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Turkey's Kurdish Friend: The Alliance between Ankara and Erbil

Abstract

Since the mid-2000s, the strategic partnership between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq has been one of the most peculiar aspects of Turkish foreign policy. The Iraqi Kurdish region's need for geopolitical support and outlets for oil export matched Turkey's thirst for energy and for regional influence. At the same time, this relationship has served both actors well in their struggle against common enemies in the Kurdish transnational political space. This alignment of interests—combined with a certain degree of ideological affinity—allowed the relationship to blossom to the point that Ankara is today's Erbil's main patron. This article delves into the history of the Turkish-Iraqi border, Turkey's Kurdish question and the Kurdish national movement in Iraq to show how the conditions for this alliance materialised and discusses the main features of what is today a solid and resilient partnership.

Keywords

Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurds, Oil and gas, Iraq

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Introduction

In June 2023, just a month following his decisive but contested re-election as the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan Masrour Barzani. This was the first high-level international meeting held by Erdoğan after the elections and the partnership between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) was on the agenda.[1] To most readers, familiar with the complex and violent history of Turkish-Kurdish relations, the occasional news on such meetings might seem puzzling. Yet, for Turkey, there were always "good" Kurds and "bad" Kurds.

At least since the end of the Kemalist single-party system in 1950, the conservative blocs in power in Ankara have nurtured a special relationship with the Kurdish tribal and landowning elite in Turkey's Kurdish region. In turn, the latter delivered (and still delivers) the vote of large rural constituencies and many conservative MPs to the ruling party. Since the 1960s, this mutually convenient partnership had the additional purpose of suffocating the advance of the Kurdish left and, since the mid-1980s, the insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Until relatively recently, however, this approach to the Kurds did not extend abroad to the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The border between Turkey and Iraq remained largely sealed, except for a few Turkish military incursions against the PKK base on Qandil mountain range in northern Iraq in the 1990s. It was only in the 2000s that the relationship between Ankara and the Kurds of Iraq started developing due to two important changes. First, the coming to power in Turkey of Erdoğan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, a party which, unlike its predecessors, came from outside the tradition of Turkish nationalism and emphasised Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood under the banner Sunni Islam and in reference to an idealised Ottoman past. On the other hand, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 allowed for the creation and international recognition of an autonomous Iraqi-Kurdish region, the KRG, based in Erbil and under the rule of the conservative Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by the Barzani family. The relationship between the two governments started flourishing in the late 2000s and developed on economic, geopolitical, and ideological basis. First, in economic terms, energy-poor but industrially booming Turkey eyed the vast oil and gas reserves of the Iraqi Kurdish region while the KRG was searching for outlets to export its oil directly and bypass the federal government in Baghdad. Second, in geopolitical terms, Erdoğan showed ambitions of making Turkey the regional hegemon in the Middle East while Barzani was seeking

the support of foreign powers to strengthen the Kurdistan region's autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad, making the KRG's entry into Turkey's sphere of influence a mutually convenient outcome. Third, in ideological terms, the conservative nature of both the AKP and the KDP, both parties' reliance on the traditional structures of Kurdish society, and the strong and common enmity towards the Kurdish left and the PKK added a solid political seal to the material basis of this alliance.

The importance of the partnership between Turkey and the KRG is manifold. For Turkey, this relationship has been one of the most successful aspects of its—otherwise quite unsatisfying—post-2002 Middle East policy. Domestically, it contributed to redefining the role of the Kurds within the Turkish nation, weakening the taboo on public expressions of Kurdish culture and politics. Within the transborder space of Kurdish politics, the alliance with Turkey has strengthened the KDP economically and geopolitically but decreased its standing in the eyes of Kurds worldwide. At the same time, the rival PKK and other Kurdish forces opposing Ankara in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq have enjoyed a surge in popularity. The Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish alliance has been one of the most important developments in Middle Eastern regional politics, shaping some of its most central issues and dynamics such as the competition for influence over post-2003 Iraq, the viability of the latter as a sovereign state, Turkish-Iranian relations, and the Syrian civil war. Yet, this story has been largely overlooked by scholars of the Middle East for two reasons. On the one hand, this was due to its complexity and apparent contradiction with the established "ethnic" narrative on Turkey's relation with the Kurds. On the other, this negligence is the result of a general marginality of Kurdish studies within the scholarship on the Middle East as well as the separation between expertise on Turkey and on the Arab Middle East that has been sedimented in academia and policy work since the Cold War. To shed light on this apparent contradiction, this article will first explain the origins of this alliance by illustrating the historical developments which made it possible on both sides of the Iraqi-Turkish border. Secondly, it will outline the economic, geopolitical, and ideological dimensions of the Turkish-KRG partnership as it blossomed in recent history.

The *Good* Kurds

Even if the recent media coverage of the war on the Islamic State (IS) made us used to the idea of Kurdish forces as secular and democratic exceptions in a

region dominated by terrorists and fundamentalists, Kurdish politics remains complex and contradictory. As a matter of fact, the most successful modern Kurdish party, the KDP, is a conservative and ethno-nationalist force that has led the Kurdish regional government of Iraq with semi-authoritarian means since 1992.

