

## A Troubled Alliance: Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan (2009- 2017)

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### Abstract

Iraqi Kurdistan's September 25, 2017 independence referendum put a strain on the relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Turkey, which have, against all odds, formed a strategic alliance that for the last decade served Ankaras interests in Iraq. This study examines the origin of the alliance between Turkey and the KRG and looks at the recent deterioration in relations between the two. It also assesses the implications of the collapse of the alliance for Turkey's security, economic, and geostrategic interests in Iraq. The study proposes that inconsistency in Turkey's policy towards both the Kurdish question in Turkey and the ambitions of the Kurds in Iraq forced the authorities in Ankara to reject Iraqi Kurdistan's bid for independence endangering the alliance between the Turkish government and the KRG. It argues that Turkey may find it difficult to protect its interests in Iraq if it decides to completely abandon its alliance with the Iraqi Kurds.

### الملخص:

اجراء استفتاء الاستقلال الذي قام به اقليم كردستان العراق في 25 ايلول / سبتمبر 2017 أثر ضغطا كبيرا على تعقيد وتعليق جزئي في العلاقات بين حكومة الاقليم وتركيا التي توصف بأنهما جهتان متحالفتان تحالفا استراتيجيا في العقد الماضي والتي لبّت مصالح أنقرة في العراق و الاقليم. تبحث هذه الدراسة في اساس التحالف بين تركيا وحكومة إقليم كردستان، وتفسر اسباب التدهور الأخير في العلاقات بين الجانبين. كما يتم البحث بتقييم انعكاسات احتمال انهيار التحالف الكامل على مصالح تركيا الأمنية والاقتصادية والجيوسياسية في العراق و الاقليم. وتجزم الدراسة على أن عدم الاتساق في سياسة تركيا تجاه كل من المسألة الكردية في الداخل التركي و وطموحات الأكراد في العراق أجبر السلطات في أنقرة على رفض محاولة كردستان العراق للاستقلال مما يعرض التحالف بين الحكومة التركية وحكومة إقليم كردستان للخطر. و بين البحث بأن تركيا قد تجد صعوبة في حماية مصالحها في العراق اذا قررت التخلي تماما عن تحالفها مع الاكراد العراقيين.

**پوخته:**

ئه نجامدانی ریفرااندومی سه‌ربه‌خویی له لایهن هه‌ریمی کوردستانی عێراقه‌وه له 25\09\2017 دا کاریگه‌ری نه‌رینی دروستکرد له‌سه‌ر په‌یوه‌ندییه‌کانی تورکیا و حکومه‌تی هه‌ریم. له دوا‌ی سا‌لی 2007 وه و سه‌رباری ناسته‌نگ و نا‌کوکییه‌کان، تورکیا و حکومه‌تی هه‌ریم توانیان هاو‌په‌یمانییه‌کی ستراتیژی به‌هیز پیکته‌ین که به شیوه‌یه‌کی به‌رچاو ئهم هاو‌په‌یمانییه‌ خزمه‌تی به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌کانی تورکیای ده‌کرد له عێراق و هه‌ریمی کوردستان. ئهم تو‌یژینه‌وه له بنه‌ره‌تی هاو‌په‌یمانییه‌تی هه‌ولێر و نه‌که‌ره و هه‌روه‌ها خرا‌په‌وونی ئهم دوا‌یه‌ی په‌یوه‌ندی نیوان ئهم دوو هاو‌په‌یمانه‌ ده‌کۆلیته‌وه. هه‌روه‌ها تو‌یژینه‌وه‌که نه‌که‌ری کاریگه‌رییه‌کانی کۆتایی هاتنی ته‌واوی هاو‌په‌یمانییه‌تی نیوان هه‌ولێر و نه‌که‌ره له‌سه‌ر به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌کانی تورکیا له عێراق هه‌له‌سه‌نگینییه‌تی. تو‌یژینه‌وه‌که پێداگری له‌وه‌ ده‌کات که په‌یره‌وه‌کردنی سیاسه‌تی چو‌نییه‌ک و به‌رده‌وام له لایهن تورکیاوه به‌رامبه‌ر به‌ دۆزی کورد له تورکیا و هه‌روه‌ها به‌رامبه‌ر به‌ ئامانه‌کانی کورد له عێراق هۆکاری سه‌ره‌کی بوو که پالی به نه‌که‌رمه‌وه نا که‌وا هه‌نگاوی حکومه‌تی هه‌ریم به‌ره‌و سه‌ربه‌خویی ره‌ت بکاته‌وه و به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌کانی تورکیا له عێراق بخاته‌ ژێر مه‌ترسیه‌وه. هه‌روه‌ها، تو‌یژینه‌وه‌که پێشبینی نه‌وه‌ ده‌کات که کۆتاییه‌ینان به‌ هاو‌په‌یمانییه‌تی له‌گه‌ڵ هه‌ریمی کوردستان ناسته‌نگی گه‌وره له‌به‌رده‌م تورکیا دروست‌ده‌کات له به‌دیه‌ینانی ئامانج و به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌کانی له عێراق و هه‌ریمی کوردستان له دا‌هات‌وودا.

**Introduction**

In addition to Iran, Turkey plays a profound role in the politics of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. Given its geostrategic location, large population, economic capabilities, and international alliances (Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization–NATO), Turkey is a significant regional actor that the Iraqi Kurds cannot ignore. Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan share a long and porous border and the two are tied through common culture, history, and religion. More significantly, Turkey has security, economic, and geostrategic interests in Iraqi Kurdistan that cannot be overlooked by the ruling elite in Ankara. The nature and forms of interactions between Turkey and the KRG influence not just Iraq's future stability but also the shape of regional politics and its future alliances. Therefore, the development in relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan deserves greater attention.

Since 2002, the relation between Ankara and Erbil — the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan — has evolved from an outright hostility to a close alliance and finally to a strained relationship caused by Iraqi Kurdistan's independence ambitions. What explains the ups and downs in Turkey–Iraqi Kurdistan's relations over the last decade? Why did Turkey— acting against the will and interests of the central authorities in Baghdad — decided to leave its previous suspicions of, and hostility towards, the Iraqi Kurds behind and form an alliance with Erbil beginning with 2009? What caused Turkey to abandon its alliance with the Iraqi Kurds in the aftermath of Erbil's decision to conduct an independence referendum on September 25, 2017? How will terminating the alliance between Erbil and Ankara affect Turkey's ability to secure its interests in Iraq? This study answers those questions by analysing and examining the domestic and external factors that drove Turkey close to the Iraqi Kurds. It also examines and analyses the factors that forced Turkey to ignore its alliance with Erbil and to eventually act against the Iraqi Kurds' interests in Iraq. The study finally assesses the ramifications of the end of the alliance between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan for Turkey's interests in Iraq.

The study posits that since coming to power in 2002, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development party (AKP) took a different stance on the Kurdish issue both inside and outside Turkey aiming to solve Ankara's Kurdish dilemma but the party largely failed to formulate a clear Kurdish strategy. In essence, Ankara has been inconsistent in its political approach to the Kurdish challenge and that discrepancy has been mainly responsible for the recent damage to the alliance between Ankara and Erbil. If Turkey abandons its close alliance with the Iraqi Kurds, it may struggle to secure its interests in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan in the future.

The study depends on data on the subject found in secondary literature (books, journal article, and other online sources) and in Kurdish, Iraqi, Turkish, and international media—that have covered the interactions between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan—and employs them in order to support its arguments. The study is divided into three sections. The first section looks at Turkey's security, economic and geostrategic interests in Iraq. The second section of the study examines the origins of the alliance between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. The final section will shift the focus of the analysis to the factors that resulted in the weakening of the alliance between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. The study ends with a number of conclusions regarding the strained relationship between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan in the aftermath of the Kurdish independence move.

## **1. Turkey's interests in Iraqi Kurdistan: security, economy, and regional balance of power**

Before analysing the origins of the alliance between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, it is important to examine Turkey's various interests in Iraqi Kurdistan. Several factors impact upon and influence Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan. This section briefly looks at those factors and prepares the ground for the analyses that take place in the following sections. These are the major determinants of Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **1.1 Security concerns**

Security considerations occupy a central position in the making of Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraq in general and Iraqi Kurdistan in particular.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the Turkish government has subordinated economic gains and regional balance of power to achieving its security goals in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Turkish states prioritization of security corresponds to the ideas proposed by the neorealist theory of International Relations.

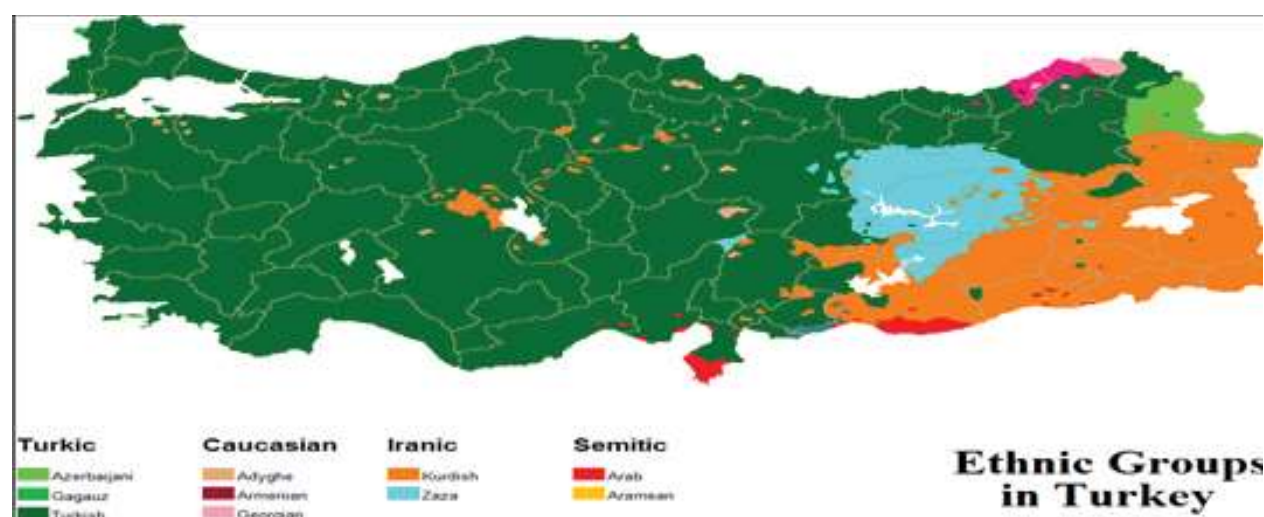
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1- Henri J. Barkey, 'Turkey and Iraq: the Perils (and prospects) of Proximity', (Special Report 141), United States Institute for Peace, 2005, pp. 34-, available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/200507/turkey-and-iraq-perils-and-prospects-proximity> [Date accessed: 14/2017/02/].

The neorealist theory asserts that states foreign policy is first and foremost driven by the imperatives of the anarchical structure of the international system, which lacks an overreaching authority — a world government— that can guarantee the states security. Under anarchy, states have to rely on themselves and their own capabilities in order to ensure their survival<sup>2</sup>. Neorealists argue that war is not a permanent condition in international relations but is possible at all times and states have to be ready to defend their security against threats and challenges emanating from an uncertain international environment that they operate in. In essence, before moving towards achieving other goals, states have to first ensure their security and survivability in a dangerous and highly competitive international environment.

Following this neorealist logic, the Turkish state has prioritised facing and managing the threats and challenges that stem from Iraqi Kurdistan, including the challenge posed by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish insurgent group that has been at a violent war with the Turkish state since 1984, and by the spill-over of Kurdish nationalism from Iraqi Kurdistan into Turkey's Kurdish dominated south-east. (See map: 1)

Map (1): Distribution of ethnic groups in Turkey



Source: <https://www.google.iq/search?dcr=0&biw=1290&bih=721&tbn=isch&sa=1&ei=Q8xRWv6HEKiv6ATFmrqQDw&q=Turkey%27s+ethnic+make+up&oq=Turkey>

The PKK is partly a product of the Turkish states failure to integrate Turkey's Kurdish community the majority of whom have been disillusioned with the Turkish states anti-Kurdish policies including rejecting the Kurds demands for

2- William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and foreign policy', in Steve Smith et al (eds), 'Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, and Cases', (UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3554-.

