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Iraq – a new front for Turkey?

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On 5 December, the Iraqi government accused Turkey of violating its territorial sovereignty and illegally sending its troops across the state border. It insisted on the withdrawal of the Turkish troops, otherwise a complaint would be brought to the UN Security Council, and suggested it was prepared to launch a military operation, with political support – and probably also motivation – from Iran and Russia.

The pretext for Baghdad's political offensive was provided by the presence of the Turkish armed forces in Iraq in connection with Turkey's engagement in the training of Arab and Kurdish fighters to combat Islamic State. The real goal of this offensive is an attempt by Iran and Russia to eliminate Turkey as a political player in the Middle East.

Given the vast scale of Turkey's interests in northern Iraq, it will not relinquish them voluntarily. This increases the risk of an escalation of tension in Iraq and of Turkey becoming further entangled in the Middle Eastern crisis, including it coming into open confrontation with Iran and Russia in Iraq.

The Turkish military presence in Iraq and its background

The direct cause of the tension between Ankara and Baghdad is the situation concerning the Bashiqa training camp located around 30 km to the north east of Mosul (Iraq's second largest city, which was occupied by Islamic State in June 2014).

There have been reports in the press which are difficult to verify stating that this is a Turkish army camp for Kurdish (Peshmerga from the Kurdish Autonomy), Turkmen and Arab (Sunni, so-called Hashid Vatani) forces being trained to fight Islamic State near Mosul. The camp has probably been in operation since March this year under informal deals struck by the Turkish and Iraqi governments (on central and local administration levels) in December 2014. Over 2,000 fighters (Arabs and Kurds) have reportedly been trained at this camp to date. At least two other camps of this kind operate on a similar basis in northern Iraq. The Turkish army is in charge of training and security at these camps: around 600–900 soldiers with artillery and tanks at their disposal are reportedly stationed in Bashiqa. It is estimated that a total of around 2,000 Turkish soldiers are engaged in the training programme and in protecting it.

In addition to the training programme mentioned above, the Turkish army has been engaged for more than ten years, with varying degrees of intensity, in air raids and special ground operations targeted against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), whose headquarters are located in the Qandil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan. There are reports that Turkey has a

number of small outposts in Iraqi Kurdistan used as a support base for these operations.

Although the Turkish policy in Iraq has been overshadowed by Ankara's policy towards Syria, it is undoubtedly of greater importance, more multidimensional and more effective – Iraq (and especially Kurdistan) has for years played a strategic role in Turkey's policy. Above all, Turkey is the key partner and patron for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party led by Masoud Barzani which governs the region. Turkey has offered political, military and economic support to the KRG. In exchange, it has used the Kurdish autonomy as a counterbalance and a barrier to the PKK, and also as an important outlet for its goods and services. Furthermore, it sees the region as a strategic alternative to supplies of oil (and in the future) of natural gas. Natural gas supplies have become an issue of the utmost importance, given the serious deterioration of Turkey's relations with Russia, which is the main natural gas supplier to Turkey.

In parallel to supporting Iraqi Kurds, Turkey has for years been engaged in supporting Sunni Arabs in Iraq, a group which has been entirely marginalised by the Shia forces which are predominant in this country and which rely on Iran since it has filled the political vacuum left after the US withdrew its troops from Iraq. At present, a great part of Iraqi Sunnis have backed Islamic State (IS) either voluntarily or under compulsion. Turkey's support for the decentralising tendencies among Kurds and for the Sunni opposition has become an axis of tension between Ankara on the one side and Baghdad and its Iranian protector on the other.

IS's spectacular successes in 2014 (the occupation of western Iraq) and the panic they provoked in Iraq have provided Turkey with more room for manoeuvre – hence the openness to its military and training presence in Iraq. By supporting Barzani's Kurdish Peshmerga forces Turkey, for example, has stronger protection of its own interests in the unstable situation and a barrier is built against those Kurdish forces which are dangerous to both Turkey and Barzani (mainly the PKK, but also the pro-Iranian Kurdish groupings in the southern part of the KRG). Training and support for the Sunni forces in Iraq means a continuation of the previous policy and Turkey's strategic plan to create a strong pro-Turkish Sunni actor in Iraq and in the region – Ankara has been vying with Islamic State for this role, and this explains its moderate engagement in combating IS. Sunni troops would be an indispensable participant of a possible offensive on Mosul. Their engagement is necessary for the local people to accept the ousting of Islamic State forces. Kurds and Shias may not count on such support. The same mechanism of persuading part of the opponents to take sides decided on the US forces' success in the pacification of the Iraqi 'Sunni triangle' in 2007.