The Kurds of Iraq, along with those of Turkey and Syria, were part of the Ottoman Empire until a series of conflicts and treaties during and after World War I partitioned the Ottoman Kurdish region among the new Turkish republic, the British mandate over Iraq and the French mandate over Syria. In Iraq, a de facto British colony until 1958, the Kurdish tribal elite was part of the Sunni minority that dominated a predominantly Shi'a country. In the 1940s, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq developed two strands. On the one hand, in the Kurdish towns and mixed cities of Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Mosul, and Baghdad, the Kurdish nationalism professed by the urban middle and working classes looked to the left, in solidarity with the communist movement and global anti-colonial struggles. On the other hand, Kurdish nationalism had been raised by members of the tribal and landowning elite, Shaykh Mahmoud Barzanji first and later Shaykh Ahmed and Mullah Mustafa Barzani, through a series of unsuccessful revolts against the central state which had a tribal as much as a nationalist character (McDowall 2021, 291–304). However, due to the predominantly rural nature of the Kurdish region, the developing nationalism of the urban and professional classes had to compromise with these tribal leaders who were able to mobilise small private armies among their tribesmen. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), established in 1946, reflected this compromise between its leftist "urban" politburo and its rightist "tribal" president, Mustafa Barzani. Meanwhile, the peasantry, the great majority of Kurdish society, remained rather passive to Kurdish nationalism. Kurdish peasants, like the Arab peasants of Iraq, were busy fighting a brutal class struggle against their own dispossession, in a decades-long conflict that saw tribal leaders grab and enclose communal tribal land and turn their fellow tribesmen into landless peasants, with British colonial and Iraqi state support (Batatu 1978; Haj 1997). The political force that tried to organise the peasant struggle with some degree of success was, rather than the Kurdish KDP, the burgeoning Iraqi Communist Party.

The Iraqi revolution of July 1958, led as a coup by Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim, opened a long era of military rule over Iraq, coloured with different shades of Arab nationalism until 2003. The objective of the July revolution

was to rid Iraq of British colonialism and, with it, of the monarchy and the land-grabbing clique that had ruled the country on London's behalf. The leftist *urban* of the KDP supported the progressive nature of the revolution, the establishment of the republic, and the projects of land reform. Land redistribution started already in September 1958 and made the landowning elite increasingly hostile to the new course. Moreover, Qasim was quite uneasy with the power held by Mustafa Barzani in the Kurdish tribal hinterland. After the revolution, Barzani had started behaving like a paramount tribal leader demanding fealty from friendly *aghas*—the Kurdish tribal chiefs—and attacking hostile tribes (Rubin 2007). When the conflict between Barzani and Qasim unfolded, in 1961, the Kurdish leader was joined by a significant portion of landowning chiefs which opposed the land reform. The Kurdish revolt that broke out that year—and that was to continue intermittently until 1991—was fused with the demands of the Kurdish tribal and landowning elite (Degli Esposti 2022, 60–67). The Kurdish left representative of the KDP was forced to surrender the leadership of the Kurdish movement to the superior military capabilities of Mustafa Barzani and his tribal following and, in 1966, the latter expelled the former from the party. The increasing militarism and anti-Kurdish brutality of the Arab nationalist and Baathist regimes that followed Qasim vindicated Barzani's uncompromising stance and gave mass support to his revolt. That said, the KDP uprising led by Barzani in the 1960s and 1970s remained hard to distinguish from a mere project of personal rule over the Kurdish region supported by the traditional structures of Kurdish societies. By the 1970s, the conservative character of the Kurdish leadership was also visible in its foreign relationships, particularly in the growing dependency on the support provided by the Shah of Iran, the U.S., and Israel. Mustafa Barzani's reliance on foreign military aid was to be the cause of his defeat. When, in 1975, the Shah reached an agreement with Saddam Hussein, Iranian and US support for the KDP ended overnight and the insurgency collapsed. As Henry Kissinger (1999, 594) wrote to the Shah, clarifying Washington's priorities, the Iraqi Kurdish question was "a matter for Your Majesty to decide in the best interests of your nation".

The Kurdish uprising resumed with strength in the 1980s while Iraq was busy with Saddam Hussein's bloody adventure against post-revolutionary Iran (1980–88). In the meantime, the Iraqi Kurdish left had re-organised into a new party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by the charismatic Jalal Talabani. The KDP, now led by Mustafa Barzani's son Masoud, and the

PUK fought their separate guerrilla wars until, in 1986, were convinced by Khomeini to form a united Kurdistan Front. The combined threat of an Iranian offensive and a united Kurdish guerrilla pushed the Baathist leadership to unleash a genocidal campaign of devastation and depopulation of the Kurdish countryside aimed at starving the insurgency and known as the "Anfal campaign". These policies—on top of decades of warfare—led to a rapid process of forced and voluntary urbanisation and to the virtual destruction of the Iraqi Kurdish peasantry as a social class. After Saddam Hussein's unsuccessful attempt to seize Kuwait and be protected by an Anglo-American no-fly zone over northern Iraq, the forces of the Kurdistan Front took control of most of the Kurdish region in 1991. The KDP and PUK established then a local administration, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to run the three Kurdish provinces of Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah. Saddam Hussein refused to recognise the KRG but could not retake the provinces due to the no-fly zone, so he imposed a harsh embargo over the Kurdish region.