3- Ibid.

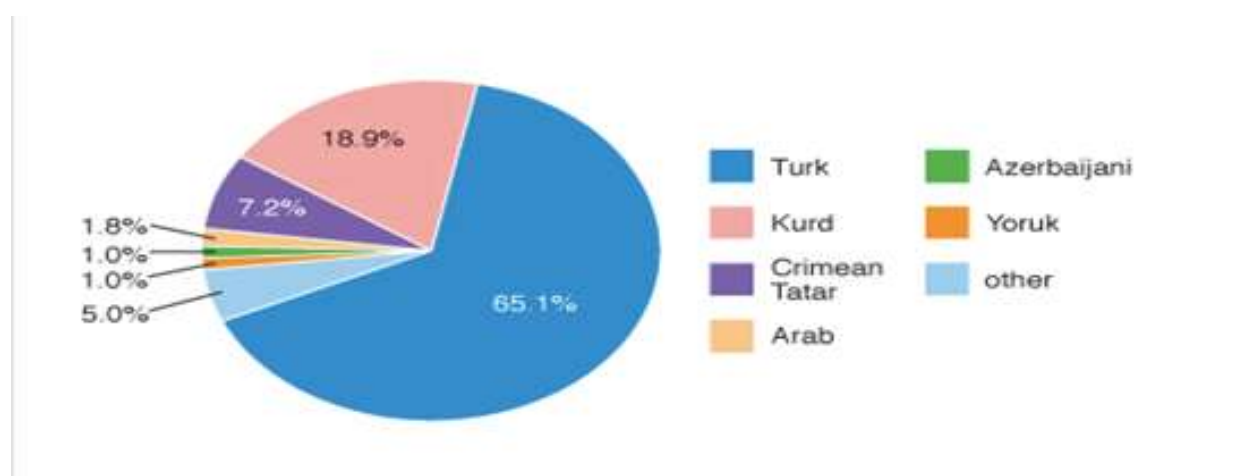
4- Greg Bruno, 'Inside Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)', 'Council on Foreign Relations', (October 19, 2007), available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk>, [Date accessed: 18/2017/05/].



greater socio-cultural and political rights and using brute force against Kurdish violent and non-violent movements inside Turkey.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to state exactly how many Kurds live within the Turkish borders because official consensus do not collect data on ethnicity. However, most surveys suggest that ethnic Kurds make up between 15% to 20% of Turkey's population.<sup>6</sup> (See Figure: 1)

The PKK is driven by an ideology of Kurdish nationalism imbued with secular and socialist principles. The Kurdish militant group purports that it fights on behalf of Turkey's Kurdish community and its primary goal has fluctuated between demands for an independent Kurdish state to securing considerable autonomy for the Kurds in Turkey. The PKK's violent campaign against the Turkish state and Ankara's military response to it has claimed more than 40,000 lives since 1984.<sup>7</sup>

Figure (1): Ethnic composition of Turkey



Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkey/Settlement-patterns>

The Kurdish militant group has adopted guerrilla warfare as a strategy in order to weaken the Turkish state's authority and military control over Turkey's southeast where the majority of the country's ethnic Kurds reside. To realise this goal, the PKK's militants have attacked Turkish military posts and security forces and have killed and assassinated politicians and administrative officials who have aligned with Ankara and have refused to cooperate with the PKK.

In addition to violent tactics, the Kurdish militant organization has also waged a media campaign that has aimed to revitalise the Kurdish identity among members of the Kurdish community and to damage the reputation of the Turkish state and jeopardize its authority in Turkey's South East. Further, the PKK has been capable of developing influence over the policies and behaviour of Kurdish non-violent movements and parties that have emerged and operated in Turkey.

5-Ragan Updegraff, 'The Kurdish Question', 'Journal of Democracy', Vol.23, No.1, (2012), pp. 122-123.

6- The World Factbook-Turkey, CIA, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>, [Date accessed: 03/05/2017]

7- Bruno, Op.Cit,

Outlawed by the Turkish authorities as a terrorist organization, the PKK has been able to entrench itself in the mountainous border between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly in the Qandil mountains that have become the PKKs strong hold for the last 20 years. From Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK has commanded its fighters inside Turkey and directed violent operations against the Turkish state.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, Ankara has employed its military and diplomatic machineries in order to deny the PKK a safe heaven in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Preventing the impact that Iraqi Kurdish empowerment may have on the Kurds in Turkey has required Ankara to contain the Kurdish political and territorial ambitions in Iraq, be that achieving a strong autonomous entity — that would include the oil-rich city of Kirkuk— or moving towards independence.<sup>9</sup> Kurds in Turkey have been restive, rebelling against the state authorities in Ankara several times since the establishment of the modern Turkish state in 1923.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Turkey has worked to check Iraqi Kurds autonomous ambitions and has sought to undercut their bids for greater autonomy or for the creation of an independent Kurdish entity along Turkey's borders.

## 1.2 Economic interests

Economy strongly factors into Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan, which is seen by the Turkish authorities as their country's main gate to the rest of Iraq. As an industrial based economy, Turkey sees Iraq as an important market for selling its products and services. Further, Turkey, which lacks enough hydrocarbon resources to feed its growing economy, is in need of accessing Iraq's vast oil and gas resources. Indeed, one reason why Turkey aims to keep Iraq stable is to ensure that the country is open for business and for Iraqi oil and gas to be safely transferred to Turkey and via Turkey to the global market.<sup>11</sup> Figure 2 shows that there was a noticeable increase in petroleum consumption in Turkey in 2015. This trend forced Ankara to seek for alternative sources of low-price oil.

From the perspective of Ankara, the Iraqi market as well as the country's hydrocarbon resources allow for achieving greater economic prosperity in Turkey, which, in return, contribute to consolidating the Turkish government's domestic authority, popularity, and legitimacy. Further, maintaining economic ties with Iraq helps Turkey to enhance its regional and international status. Ankara has pursued a strategy of establishing

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8- Pinar Tank, 'The effects of the Iraq War on the Kurdish issue in Turkey', 'Conflict, Security & Development', Vol. 5, No.1, (2005), pp. 6986-.

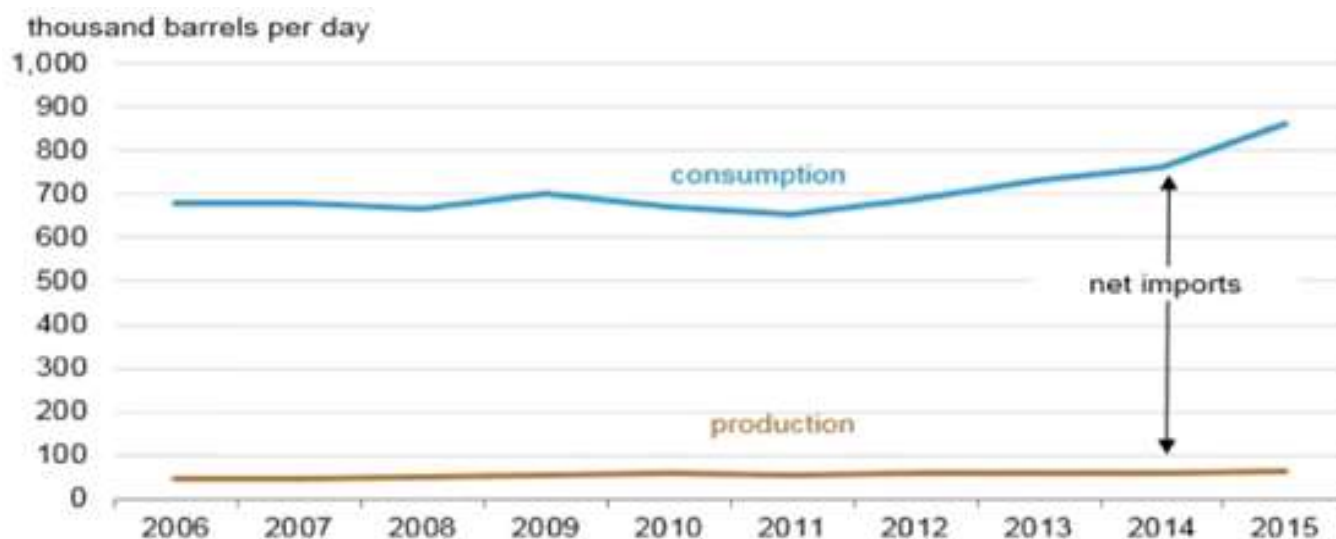
9-Bakery, (2005), Op.Cit, p.4.

10- Dogu Ergil, 'The Kurdish Question in Turkey', 'Journal of Democracy', Vol.11, No.3, (2000), pp. 123127-.

11- Hasan Turunc, 'Turkey and Iraq', Special Report, 'London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)', (2011), p. 42, available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/435031/Turkey%27s%20Global%20Strategy\\_Turkey%20and%20Iraq%28Isero%29.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/435031/Turkey%27s%20Global%20Strategy_Turkey%20and%20Iraq%28Isero%29.pdf) [Date accessed: 24/2016/09/].

Turkey as an international energy hub, that is a transit route through which hydrocarbon resources are transferred from the East to the West.<sup>12</sup> Iraq's oil and gas are transferred to the international market via Turkish territory, assisting Turkey in realising its strategy of becoming an international energy route, which, in the end, enables Ankara to gain political leverage over regional and global politics.

Figure (2): Turkey petroleum consumption and production



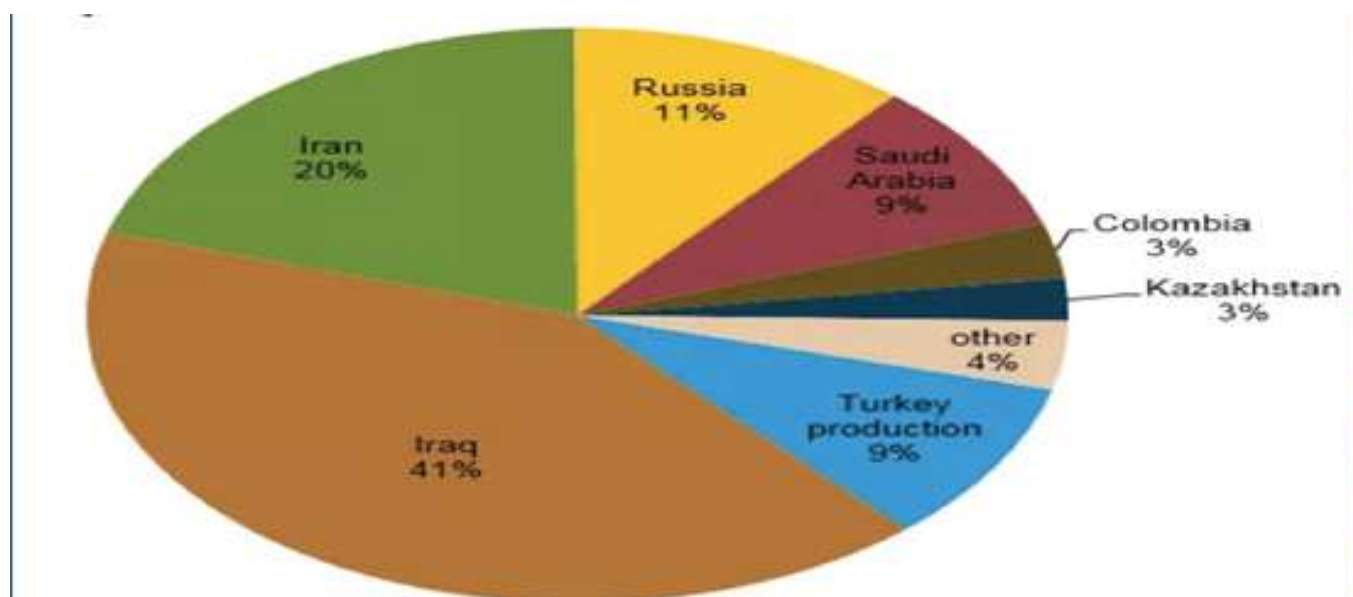
Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, available at: <http://www.bunkerportsnews.com/News.aspx?ElementId=25c62bdb-569b-4928-bb701-be484b1d14a>

Access to Iraq's oil and gas resources also permits Turkey to diversify its energy sources and reduces its dependency on Russia and Iran, long-time competitors of Turkey in the Caucasus and in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> Iraq provides good quality oil with low price to Turkey, which would otherwise depend on comparatively expensive Russian and Iranian energy that could also be utilised by Moscow and Tehran as political tool to put pressure on Turkey in regard to various regional and international issues. Figure 3 shows that in 2015, Iraq was Turkey's largest supplier of crude oil.

