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Yattioui, Mohamed Badine El; Yattioui, Yassine El
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The Turkish diplomatic strategy in Iraq: Shifts and continuities, 2003-2023

Mohamed Badine El Yattoui*
Yassine El Yattoui**

ABSTRACT

Relations between Türkiye and Iraq have gone through different stages between 2003 and 2023. The objective of our article is to analyze the constants and evolution of the relationship between the two neighbors from the Turkish perspective. We try to explain how economic aspects and border security issues are at the heart of Turkish diplomacy. Since the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power, the Turkish vision and strategy in the Middle East, and in Iraq in particular, have passed through different moments which depended on the regional context or the Turkish domestic context – a complex bilateral relationship that depends on several factors.

Key words: Türkiye; Iraq; diplomacy; strategy; economy.

**LA ESTRATEGIA DIPLOMÁTICA
TURCA EN IRAK: CAMBIOS Y
CONTINUIDADES, 2003-2023**

RESUMEN

Las relaciones entre Turquía e Iraq han conocido diferentes etapas entre 2003 y 2023. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las constantes premisas y los hechos cambiantes de la relación entre los dos vecinos desde el punto de vista turco. De esta forma, se busca explicar cómo los aspectos económicos y las cuestiones de seguridad fronteriza están en el corazón

* Doctor, Universidad Lyon III, Jean Moulin (Francia). Profesor, National Defence College (Emiratos Arabes Unidos). [mohamed-badine@hotmail.fr]; [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4714-0292].

** Magister, Universidad Lyon III, Jean Moulin (Francia). Doctorante, Universidad de Salamanca (España). [elyattoui-yassine@hotmail.fr]; [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1669-1091].

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de la diplomacia turca. A partir de la llegada al poder del AKP y de su líder Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, la visión turca y su estrategia en el Medio Oriente, e Iraq en especial, han conocido diferentes momentos. Esto ha dependido del contexto regional o del contexto doméstico turco, que a lo largo de los años ha demostrado una relación bilateral compleja, dependiente de varios factores.

Palabras clave: Turquía; Irak; diplomacia; estrategia; economía.

INTRODUCTION

The relations between Türkiye and Iraq have always been complex; however, the goal of this paper is to focus on the different stages between 2003 and 2023. We analyze the constants and evolution of the relationship between the two neighbors from the Turkish perspective and its interests. The paper tries to explain how economic aspects and border security issues are at the heart of Turkish diplomacy during these two decades.

Since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power, with the support of the AKP, his vision and strategy in the Middle East and in Iraq in particular, have taken distinct forms. Indeed, they have depended on the regional context or the Turkish domestic context in what was originally a bilateral relationship characterized by several factors.

It seems clear that Ankara is using the Middle East in general and Iraq especially to increase its regional power. As Ari & Munassar

(2020, p. 2) explained, “the concept of ‘regional power’ has prevailed among the IR studies of regionalism and regional power theorizing. This new wave of studies has emphasized the foreign policy behavior of regional powers, which contribute to regional and international order as good global citizens”. According to Aksu (2013, p. 12), “Turkey, a bridge between the East and the West, has emerged as a true regional power and a significant global player since the end of the Cold War. Especially after the 2000s, Turkey has become a success story in every aspect of the social, political, and economic spectrums”. The new status of this country during the first decade of this century gave rise to an “agential space and role in contributing to the international institutions and order” (Ari & Munassar, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, we ask the questions: What are the shifts and the continuities of the Turkish diplomatic strategy in Iraq?

The justification of the project to evaluate twenty years of relations can be explained in many ways. The first reason is that Iraq faced its invasion by a coalition led by the United States exactly 20 years ago. The second is that 2003 is also the moment that saw a big shift in Turkish political history when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took office in Türkiye as prime minister. The third is that 2023 is an election year in Türkiye, with crucial decisions (presidential and parliamentary) to be made as Erdoğan is still leading the country as president (since 2014) and hopes to be elected one more time in this symbolic year of the centenary of the Turkish Republic.