The 1990s were crucial in shaping the social, political, and economic structures that characterise the region today. The Kurdish administration established in 1992 was short-lived as the profound and historical rivalry between the KDP and the PUK soon led to clashes between the respective peshmerga forces. In 1994, the confrontation between the two Iraqi Kurdish parties escalated into a three-year long civil war that saw the intervention of Turkey and Saddam's army in support of the KDP, and Iran and the PKK on the side of the PUK. Except for Saddam Hussein—whose days, as we know, were numbered—this set of alliances was the first legacy of Kurdish self-rule in the 1990s bound to last until today. Its second legacy was the permanent military partition of the region into a KDP-controlled area in the north (Erbil and Dohuk) and a PUK-controlled south (Sulaymaniyah) which continued to be divided by an actual border even today. In these sub-regions, Barzani and Talabani established two separate single-party administrations (Stansfield 2003) which found themselves under a double embargo: Baghdad's blockade against the rebellious Kurdish provinces as well as the international sanctions against Saddam's Iraq. As the productive economy of the region had been devastated by decades of war, the only two sources of income for the Kurdish parties were the control of smuggling routes and the distribution of international humanitarian aid. The nature of these revenues contributed to give a strong rentier character to the political economy of the Kurdish region of Iraq even before the development of a local oil industry, which did not begin until the mid-2000s. This was the

third important legacy of the 1990s (Natali 2010). Finally, the political situation combined with the rentier nature of the Iraqi Kurdish economy in the 1990s contributed to the evolution of its class structure. When, in 1991, the KDP and the PUK took military control of a region, their leaders had only very loose connection with Kurdish societies having spent the previous decades in clandestine activities. Therefore, in the 1990s, the two parties fiercely competed to win the loyalty of the people who had held power in the region under the Baath regime to incorporate them and their constituencies into the parties. This largely included entrepreneurs—mostly state contractors—and the chiefs of the Kurdish tribes that were previously loyal to Baghdad. Some of the latter had armed and led collaborationist Kurdish units that fought against the insurgency and had been involved in mass atrocities against civilians. All of them received an amnesty in 1991 and gradually joined one or the Kurdish other party. These two groups became part of a new ruling class headed by the leaderships of KDP and PUK who enjoyed the monopoly of violence and thus the control of the economy (Degli Esposti 2022, 89–94). This process had the additional outcome of erasing any residual ideological difference between the two parties which became virtually indistinguishable expect for the much stronger and quasi-monarchical hold the Barzani family exercised over the KDP compared with the more oligarchic nature of the PUK.

All the main political features of the Kurdish region of Iraq—the KDP-PUK duopoly, their international alliances, the territory under their control, the rentier nature of the regional economy, and the predatory and "war-lordly" character of its ruling class—developed in the crucial 1990s and were to be strengthened by the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The two Kurdish parties gained a prominent seat at the post-war negotiations and, in alliance with Shi'a forces, decided Iraq's new institutional arrangement. A unified Kurdish regional government was established, this time with full Iraqi and international recognition. The KRG kept its peshmerga forces—de-facto KDP and PUK militias—and the Iraqi army was not allowed into the region. The years that followed were a period of tumultuous economic growth in the Kurdish region. While the rest of Iraq was sinking into a vortex of violence under U.S. occupation, the KRG looked like a beacon of stability and prosperity, the only success story of America's adventure in Iraq. These conditions allowed the region to attract foreign investments in real estate and the development of the local oil industry. Under the new constitution, Baghdad started transferring 17 per cent of its budget to the region which strengthened the rentier nature of

its economy. The ruling class—KDP and PUK politicians and warlords and affiliated tribal leaders and entrepreneurs—absorbed large part of this rent via licit and illicit means while most of the population was incorporated within the clientelist networks of the two parties with public employments and handouts and kept quiet with repression.[2]

However, cracks started to show in the party duopoly, with the KDP capturing the lion's share of the rent and holding the positions of president and prime minister of the region for the two most senior Barzanis (Masoud and Nechirvan) and the PUK increasingly weakened by factionalism and split. Moreover, the semi-authoritarian politics of the KRG and the kleptocratic practices of its elite generated among the population profound disillusion towards Kurdish self-rule and large protests broke out in 2011, in conjunction with the Arab uprisings. Finally, oil was to become a major issue of contention with Baghdad as the constitution assigned to the central state the exclusive right to export Iraqi oil, but Kurdish authorities eyed the enormous potentials of an independent oil policy. All these conditions led the Barzanis to look for the protection of a powerful foreign patron. Coincidentally, in these very years, Erdoğan's AKP was consolidating its power in Turkey and was ready to propose a new policy towards the Kurds, both at home and abroad.

Erdoğan's Kurdish Policy

At the 2002 elections in Turkey, Erdoğan's newly established Justice and Development Party (AKP), a self-styled moderate Islamist force, won a vast parliamentary majority. The victory of the AKP was a political earthquake, which brought to power a new generation of politicians raised outside the dominant political tendencies and within the tradition of Turkey's political Islam. The coming to power of the Islamists had been long in the making due to their growing roots within Turkish society (Eligür 2010), roots that were partly laid by the destruction of the left after the 1980 military coup.

The AKP was particularly successful in Turkey's Kurdish provinces, inheriting the popular strength of its more radical Islamist predecessors among conservative Kurds. But thanks to his more liberal outlook, Erdoğan also won the support of many less religious Kurds who saw in him the only viable alternative to the Turkish nationalist establishment. During his first term in office (2002–7), the AKP consolidated its power to the point that, by 2007, it had incorporated a large part of the Kurdish tribal leaders (*agha*), landowners, and entrepreneurs which had traditionally supported Turkey's mainstream parties.

This process was the latest manifestation of a historical alliance between the conservative blocs that ruled Turkey since 1950 and the tribal and landowning elite of its Kurdish periphery (Beşikçi 1992; Yadirgi 2017). Since 2002, the local ruling class rallied behind the AKP to contain the advance of the Kurdish left in the southeast.