12- Emil Soulemanov & Josef Kraus, 'Turkey: An Important East-West Energy Hub', 'Middle East Policy', Vol.19, N.2, (2012), pp.157168-.

13- Gawdat Bahgat, 'Iran-Turkey Energy Cooperation: Strategic Implications', 'Middle East Policy', Vol.21, No.4, (2014), pp.12132-.

Figure 3: Turkey crude and condensate supply by source, 2015



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration based on International Energy Agency, Monthly Oil Data Service, available at: [https://i0.wp.com/www.eurasiareview.com/wp-content/uploads/201702/crude\\_condensate\\_supply\\_sorce.png](https://i0.wp.com/www.eurasiareview.com/wp-content/uploads/201702/crude_condensate_supply_sorce.png)

### 1.3 Regional balance of power

Despite the fact that there have been no direct clashes between Turkey and Iran in modern times, the two regional powers have competed for influence in the Middle East<sup>14</sup>. Turkey and Iran share certain security and economic interests but the two countries have been at odds in many areas across the Middle East. The two states possess fundamentally different political identities and ideologies. In addition to strategic rivalry, Iran and Turkey are divided by religious faith<sup>15</sup>. While the Iranian regime adheres to the Shia branch of Islam, the Turkish government (particularly under the rule of the Justice and Development Party – AKP) follows the Sunni branch. This sectarian division has added to the intensity of Turkey–Iran rivalry in recent years. A main objective of Turkey's foreign policy has then been to counterbalance Iran's regional influence, particularly in Iraq. The U.S.'s removal of the Iraqi former Baath regime in 2003 has given Tehran an opportunity to expand primarily by empowering the country's Shia majority who maintain strong ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Exploiting the religious bond that ties Iraq's Shia authorities to Iran, the Iranian ruling regime has been capable of developing effective influence over almost all aspects of Iraqi politics. Iran commands a system of alliance that includes Shia militias, powerful religious figures, and influential politicians rendering the Islamic Republic the most powerful external actor in Iraq<sup>16</sup>.

14- F. Stephen Larabe & Alireza Nader, 'Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East', RAND, (2013), p. vii, available at: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND\\_RR258.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR258/RAND_RR258.pdf) [Date accessed: 26/2016/11/].

15 Ibid.

16 - Zmkan A. Saleem, 'The Kurdish Challenge to U.S. Strategy in Iraq', FikraForum, 'The Washington Institute for Near East Policy', (2017), available at:

Iran's growing political clout in Iraq has frustrated the Turkish state, which sees Tehran's growing control over Baghdad as a strategic setback for Turkey. As a result, the ruling elite in Ankara has attempted to strengthen its ties with the Iraqi Kurds and Sunni Arabs in order to balance Iran's power in Iraq.

## 2. The formation and the break down of the alliance between Turkey and the KRG

When Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region decided to hold an independence referendum to break away from Iraq on September 25, 2017, Turkey took a harsh stance against the Kurdish authorities in Erbil-- the capital of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) — by joining force with the federal Iraqi government and Iran in punishing the Kurdish authorities for holding the independence vote. In coordination with Baghdad, Ankara stopped all flights to and from Iraqi Kurdistan, ordered joint military manoeuvres between the Turkish and Iraqi armies on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan, and threatened to shut down the oil pipeline that transfers Kurdistan region's oil to the world market via Turkish territories.<sup>17</sup> (See map 2)

Map 2: Oil pipeline transferring Iraqi Kurdistan's oil to world market via Turkey



Source: <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21568760-governments-turkey-iraq-and-iraqi-kurdistan-play-dangerous-game>

Turkey's hostile posture against the KRG's independence move was a reminder that Ankara still perceives the emergence of an independent Kurdish state along its borders as a threat to its national security. Moreover, Turkey will do whatever it can in order to abort the empowerment of the Kurds in the region, which could, from the perspective of the policy-makers in Ankara, encourage Turkey's Kurds to move against the Turkish state.

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-kurdish-challenge-to-u.s.-strategy-in-iraq> [Date accessed: 12/2017/12/].

17- Paul Alexander, 'Iraq, Turkey Move to Punish Kurdistan for Referendum Vote', 'VOA-Middle East', (28/2017/09/), available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/iraq-turkey-move-to-punish-kurdistan-for-referendum-vote/4047227.html> [Date accessed: 12/2017/12/].



This stance, however, contradicted Turkey's decade-long foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds that centred on strengthening the ties between Ankara and Erbil against the will of the central authorities in Baghdad. Entering into an unlikely alliance with Iran and Baghdad in order to contain the Iraqi Kurds' independence ambitions could not just harm Ankara-Erbil's strategic relations but it could also markedly weaken Turkey's influence across Iraq. The following two subsections examine the origins of the alliance between Turkey and the KRG and the causes of its breakdown at the aftermath of the Iraqi Kurds' independence move.

## 2.1 The formation of the alliance: looking at the origins

Over the past decade, Turkey built close relations with the Iraqi Kurds and Ankara mainly depended on the KRG in order to achieve its economic, security, and geostrategic goals in Iraq. Under the AKP leadership, Turkey transcended the traditional anti-Kurdish stance of the Kemalist-nationalist establishment and decided to recognise the autonomous status of the KRG in Iraq-- determined by the Iraq's new constitution of 2005 — and to deal with the emerging Kurdish entity in northern Iraq as a legitimate external actor.

The AKP's approach to the Iraqi Kurds was at a stark contrast to the proponents of the military-led secular establishment in Turkey which rejected recognising and dealing with Iraqi Kurdistan as a legitimate entity on the ground that the KRG would become a platform for the PKK to attack Turkey and would in the future seek independence from Iraq, endangering Turkey's national cohesion and territorial integrity. They preferred applying constant pressure on, and military threat against, the Iraqi Kurdish authorities in order to force them to abandon what the state establishment in Ankara perceived as Iraqi Kurds' assistance to the PKK.

The AKP, however, took a more pragmatic approach to the Iraqi Kurds and saw in developing ties with the KRG as an opportunity through which Turkey could advance its interests in Iraq. Unlike the military-led Kemalist establishment, the AKP leadership sought to de-securitise the Kurdish question in Turkey and planned to deal with it through political means. (See table 1 for a comparison between the two political trends in Turkey) This approach to Turkey's Kurdish question was in parallel with the AKP's foreign policy shift from a nearly exclusive focus on Turkey's relations with the West -- the United States and Europe in particular-- to an opening towards the Middle East and the Islamic countries that included Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>22</sup>.

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18 - Meltem Muftuler-Bac, 'Changing Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq: new tools of engagement', 'Cambridge Review of International Affairs', Vol.27, No.3, pp.538552-.

19- International Crisis Group, ' Turkey and Iraqi Kurds-Conflict or Cooperation?', Middle East Report, No18, (2008), p.3, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/turkey-and-iraqi-kurds-conflict-or-cooperation> [Date accessed: 24/2017/04/].

20 -Ibid.

21 F. Stephen Larrabe, 'Turkey's New Kurdish Opening', 'Survival', Vol.55, No.5, (2013), pp. 133146-.

The AKP leaders asserted that Turkey had the chance and the necessary capabilities and geostrategic position to become a regional superpower and exert economic, political, cultural and diplomatic influence in order to achieve its strategic interests in the Middle East<sup>23</sup>. These ideas were first introduced by Ahmet Davutoglu who proposed the so-called “Strategic Depth” doctrine for Turkey to pursue in its foreign policy in the Middle East. Davutoglu, a leading member of the AKP, held various formal government positions, including Turkey's foreign minister and prime minister. Under the AKP, Turkey sought ‘zero problems with its neighbours. Moreover, the AKP's reconciliatory approach towards Turkey's Kurds allowed Ankara to form ties with the Iraqi Kurds.

**Table 1: Differences and similarities between the AKP and the secular–nationalist establishment in Turkey in terms of ideology, support base and power, and domestic as well as foreign policy.**

|                           | The Kemalist-nationalist establishment   | The AKP   |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Political ideology</b> | <p>They adhere to the Secular nationalist principles * introduced by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founding father of the modern Turkish Republic. They believe in a militant version of secularism</p> <p>They perceive political Islam and Kurdish nationalism and identity as existential threats to the fundamental principles of the Turkish Republic and, therefore, seek to contain them forcefully if necessary</p> <p>Pursued assimilationist nationalism in regards to * the Kurds and prefers uniformity in terms of national identity based on the identity of the country's majority Turks</p> | <p>Classified under the category of Sunni * Muslim movements, the AKP signifies the possibility of a reconciliation of Islam with secularism and democracy, thus arguably becoming a model for the rest of the Muslim world</p> <p>Proponents of the AKP favour a more * moderate version of secularism at home that would open the political space for moderate Islamic parties and groups to operate and flourish</p> |

22- Kllie Bugar Kanat, ‘Is Turkey Turning Away From the West?’, ‘Insight Turkey’, Vol.12, No.1, (2010), pp. 208209-.

23 Alexander Murinson, ‘The Strategic depth doctrine of Turkish foreign policy’, ‘Middle Eastern Studies’, Vol.42, No.6, (2006), pp.945964-.

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| <p><b>Support base and political power</b></p> | <p>The Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet halk Partisi-CHP) asserts the Kemalist banner and was founded by Ataturk himself</p> <p>The Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetci Hareket Partisi-MHP) is considered as an advocate of Kemalism in Turkey given the party's strong nationalist ideas to which Kemalists usually subscribe</p> <p>Many Kemalist-nationalists are grouped around the MHP, which has adopted a more traditional, religiously observant line</p> <p>The newspaper Cumhuriyet (The Republic) stands to express the most orthodox Kemalist viewpoint but has small circulation in Turkey</p> <p>Kemalism is also defended by non-governmental organizations such as the Ataturk Thought Association led by former military officers. Before AKP's rise to prominence, the advocates of the Kemalists controlled top positions in Turkey's judiciary</p> <p>Prior to the rise of the AKP in 2002, the Turkish military controlled most of the levers of power in the Turkish state and presented itself as the guardian of the Kemalist pillars of the modern republic. The military staged several Coup d'état in order to get the civilian branch of the government in line with Kemalism</p> | <p>Supported by large portions of the Turkish society's religiously conservative individuals, the AKP won almost all general elections in Turkey since 2002</p> <p>The party controls the Turkish government and permeates the state's various institutions</p> |
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| <p><b>Domestic Politics</b></p> | <p>Defend and preserve the hegemony of the Kemalist ideology as envisioned by Atatürk himself, which represented a progressive political agenda to form and maintain a strong and secular Turkish nation-state</p> <p>Favour a security approach to Turkey's Kurdish question and have supported violent suppression of the Kurdish demands for cultural and political rights in Turkey</p> <p>Prevent the Islamization of the Turkish society and state and prevent the public manifestation of Islamic Symbols in the public sphere (including Hijab</p> | <p>De-securitizing political Islam and Kurdish nationalism and cultural demands in the domestic realm</p> <p>Opening the domestic political space for moderate Islamic movements and parties to flourish</p> <p>Supporting a multi-cultural conception of citizenship inside Turkey, which would allow for the country's various ethnic groups to maintain and express their ethnic identity within the framework of a unified Turkish state. Accordingly, the AKP leadership do not see Kurds' demand for cultural rights as a threat to Turkey's national security. As long as ethnic Kurds maintain a sense of loyalty to the Turkish state, their demand can be accommodated via peaceful means. Given their adherence to Turkey's Ottoman legacy, the AKP leadership believe that Islam can operate as a common identity in binding the Turks and the Kurds in Turkey</p> |
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| Foreign Policy | <p>Unbalanced focus on Turkey's relations with the West, including the United States and Europe</p> <p>Reject Turkey's involvement in the Middle East on religious-sectarian bases and think that utilizing Turkey's religious-Sunni identity of the majority of the country's population in order gain influence and allies among the Middle Eastern states is a dangerous game and could pave the way for the sectarian conflict in the region to extend to Turkey and destabilize the country's domestic security</p> <p>Reject dealing with Iraqi Kurdistan as a legitimate entity and prefer containing the KRG through diplomatic and military means</p> | <p>They see a problem in Ankara's over-obsession with the West and aim to widen the horizon of Turkey's foreign policy options by adding a Middle Eastern dimension to Turkey's external engagement. They conceive no danger in Turkey deepening its relationships with Middle Eastern states, which were historically parts of the Ottoman Empire, based on Turkey's historical-Islamic identity</p> <p>According to their view, shared history, culture and religious faith with the population of the Middle East allow Turkey to play a leading role in the region and provide the country with important opportunities to project soft power across the region</p> |
| Similarities   | <p>Both share a strong sense of patriotism and attachment to the Turkish nation-state</p> <p>The AKP represents a more pragmatic and liberal mindset than Kemalism, but it has successfully internalized the Kemalist paradigm of Turkish nationalism. The concept of the nation-state and the achievements of the modern Turkish republic are not called into question or refuted by the AKP</p> <p>Both Kemalism and the AKP share a state-centric view of the world and Turkish national interests</p>  |   |