TURKISH DIPLOMACY WITH IRAQ SINCE 2003

Turkish diplomacy in Iraq: the result of permanent pragmatism and apparent contradictions in the Middle East

Since the foundation of the republic in 1923 and more specifically since the end of the Second World War, Turkish diplomacy has been organized around two principles. The first is to guarantee the security of the territory (strengthened through a strategic alliance with the United States and membership of the NATO in 1951), and support for the regional status quo, centered on the borders inherited from the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. The second Türkiye principle was established to assume the westernization of the country, embodied by the desire to enter the European Union (Özge, 2013, p. 34).

Since 2002 and the coming to power of the AKP, “zero problems with neighbors”, has gradually replaced the old motto of diplomacy. A slogan coined by Ahmet Davutoglu (Özge, 2013, p. 34) presents a “good neighbor policy” and he suggests that Turkish diplomacy must have “strategic depth”, due to its geographical location, which must be amplified in order to derive the maximum benefit (Burdy & Marcou, 2013, p. 10).

According to Ahmet Davutoglu, the true designer of his country’s new doctrine, Türkiye must extend its influence beyond its borders, particularly in the Middle East. He highlighted the historical and geographical proximity stemming from the Ottoman Empire as a unifying element, but also religion. Istanbul was for many decades the capital of the Caliphate.

According to Davutoglu, this gave the Turks a specific role in the defense of Islam for centuries and it is time to continue with this project. If security is the main concern, Türkiye must become a leading diplomatic actor in the 21st century in order to increase its political and economic influence. Its vision focuses on five principles: the balance between security and democracy, zero problems with neighbours, radiating Türkiye’s influence from the Balkans to Central Asia via the Middle East (covering both the areas of Pan-Ottomanism and Pan-Turkism), adherence to a multidimensional foreign policy, and effective representation in international organizations (Özge, 2013, p. 39). Some speak of “neo-Ottomanism” (Parlar Dal, 2010, p. 35) due to the exaltation of Türkiye’s Ottoman past in symbolic places (Sarajevo, Kirkuk) by the AKP government. This can be seen as a way to signify its accession to the status of an emerging power.

Ahmet Davutoglu, in a book published in 2001, *Strategic*, put forward the claim that Türkiye’s international position was already developing a doctrine based on the pillars of: “Strategic depth”, “The concentric circles”; “soft power”; and “Zero problem with the neighborhood” (Kazancgil, 2016, p. 43).

According to Burdy & Marcou (2013, p. 10), it was necessary to wait for the second victory of the AKP (2007-2011), and the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, to truly realize that a new Turkish foreign policy was taking shape. More specifically, this new policy was aimed at the Arab and the Islamic world, as part of a pan-islamist strategy. Between 2002 and 2007, the AKP sought to reassure the Kemalist estab-

lishment, which controlled many state sectors and especially the army. The latter has always kept a certain distance from the Arab world for ideological reasons (Burdy & Marcou, 2013, p. 10). The resignation of Ahmet Davutoglu from his post as Prime Minister and the coup attempt in 2016 have both had an impact on the conception of Turkish foreign policy.

According to Aurélien Denizeau (2021, p. 1), until the failed coup in 2016, the reference for Türkiye's diplomatic strategy was Ahmet Davutoglu, Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014) and then Prime Minister (2014-2016). Denizeau adds that it has become more difficult to determine its objectives and principles of action including when analyzing internal policy, because Erdogan's foreign policy no longer seems to reflect a long-term strategic vision. The author also mentioned that since 2016 and the purge that followed, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has moved closer to the military institution and appointed Hulusi Akar as minister of Defense in 2018. The consequence of these actions is that, as a result of the "new military-bureaucratic structure, critical leadership positions are allocated based on political loyalty, often at the expense of merit" (Ozkan, 2023, p. 1). The constitutional reform in 2018 increased the personalization of foreign policy, a further consequence of the *presidentialization* of the regime (Jabbour, 2020, p. 108).