Despite the continuity in this political arrangement, the AKP moved timid steps towards the cultural recognition of the Kurds of Turkey and away from eight decades of assimilationist policies. Apart from the party's Islamic background, a more open approach to the Kurdish question in mainstream Turkish politics was favoured by the temporary end of the PKK uprising in Turkey following the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. Moreover, in the 2000s, there was a general (but misplaced) perception that the main obstacle to Turkey joining the European Union was the treatment of its cultural minorities. Notwithstanding these favourable conditions, Erdoğan moved very cautiously in his first term in office to make sure not to upset the Kemalist establishment, and particularly the military and the judiciary. He limited his actions to permitting private Kurdish language education—an issue directly related to the EU application process—and publicly acknowledging the existence of a Kurdish question in the country. The relations of power within the Turkish state were to change in the second half of the 2000s due to a number of events such as the AKP's landslide at the 2007 elections, the elections as the head of state of Erdoğan's then right-hand men Abdullah Gül, and the discovery, in 2008, of the *Ergenekon* nationalist conspiracy that allowed the government to arrest hundreds of unfriendly bureaucrats and security officials.[3] These changes gave Erdoğan a much freer hand in both his domestic Kurdish policy as well as in Turkey's foreign policy. Moreover, in 2004 the PKK had resumed its military activities—Turkey had never completely stopped attacking it—and since the mid-2000s casualties on both sides started growing. In February 2008, the Turkish armed forces launched a major cross border incursion aimed at the PKK bases in northern Iraq. The Operation Sun (Güneş Harekatı)—preceded by several months of air bombardments—was costly both in human and financial terms and ultimately proved itself unable to dislodge the guerrilla group from its positions. The overall failure of the operation, and the general resumption of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, helped the AKP leadership understand that the Kurdish war could not be won militarily.

Under these new conditions, the Turkish government developed a Kurdish policy that, given the transnational nature of the Kurdish question, needed

to have both a domestic and a foreign component. The foreign component of this policy was essentially the establishment of a strategic partnership with the Iraqi Kurdish region which will be discussed in length in this article. Turkey's domestic Kurdish policy involved both some limited reforms and a much more ambitious—yet ultimately ephemeral—peace process with the PKK. Beside the material and human cost of the war, the insurgency was a factor of instability affecting the entire border region and a source of recurrent tension with Syria, Iraq, and Iran thus affecting Turkey's developing Middle Eastern ambitions. Moreover, the Kurdish-inhabited region is a major crossroad for land trade routes and oil and gas pipelines and pipeline projects which the PKK could easily sabotage. Domestically, the AKP was losing ground to the Kurdish political left which, at the local elections of March 2009, won 99 municipalities, threatening the government's hold over the southeast. In July, the Turkish government announced a package of reforms aimed at enhancing the rights of the Kurds and stopping the bloody conflict with PKK. The plan took the name of Kurdish Initiative and was part of a wider programme to enhance minorities' rights in Turkey (Kayhan Pusane 2014). Despite the high interest raised by the media, the reforms only started with the beginning of the peace process since Erdoğan wanted to use the reforms as concessions at the negotiation table with the PKK. After years of unsuccessful secret talks, in late 2012 Ankara and the PKK seemed to have reached some sort of agreement. In January 2013, a delegation of pro-Kurdish politicians was allowed to visit Öcalan in jail. That was the first of 22 visits in less than two years. At the same time, the Turkish parliament approved a bill allowing defendants to use language other than Turkish in trials. In March, Öcalan delivered a letter to the Kurds celebrating the *Newroz*, the Kurdish new year, which called for the withdrawal of the PKK from Turkish territory and two days later, the PKK leadership in the field declared a ceasefire. For the first time, since the beginning of the insurgency in 1984, arms were laid down on both sides (Çandar 2020).

However, soon after the ceasefire and some other limited reforms, the peace and reform processes stalled. The Kurdish side had put forward a series of moderate demands such as Kurdish-language education, full organisational freedom, and the release of political prisoners. Yet, the government seemed unable or unwilling to take any further step. On the one hand, Erdoğan was losing nationalist voters to the Turkish far-right for negotiating with the "terrorists". On the other hand, his policies had legitimised and galvanised the Kurdish movement, rather than containing its advance. Despite the growing

disillusion towards the process from both sides, the ceasefire lasted for over two years. At the general elections of June 2015, however, the AKP lost ten percent of its votes to both the Turkish nationalist right and the Kurdish left, organised in the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and, with it, its parliamentary majority. For Erdoğan, the electoral result was the final nail in the coffin of the peace process. However, there was another important reason that brought the peace process—and the AKP's domestic Kurdish policy—to its end. Beyond the border, in war-torn Syria, Kurdish forces led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a sister party to the PKK, was turning the tide in its struggle against the IS. In January 2015, they had pushed back the Islamists from Kobane, and, at the time of the elections, they had come to control most of the Turkish-Syrian border region. For Ankara, this meant a severe limitation to its ability to influence the Syrian conflict and an unacceptable empowerment of the PKK. At the same time, the Kurds of Turkey saw their government as the main foreign sponsor of IS and this rift contributed to the large movement of votes from the AKP to the HDP.