The table is based on the analysis provided by: Omer Taspinar, 'Turkey's Middle East Policies Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism', 'Carnegie Middle East Centre', (2008), available at: [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10\\_taspinar\\_final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf) [Date Accessed: 112016/05/].



The AKPs drive towards the Iraqi Kurds was compounded by the fact that the federal Iraqi government, which came to power after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, had no leverage over the PKK and its activities in the northern Kurdish dominated part of Iraq that borders Turkey. Moreover, the rising sectarian conflict between the Iraqi Shias and the Sunnis left little hope for Turkey to achieve its economic interests in Iraq through cooperation with the government in Baghdad.

Further, the U.S. invasion of Iraq tilted the sectarian balance of power in Iraq in favour of the majority Shias who have been closely connected with Iran. Thus, the invasion served Tehrans interests in Iraq and resulted in an unprecedented rise in Irans influence in Iraq mainly at the expense of Turkeys power in Iraq. Given these, the AKP leadership moved closer to the Iraqi Kurds looking at the KRG as a gateway to Turkeys interests in Iraq<sup>(24)</sup>.

The AKP decided to form a strategic alliance with the KRG, particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) — one of the leading political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan — in order to achieve Turkeys security, economic, and geostrategic interests in Iraq<sup>25</sup>. By forming an alliance with the KRG, Ankara endeavoured to contain the independence ambitions of the Iraqi Kurds and to prevent the PKK from using Iraqi Kurdistans territory as a launch pad against the Turkish state.

Containing the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan and diminishing its activities along the Turkish–Iraqi border have always been the central security goal of the Turkish government, which conceived of the KRG as an asset in fighting the influence of the PKK in Iraq. Recognizing that military means would not alone be sufficient to rein in the militants of the PKK, Ankara demanded the KRG to step up its efforts against the Kurdish insurgent group as a precondition for Turkeys recognition of the autonomous status of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>26</sup> Given the KDPs rivalry with the PKK,<sup>27</sup> the Turkish government received a positive reaction from the leaders of the KDP who enhanced the KRGs anti-PKK policies beginning with late 2008. The KRG banned PKK affiliated parties, arrested PKK politicians, closely monitored the groups activities, and closed down the PKKs offices<sup>28</sup>.

Further, the KRG–Turkey security cooperation included providing intelligence on the PKKs positions and activities by the KRG security institutions to their

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24 -Alireza Nader, Larry Hanauer, Brenna Allen, Ali G. Scotten, ‘Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan’, RAND, (2016), pp.6768-, available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1452.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1452.html) [Date accessed: 242017/05/].

25- Henri J. Bakery, ‘Turkey’s New Engagement in Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan’, Special Report 237, United States Institute Of Peace (USIP), (2010), pp. 38-.

26- Mohammed M.A. Ahmed, ‘Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building’, (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), p.163164-.

27- Denis Natali, ‘PKK Challenges Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan’, ‘Al-Monitor’, (May 9, 2013), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201305/pkk-barzani-challenge-kurdistan.html> [Date accessed: 242017/02/].

28- Gonul Tol, ‘Turkey’s KRG Energy Partnership’, ‘Foreign Policy’, (January 29, 2013), available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/201329/01/turkeys-krge-energy-partnership/> [Date accessed: 262017/02/].

Turkish counterpart. With explicit agreement of the KRG, the Turkish military increased its existence in Iraqi Kurdistan where it monitored and pursued the PKK and its fighters. Increased security cooperation and coordination between Ankara and Erbil convinced the Turkish authorities to form diplomatic relations with the Iraqi Kurds.

Previously, Iraqi Kurdish leaders were demonised as enemies of the Turkish state and as accomplices in the PKKs violent activities against the Turkish security forces by the military-led secular establishment in Ankara. This perception had, however, changed under the AKP which increased Turkey's diplomatic presence in Iraqi Kurdistan and invited Iraqi Kurdish leaders to Ankara for official meetings with their Turkish counterparts.<sup>29</sup>

In April 2010, the KRG's former president Masud Barzani—who is the leader of the KDP at the same time — visited Turkey for high official meetings with Turkey's President, Prime Minister, and foreign minister<sup>30</sup>. A year later in 2011, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan visited Erbil and officially opened Turkey's Consulate in the city<sup>31</sup>. Increased security cooperation between Ankara and Erbil paved the way for on-going diplomatic engagement between the two.

Forming an alliance with the KRG also helped Turkey to realise its economic interests in Iraq. Turkey's economic interaction with the KRG has been manifold involving increased trade with Iraqi Kurdistan and investing in the most significant economic sectors in the Kurdish region.<sup>32</sup> Incentivised by the KRG's 2006 investment law, Turkish companies moved into Iraq's Kurdish region in large numbers, scoring the largest among the foreign companies investing in Iraqi Kurdistan. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of Turkish companies investing in the KRG tripled from 485 to almost 1,500<sup>33</sup>.

Iraqi Kurdistan has also become a significant market for selling Turkish products. In 2007, export from Turkey to the KRG stood at \$1.4 billion, making Iraqi Kurdistan Turkey's nineteenth largest market. In 2013, Turkish export to the KRG had however risen to \$8 billion, which made Iraqi Kurdistan Turkey's third largest market.<sup>34</sup>

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29- Bill Park, 'Turkey-Kurdish Regional Government Relations After the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq: Putting the Kurds on the Map?' Carlisle, (Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), p.8.

30- Park, Op.Cit,

31- KRG.org, 'Barzani and Erdogan Open Erbil Int'l Airport and Turkish Consulate', (March 13,2011), available at: <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?r=223&l=12&s=02010100&a=39389&s=010000> [Date accessed: 11/2017/05/].

32- Turkish companies engaged in different economic sectors in Iraqi Kurdistan including building and finances, agriculture, construction, education, electrical power systems, health care, oil and gas extraction, and services, telecommunications, transportation, tourism, and water industry. See: Soner Cagaptay, Christian Bache Fidan, and Ege Cansu Sacikara, 'Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth', 'The Washington Institute', Policy Watch 2387, (March 16, 2015), available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-kr-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth> [Date accessed: 15/2016/11/].

33- Ibid

34-Ibid

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The need to achieve its strategic goal of accessing Iraq's oil and gas resources played an important role in Turkey's alignment with the KRG. Turkey needs a reliable supply of oil and gas from Iraq not just to ensure adequate energy supply for its rapidly growing industrial based economy but also to reduce its dependence on Russia and Iran, the two principal importers of oil and gas to Turkey. Bypassing Baghdad, Ankara decided to enter into energy cooperation with the KRG providing an opportunity to Kurdish authorities in Erbil to independently sell the Kurdish regions oil. A 2012 energy deal between Ankara and Erbil allowed for constructing three export pipelines (two oil pipelines and one gas pipeline) between KRG territory and Turkey that enabled Erbil to sell oil to Turkey and to use Turkish territories to transfer oil to the world market.

Through alliance with the KRG, Turkey sought to balance Iran's rising influence in Iraq, particularly with the U.S. withdrawal from the country in 2011. Iran's growing clout over the Shiite authorities in Baghdad forced Ankara to help strengthen the Iraqi Kurds — and the Sunnis — as a way to prevent the Shias as well as Iran's complete domination over Iraq. From Turkey's perspective, a greater political role for the Iraqi Kurds and Sunni Arabs, Turkey's allies, would allow Ankara to contribute to the shaping of Iraq's politics in ways that Turkey's interests would be secured while an Iranian hegemony would be prevented in Iraq.

While Turkey's relations with Baghdad were worsening — primarily because of Nouri Maliki's (Iraq's Shia Prime Minister from 2006–2014) pursuit of authoritarianism with a sectarian overtone that eventually worried the policy-makers in Ankara — the ties between the KRG and Turkey were strengthening. Reflecting on the close relationship formed between Turkey and the KRG, Soner Gagaptay and Tyler Evans stated in 2012: Today, amid Turkey's ongoing tensions with the Iraqi government, the nascent relationship between Erbil and Ankara has grown into an undeclared entente against Baghdad. Turkish Foreign Ministry officials have been shuttling regularly to Erbil for consultations with the KRG, and without making stops in Baghdad.

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35- David Romano, 'Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey: Temporary Marriage?', 'Middle East Policy', Vol. XXII, NO.1, (2015), pp.9195-.

36- Ibid

37- In January 2014, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz claimed that Turkey was importing 450,000 bpd from northern Iraq. By late 2014, the KRG had sold approximately 30 million barrels of oil through Turkey. See: Nader et al, Op.Cit, p.87.

39- Nader et al, Op.Cit, p.68.

Soner Gagaptay & Tyler Evans, 'Turkey's Changing Relations with Iraq: Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down', 'The Washington Institute', Policy Focus 122, (2012), p.7, available at: [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus122\\_CagaptayEvans.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus122_CagaptayEvans.pdf) [Date accessed: 18/2016/04/]

Turkeys policy shift towards the Iraqi Kurds came as a surprise to observers and policy analysts alike. As late as 2007, the Turkish authorities were holding the KRG responsible for a rise in PKK attacks on the Turkish military posts and security forces. During this period— when there was an evident increase in the PKKs anti-Turkey violent activities —, Ankara did not even allow Iraqi Kurdish officials to travel to Turkey for negotiations <sup>40</sup>. Distrusting the KRG, Ankara first resorted to the authorities in Baghdad in order to put an end to the PKKs threat to Turkey. Turkish official meetings with the authorities in Baghdad began as late as 2008 and culminated in signing several memorandums on issues ranging from strategic and security dialogue to bilateral trade and energy cooperation. <sup>41</sup>

However, the political dimension of the ties between Ankara and Baghdad was showing signs of deteriorations primarily due to Turkeys dissatisfactions with the Baghdads marginalization of Sunnis and the Kurds and the Shia-led governments centralization policy under the rule of Maliki. Striking a sectarian balance in Iraq was Turkeys main objective, but when Maliki did not abide by his promises to include the Sunnis and the Kurds in ruling Iraq, he alienated the Turkish government, which saw Malikis policies as sectarian and as an attempt at imposing the Shia hegemony over the Iraqi politics <sup>42</sup>. Thus, as it failed to strike an ethno-sectarian balance in Iraq, Turkey moved to forge an alliance with the Iraqi Kurds in order to secure its interests in Iraq. The Turkish-KRG alignment began as late as 2009 and it was fully crystallised in 2012 and continued until September 25, 2017 when the KRG leadership decided to conduct an independence referendum.

