Charountaki, 2012; Cornell, 2012; Bryza, 2012; Park, 2012, 2014; Tocci, 2013; Jenkins, 2013; Tol, 2014; Balcı, 2014; Çağaptay, 2014; Romano, 2015; Kayhan Pusane, 2016, 2017, 2020).

This vast literature on Turkish foreign policy have long discussed Turkish policymakers' policy preferences and initiatives vis-à-vis the Iraqi Kurds without making much of a distinction among various Iraqi Kurdish actors. Although Turkish political leaders built closer relations with certain Iraqi Kurdish actors than others from time to time, there has not been a major policy variation toward different political actors of Iraqi Kurdish politics until recently. However, especially from the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum onwards, it has been possible to observe an increasing level of divergence between Turkey's attitude and discourse vis-à-vis the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), two major political parties of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While Turkey's cooperation with the KDP in the struggle against the PKK has significantly increased in the past few years, Turkish officials' uneasiness regarding the PUK ties with the PKK and the YPG has been more and more apparent.

This paper provides an account of Turkey's changing attitude and discourse about the KDP and the PUK since 2017 and the future prospects of this policy. The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: First, a brief overview will be provided about the history of Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds from the 1991 Gulf War onwards. Second, developments leading to Turkey's dichotomy between the KDP and PUK will be discussed. And finally, the potential implications of this dichotomy in Turkish foreign policy both for the region and beyond will be analyzed.

2. The 1991 Gulf War and Its Aftermath

The PKK presence in northern Iraq was consolidated mainly due to the developments experienced at the end of the 1991 Gulf War. With the Kurdish rebellion in the north and

Saddam Hussein's policy to violently suppress this rebellion, hundreds of thousands of Kurds fled to the Iraqi-Turkish border. This raised eyebrows in Turkey with the thought that several PKK terrorists might also enter Turkey along with these Iraqi Kurdish refugees. As a result, then Turkish President Turgut Özal played an important role in the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 in 1991, which condemned "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population", leading to the launch of Operation Provide Comfort, a humanitarian relief operation for the Iraqi Kurds, and which resulted in the creation of a safe-haven for the Kurds in the north of the 36th parallel (See United Nations, 1991). Özal supported this endeavor mainly to make the Kurdish refugees return to Iraq and prevent their influx into Turkey.

These developments further complicated Turkey's age-old Kurdish question and allowed the PKK to acquire a comfortable living space in northern Iraq close to the Turkish border. In response to these developments, President Turgut Özal pursued a strategy of engaging the Iraqi Kurdish leaders rather than alienate them with the goal of receiving first-hand information from the region and having a say over developments in northern Iraq. As part of this strategy, Jalal Talabani and a representative of Masoud Barzani were secretly invited to Turkey in 1991. Furthermore, Turkey granted diplomatic passports to both Iraqi Kurdish leaders and allowed their political parties, namely the KDP and the PUK to open representative offices in Ankara in the early 1990s.

Although Turkey made an effort to pursue closer relations with both the KDP and the PUK in the early 1990s, most of the time, there was more convergence of interests between the Turkish governments and Barzani's KDP. When some of the PKK members went to northern Iraq in the aftermath of the 1980 coup in Turkey, the KDP allowed the PKK to control certain areas along the Iraqi-Turkish border. However, as the PKK grew "in size and ambition", its presence turned into a threat for the KDP (Dri, 2020). Thus, in the 1990s, the KDP was more open to working with Turkey to remove the PKK from northern Iraq. On the contrary, the PUK-controlled areas were far from the Iraqi-Turkish border and the PUK was ideologically closer to the PKK. Accordingly, the PUK was often known to be "more tolerant toward the PKK than the Erbil-based KDP" (Alaca, 2022).

Despite this variation in Turkey's perception of the KDP and the PUK, Turkish governments mainly pursued a unified policy vis-a-vis northern Iraq in the 1990s, which favored Iraqi control over the area, and which included efforts to work with both the KDP and PUK in order to put an end to the PKK presence in northern Iraq. During this period, Turkey provided protection

and aid to the Iraqi Kurds as well as “a lifeline [for them] to the outside world” (Cagaptay, 2007). Thus, “both the KDP and the PUK have worked alongside Turkey against the PKK”, albeit with mixed results.