Strengthening Turkish clients (Kurds and Sunnis) in Iraq and also in Syria would protect Turkey's interests in the short term and would offer Ankara vast and long-lasting benefits in the entire region in the future. This is contrary to the interests of both Iran and Russia.

The current crisis

The currently existing tension is not a sign of changes in Ankara's policy alone – there is nothing new in Turkey having interests and a presence in Iraq and it has been accepted so far. It seems that it is a consequence of the new phase in the Middle Eastern crisis, the catalysts of which have included: the Russian intervention in Syria (since September this

year), the consolidation of the unbalanced Damascus-Baghdad-Teheran-Moscow axis , and last but not least the severe Turkish-Russian crisis since the Turkish air forces brought down the Russian bomber aircraft (on 24 November). When Iran and Russia (who are in fact the protectors of Assad's regime) took the strategic initiative in Syria, the local opposition and its patrons (including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the USA) became weaker. Furthermore, the possibility that anti-Turkish Kurdish groupings (PKK and its Syrian branch, PYD) will receive support has become more realistic. Turkey's fear of the consequences of shooting down the Russian bomber aircraft has also undermined its ability to support and protect its protégés in Syria (for example, combat flights over Syria have been withheld). At the same time, Turkey's Western allies are not overly keen to genuinely strengthen Ankara, while Kurds in Iraq are concerned about Turkey's problems and the growing strength of its opponents. The space for adversely affecting Turkish interests in Iraq has thus been created.

When raising the issue of the Turkish presence in Iraq, Baghdad accused its neighbour of making an illegal intervention, a violation of its territorial integrity, and insisted that Turkish troops leave its territory immediately. It also threatened that it would bring a complaint against Turkey to the UN Security Council's forum, and initiated the process. Some Iraqi politicians have appealed for air raids to be launched on Turkish forces, and armed incidents have been seen between Kurdish troops and Shia militias. Baghdad's standpoint has been strongly supported by Teheran and Moscow. The USA has reacted very moderately to the crisis, distancing itself from Turkey's activity and principally agreeing with Baghdad's standpoint. Turkey has held back from reinforcing its bases and has avoided a verbal escalation of the dispute, but does not intend to withdraw from Iraq.

Possible developments

There is a very high risk that the crisis between Ankara and Baghdad – and in practice the crisis between Turkey vs. Iran and Russia in Iraq – will escalate. Iraq, Iran and Russia formally questioned Turkish interests in Iraq, and it is very unlikely that Turkey will voluntarily relinquish its long-standing efforts and investments in Iraqi Kurdistan (any possible concessions Ankara makes may only be of a tactical nature).

The worsening crisis will undoubtedly have a political dimension (the delegitimisation of Turkey's regional ambitions, for example at the UN forum) and also a military dimension. The risk of the destabilisation of Iraqi Kurdistan is very realistic, considering the tension with the forces loyal to Baghdad and Teheran involved, and given the risk of the escalation of tension between Kurds themselves. It cannot be ruled out that the Syrian scenario will be repeated in Iraq, i.e. that Iraq will ask Russia to protect its air space or to expand the 'anti-terrorist' operation in Syria to Iraq. If this scenario plays out, Turkish flights over Iraq would be withheld or a direct confrontation of Turkish and Russian forces might take place. In practice this would mean that the forms of the Middle Eastern crisis known from Syria would make an appearance in Iraq.

The escalation of tension would have a direct impact on the situation in Turkey itself: the threat posed by the PKK, the terrorist threat and the migration pressure would increase. The security of oil supplies (from Iraqi Kurdistan) and natural gas supplies (from Russia, Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan) would also pose a greater challenge.

Regardless of the high risk posed for Turkey by the way the situation in Iraq develops, it is rather unlikely that Turkey will voluntarily relinquish its interests in Iraq. This would mean that the efforts Turkey has been making over the past decade would be wasted and that Turkey would be pushed out of the Middle East but will still have to incur the costs of the regional crisis (for example, as regards the Kurdish, the terrorist and the refugee issues). Unlike in Syria, it would be more ready to take active remedial measures (especially support for the KRG) whilst, however, minimising the risk of open conflict with Iraq and its protectors.