## 2.2 The end of the alliance: examining the causes

The relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds was not strong enough to stand the KRGs independence move. Several factors account for the weakening Turkeys alliance with the KRG that could in the end undermine Turkeys interests in Iraq:

### Iraqi Kurds ambitions for independence

As shown, the alliance between Turkey and the KRG did serve the security, economic, and geostrategic interests of Ankara in Iraq. The relationship, however, benefited the Kurdish authorities in Erbil too, particularly their goal of enhancing the KRGs ability for an independence move. For long, the Iraqi Kurds sought autonomy and independence from Iraq but their ambitions clashed with the interests of the traditionally Arab dominated central governments in Baghdad. Iraqi governments would provide a degree of self-rule

40- Sami Moubayed, 'Turkey determined to Turn the Screws', 'Asia Times', (October 30, 2007), available at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_%20East/IJ30Ak06.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_%20East/IJ30Ak06.html)[Date accessed: 18/2016/04/]

41- Cagaptay & Evans, Op.Cit, p.3.

42- Ibid, p.8.

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for the Kurds when weak but would end Kurds self-government when later regaining their strength.

The U.S. 2003 invasion of Iraq created an opportunity for the Iraqi Kurds to expand and cement their autonomy within the framework of a federal-democratic Iraq. Providing assistance to the American toppling of the Baath regime in 2003, the Kurds received help and protection from Washington during the early years of U.S.s occupation of Iraq<sup>43</sup>. However, the 2011 U.S. withdrawal from Iraq presented the Kurds with a strong challenge as they remained without their strong international ally. Iraqi Kurds had to face a dominant Shia majority government in Baghdad, backed by the Islamic Republic of Iran with no interest in allowing the Iraqi Kurds to achieve full autonomy or independence.

The relationship between Erbil and Baghdad began to deteriorate from 2011 and on and conflict emerged between the two over control over the disputed territories; sharing of national revenues; control over oil investment; as well as the status of the Kurdish fighting forces, the Peshmarga<sup>44</sup>. Under pressure from Iran and a resurging Arab nationalism in the centre, Kurds looked into finding an external ally in order to balance the power of their domestic and regional rivals. Turkey offered the Kurds the external partner they needed and Ankaras engagement with Erbil enabled the KRG to be better positioned to seek greater autonomy and later seek independence:

In pursuit of its own strategic interests, Turkey has engaged the Iraqi Kurds in a range of ways that have bolstered the KRGs autonomy within the Iraqi polity, its economic strength, and its military capabilities—all of which have made the KRG better positioned to pursue independence<sup>45</sup>. Ignoring the Kurds historical ambitions for independence, Turkey lifted various constraints on the way of the Kurdish leaders to attempt to break away from Iraq. Turkey not only recognised the status of the KRG as an autonomous entity but also allowed the Iraqi Kurds to independently sell oil in the world market, providing a source of income for Erbil through which it could operate without relying on Baghdad.<sup>46</sup> Accessing the world market via Turkey enabled Erbil to overcome the landlocked condition that had always impeded the Iraqi Kurds goal of achieving independence from Iraq.

A major shift in Turkey's Iraqi Kurdistan's policy was represented by Ankaras tacit consent on the KRGs control over Kirkuk in July 2014. Previously, the Turkish authorities denied Erbil's claim that Kirkuk was a majority Kurdish city and that the KRG had the right to control it. Ankara had always asserted that Kirkuk was a Turkmen majority city and the Kurdish authorities in Iraq had no

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43- Nader et al, Op.Cit, p.22.

44- Gareth Stansfield and Liam Anderson, 'Kurds in Iraq: The Struggle Between Baghdad and Erbil', 'Middle East Policy Council', Vol.VXI, No.1, available at: <http://mepc.org/journal/kurds-iraq-struggle-between-baghdad-and-erbili> [Date accessed: 24/2017/08/].

45- Nader et al, Op.Cit, p.76.

46- Park, Op.Cit, p.8.



right to rule it as a part of their autonomous region of Iraq. The Turkish state threatened with direct military intervention in order to prevent the Iraqi Kurds from imposing their control over Kirkuk. However, with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, the Kurdish forces controlled Kirkuk and the rest of the internally disputed areas. Turkey took no action to halt the Iraqi Kurds territorial expansion<sup>47</sup>.

In fact, the Kurdish authorities started to sell Kirkuk's oil via the pipeline running from the Kurdish region to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan<sup>48</sup>. Thus, Turkey acquiesced to the Iraqi Kurds territorial expansion and helped the KRG to gain greater economic resources for building a viable independent state. Turkey also abandoned the Turkmen minority in Kirkuk in favour of its alliance with the Iraqi Kurds.

Turkey for long assisted the Iraqi Turkmen community, an ethnic Turkic group inhabiting the Kurdish region of Iraq. Ankara advocated for the rights of the group and helped the Turkmen to organise themselves politically. Turkmen political parties in return provided access and information on the Kurdish region of Iraq to Turkey, which, in essence, manipulated the Iraqi Turkic community and used them to balance the Kurds' ambitions in Kirkuk<sup>49</sup>. However, no Turkish official raised the Turkmen question when the Kurdish forces moved to Kirkuk in large numbers and ruled the city for three years from 2014–2017<sup>50</sup>. In contrast, the Turkish government provided military assistance to the Kurdish Peshmarga forces.

Turkey was among the several countries that provided military assistance to the Iraqi Kurds with the aim of bolstering the KRG's forces to withstand the threat posed by the militants of the IS<sup>51</sup>. Protecting Turkey's growing economic interests in Iraqi Kurdistan may have driven Ankara to provide military support to the KRG. The military assistance, however, signified the strength of the new relationship between Turkey and the KRG. Further, Turkey provided a pathway for the KRG forces via Turkish territories to cross to Syria in order to help the Syrian Kurds defeat the militants of IS in the city of Kobane.<sup>52</sup> This Turkish move bolstered the international reputation of Iraqi Kurdistan and strengthened the Kurdish leaders' resolve for independence.

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47 Nader et al, Op.Cit, p.22.

48 Tol, Op.Cit.,

49 Barkey, (2005), Op.Cit, p.7.

50 Fehim Tasken, 'Iraqi Turkmen feel abandoned by Turkey', 'Al-Monitor', (June 20, 2014), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201406/taştekin-iraqi-turkmen-kurds-turkey-isis-kirkuk-kr.html> [Date accessed: 202017/08/].

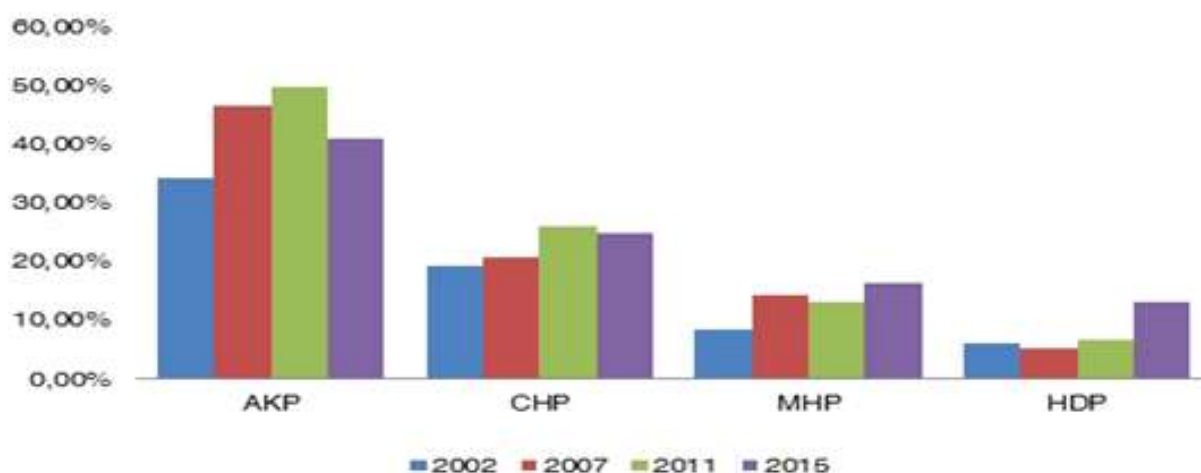
51 Humeyra Pamuk, 'Turkey trains Kurdish peshmerga forces in fight against Islamic State', 'Reuters', (November 22, 2014), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-iraq/turkey-trains-kurdish-peshmerga-forces-in-fight-against-islamic-state-idUSKCN0J60B720141122> [Date accessed: 252017/08/].

52- Liz Sly, 'Syrian Regime denounces Turkey for allowing foreign fighters to enter to Kobane', 'The Washington Post', (October 30, 2014), available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iraqi-kurds-join-fight-to-break-islamic-state-siege-on-syrian-town/2014/10/30/d846f3011-6026-e491-f75-d89b5e8c251\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6eab81b72dec](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-kurds-join-fight-to-break-islamic-state-siege-on-syrian-town/2014/10/30/d846f3011-6026-e491-f75-d89b5e8c251_story.html?utm_term=.6eab81b72dec) [Date accessed: 252017/08/].

## The Kurdish question in Turkey

While the AKP ended Turkey's traditional suspicion of the Iraqi Kurds and formed an alliance with the KRG, Turkey's ruling party since 2002 (the AKP won almost all elections in Turkey since 2002 – see figure 4) has failed to fully address Turkey's Kurdish question. As stated, Turkey's opposition to the empowerment and independence of the Iraqi Kurds is rooted in Ankara's fears that the Kurdish gains in Iraq would encourage Turkey's Kurds against the Turkish state. Therefore, building long-term and stable alliance between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey largely depends on addressing the challenge posed by the Kurds to the Turkish state. Even though the AKP did initiate a domestic peace process in order to solve the Kurdish issue in Turkey via peaceful means, a number of domestic and regional factors forced the AKP leadership to abandon the peace initiative and return to the dismal relationship with Turkey's Kurds.

Figure 4: The AKP has been the winner of almost all elections in Turkey since 2002



Source: [http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/rielcano\\_en/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/commentary-toygur-new-turkey-that-was-not-in-erdogan-plans-aftermath-critical-june-2015-elections](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/web/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/commentary-toygur-new-turkey-that-was-not-in-erdogan-plans-aftermath-critical-june-2015-elections)

After winning the November 2002 elections, the AKP pursued democratic reforms that were designed to improve democracy in the country and enhance Turkey's membership for the EU (53). Directly or indirectly these reforms benefited the Kurds in Turkey. The AKP's reforms included an end to the state of emergency, the reduction of pre-trial detention periods, dismantling of the State Security Courts. Further, the AKP government lifted restrictions on the public use of Kurdish language, began a publically funded 24-hour Kurdish language television, opened Kurdish language university departments, and allowed Kurdish to be taught as an elective course in middle and high schools since June 2012. <sup>54</sup>The democratic reforms carried out by the AKP weakened the domestic role of the Turkish military and opened the political space for the Kurdish question to

53-Ersel Aydinli, 'Civil-Military Relations Transformed', 'Journal of Democracy', Vol.23, No.1, (2012), pp. 104107-.

54- Larrabe, Op.Cit, pp.134135-.

be addressed peacefully. The military perceived the Kurdish challenge as a national security threat and dealt with it through military means<sup>55</sup>. Recognizing the failure of military means in defeating Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, the AKP stressed that the Kurdish question should be taken out of the security realm and should be addressed through political and non-military means<sup>56</sup>.

These initiatives became part of the 2009 “Kurdish Opening” and the “Solution process” announced by the AKP. In the process, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan began secret negotiations with the jailed PKK leader Ocalan and sought his help in ending the militant groups activities against the Turkish state<sup>57</sup>. In 2013, the PKK expressed support for the government's peace attempt and decided to withdraw its fighters from the Turkish territories into Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>58</sup>. In addition, greater freedom was provided for Kurdish political parties to emerge and run for Turkey's parliament. In this respect, Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) became the strongest Kurdish-led party in Turkey that has aimed to advance the Kurdish community's interests through legal and political means<sup>59</sup>. The political successes of the HDP, however, represented a challenge for the AKP and its domestic plans, leading the ruling party in Turkey to abandon the peace process with serious consequences for the alliance between Ankara and Erbil.