From the mid-2000s onwards, when Turkish policymakers once again tried to improve relations with the Iraqi Kurds, similar dynamics were at play. In fact, Turkey experienced a period of calm regarding PKK terrorism after 1999, when the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured and imprisoned, and the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire. However, in the summer of 2004, the PKK, taking advantage of the U.S. War in Iraq and its uncertainties, revived its attacks on Turkish targets. This development inevitably strained relations not only between Turkey and the United States, but also between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds since the Turkish leaders as well as the public were of the opinion at that time that neither the United States nor the Iraqi Kurdish leaders were providing sufficient support for Turkey’s counterterrorism efforts against the PKK after the latter resumed using northern Iraq as a base for its attacks on Turkey.

When Turkey initiated a rapprochement with the KRG around 2008, Turkish policymakers’ main goal was to take advantage of the energy resources of northern Iraq and to bring the Iraqi Kurds to Turkey’s side both in the latter’s struggle against the PKK and in the AKP government’s efforts to resolve Turkey’s Kurdish question through political means. During this period, although the AKP officials developed closer ties with the KDP, including close personal relations between President Erdoğan and the former President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani, as well as the current President Nechirvan Barzani, Turkey worked with both the KDP and PUK in its efforts to end the PKK terrorism and resolve the Kurdish question. During this period, Turkish businesses heavily invested in the KRG, and the Iraqi Kurdish oil began to arrive at international markets through Turkey. Both Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani played important roles in Turkey’s Kurdish resolution process between 2013-2015.

3. Turkey’s Emerging Dichotomy Between the KDP and PUK

As the golden years of the Turkey-KRG relationship came to an end with the 2017 independence referendum, Turkey’s attitude vis-à-vis the KDP and the PUK began to diverge. It was possible to observe the initial signs of this change in the run-up to the referendum date. In August 2017, news outlets published reports claiming that the PKK kidnapped two Turkish citizens working for Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization near the PUK-controlled Sulaimaniyah (Zaman, 2017). Soon after this, Turkey closed the PUK’s office in Ankara and asked the office staff to leave the country, including the PUK’s Ankara representative Behroz

Gelali. Turkish Foreign Ministry sources, however, stated that Turkey's behavior resulted from Gelali's connections to the PKK (Bozarslan, 2017).

Indeed, from 2017 onwards, Turkey's interactions with the PUK mainly revolved around Turkish complaints regarding the PUK leaders' tolerant attitude toward the PKK as well as their improving relations with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and PUK's denial of these charges. From Turkey's perspective, the PUK's presence in Sulaimaniyah has served "as a strategic bridge" between the PKK in Qandil and the YPG in Syria. It was even claimed that the PUK was issuing identity cards to the PKK militants, providing them with a relative freedom of movement in the area (Anadolu Agency, 2024). This policy was in a way a reflection of the split emerged among different Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria within the context of the Syrian conflict. While the Kurdish National Council was created in October 2011 as a Syrian Kurdish umbrella organization under the sponsorship of Masoud Barzani, the Talabani remained close with the PYD/YPG (later SDF) and the PKK (Al-Jeratli, 2023). In March 2018, although Turkey removed the post-referendum flight ban that it imposed on Erbil, then Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım declared that flights to Sulaimaniyah would not resume because the activities of the terrorist organization [PKK] were continuing in Sulaimaniyah (Rudaw, 2018). When Iraq's President Barham Salih visited Turkey in 2019, the PKK was once again at the top of their agenda. Turkey removed the flight ban to Sulaimaniyah after this visit in 2019 only when the PUK clearly demonstrated that it was cracking down on the activities of the PKK and it closed the offices of Tavgarî Azadi, a PKK-affiliated group in Sulaimaniyah (Van Wingenburh, 2023). Turkey re-imposed the flight ban in and out the Sulaimaniyah Airport once again in April 2023 due to "the intensification of PKK terrorist organization's activities in Sulaymaniyah" and "infiltration by the terrorist organization into the airport" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2023).

