

Kurdish Allies and Kurdish Enemies: Turkey's New War Against the PKK

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Executive summary

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This paper focuses on the post-2015 Turkish warfare against the Kurdistan Workers' Party PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and the long-running relationship between the Turkish state and the ruling Barzani family. The commentary presents an overview of the interests behind the Ankara-Erbil coalition and the wider stakes in the current conflict. It is argued that the Turkish military operations not only have taken a great toll on the civilian population of the KRI and the ecosystem of the region, but destabilizes the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A full-blown civil war in the KRI between the PKK and KDP provoked by Turkey could be the final straw removing the last of the post-Islamic State stability in Iraq.

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Introduction

While the war between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) has lasted for almost 40 years now, the conflict has gone through a significant change during the last six: the conflict is mostly waged not in Turkey now but in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).³ Moreover, with the start of the Turkish Operations Claw-Eagle (*Peçe-Kartal Operasyonu*) and Claw-Tiger (*Peçe-Kaplan Operasyonu*) in June 2020, armed engagements escalated sharply. The escalation has been shaped by the Turkish use of both its much-discussed drone technology⁴ and also, as repeatedly alleged, chemical weapons.⁵ None of this is happening behind the Iraqi federal government's and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) back. The relationship that Turkey has with the KRG, specifically with the most powerful party there, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê*, KDP), ruled by the Barzani family, dates back to long-running political and military ties.

Turkey's Ambitions and KDP Interests

In *The Fratricide*, a documentary book by Faysal Dağlı on the civil war in the KRI between the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, *Yekêtiy Nîştîmanîy Kurdistan*) and also the PKK, which lasted from 1994 to 1997, former Turkish prime minister Tansu Çiller is quoted as saying “sometimes we used Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani in the war against the PKK, but we are not yet fully convinced and [thus] hesitant as to the scope of the changes made by them.”⁶ With the conflict now having escalated in the KRI and gaining widespread support from the local Kurdish parties, Tansu

³ Crisis Group (2021). Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkeys-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>

⁴ Iddon, Paul (2021). Turkey Flexes Overwhelming Airpower In Strikes Against Kurdish Fighters, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2021/08/31/turkey-flexes-overwhelming-airpower-in-strikes-against-kurdish-fighters/>

⁵ Medya News (2021). Iraqi Kurdistan: New video Footage of Gas Clouds Raise Further Concerns About Turkey's Long Suspected Use of Chemical Gas, <https://medyanews.net/iraqi-kurdistan-new-video-footage-of-gas-clouds-raise-further-concerns-about-turkeys-long-suspected-use-of-chemical-gas/>

⁶ Dağlı, Faysal (2021). *براکۆز ی - شمەری ناوخۆی کورد* (The Fratricide – The War Amongst the Kurds). Translated into Kurdish Sorani by Rebwar Hamawandi. ISBN: 434427 - 781838 – 9 (p. 478).



Çiller would have reason to be satisfied. The cooperation of the sons of Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani is much more sophisticated, and they have arguably widened the “scope” of the relations much more than their fathers. This is particularly the case for Masrour Barzani, Masoud Barzani’s son and current prime minister of the KRI, who has officially become part of the Turkish war on the Kurds of Turkey.

The conflict between the PKK and the KDP dates back to the 1980s. The two groups have differing ideological, geopolitical, and economic interests. While the PKK started out fighting against the Turkish government as an armed cadre and party committed to a leftist ideal, initially with a Marxist-Leninist leaning and then developing into a libertarian socialism, the KDP, which fought the Iraqi government, is rooted in a conservative framework with a neoliberal economic program, relying on tribal allegiances alongside a wide patronage network. The KDP was founded in 1946, making it significantly older than the PKK, founded in 1978, and it was not until the PKK took up arms in 1984 that the two parties became simultaneously armed actors in conflicts related to the general Kurdish quest for independence. By then, the KDP had developed a much wider network in transnational diplomatic and military relations, including regional actors like Iran and, most importantly, Turkey. In 1992, this conflicting setting of alliances led to the first armed struggle between the KDP, backed by Turkey, and the PKK. This was further facilitated by Turkey and Saddam Hussein agreeing in the same year that the Turkish aircraft force could enter Iraqi air space in its fight against the PKK, expanding the already existing border agreement of 1983. Although Turkey officially opposed Saddam Hussein’s regime by the 1990s, they were both opposed to the PKK presence in the Kandil mountains along the border of Iraq and Turkey. Both the KDP and PKK suffered substantial losses in terms of resources, materials, and fighters during the Kurdish intra-fighting. While the KDP was settling its dispute with the PUK, the Washington Agreement in 1998 led to a cooling off of the conflict –