During the 2015 parliamentary elections in Turkey, the Kurdish led HDP received 13.12 % of the votes crossing the 10 per cent electoral threshold needed to claim seats in the Turkish parliament. While the HDP won 80 out of the total 550 seats in the Turkish parliament, (see figure 5) the AKP failed to receive enough votes (only received 40.87% of the public votes) that could enable the party to form a majority government and amend Turkey's constitution and transform Turkey from a Parliamentary to a Presidential system with Erdogan at the top of the new Turkish polity<sup>60</sup>. With only 258 seats in the Parliament, the AKP had to negotiate with the HDP in order to form a coalition government and pursue its domestic agenda. The AKP, however, refused to do so and called for a snap election.

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55-Ayninli, Op.Cit, p.103104-.

56 Henri J. Barkey, ‘Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan’, ‘United States Institute for Peace’, Special Report 237, (2010), pp.911-, available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/201007/turkeys-new-engagement-iraq-embracing-iraqi-kurdistan-arabic-edition> [Date accessed: 11/2017/08/].

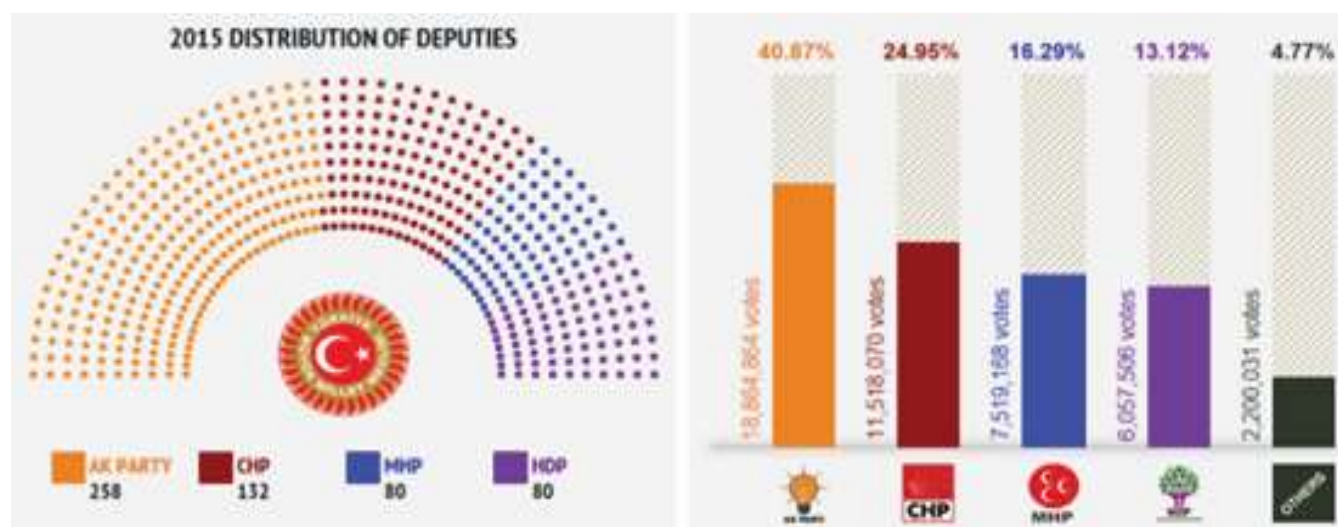
57- F. Stephen Larrabe and Gonul Tol, ‘Turkey's Kurdish Challenge’, ‘Survival’, Vol.53, No.4, (2011), pp.143152-.

58-BBC, ‘Murat Karayilan announces PKK withdrawal from Turkey’, (April 25, 2013), available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22293966> [Date accessed: 15/2017/08/].

59- Kadir Gursel, ‘Win or lose, Turkey's Kurds will advance in June elections’, ‘Al-Monitor’, (January 23, 2015), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201501/turkey-elections-kurds-win-win.html> [Date accessed: 20/2017/05/].

60 Semih Idiz, ‘Erdogan aims to create stronger presidential system’, ‘Al-Monitor’, (February 3, 2015), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/contents/articles/originals/201502/turkey-erdogan-presidential-system-campaign.html> [Date accessed: 08/2016/03/].

Figure 5: June 2015 election results in Turkey



Source: <http://cesran.org/cesran-reflections-on-turkeys-june-7-parliamentary-elections-by-dr-ali-onur-ozcelik.html>

Prior to the second round of the 2015 elections, the AKP leadership resumed its fight with the PKK and ordered air bombardment of the groups stronghold inside Iraq<sup>61</sup>. Further, the Turkish government linked the HDP to the PKK terrorism, enabling the Turkish authorities of arresting and harassing many members of the HDP.<sup>62</sup> The AKP leadership claimed that going back to military means in dealing with the PKK was a response to a militant groups renewed attacks on Turkish security forces.

However, to most observers, Erdogan, Turkey's president, staged the domestic crisis in order to achieve two interrelated goals. Firstly, the war with the PKK aimed at arousing the sense of nationalism among the country's majority Turks, which would, in return, help the AKP to widen its domestic support base and win the second round of elections by a majority. Secondly, fighting the PKK allowed Ankara to weaken the position and popularity of the HDP by associating the Kurdish-led party with terrorism and arresting its activists and members<sup>63</sup>.

Indeed, the AKP's strategy worked and the party won the November 2015 elections by a majority (the ruling party received 49.4% per cent of the votes and increased its seats in parliament to 317) enabling it to form a majority government. (See figure 6) Even though it remained an influential parliamentary force, HDP was weakened during the same elections (the Kurdish-led party only received 10.7% per cent of the votes and its seats were reduced to only 59). (See figure 6)

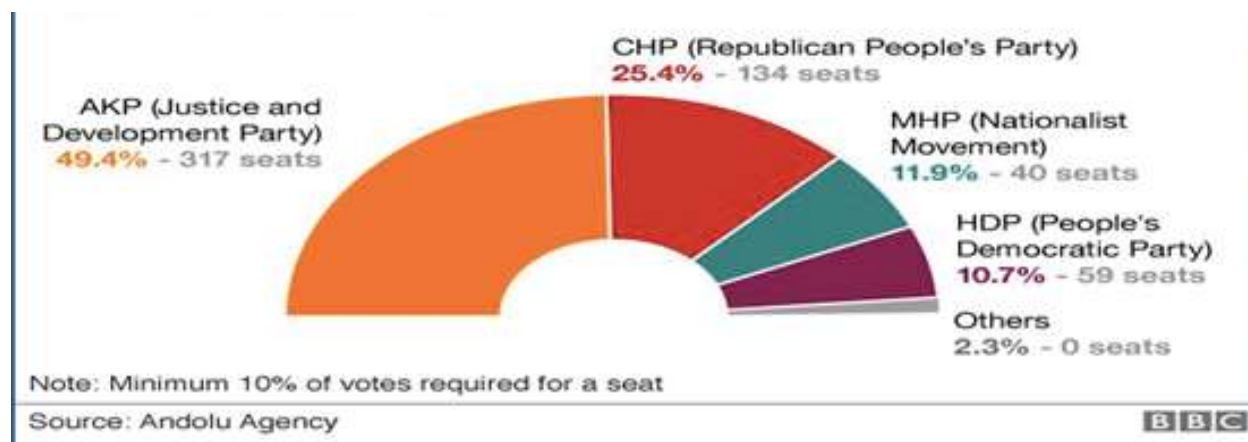
61 Amanda Paul & Demir Murat Seyrek, 'Turkey's new election: War or peace', 'Aljazeera', (October 30, 2015), available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/201510/turkey-election-war-peace-151028093829631.html> [Date accessed: 23/2016/05/].

62 The Guardian, 'Turkey: journalists and political rivals arrested as Erdogan crackdown widens', (November 3, 2015), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/03/turkey-arrests-35-people-with-links-to-erdogan-critic> [Date accessed: 04/2016/09/].

63 Paul & Seyrek, Op.Cit., See also: Gonul Tol, 'Erdogan's High-Risk Strategy', 'Middle East Institute', (August 6, 2015), available at: <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/erdogan%E299%80%80s-high-risk-strategy> [Date accessed: 23/2016/05/].



Figure 6: November 2015 election results in Turkey



Source: Andolu& BBC, available at:<http://newpol.org/content/turkey%E299%80%80s-elections-crisis-continues-%E293-%80%and-not-worst-outcome>

The AKP was thus capable of achieving victory by successfully winning the November 2015 elections, a victory that allowed the ruling party to arrange a constitutional referendum in March 2017 for changing the Turkish political system to a presidential one. The referendum was carried out and the AKP won again but largely at the expense of the peace process with the country's Kurds<sup>64</sup>. Turkey's anti-Kurdish policies exemplified by shrinking the political space for Kurdish peaceful movement to operate, arresting thousands of Kurdish activists, and using violence against the PKK and the civilian Kurdish population again alienated many Kurds from the Turkish government<sup>65</sup>.

Going back to the old school of dealing with the Kurdish question as a national security threat has negatively impacted upon Turkey's perception of, and response to, the Iraqi Kurds independence move. To prevent irredentist nationalism to cross over to inside Turkey, Ankara was forced to take a harsh stance against Iraqi Kurdistan's move towards independence. Erdogan has been promoting himself as Turkey's strong man and allowing the KRG to separate from Iraq could have damaged his image as Turkey's decisive leader:

Erdogan was also conscious of the negative impact on his charisma, as well as on his carefully cultivated image as an all-powerful leader fully in control at home and immensely influential beyond Turkey. Erdogan could therefore not accept being perceived as a weak leader unable to persuade a small and dependent entity below his southern border not to pursue the goal of independence despite his repeated warnings<sup>66</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> BBC, 'Turkey referendum grants President Erdogan sweeping powers', (April 16, 2017), available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39617700> [Date accessed:04/2016/09/].

<sup>65</sup> Kadri Gursel, 'Turkey's emergency rule stokes Kurdish separatism', 'Al-Monitor', (September 13, 2016), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201609/turkey-emergency-rule-stokes-kurdish-separatism.html> [Date accessed:03/2017/10/].

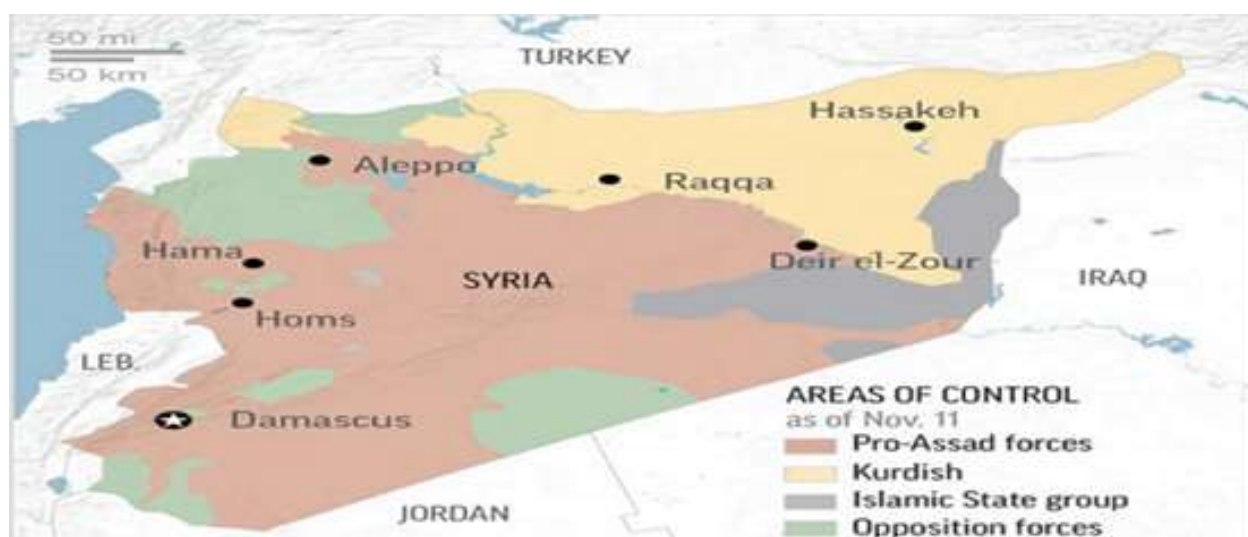
<sup>66</sup> Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 'Turkey and The KRG After the Referendum: Blocking the Path to Independence', (November 22, 2017), available at: The empowerment of the Syrian Kurds



Domestic politics aside, political and military developments in neighbouring Syria, particularly the empowerment of the Syrian Kurds, has had an undeniable impact upon the Turkish governments perception of the Kurdish threat in both Iraq and Turkey.