With a pretext, the government ended the truce, and the PKK war was resumed. Ankara rapidly securitised the country's politics and launched an unprecedented—for AKP era—wave of repression against the Kurdish and leftist opposition. Unable to form a coalition government, Erdoğan called for new snap elections in November, where the AKP recovered votes from both sides and won a majority. To avoid future electoral swings, Erdoğan formed an alliance with the Turkish nationalist right. Anti-Kurdish repression was scaled up while any prospect of political engagement gave way to the return of the traditional framing equating Kurdish politics with terrorism (Beyribey 2025, 440–1). The centre of Diyarbakir, Turkey's biggest Kurdish city, became a battlefield for months. Dozens of Kurdish mayors elected in 2014 were removed and replaced by government appointees. Most of them were re-elected in 2019 and removed again. A good part of the organisational power built by the "legal" Kurdish movement in Turkey in the previous two decades was destroyed in the span of a few years. The HDP leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were arrested in 2016 and 2017 and have been in jail since. Once again in recent history, the Kurdish question turned out to be the central issue for Turkish democracy. The failure of Erdoğan's half-hearted attempt to solve it gave way to his rapid authoritarian and nationalist turn. It is too early to say if this spiral of repression and authoritarianism can be broken by the unexpected decision of the PKK leadership, in early 2025, to unilaterally renounce the

armed struggle and disband (Grasso and Novellis 2025). The current deadlock appears much more consistent with a century of Turkey's approach to the Kurdish question than the brief peace process window of 2013–15. Yet, another aspect of Erdoğan's Kurdish policy, the relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish regional government, proved to be much more solid, fuelled as it was by a set of common economic, geopolitical, and ideological interests.

A New Turkey and a Lesser Kurdistan

The Turkey-KRG partnership developed in the span of a few years. In February 2008, while Turkey was waging Operation Güneş against the PKK, invading and bombing Iraqi-Kurdish soil, Ankara's relations with Erbil had reached their lowest point. Yet, just a few months later, in May, the first ever high-level meeting between the two sides took place when Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu met Iraqi Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani in Baghdad. And the partnership took off. Several lower-level meetings were held soon after and, in October 2009, Davutoğlu was in the Kurdish capital Erbil meeting the highest KRG authority. This tight diplomatic process was coronated, in March 2010, with the opening of a Turkish consulate in Erbil. For Ankara, this meant formally accepting Iraq's post-2003 arrangement as well as recognising a regional entity that was officially named "Kurdistan". Naturally, the Turkish-KRG rapprochement and the contemporaneous Kurdish opening in Turkey were supported by a media fanfare by both Western and Turkish pro-government outlets presenting this process as a historical watershed. Things could change so rapidly because of the ripening of several domestic conditions, both in Turkey and Iraq, outlined above. However, it is unlikely that this relationship could have flourished without the change in the geopolitical environment as a consequence of Turkey becoming an expansionist regional power, and Iraq becoming an arena for competition among regional actors.

For most of the republican period Turkey had largely kept itself outside of Middle Eastern conflicts and maintained a strong pro-West orientation prioritising its role as a NATO border country and its participation in Western and European international organisations. With the coming to power of the AKP and its ongoing economic boom, however, Turkey started developing an active great-power politics towards the Middle East. This expansionism was the reflection of Turkey's growing economic significance but also of the orientation of its new Islamist government toward the Arab and Muslim world linked to a certain idealisation of the Ottoman past "unjustly" forgotten but

the Kemalist elite. Due to the AKP's lack of experience in foreign policy, this strategic change has for long been attributed to the figure of Ahmet Davutoğlu, an International Relations professor who served first as Erdoğan's Chief Foreign Relations Advisor in 2003–9, then as Foreign Minister in 2009–14, and lastly as the Prime Minister in 2014–16 before falling into disgrace. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu pursued a strategy of economic, diplomatic, and cultural power projection of Turkey in the Arab world aimed at creating a Turkish sphere of influence, dominating local markets, and gaining access to cheap sources of energy. For a brief period following the Arab Uprisings of 2011, the AKP was also able to project itself as the political model of an Islamic democracy for the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties that came to power in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (Dalacoura 2012). Within this strategy, oil-rich, economically devastated, and politically weak post-2003 Iraq was an ideal target. However, the Shi'a nationalist parties which had come to dominate Iraqi politics following the US invasion and the strong power exercised over them by Tehran represented an insurmountable obstacle to the integration of the country in Turkey's longed-for sphere of influence. Ankara's attempt—along with some of the Gulf monarchies—to turn Iraq's Sunni forces into its proxies heavily limited its capacity to influence the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad. Moreover, this attempt was made fruitless by the growing marginalisation and repression of the country's Sunnis under the increasingly sectarian premiership of Nouri al-Maliki (2007–14) (Dodge 2012). In this context, the Kurdistan region, with its autonomous institutions, became not just valuable but also the only viable partner Turkey could develop in Iraq.[4] Oil-generated economic development and relative political stability compared to the rest of Iraq made the KRG an ideal growing market for Turkish products and an excellent destination for Turkish investments, particularly in the construction sector. Moreover, while Turkey was looking for cheap oil, Masoud Barzani was in search of a new client to circumvent Baghdad's constitutional monopoly of the country's oil export. These economic considerations—which I will discuss in detail below—played a major role in the development of the relationship. Additionally, the growing authoritarian, sectarian, and pro-Iran turn of the Iraqi government was becoming an issue of serious concern for the Kurdish regional administration. Since he had come to power, Maliki had refused to implement the constitutional provision that prescribed a referendum to decide whether the disputed ethnically mixed areas of Nineveh, Salah ad-Din, Diyala, and, especially, Kirkuk, should be added to the KRG or remain under Baghdad.