This *presidentialization* of the regime is now clear. The 12 external operations, since 2008, in Iraq, Syria, and Libya allow the Head of State to clearly assert himself as the head of the armies (Yıldırım, 2022, p. 1).

According to Jana Jabbour (2020, p. 99), Turkish diplomacy seems aggressive,

anti-Western, even irrational, but she adds that the strategy is, in reality, based on a strategic doctrine and a clear objective, which is to make this country a major regional power and a fully sovereign state. Erdoğan has a desire for autonomy in the conduct of the country's international relations. As an emerging power, Türkiye aims to diversify its relations with antagonistic actors of the international system, a consequence of a multipolar world (Iran / Israel, NATO / Russia).

The 2023 elections (presidential and parliamentary) can explain the use of foreign policy for domestic policy purposes. As such, they represented symbolic scenarios for Erdoğan, after 20 years in power, and coincide with the centenary of the founding of the Turkish Republic (Cheviron & Pérouse, 2017). These regional ambitions are hiding domestic issues such as the economic crisis in the country. The consequence is that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is playing the nationalist card to mobilize his electoral base by claiming that enemies surround Türkiye (Jabbour, 2020, p. 105).

Long-term limits to Turkish ambitions exist. The country is present simultaneously in different countries (Iraq, Syria, and Libya) and a situation of overstretch would be difficult to maintain and could backfire. In Libya, the Turks are setting up an asymmetric and proxy war. While its hard power capabilities are important (it is NATO's second army), Türkiye is not used to asymmetric wars. The Turkish intervention in Libya at the end of 2019 made it possible to reverse the balance of power on the ground and encouraged the signature of agreements regarding security and economic and energy cooperation agreements

that allowed Turkey to extend its sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean. The question of their viability will arise in the future. In Syria, Türkiye used terrorist groups to fight against Bashar al-Assad and the Kurds of the PYD / YPG. With Türkiye's expertise in proxy wars being limited, this game could turn against them at any time (Jabbour, 2020, p. 106).

The interconnection between domestic and foreign policy is clear in Turkish ambitions. Marcel Merle (1976) explained the theoretical reasons of this connection: "The heaviness of the restrictions of internal origin is such that any foreign policy decision must be evaluated according to a double rationality (internal and external), and that the irrationality or incoherence of external behavior often finds its explanation and its justification in the search for internal logic and coherence" (p. 420).

We will see that Turkish diplomacy in Iraq is not immune to these contradictions.

In 2003, the US-led coalition invaded Iraq without the approval of the UN security council (France threatened the United States to use the veto). Türkiye had hoped, since 1991, that the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds was provisional and that total control of Baghdad would be restored (Lundgren, 2005, p. 81).

However, the situation is complex as the Turkish government and military were strongly opposed to an invasion, but favorable to the deployment of American troops on their territory, in order to open a northern front against Iraq. As conflict was considered inevitable, it was considered to be in Türkiye's interest to cooperate in order to secure a place in the post-war negotiations on the future of

Iraq. The priority was to obtain guarantees from Washington that the Iraqi Kurds would not be granted an independent state in northern Iraq (Lundgren, 2005, p. 80).

Turkish public opinion remained strongly opposed to this strategy. The Turkish Parliament voted against the government's proposal that would have allowed the United States to deploy around 60,000 troops on its territory (Lundgren, 2005, p. 80).

Throughout the 20th century, Turkish-Iraqi relations were complex and experienced many crises. Ankara set up a new deal when it forged direct ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Since then, a complex triangular game has been established and the Turkish government has often prioritized its relationship with the GRK for economic reasons (Iraqi oil and Turkish products) and security (fight against the PKK and its rear bases in this region) (Marcou, 2021, p. 147).

Since 2005, Türkiye has wished to participate in the economic reconstruction Iraq and to preserve its territorial integrity, distrusting potential federalism. The Turkish elites (government, army, intellectuals) considered the new institutional organization of Iraq as possible threat to their own country. They were worried about the fact that a part of the Kurds in Türkiye would start to push for a similar political system. For this, the two neighbors entered into a strategic partnership.