but this was a temporary lull since a condition of the agreement was the commitment of both parties to help Turkey in fighting the PKK.

After Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rose to power in 2003, tensions seemed to die down. Relations between Ankara and Erbil, capital of the KRI and power-base of the ruling KDP, were focused more on building economic ties. The 2010s peace talks between representatives of Turkey and the PKK even suggested that military normalization might be possible.⁷ Part of the deal finalized in 2013 was that the PKK would retreat completely into the Kandil mountains in the KRI. Thus, when the peace talks collapsed in 2015, and the armed struggle broke out again, it was centered on the border areas of the KRI closest to Turkey. In 2018, Masrour Barzani, chief of the KDP's intelligence organization *Parastin* and thus with long-standing duties in Ankara, became the prime minister of the Kurdistan Region. He filled his cabinet with former *Parastin* personnel,⁸ and Turkish military incursions into KRI territory escalated. Under the guise of counterterrorism and combating the PKK moreover, the KRG has acted as an official ally in this conflict,⁹ relaunched in 2019 as Operations Claw-Eagle and Operation Claw-Tiger. These operations became the largest of their kind since the 1992 commencement of the Turkish engagement against the PKK in the KRI. Operation Claw-Eagle 2 (*Pençe-Kartal Operasyonu 2* and *3*) followed, including a Turkish attack on Gare mountain, where a PKK prison was located. Turkish soldiers were parachuted in between 10–14 February 2021, leading to the deaths of eight PKK fighters and three Turkish soldiers, as well as all 13 Turkish prisoners in the cave. The current ongoing operations in this series are so far the Claw-Lightning and Thunderbolt Operations (*Pençe-Yıldırım ve Pençe-Şimşek Operasyonları*), which began on April 23, 2021. These have comprised yet another escalation since drone attacks were this time conducted not only in

⁷ Çandar, Cengiz (2020). *Turkey's Mission Impossible. War and Peace with the Kurds*, Lexington Books (p. 151 ff.).

⁸ Rubin, Michael (2020). *Why Masrour Barzani should resign from leading Iraqi Kurdistan*, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/why-masrour-barzani-should-resign-from-leading-iraqi-kurdistan/>

⁹ Abdullah, N. and E. Sahinkaya (2021). *Turkish Operation Increases Conflict Among Kurds in Iraq*, https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_turkish-operation-increases-conflict-among-kurds-iraq/6207296.htm



northwestern KDP territory but also in the PUK-dominated areas around Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk. Assassinations of PKK personnel in Sulaimaniya city also occurred in 2021, with the killing of Yasin Bulut in September.

Turkey has also repeatedly engaged in disputed KRI areas, meddling with local Turkmen parties, claiming the land as old Ottoman territory, shelling alleged PKK positions in Makhmur and Sinjar, and, most importantly, aiming to gain access to the city of Kirkuk, with its vast oil and gas resources. This access had been practically promised to Turkey while Kirkuk was still ruled by the KRG when the then prime minister Nechirvan Barzani signed a fifty-year oil-export deal¹⁰ with Turkey; however, the territory was regained by federal Iraq after Baghdad moved its military in and took control following the failed independence referendum of 2017. Given its many conflicts with the Iraqi government, the KDP seems to prefer the option of being a vessel region of Turkey located in northern Iraq to that of a democratic federal region of Iraq, as Michael Rubin has argued in his study of possible scenarios of Kurdish independence.¹¹