While the Barzanis were looking for ways to expand their autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad, Maliki and the Shi'a establishment were increasingly concerned of the risk of a de-facto Kurdish secession. These developments pushed the KRG to look for an external patron which, given the context, could only be Turkey. In turn, the development of Turkey-KRG relations increased the Iraqi federal government's concerns and thus Baghdad-Erbil tensions grew (Park 2012). Therefore, the more the relationship between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish region grew sour, the more the latter relied on Turkish support. This self-reinforcing dynamic led to the gradual entrenchment in the KRG of Turkish military and intelligence outposts and bases. In 2020, the Turkish government issued a map declaring the existence of 37 bases in the region which suggests the presence of many more undeclared ones, especially belonging to the MIT, Turkey's intelligence agency.[5]

The development of this relationship has, however, not been straightforwardly easy. As mentioned before, up to the mid-2010s, Erdoğan's Turkey looked—at least to the more optimistic observers—to be on its way to solve its decades-long Kurdish question and certainly both Ankara and Erbil heavily pushed this narrative to their respective public opinions. Since 2015, however, the Turkish government has resumed the PKK war, set aside all the projects for minority rights reforms, allied in the Turkish parliament with the anti-Kurdish right, and attacked on numerous occasions Kurdish forces in Syria. Given the rapid turn of events, Erdoğan lost most of the sympathy he had enjoyed among large parts of the Kurdish population both in Turkey and abroad. This has of course made things increasingly difficult for the Barzanis and their KDP whose legitimacy was based on their Kurdish nationalist credentials. Relations with Turkey were made particularly difficult because the PKK bases are located in the Kurdish region within the traditional heartland of the KDP, and Turkish bombing campaigns regularly kill Kurdish civilians belonging to villages and tribes loyal to the Barzanis. In the same years, moreover, the Iraqi Kurdish elite was suffering from a deep crisis of popularity due to a tremendous economic crisis brought about by the 2014 IS invasion of Iraq and the collapse in oil prices. The harsh austerity measures imposed by the regional government combined with the extremely high level of corruption of the Kurdish elite led to massive waves of popular protests. The main response of the KDP was opening fire on the protesters and suspending the Kurdish parliament to shut the voice of the opposition. However, the region's president Masoud Barzani tried to recover some of the lost popularity by investing in aggressive nation-

alistic rhetoric against Baghdad. Barzani decided to unilaterally implement a referendum for the independence of the Kurdish region against the advice of both his Turkish and American allies. The independence referendum was a shrewd political move by the Barzanis, but it naturally revived genuine and popular feelings of self-determination strengthened by anti-Arab sentiments inevitably fed by a century of oppression under Baghdad's rule as well as the recent menace of IS (Charountaki 2020). The KDP easily won the referendum in October 2017, but independence could never be declared and the price the region paid was dire (Degli Esposti 2021; O'Driscoll and Başer 2019). Neither Turkey nor Iran could ever accept an independent Kurdish state and jointly closed their borders and airspace over the region. With the support of the two neighbouring countries and the assent of the Trump administration Iraqi troops moved into the disputed territories, including the city of Kirkuk, which the Kurds had come to control after the war on IS.

The crisis in the Turkey-KRG relationship following the 2017 referendum was rapidly overcome due to the importance both partners placed in it. However, the events made unequivocally clear to the Kurdish elite that this is not a partnership between equals and that it is up to Ankara to determine its limits. In exchange for some degree of Turkish protection the KDP must accept a large Turkish military presence within its borders and the very unpopular bombing and incursions against the PKK. The Kurdish elite seems willing to pay this price as this form of vassalage is probably the option that, in the current geopolitical context, grants them the highest level of autonomy from both Baghdad's centralistic ambition and their own revolting Kurdish population. Besides, the Turkey-KRG has been extremely lucrative for elites on both sides.

Economic Complementarities

In the mid- to late-2000s, both Turkey and the Kurdistan region of Iraq were experiencing a favourable economic cycle even if within two very different and, in a way, complementary trajectories of economic development. Turkey experienced strong GDP growth in the years between 2003 and 2007—which was crucial for the AKP's consolidation in power—and steady industrial development (Pamuk 2018, 261–74). One important limit to Turkey's growth was the high oil prices of those years which negatively affected the country's balance of payments, its foreign currency reserves, and thus the stability of the Turkish Lira. This has been a structural constraint to the Turkish economy for a long time, but its thirst for energy has become dramatic in the years of the

AKP consolidation between 2002 and 2013, when Turkey's GDP quadrupled, and its population increased by over ten million.[6] Erdoğan's geopolitical ambitions and the new Middle Eastern orientation of Turkish foreign policy also served the purpose of gaining access to new outlets, its industrial output as well as cheaper sources of energy. Since 2005, the KRG was enjoying a period of significant growth based on a newly found stability in terms of institutional recognition, a much lower level of political violence and uncertainty vis-à-vis the rest of Iraq, and the fact that it could count on a stable stream of revenue. In fact, according to the new constitution, the KRG was entitled to seventeen percent of the Iraqi budget which overwhelmingly came from oil revenues. In turn, this transfer constituted almost the entirety of the KRG income.[7] Very little of this new wealth was invested into meaningful economic development and most of it ended up into the pockets of the elite and into an oversized public sector that served the purpose of maintaining public support for the ruling parties. The development model envisioned by the Kurdish elite was clearly that of the Arab Gulf Petro-monarchies.