Since March 2023, two important developments have particularly increased tensions between Turkey and the PUK and further highlighted Turkey's diverging attitude and discourse between the KDP and the PUK. First, on March 15, a helicopter accident happened in the KRG's Duhok region, which according to Turkish sources "may have exposed a secret air corridor to transport senior members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) between Iraq and Syria" (Kemal, 2023). Turkish sources also added that this unregistered flight, carrying PKK militants and using an irregular route from Syria's SDF-controlled Hasakah to PUK-controlled Sulaimaniyah was possibly trying to avoid Turkish radars and detection (Kemal, 2023). Contrary to the Turkish claims, the SDF asserted that the helicopter crash happened as the group was

transferring its counterterrorism units to the KRG for training in order to “enhance its combat and security capacity” in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria (Kemal, 2023). In the minds of the Turkish officials, this incident served as a clear indicator of the growing ties between the PUK and the SDF, which is predominantly composed of YPG members. Since Turkey identifies the YPG as the Syrian affiliate of the PKK and accordingly a terrorist group, Turkish policymakers find the converging relations between the PUK and the SDF alarming and unacceptable. What was additionally disturbing for Turkey regarding the helicopter crash was that Turks mainly believed “such flights could only happen with the knowledge of the U.S. government” (Kemal, 2023).

Furthermore, on April 7, 2023, SDF leader Mazlum Kobane was the target of a drone strike near the Sulaimaniyah International Airport where he was also accompanied by three U.S. military personnel. Although Turkish Defense Ministry officials denied Turkey’s involvement in this attack, all eyes still turned to Turkey as the most probable perpetrator since Turkish policymakers have long been complaining about the U.S. cooperation with the SDF in the fight against IS and expressing concern about the growing PUK-SDF relations. Moreover, Turkey has been frequently using drone strikes to attack PKK members in its counterterrorism operations in northern Iraq.

Both developments played an important role in demonstrating Ankara’s increasing uneasiness about the recent preferences and activities of the PUK regarding the PKK and the SDF. On April 12, 2023, then Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu sent a strong warning to PUK leaders: “In Sulaimaniyah, the PKK has taken control of, especially the political party of Talabani”. “The PKK has not only penetrated the party or the administration, but also the airport and other strategic areas” (Kırbaki, 2023). Then Presidential spokesperson İbrahim Kalın also uttered: “We know that the PKK has a very serious establishment in Sulaimaniyah.....No matter where the PKK exists, we will never allow it to nest there and become a threat to our country” (Aydoğan, 2023).

The U.S. connection in the growing PUK-SDF relationship has further aggravated Turkey’s concerns. Many Turks already believe that the United States is interested in creating a PKK-affiliated state in Syria and the U.S. cooperation with the YPG in the fight against IS has reinforced these beliefs (Outzen, 2023). Although the Obama Administration identified the U.S. partnership with the YPG as “temporary, transactional, and tactical”, this cooperation significantly contributed to the deterioration of the Turkish-American relationship (Çamlıbel,

2017). In the meantime, Turkish Armed Forces have carried out several military operations in Syria since 2016 with the goal of removing the YPG presence along the Turkish-Syrian border.

4. What Lies Ahead

Although Ankara has built closer relations with the KDP than with the PUK from the 1990s onwards, its harsh discourse about the PUK in recent years and its increasing complaints about the PUK's permissive attitude toward the PKK and SDF is at unprecedented levels compared to the past. This constitutes an important change not only for Turkey's policy toward the KRG, but also for the long-established KDP-PUK dynamics in the region. Turkish policymakers have always been in favor of preserving the balance of power between the KDP and the PUK in northern Iraq despite tensions and disagreements between them. Turkey considers the maintenance of the KDP-PUK balance as a key factor for the political stability of the KRG and accordingly for Turkey's national security due to the PKK presence in the region.

There is no doubt that Turkey's security concerns emanating from northern Iraq have increased over the years as the PKK presence expanded there, especially in PUK-controlled areas. While the PKK establishment was mainly limited to the Qandil Mountains for a long time, the terrorist organization can now move freely in Sinjar and Sulaimaniyah (Soylu, 2023). Turkey's increasingly harsh attitude and discourse about the PUK is not surprising within this context. However, Turkey's national interests regarding Iraq are quite complex and they are pushing Turkish leaders toward a more comprehensive strategy in Iraq.