The Turkish ambitions are clear: to reestablish the influence in the region that was lost with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and thus further the expansionist project Turkey assumed in other areas, including Armenia, Libya, and even the Balkans. Iraq is an easy target here, as the leadership in Baghdad cannot and will not attempt to resist Turkish influence. Turkish top officials have repeatedly summoned the Iraqi prime minister and other figures from the defense and intelligence sector to emphasize that the war against PKK in Iraq is paramount. The 2020 Sinjar agreement establishing solely Iraqi federal control of the district has been one of the most prominent outcomes of the alliance.¹² The Turkish state believes that

¹⁰ Pamuk, H. and O. Coşkun (2013). Exclusive: Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan Ink Landmark Energy Contracts, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-iraq-oil-idUSBRE9AS0BO20131129>

¹¹ Rubin, M. (2020). Will the United States Ever Support Kurdish Independence? *Kurdish Autonomy and U.S. Foreign Policy*. V. Eccarius-Kelly and M. M. Gunter. New York: Peter Lang 33–50 (p. 44).

¹² Marouf, H. (2021). The Sinjar Agreement Has Good Ideas, But Is It a Dead End?, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-sinjar-agreement-has-good-ideas-but-is-it-a-dead-end/>

without eliminating the Kurdish resistance in Iraq, ending what it regards as the existential threat of the PKK will be impossible.¹³ Defeating the PKK in Kandil, Turkey hopes, will cure its “Kurdish problem” in Turkey and also Syria.

This serves Masrour Barzani’s interest as well, as he needs to conceal a series of failures. One of the failures was the independence referendum, which, rather than bringing independence, caused the KRI to lose a significant part of its territory, including areas like Kirkuk that were won back from the Islamic State through heavy fighting just a few years before. Economic crisis, waves of protest, and an outflow of people fleeing to Europe further weaken Barzani’s position as leader of a supposedly prospering and stable region. For the fight against the PKK, he wants to win Erdogan’s alliance for several reasons.

First, Masrour Barzani wants to undermine his cousin and brother-in-law Nechirvan Barzani, who has been a key ally of Erdogan and Turkey following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and especially after the establishment of the fifty-year energy deal. Outplaying Nechirvan’s economic allyship with a fundamentally security-based alliance is his hope here. Second, Masrour Barzani lacks domestic allies. His coalition government is already in tatters as neither the Gorran party nor the PUK is content, and his government failed to recover ties with Baghdad after the referendum. Securitizing his grip on power is a way of circumventing the need for national coalitions. Third, the US withdrawal in the Middle East and Iraq may make the already powerful Iran more influential in the country. Having Turkey as a partner protects against this dynamic (Turkish-Iranian ties are traditionally rather flexible). Indeed, the fact that Masrour Barzani’s government repeatedly closed the border to the neighboring Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and allowed further conflict between KDP and the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) dominant there shows that he

¹³ Taşpınar, O. (2021). Turkey’s Kurdish obsession Explains Putin’s Gains and US Strains, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/10/07/turkeys-kurdish-obsession-explains-putins-gains-and-us-strains/>



is willing even to torpedo the US-facilitated talks between the KDP-supporting Kurdish National Council (*Encûmena Nîştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê*, ENKS) and PYD in AANES. It seems as if there is a greater gamble on a post-US power Turkish-backed KDP, which is closely linked to Erdoğan's own gamble of moving away and being apparently prepared to break from the United States.