Only a few months after the re-establishment of the KRG within the new Iraq, the Kurdish parliament approved an extremely generous foreign investment law "amongst the most investor-friendly laws in the wider region".[8] The law, inspired by the ones in place in the Gulf, allowed foreign investors to repatriate profits in full, buy land, and enjoy a ten year tax-free regime.[9] Investors had to partner with local companies inevitably connected with the political parties allowing the Kurdish elite to benefit from this foreign investment while the impact on the KRG revenues was insignificant. A free-visa regime allowed foreign companies to bring in their staff making Erbil an important expat hub while the effects on local employment remained negligible (Bache 2018). The biggest part of foreign investments went into a gargantuan construction boom that transformed the skylines of the main Kurdish cities. Turkey's constructors had the lion's share as their investments in the region's construction sector amounted to six billion dollars between 2009 and 2022.[10] With the end of the international sanctions regime in 2003, normal trade between Iraq and its neighbours was resumed. Iraq was never able to rebuild its productive capabilities, and the oil revenues made it a new important market for any sort of product that the more industrialised and neighbouring Iran and Turkey easily conquered. Ankara became soon Iraq's most important trade partner in the region. The Kurdish region became completely dependent on Turkish products to the point that, in the mid-2010, an estimated 80 percent of consumer goods

in the region were Turkish made (Bache 2018). Therefore, in terms of trade too, the Turkish-KRG relationship has been beneficial to both Turkish economic actors and their local Kurdish partners even if it did not help develop and diversify the Kurdish economy.

Despite the importance of investments and trade, the most significant economic aspect of the Turkish-KRG relationship is, by far, oil. As mentioned before, the search for cheaper sources of energy has been a driving motivation of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy and its relationship with Iraq which is one its primary oil suppliers. An Iraqi-Turkish pipeline connecting the oilfields of Kirkuk with the Turkish port of Ceyhan was built in 1976 and doubled in the mid-1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. Given Turkey's troubles at exercising influence over the post-2003 Iraqi government, the ambition of the Iraqi Kurdish regional authorities to export oil independently from Baghdad became, in the late 2000s, a fundamental aspect of the Ankara-Erbil partnership and a permanent source of tension with Baghdad for both. Since the coming into force of the 2005 constitution, the KRG has been locked in an unsolvable legal controversy over its right to independent oil export. The constitution of Iraq states that the oil and gas belong to its people as a whole and that the federal government manages these resources and redistributes the revenues among its provinces. The KRG is thus entitled to 17 percent of Iraqi budget according to the population of its provinces. However, the constitution ambiguously refers "the present fields".[11] The oil industry of the Kurdish region was then extremely underdeveloped but geological surveys already indicated massive untapped reserves of both oil and gas and the KRG has claimed its right to independently export the output of the new fields.[12] The issue has great political consequences on both sides. For Baghdad, besides the loss of income and the empowerment of the KRG, the risk is that other oil producing governorates would claim the same right and that Iraq would lose its capacity to redistribute revenues to oil-poor provinces including Baghdad endangering its viability as a country. For Erbil, independent export means that the central government can no longer blackmail the KRG and brings the region a step closer to independence. Moreover, revenues that come to the KRG ministries directly, rather than via the Iraqi treasury, are even easier to embezzle and allow for enormous opportunities for enrichment for the local elite.

In 2007, the Kurdish parliament approved an oil and gas law which accorded favourable conditions to companies coming to develop the region's oil industry. The first few years of exploitation by medium-sized companies convinced

some giants to join the feast and, by 2012, ExxonMobil, TAQA, Total, Chevron, and Gazprom had moved in. These powerful partnerships encouraged the KRG to openly challenged Baghdad. In May 2012, Ankara and Erbil signed a fifty year energy agreement and Kurdish oil began to be exported directly to Turkey via trucks. In the meantime, a "Kurdistan oil pipeline" was being built. In 2013 oil started flowing into this new pipeline which merged into the Kirkuk-Ceyhan at the Iraqi-Turkish border. These were moves that the Iraqi government could not ignore, and, at the beginning of 2014, Baghdad suspended its budget transfer to Erbil. Tension run so high that, by late spring, a military confrontation between the Iraqi army and the Kurdish peshmerga seemed likely and was only avoided by IS's sudden takeover of Mosul in June and the three-years long conflict that followed. After the war, the Kurdish independence referendum in October 2017 forced Ankara to rhetorically side with Baghdad on the issue of Iraq's territorial integrity and to threaten the KRG with military drills at its borders. With this move, Erdoğan proved to his domestic audience that he opposed Kurdish secessionism but, even more importantly, showed the Barzanis that unilateralism does not belong to a junior partner. However, Erdoğan's promises that he would economically starve Iraqi Kurdistan and block and the flow of oil never materialised (Park 2019). Turkey's overall soft and quasi symbolic reaction to the threat of Kurdish independence in 2017 showed beyond any doubt the importance Ankara placed in its relationship with the KRG. The dispute between Baghdad on one side and Erbil and Ankara on the other on oil export continued to unfold. In February 2022 the Iraqi Supreme Court declared the KRG 2007 oil and gas law unconstitutional and the in March 2023 an international court of arbitration sentenced Turkey to pay Iraq around 1.5 billion dollars for breach of contract.[13] In response to the second ruling, Turkey halted oil flow in the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline damaging the Iraqi government but even more the KRG which was left without its main source of revenues. Ankara keeps supporting Erbil in its dispute with Baghdad, but it is also clear that, when trouble occurs in this triangular oil dispute, it is the Kurdish region that pays the highest price.

Conclusion: Marriage of Love or Mere Convenience?

The final aspect of the relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds is its ideological and class dimension. For Erdoğan, the relationship with the Barzanis has served the purpose of gaining a certain degree of credibility with the Kurdish population of Turkey and he consistently presented the KDP as

a "moderate" and conservative alternative to the PKK and Turkey's Kurdish left. The dimension of ideological affinity and anti-PKK solidarity, even if secondary compared to the economic and geopolitical dimensions, is worth some consideration especially because it has been largely ignored by the literature on the subject.