Since the beginning of the Syrian turmoil in 2012, the Syrian Kurds led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the Peoples Protection Unit (YPG) have been able to expand their control over large swaths of territory along the Syrian–Turkish border.<sup>67</sup> (See map 3) The YPD is an offshoot of the PKK, Turkey's number one enemy<sup>68</sup>. In its struggle for building an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, the group has drawn support from Kurds across the region. Thousands of Kurdish volunteers from Iran, Turkey, and Iraq have come to aid the PYD in expanding and protecting the Kurdish partys administrative and military control over the self-declared cantons of Efrin, Kobane, and Jazira, collectively named Rojava<sup>69</sup>.

Map 3: Areas under the control of the Kurds in Syria 152017/01/



Source: <http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/world-after-is-collapse-syria-government-faces-us-backed-kurds-411234>

Turkey has feared that a KRG-like semi-autonomous Kurdish region ruled by the

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/turkey-and-krg-after-referendum-blocking-path-independence> [Date accessed: 252017/12/].

67 Heiko Wimmen & Muzehher Selcuk, 'The Rise of Syria's Kurds', 'Carnegie Endowment for International Peace', (February 05, 2013), available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=50852> [Date accessed: 252016/10/].

68 Reuters, 'YPG fighters credit Ocalan with Syria victory', (October 23, 2017), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa/ypg-fighters-credit-ocalan-with-syria-victory-idUSKBN1CS1J7?il=0> [Date accessed: 142017/12/].

69 Ralf Hoppe, Maximilian Popp, Christoph Reuter, Jonathan Stock, 'The Kurds' Lonely Fight against Islamic State Terror', 'Spiegel Online', (292014/10/), available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/kurdish-fight-against-islamic-state-could-fundamentally-change-region-a-999538.html> [Date accessed: 252016/08/]

PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish PYD would emerge in Syria <sup>70</sup>. This is exactly what has been taken place with the Syrian Kurds building self-rule in northern Syria. In addition to a functioning administration, a court system and police, Rojava also boasts its very own secret service and it produces its own electricity. Furthermore, the government actively seeks to attract companies to the region and has a council dedicated to stimulating the economy <sup>71</sup>. Turkey fears that Rojava would become a strong enclave for the PKK from where the group would intensify its attacks on the Turkish security forces in and outside Turkey.

Further, Turkish authorities have learnt that the territorial and political gains of the Syrian Kurds would bolster Turkey's Kurds and would encourage them against the Turkish government. Indeed, when the Syrian YPG put up a strong resistance against the militants of IS in the city of Kobane in 2015, Turkey's Kurdish HDP capitalized on the moment and blamed Erdogan and the AKP for refusing to assist the Syrian YPG and their fight against IS. Many members of Turkey's Kurdish community responded to the HDP and criticised the Turkish government's stance on the fight in Kobane. Moreover, the Kurdish resistance in Kobane helped HDP to defeat the AKP in the Kurdish dominated South Eastern Turkey during the first round of the parliamentary elections. <sup>72</sup> Convergence of interests in fighting the militants of IS in Syria brought the YPD close to the United States. Washington has provided military assistance to the YPG dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that have cleared much of the northern Syrian territories from IS, including the city of Raqqa the radical groups capital in Syria. U.S.'s alliance with the Kurdish SDF angered Turkey which fears that through their fight against IS, the PKK-affiliated YPD has gained, and will continue to gain, international recognition and support.

This, from Turkey's perspective, could further embolden the Kurds in Syria to seek greater autonomy and even independence in the future. It was within the context of the rising Kurdish regional challenge to Turkey's national security that the Iraqi Kurds conducted an independence referendum that engendered a harsh response from the previously friendly AKP-ruled Turkey. Again, president Erdogan's domestic political calculations played a role in shaping Turkey's response to the Iraqi Kurds bid for independence: It was clearly not politically feasible for Erdogan to fail to react to the KRG's bid for independence as he was so strongly opposed to the emergence of a similar Kurdish belt in northern Syria controlled by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed component the People's Protection Units (YPG) linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984. <sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> VOA, 'It's Not Independence, But Syria's Kurds Entrench Self-Rule', (October 08, 2017), available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-kurds-entrench-self-rule/4061323.html> [Date accessed:15/2017/11/].

<sup>72</sup> Danya Chudacoff and Noah Blaser, 'I do not want be called a Turkish Kurd', 'Aljazeera', (October 12, 2014), available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/201410//do-not-want-be-called-turkish-kurd-2014101253147924127.html> [Date accessed:16/2016/12/].

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### 3. The end of Turkey–KRG alliance: consequences for Turkey's interests in Iraq

The previous sections looked at the causes of the formation as well as the end of the alliance between the KRG and Turkey. This section will examine the implications of the end of the alliance for Turkey's interests in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### 3.1 Security interests

Allying with Tehran and Baghdad against the KRG's independence referendum has earned Ankara the security of not having to deal with an emerging Kurdish state at its border. In doing so, however, Turkey may have lost Erbil, Ankara's strongest ally against the PKK in Iraq. As demonstrated earlier, Iraqi Kurdistan's KDP shared Turkey's animosity towards the PKK and coordinated its anti-PKK effort with the Turkish government. Moreover, the KDP has been useful for Turkey in Syria where a KDP-affiliated Kurdish group balanced the dominance of the PKK-affiliated PYD and its armed wing of the YPG<sup>74</sup>.

Now that the KRG is alienated from Turkey, Ankara has to rely on its own military capabilities and its alliance with Baghdad and Iran in order to contain the PKK in Iraq and Syria. The KDP may not ally with the PKK against Turkey but is unlikely that the Iraqi Kurdish party would provide Turkey with the same assistance against the PKK as it was prior to the independence referendum and Turkey's rejection of the Iraqi Kurdish vote.

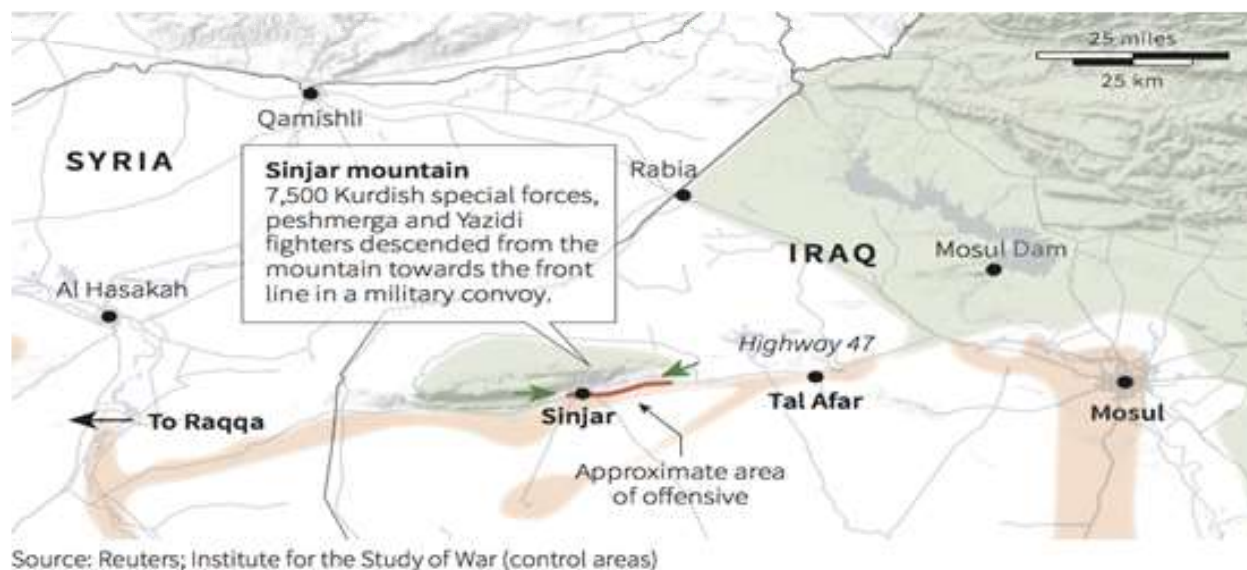
IS's offensive in Iraq and Syria resulted in the expansion of the PKK in both countries along the Turkish border. In addition of greater control for PKK-affiliated PYD in the Kurdish dominated areas of Syria, the PKK militants have imposed their control over the Sinjar Mountains in northern Iraq. In the face of the IS's offensive on Sinjar, home to the Yazidi Kurds, the KRG forces retreated leaving the population vulnerable to the militants of IS. Filling the vacuum left by the KRG, the PKK moved in to the area, protected the Yazidi community in Sinjar Mountains, and organised Yazidi volunteers into the Protection Units of Sinjar, an armed group loyal to the PKK.<sup>75</sup> (See map 4) Turkey now faces the PKK not just in Iraqi Kurdistan's Qandil Mountains but also in Sinjar Mountains – a second front where the Turkish military has to fight the Kurdish militants of the PKK.

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73 Centre for Strategic & International Studies, Op.Cit.,

74 Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, 'The Syria factor in Iraqi Kurdish Politics', 'Carnegie Endowment for Peace', (April 21, 2014), available at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55390> [Date accessed:25/2016/10/].

75 Raed Al-Hamid, 'The PKK in Sinjar at the Centre of Many Conflicts', 'The Washington Institute', (July 5, 2017), available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ppk-in-sinjar-at-the-center-of-many-conflicts> [Date accessed:26/2017/8/].



Source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/kurdish-forces-say-isis-defeated-in-sinjar-2015-11>

It is difficult for Baghdad to provide assistance to Turkey in regard to fighting the PKK in both Qandil and Sinjar Mountains. Weak and struggling with providing security in the main urban centres of Iraq, it is highly unlikely that Iraq's official forces (the Iraqi army and the federal police) will have the capability to reach the remote mountainous areas of the country in order to fight the PKK in coordination with Turkey. The only part of the Iraqi forces that has been able to attend Sanjar region are the Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces (the PMU) which are more loyal to Iran rather than the official authorities in Baghdad.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, if Ankara is to coordinate its effort against the PKK Sinjar, it has to first deal with Tehran. During the KRGs independence move crisis, Turkey and Iran did agree to coordinate their security efforts against the PKK and its Iranian affiliate PJAK (Party for Life of Kurdistan) along the Turkish Iranian border and Ankara could rely on Tehran in that respect <sup>77</sup>. However, Iran may not cooperate with Turkey in Sinjar as the Iranians are also interested in increasing and maintaining their control over region, which is a part of the strategic corridor that links Iran to its allies in Syria and Lebanon. Iran, therefore, might not be interested in giving up leverage for Turkey in Iraq (see below). There are greater points of disagreement that could impede future cooperation between the two in achieving Turkey's security interests in Iraq. From the central Iraqi governments point of view, the Turkish government is bent on realising its long-time historical ambitions in northern Iraq, particularly in Mosul and Kirkuk. Not long ago, Iraq's Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi complained about the Turkish military existence in Basheeq close to Mosul and demanded Ankara to remove its force from Iraq. The spat between Baghdad and Ankara

<sup>76</sup> Mahmut Bozarsalan, 'Iran, Turkey have own plans for Iraq's strategic Sinjar', 'Al-Monitor', (November 15, 2017a), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201711/turkey-iraq-iran-why-so-interested-in-sinjar-1.html> [Date accessed: 29/2017/11/].