Destabilization of KRI and beyond

The Turkish military operations have taken a great toll on the civilian population of the KRI and the ecology of the region. Discussing this issue in solely strategic terms does not reflect the magnitude of the civilian impact. The Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) has extensively documented all Turkish military incursions into the territories of the KRI. Their 2017 report had already concluded that the resurgence of cross-border military operations following the collapse of the 2013–15 peace negotiations led to at least 103 civilian deaths and injuries to 109 more, with more than 1,500 civilians displaced and acres of land being deforested.¹⁴ The June 2021 report concludes “while Turkey claims to target the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), in Operation Claw-Lightning, the reality is that civilians living in the border regions are most critically impacted by Turkey’s bombings.”¹⁵

The Kurdish autonomous region’s agrarian production is already in shambles, and the rural population, which constitutes the backbone of this, is being either directly targeted or else pushed to flee into the cities. Forests that are key to regulating the climate and protecting the ecosystem are being destroyed. Turkish airstrikes targeting areas like Sinjar and Makhmour are endangering thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Sinjari Yezidis and others who fled the

¹⁴ Christian Peacemaker Teams – Iraqi Kurdistan (2017). *Civilian Impacts of Renewed Turkish and Iranian Cross-Border Bombardments in Iraqi Kurdistan (2015–2017)*, <https://cptik.org/reports-1/2017/10/17/civilian-impacts-of-renewed-turkish-and-iranian-cross-border-bombardments-in-iraqi-kurdistan-2015-2017>

¹⁵ Christian Peacemaker Teams – Iraqi Kurdistan (2021). *No Return: The Civilian Impact of Turkey’s Operation Claw-Lightning* (p. 11), <https://cpt.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Civilian-Impacts-Claw-Lightning-eng.pdf>

Islamic State have been slowly trying to move back to their home over recent years; this is endangered when Turkey targets these civilian areas.¹⁶ The destabilization facing the KRI is therefore occurring on various levels and damages the livelihoods, the economy, the environment, and the very safety of the civilian population.

Looking at the different groups of Iraqi Kurds who were among the refugees seeking to enter the EU but trapped in Belarus in the fall and winter of 2021, we see the various factors of destabilization directly translating into reasons to seek refuge abroad. Many, for example, were from the Turkish drone-war-affected regions.¹⁷ Many were Yazidis who had lost their last hope of returning to Sinjar. Others had come from an urban background and stated that years of financial hardship and political as well as economic uncertainty due to the party-monopolistic system of the KRI made it impossible to live a secure and stable life there. Others again had been among the disenfranchised protesters but who now see no hope in the Kurdish opposition and fear the iron fist of the regime, which has repeatedly used severe violence against its critics. While other conflict zones are shaped by one major threat – a war or some other insurgence – the insecurity in KRI is shaped by several dimensions of insecurity, inequality, and ultimately violence. Turkey is involved in many of them.

Policy Implications

The Turkish war against the PKK in the KRI has been escalated and become institutionalized to the level that Erbil and Baghdad are no longer mere bystanders but part of the conflict.¹⁸ With militia infighting and Iranian involvement worsening in Baghdad, a full-blown civil war in the KRI between the PKK and KDP provoked by

¹⁶ Zaman, A. (2021). Turkish Airstrikes Claim Yazidi Lives in Iraq's Sinjar, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/turkish-airstrikes-claim-yazidi-lives-iraqs-sinjar>

¹⁷ MacDonald, A. (2021). Poland-Belarus: Iraqi Kurdish Refugees Reject Offer to Return to Hardship at Home, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/poland-belarus-refugees-kurdish-refuse-return-home>

¹⁸ Taştekin, F. (2020). PKK Remains Thorn in Side of Turkish-Iraqi Relations, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/turkey-iraq-kurdistan-pkk-problem-mahkmour-camp-dohuk.html>



Turkey could be the final straw removing the last of the post-Islamic State stability in Iraq. Certainly, with at least two major powers intervening in the country and the United States withdrawing, a much more volatile situation should be anticipated.