Ankara has already shown interest in expanding cooperation with the KDP across various sectors, including energy and security, particularly in Turkey's fight against the PKK. Despite longstanding, unresolved problems between Turkey and Iraq, such as the water dispute, Turkish leaders are also very much willing to work with the Iraqi central government on the ongoing Dry Canal/Development Road project, which aims to connect Asia to Europe via the construction of a highway as well as a railway that would act as a trade route from the al-Faw Port in Basra to Turkey (Soylu, 2023). However, according to Erkmen, the recent Turkish foreign policy activism toward Iraq is primarily driven by the prospect of a U.S. withdrawal from the region. Such a scenario could potentially bolster Tehran's influence in Iraqi politics. Turkish policymakers are therefore striving to offer Turkey's partnership and cooperation to Iraq, providing the Iraqi central government with an alternative power center in case of a possible U.S. withdrawal from the region (Erkmen, 2024). Turkey and Iran have long been historical rivals and the Dry Canal/Development Road project, if successfully implemented, is

likely to transform the al-Faw port into a competitor to Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf, while also enabling Iraq to build a direct link to the European markets (Elmalı, 2023). Even discussions on energy and trade inevitably bring security concerns to the forefront of politics in the Middle East.

Turkish officials have recently raised the possibility of a major military operation in northern Iraq, specifically targeting the Metina and Gara regions in summer 2024. These plans appear to be linked, at least in part, to the objective of safeguarding the above-mentioned potential trade route between Basra and Turkey, which traverses Iraqi territory. Following a Turkish cabinet meeting on March 4, President Erdoğan declared:

“Hopefully, this summer, we will have permanently resolved the issue regarding our Iraqi borders. Our will to create a security corridor of 30-40 kilometers deep along our Syrian borders remains intact. We have preparations that will give new nightmares to those who think that they will bring Turkey to its knees with a ‘terroristan’ along its southern borders” (Duvar English, 2024).

Minister of Defense Yaşar Güler also explained in a recent video conference that Turkey has been fighting against terrorism in line with a plan for the past five years and it “now has to take its counterterrorism efforts to another level” (Daily Sabah, 2024). Güler said that “the PKK had a strong presence in northern Iraq” and the rural areas of the region were marked by “multistory caves stacked with food and ammunition supplies”. Yet, “Qandil is not like it was 10 or 15 years ago, thanks to our efficient operations”. Minister of Defense Güler further explained that although the Qandil Mountains do not constitute an effective sanctuary for the PKK anymore, Turkey will continue to attack the terrorists in the Asos region (south of Qandil), where the PKK has been relocating (Daily Sabah, 2024).

The high-level talks in Baghdad among top Turkish and Iraqi officials on March 14, 2024, have been of utmost significance within this context. These talks have brought together Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan, Defense Minister Yaşar Güler, head of the National Intelligence Organization İbrahim Kalın with Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Fuad Hussein and other high-ranking security officials of Iraq (Reuters, 2024). According to the Turkish-Iraqi joint statement disclosed after the Baghdad meeting, “[t]he two sides...stressed that the PKK organization represents a security threat to both Turkey and Iraq, and it is certain that the presence of this organization on the Iraqi territory represents a violation of the Iraqi constitution”. The joint statement also revealed that the Iraqi National Security Council banned

the PKK as well as its extensions (Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). This is a remarkable development considering that the Iraqi central government did not provide much support for Turkey's fight against the PKK in the past. The prospects of Turkish-Iraqi cooperation seem to be shaping the Iraqi discourse about the PKK. Yet it remains uncertain how this discourse will manifest in practical terms.

Given the ongoing intricate dynamics of Turkey-Iraq relations, it is not easy to expect a permanent divergence in Turkey's policy toward the KDP and PUK in northern Iraq. Despite Turkey's growing pressure on the PUK to crack down on the PKK, it seems improbable that Turkey will want to completely alienate the PUK. At the end of the day, PUK leaders have traditionally had a close relationship with Iran (Alaca, 2024). Iran, which perceives the KDP as an actor mainly aligned with the U.S. and Israel, has historically turned to the PUK to balance against their influence in Iraqi Kurdish politics (Balci, 2024). Thus, Turkish policymakers would not want to drive the PUK further toward Iran. Indeed, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's visit to Iraq in August 2023, where he met with the KRG's Deputy Prime Minister and PUK official Qubad Talabani also demonstrates that Turkey has not completely ruled out a policy of engagement with the PUK. Turkey's national interests in Iraq are pushing Turkish leaders toward a strategy of building ties with all the major actors in Iraqi politics. Given the high stakes for Turkish foreign policy in Iraq, especially now in the face of the potential Dry Canal/Development Road project, it is highly likely that Turkish policymakers will strive to establish a working relationship with all major Iraqi political actors, including the PUK.

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