<sup>77</sup> Metin Gurcan, 'Turkey, Iran could unite to overcome their Kurdish worries', 'Al-Monitor' (October 10, 2017), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201710/turkey-iran-forging-anti-kurdish-independence-alliance.html> [Date accessed



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reached a critical point where Abadi and Ardogan personally attacked each other over Turkish military existence over Iraqi territory.<sup>78</sup>

Baghdad–Ankara disagreements have deeper roots. Ankara has not been uneasy over the Shiite majoritys control over Iraq, which has meant Irans indirect dominance over Turkeys neighbour. To avoid this, Turkey has interfered in Iraqs domestic politics in an attempt to empower the Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds to counterbalance the Shiite dominance in Iraq. Turkeys strategic alliance with the Kurds from 2009 and on is a case in point, but beyond Erbil–Ankara alliance, the Turkish government formally extended its support for the Sunnis trying to encourage them to participate in Iraqs elections by forming their own block before Iraqs 2010 general elections.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, Turkey formally stood against the re–election of Iraqs former Shiite Prime Minister Nouri Al–Malki, siding with the Kurds and the Sunnis. The Iraqi central authorities saw these policies as sectarian and as attempts by Turkey to further divide the Iraqi society and weaken its central government. The Iraqi Shiite Arabs are suspicious of the Turkish policies, particularly Ankaras assistance for the Sunni Arabs around Mosul<sup>80</sup>. These disagreements may arise again in the future, reducing the amount of help that Turkey expect from the Iraqi central authorities against the PKK.

### 3.2 Economic interests

As part of punishing the KRG and preventing it from future independence attempts, Turkey and the central authorities in Iraq have jointly decided to weaken Iraqi Kurdistan and end its economic independence. One way of doing this is to find an alternative trade route between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan that bypasses the KRGs control. Trade interactions between Turkey and Iraq take place via Khabur border crossing controlled by the Kurdish authorities, but Baghdad and Ankara have been looking to finding an alternative border crossing to Khabur, one that directly links trade between Turkey and Iraq at Ovakoy (See map 5)<sup>81</sup>. Baghdad and Ankara have also applied pressure on the KRG to hand in the rest of the border crossing to the Iraqi federal authorities. If these efforts succeed, the KRG would be weakened but that might be on the expense of the Turkish security interests in Iraq.

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78- Stephen Kalin, ‘Disputes over Turkish troops throws future of Mosul into question’, ‘Reuters’, (January 7, 2016), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-turkey/dispute-over-turkish-troops-throws-future-of-mosul-into-question-idUSKBN0UL1DF20160107> [Date accessed:252017/10/].

79 Sean Kane, ‘The Coming Turkish-Iranian Competition in Iraq’, ‘United States Institute for Peace’, Special Report 276, (2011), pp.912-, available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/201106/coming-turkish-iranian-competition-iraq> [Date accessed: 232016/10/].

80- Ibid.

81- Hurriyet Daily News, ‘Turkey-Iraq agree for second border gate to bypass Kurdish region’, (October 26, 2017), <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-iraq-agree-for-second-border-gate-to-bypass-kurdish-region-121468> [Date accessed: 232016/10/].

Map 5: An alternative border crossing (Ovakoy) between Iraq and Turkey bypassing the KRG control



Source: <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/us-envoy-mcgurk-strives-to-block-historic-ovakoy-border-gate-project-2797368>

Trade with the KRG has been a source of income for Turkey's Kurdish citizens on the other side of the border. Reduced trade and economic interactions with the KRG could mean increased unemployment among Turkey's Kurds who might then join the PKK against the Turkish state. Further, Iraqi Kurds may also see the PKK as alternative to the KRG for identity satisfaction and seek national liberation through the group's ideology and struggle. In other words, a weaker KRG may result in a stronger PKK, which, in return, means a greater threat to Turkey's security. Moreover, if the economic situation in the KRG deteriorates further, Turkey may lose a profitable market for selling its products which in the end negatively impacts upon Turkey's economic performance.

Turkey's punishment of the KRG has also included a threat to end Erbil's ability to sell oil via the pipeline that crosses Turkish territories with dire consequences for Ankara's energy interests. After regaining control over Kirkuk and the rest of the disputed territories between Baghdad and Erbil on the 16th of October 2017 (see map 6), the Iraqi central authorities stopped the flow of oil from the city's oil fields to Turkey and then to the world market<sup>82</sup>. This has been a major setback for the KRG's economy but also for the Turkish economic interests in Iraq. Turkey has benefited from the KRG's oil sales but the Iraqi government has refused to resume selling oil through the KRG-Turkey's pipeline and instead put in place plans to sell Kirkuk's oil via Iran, the country that Iraq's Shiite authorities believe that they owe mainly because of Tehran's military support for the Iraqi and the PMU forces in retaking control of Kirkuk from the Kurds<sup>83</sup>.

82– Mahmut Bozarsalan, 'Baghdad could take oil in new direction-away from Turkey', 'Al-Monitor', (December 18, 2017b), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201712/turkey-iraq-kirkuk-oil-to-flow-iran.html> [Date accessed: 22/2017/12/].

83– Fazel Hawrami, 'How Iran helped Baghdad seize back Kirkuk', 'Al-Monitor', (October 17, 2017), available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/201710/iran-kirkuk-recapture-soleimani-quds-force-eqbalpour.html> [Date accessed: 15/2017/12/].

Map 6: Areas lost by the KRG on October 16, 2017



Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/201710/territory-lost-kurds-iraq-171031133441429.html>

### 3.3 Geostrategic interests

Iran has been winning the most from the KRG's failed attempt at secession from Iraq primarily at the expense of Turkey. As stated earlier, the Iraqi authorities have diverted the export of Kirkuk's oil from Turkey to Iran. According to the new oil deal between Iraq and Iran, 30,000,600,000-barrels of oil will be exported to the Iranian city of Kermanshah. According to reports, Baghdad is thinking of completely abandoning the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline through which Kirkuk and Iraqi Kurdistan's oil is exported to the Mediterranean Sea via Turkish territories, damaging Turkey's future energy interests in Iraq. Baghdad may then use oil as a political tool against Turkey, demanding Ankara to abandon building further dams on the Tigris and Euphrates, the two rivers that flow from Turkey to Iraq.

By siding with Tehran and Baghdad against the KRG, Turkey ended most of the influence it had over Baghdad and left the country to be dominated by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The alliance with the Kurds and the Sunnis allowed Turkey to increase leverage over the Iraqi politics. Now that the KRG and its dominant force of the KDP have been weakened, Iran is expected to replace Turkey in Iraqi Kurdistan as the most powerful external actor. Turkey's approach to the KRG has been selective, focusing on strengthening ties exclusively with the KDP in neglect of the rest of the political forces including the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and its offshoot party Gorran (the Change Party). The Turkish government refused to build strong connections with the PUK, the party that has dominated Iraqi Kurdistan's Sulaimaniya province, which borders Iran. Turkey's denial of the PUK is attributed to the party's ties to both Iran and the PKK. Geographic proximity and mutual interests in fighting Iraq's former Baath regime created bonds between the PUK and the Islamic Republic. These ties were further strengthened during the Kurdish internal fighting in the 1990s when Iran backed the PUK while Turkey supported the KDP. Iraqi Kurdistan has thus been the battlefield for a proxy war between Iran and Turkey with each regional power supporting opposing Kurdish parties.



Just like Turkey, Iran has security interests in Iraqi Kurdistan and has attempted to shape the regions politics in ways that serve Tehrans geostrategic goals in the region. From Tehrans perspective, a Kurdish state in northern Iraq could bolster irredentism in Iranian Kurdistan and could thus endanger Irans domestic security. Moreover, as the Islamic regime in Iran sees it, the rising Kurdish state in northern Iraq will be friendly to the U.S., Israel, and Turkey, all considered by Tehran as rival and enemy states. Through building strong relations with Turkey, the KDP became the strongest force in the KRG, occupying top position in the regional government while imposing its control over the Iraqi Kurdish regions energy resources. At the same time, the PUK, Irans ally, became weaker due to factional infighting within the party. Therefore, Iran feared that an independent Kurdistan would be dominated by Turkeys ally, the KDP, in the future. Irans opposition to Iraqi Kurdistans independence has to be seen in this context.

Iran manipulated the intra-Kurdish rift, and by allying with certain factions within the PUK, the Islamic Republic was capable of aborting the Kurdish move towards independence. By ending the independence movement in the Kurdish region of Iraq, Iran defeated not only the KDP and its allies in the PUK, but also Turkey, which has now lost most of its leverage in the KRG and the rest of Iraq to its regional rival the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## Conclusions

Will Turkey completely abandon the Iraqi Kurds after the fact that the latter pursued independence against Ankaras advice and security interests? Seemingly, the Turkish authorities are moving towards that direction. As of the time of finishing this study, Ankara still refuses to officially meet with the Iraqi Kurdish leaders and asserts on dealing with the Iraqi central authorities when it comes to achieving Turkeys interests in Iraq. However, as this study demonstrated, Turkey will face an array of challenges in Iraq if it chooses to bypass the Iraqi Kurds and to directly deal with the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. The Iraqi federal government is weak and it might take years, if not decades, for the official Iraqi army to be able to extend its control towards the Kurdish dominated north where the PKK, which represents the strongest challenge to Turkeys national security. Fighting the PKK is what Turkey might demand the Iraqi central authorities and in case of lack of such capabilities from the part of the Iraqi government, Ankara has to trade with the Shia militias who might be able to contain the PKK activities in northern Iraq, particularly in the Sinjar mountains, but who pledge greater allegiance to Iran rather than to the official government of Iraq.

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85 Saleem, (2017), Op.Cit.,

86 Michael Weiss, 'How America sided with Iran over Iraq's Kurds', 'CNN', (October 24, 2017), available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/24/10/opinions/how-america-sided-with-iran-over-iraqs-kurds-weiss/index.html> [Date accessed: 18/2017/12/].

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Turkey may need to rely on Iran for protecting its security from the militants of the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although Iran and Turkey cooperated against the Iraqi Kurds independence ambitions, there are more that divide the two regional powers in the long term. Turkey and Iran disagree on many regional issues, including the regional Sunni–Shia polarization where Tehran and Ankara have backed opposing sides, which could continue in pitting them against each other. At that time, Turkey has to make regional concessions for its rival, Iran, in order to secure itself from the PKK. In short, completely abandoning the Iraqi Kurds will cost Turkey, particularly in regards to managing the threat posed by the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Turkey may also lose economically, particularly with regards to Iraqs energy sector, if it decides to move away from Iraqi Kurdistan and focus on its connections with the central Iraqi government for achieving its economic interests in Iraq. Given Irans ideological ties to, and its military and diplomatic support for, the Iraqi Shia authorities, Baghdad is already planning to give to provide Tehran a greater access to Iraqs oil. Diverting Kirkuks oil sale from Turkey to Iran is the manifestation of this new reality.

Erbils independence attempt did contribute strongly to the straining of the relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. But it is unfair to blame the weakening, and probably the termination of, the strategic alliance between Ankara and Erbil in its totality. Firstly, it was Turkey that helped the Iraqi Kurds to achieve a degree of economic independence from Baghdad, abandoned the Turkmen in Kirkuk in favour of its alliance with the Kurds, and supported Erbil military against IS not only in Iraq but also in Syria. With assistance from Turkey, the KRG became more prepared to step towards independence.

Secondly, Ankara under the AKP failed to address Turkeys Kurdish question, a prerequisite for any long-term alliance between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. The AKP did initiate a domestic peace process in order to align Turkeys Kurds concerns. However, as Turkeys Kurds were making an advance on the domestic political front, they began to threaten Erdogans designs for transforming Turkey into a presidential system with himself at the top. By restarting the Turkish governments war with the Kurds, Erdogan tapped into the sense of nationalism among the countrys Turkish majority just to increase his popularity and expand his domestic power.

Finally, the rise of the power of the Kurds in Syria engendered greater concern among the ruling Turkish elite of an alliance between an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Turkeys fear of the rising Syrian Kurds influence and their possible union with the Iraqi Kurds was compounded by the links between the Syrian dominant Kurdish forces and the PKK. As the Turkish authorities saw it, they had no option other than preventing the Iraqi Kurds independence so that they avoid finding themselves surrounded by an expanded Kurdish reign at their South Eastern borders.

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