Since the rise of the PKK in the 1980s, Öcalan's movement has undermined the position of prestige enjoyed by the Iraqi KDP as the most important Kurdish nationalist actor. Turkey and the KDP had already started to cooperate in the 1990s, before the coming to power of the AKP, when the PKK supported the KDP's rival PUK in the Iraqi Kurdish civil war (1994–98). When the relationship between Turkey and the KRG took off in economic and diplomatic terms in the late 2000s, the Islamist political identity of the AKP allowed for the development of its political aspect. At the ideological level the Turkish AKP and the Iraqi Kurdish KDP presented only some elements of affinity but a high degree of compatibility. Both parties were conservative and presented a strong pro-business and pro-capitalist character. Unlike the AKP which evolved from Turkey's Islamist tradition, the KDP was founded as a secular party, but the Barzani family have strong ties with the Muslim clergy and maintain an extremely pious public image. The founder of the party Mullah Mustafa Barzani came from a lineage of shaykhs belonging to the Naqshbandiyyah which is the sufi order that most profoundly influenced the development of Turkish Islamism in the twentieth century. Moreover, the Barzanis placed great emphasis in the tribal structures of the Kurdish society and in the political and cultural role of tribal elites and, as we have seen, the support of tribal leaders has long been an important element of Turkish rule over its Kurdish region. While these elements are far from constituting the basis for a solid ideological partnership, the elements of compatibility have been sufficient to motivate the relationship on both sides. At a time of growing Kurdish political awareness, Erdoğan heavily relied on this alliance and brandished his relationship with Massoud Barzani as a sign of respect for the Kurdish traditional way of life. In November 2013, Erdoğan held a mass public meeting in Diyarbakir, the "capital" of Turkish Kurdistan, standing next to Masoud Barzani in full traditional Kurdish clothes.[14] The event had the purpose of strengthening the AKP's pro-Kurdish credibility and undermining the Kurdish left's electoral hold over the region. Such public recognition of Kurdish identity by the Turkish government would have been unthinkable just a few years before and signalled the highest point of the "political" dimension of the AKP-KDP partnership.

While this dimension was to be weakened, as we have seen, by Erdoğan's political turn and Barzani's nationalist rhetoric, it did help the development of the Turkey-KRG partnership which, as uneven as it is and despite some crises, has remained solid for over twenty years.

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Notes

1 Amberin Zaman, "Erdogan, Barzani Meet in Ankara as Iraqi Oil Exports via Turkey Remain Frozen," *Al-Monitor*, 20 Jun. 2023 https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/erdogan-barzani-meet-ankara-iraqi-oil-exports-turkey-remain-frozen.

2 *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable*. Vol. 2, World Bank Group, 2016, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/708441468196727918, (accessed 9 Jun. 2026).

3 Ergenekon, a name inspired by Turkic mythology, was an alleged Turkish nationalist organisation with members drawn from the bureaucracy and the military with the aim of plotting against the democratic government of Turkey. The discovery of this group in 2011 led to hundreds of arrests and dismissals but it remains unclear to what extent the police operations and trials were also aimed at strengthening the AKP government (Aydinli 2011).

4 The choice to invest in the political and diplomatic relationship with the KRG was also due to the growing realisation that the more ideologically suitable proxy for Turkey in Iraq, the Turkmen minority was less and less a viable ally. This was due to a number of reasons, such as the small size of the Turkmen minority which was not compatible with Turkey's ambitions, as well as the internal division within Iraqi Turkmens and the fact that some groups were already cooperating with Kurdish political forces (Strakes 2009).

5 Yerevan Ismael, "Turkey's Growing Military Presence in the Kurdish Region of Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 18 May 2022, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-growing-military-presence-kurdish-region-iraq.

6 World Bank, 2025. "GDP – Turkiye," p. 5. World Bank Open Data, https://data.worldbank.org (accessed 9 Jun. 2026).

7 *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Assessing the Economic and Social Impact of the Syrian Conflict and ISIS*. Vol. 1, World Bank Group, 2015, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/574421468253845198/pdf/Iraq-Assessing-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-the-Syrian-conflict-and-ISIS.pdf (accessed 9 Jun. 2026).

8 *The Kurdistan Tribune*. "KRG's Investment Law Is amongst the Most Investor Friendly Laws in the Wider Region – Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir." Nov. 20, 2011, https://kurdistantribune.com/krgs-investment-law-amongst-most-investor-friendly-laws-wider-region-minister-falah-mustafa-bakir/.

9 Kurdistan Regional Government. 2025. "Investment Law." Board of Investment, https://gov.krd/boi-en/publications/investment-law (accessed 9 Jun. 2026).

10 Mehmet Mevlüt Yakut, "Strengthening Türkiye-KRG Relations: A Shared Path Towards Prosperity," *Kurdistan Chronicles*, Nov. 18, 2023, https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/2828.

11 Constitute Project, "Iraq 2005 Constitution," https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005 (accessed 18 Jan. 2025).

12 Robin Mills, *Under the Mountains: Kurdish Oil and Regional Politics*, OIES Paper: WPM 63, The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, Jan. 2016, https://www.oxfordenergy.org/publications/under-the-mountains-kurdish-oil-and-regional-politics.

13 Yousif Saeed, "Trilateral Agreement Necessary to Resolve Turkey-Iraq Oil Dispute," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, Sept. 22, 2023, https://agsi.org/analysis/trilateral-agreement-necessary-to-resolve-turkey-iraq-oil-dispute/.

14 Cengiz Çandar, "Erdogan-Barzani 'Diyarbakir Encounter' Milestone," *Al-Monitor*, Nov. 20, 2013, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/11/erdogan-barzani-kurdistan-diyarbakir-political-decision.html.

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