With regard to policy implications for the EU and US, we argue that there are three approaches that should be taken to tackle the situation. Firstly, the dealings of the US and EU with the Kurdistan Region must undergo a fundamental overhaul. The Western reconstruction and institutionalization efforts in Iraq have largely been focused on Baghdad, which does not sufficiently support the country as a whole. While withdrawing from Iraq is a domestic prerogative of the US, abandoning political processes should not be. The Kurdistan Region is a political and institutional reality, and any aim to democratize Baghdad must go hand-in-hand with democratizing other relevant polities in the state, which includes the KRI. The authoritarian turn in the KRI is partly an outcome of the neglect vis-à-vis Erbil, and the West only dealing with Erbil in business or party-related terms over the last decades has effectively legitimized the clientelist networks. Directing the KDP and consequently the KRG away from dangerous cross-border dealings with an already uncontrolled Turkey and towards Baghdad involves dealing with the uncomfortable questions that policymakers avoided after 2005, namely the resolution of constitutional unclarity between Erbil and Baghdad. Here, pushing for the rule of law involves Iranian dealings in Iraq as well. The current negotiations with Iran should be taken as an opportunity to bring Iranian involvement in many countries, especially in Iraq, to the negotiation table. An independent KRG is not possible without an independent federal Iraqi government and vice versa. Without such steps, no form of civilian control of the armed forces or militias can be achieved, let alone democratization and institutionalization. Turkey is only using loopholes enabled by failed Western strategies towards Kurdish actors in general.

Secondly, while Turkish expansionism needs to be tackled as a whole, the Turkish escalation of its war with the Kurds must be halted

immediately. The current operations are not just a war on PKK positions in Kandil but also a clear attack on civilians across the Kurdistan region in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. As the conflicts in both the KRI and NES escalated after the failure of the Ankara-PKK peace negotiations, it is of the utmost importance for both the EU and US to encourage a resumption of those talks. Peace in the region nowadays is important not only for the Kurdish population but crucial also in the overall war against terror. While Turkey's war against the Kurds could be ignored by Western policymakers and reports on eradicated villages in southeast Turkey were of little political relevance for them in the past, today, Kurdish groups like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are kingmakers in many political constellations, most importantly in holding back a resurgence of the Islamic State. This consideration also applies to the PKK, which was fundamental in creating the transborder corridor that saved thousands of Yezidis and, together with PUK Peshmerga troops, was active in the fight against the Islamic State on the Kirkuk and Diyala fronts. During the years of war against the Islamic State, it became evident that no matter how big the Jihadist threat, Turkey under Erdoğan was willing to worsen the situation if it supported the long-term goal of hindering any genuinely independent form of Kurdish self-rule. Regional security and securing the long fought-for gains against Jihadism is therefore deeply linked to enabling a peace process between Turkey and the PKK and working towards a political and institutional resolution of the Kurdish question and transregional end to conflict.

Thirdly, in terms of the EU migration regime and the mass outpouring from the KRI, the way the EU deals with Turkey must change. The EU's hope of limiting the influx of refugees through its 2016 deal with Turkey has not materialized.¹⁹ Smugglers find new routes, people die on the borders of the EU on a daily basis, and the political leverage afforded by the deal has only encouraged Ankara

¹⁹ Christofis, N. (2021). "“You sleep with the devil; you wake up in hell!”: On the new EU-Turkey Deal.” *The Commentaries* 1(1): 1–7.



to engage in a record number of conflicts.²⁰ The conflicts in Syria and Iraq motivate Kurdish civilians to leave the country, and if the Turkish military intervention does not push people out of their homes, the increasingly autocratic and corrupt KRI does. Investing in reset in its relationship with Turkey will require the EU to acknowledge migration as a reality that cannot be halted by questionable deals and that the Turkish military interventions are exacerbating the situation. Turkey's resolution of its Kurdish question, which once was a key pillar to the conditions of the EU-membership negotiations, has been securitized again and deemed a terrorist matter by Turkish politicians of all parties, opposition as well as government. The last decades have shown that there is no military solution to the war with the PKK. Unlike 40 years ago, however, the conflict now involves the delicate politics of the northern Middle East. Actively pushing for a peace process will help save lives and ecologies, support democratic institutionalization in the Kurdish region generally, and curb illegal migration.

²⁰ Bezwan, N. and Keles, J. Y. (2021). "Playing politics with the plight of refugees. How the EU went into Erdogan's political receivership." *The Commentaries* 1(1): 9–15.