According to Gürsel (2013, p. 193), a paradigm shift has occurred in Türkiye's foreign policy and in its view of the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Turkish army considered it a threat to Iraqi national unity and to that of Türkiye too, because autonomy in one part of

the region could have given ideas to the Kurds. From 2007, the KRG has been seen as a strategic partner and not a threat. Economic needs obviously played a role, but the redistribution of power relations between the AKP and the army seems to have been decisive.

Despite the attachment to the unity of Iraq, Ankara quickly established close relations with the KRG, to which it had initially refused the status of official interlocutor, for fear of seeing it disrupt the stability of the Kurdish provinces of Türkiye. This change, displayed from 2007, can be explained by the fact that Erdogan's government then enjoyed greater leeway vis-à-vis the army (thanks to a double victory in the presidential and legislative elections this that year) (Burdy & Marcou, 2013, p. 11).

Türkiye must import more than 90% of its oil and natural gas needs. It meets more than 70% of its energy demand by importing fossil fuels and coal from Russia and Iran. In 2011, imports from these two countries reached \$36.5 billion. As such, the country looked for alternatives, Iraq being the most obvious by proximity. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has governed the north of the country almost independently since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (Gürsel, 2013, p. 192) and, as a consequence, Turkish exports in this region are increasing, from \$1.4 billion in 2007 to \$ 8 billion in 2013 (Cagaptay *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, a consulate is opened in Erbil in 2010. In 2009, Massoud Barzani, the president of the GRK, supported the "democratic opening" launched by Erdoğan, towards the Kurds of Türkiye and called on the PKK

to lay down their arms (Burdy & Marcou, 2013, p. 11).

In 2012, in Erbil, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz and Oil Minister Ashti Hawrami announced that the KRG was going to build a pipeline allowing it to produce one million barrels per day and transport oil from the north of the Iraq to Türkiye. The reaction of Ali Al Moussaoui, Maliki's adviser, was clear when he declared that "any agreement had to respect the Constitution and the laws which govern relations between Baghdad and the Kurdish part of the country, in the north" (Kirdar, 2013, p. 112). The strong tensions between the three actors were visible with an Ankara-Erbil axis facing Baghdad.

In July 2012, Iraq banned Türkiye from entering its airspace, accusing it of "stirring up sectarianism in Iraq by supporting the country's Sunnis" and threatened to sever trade relations with Türkiye. The visit of Ahmet Davutoglu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Kirkuk and Erbil a month later provoked a strong reaction from Hoshiyar Zebari, the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, who stated that this visit was not "appropriate" and constituted "interference in the internal affairs of Iraq" (Kirdar, 2013, p. 114).

Ankara's desire to influence Iraqi policy

Strengthened by its economic weight, Türkiye is also making itself heard on the Iraqi political scene. It was therefore very involved in the negotiations for the formation of a government after the elections of March 2010. The two essential assets of the strategy of Turkish entry into Iraq are the Turkmen card and the

proximity with the Sunnis (Cécillon, 2011, p. 77), as we will see. But let's start with the Kurdish question which is the priority of the Turks.

For Turkey, preserving the territorial status quo and existing borders is considered a priority, as is fighting the PKK attacking from northern Iraq. To achieve this, since 1991 and the end of the Gulf War, Iraqi territory has faced incursions by the Turkish army. There have also been political factors, as Turkish governments have developed regular contact with the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties since 1991: the PDK (Kurdistan Democratic Party) of Massoud Barzani and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) of Jalal Talabani. This is a break with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a neighbor and the inviolability of borders, which had long been the main pillars of Turkish foreign policy. The paradox, according to Lundgren (2005, p. 89), is that Turkey's goal was to defend Iraq's territorial integrity by violating its sovereignty.

Between 1961 and 1975, the Iraqi Kurds had Iranian support both logistically and financially, with the blessing of Washington. The objective of the Shah and the Americans was to counterbalance Soviet support for Iraq. Therefore, during the Iran-Iraq war, there was a new paradigm since each of the governments sought to form an alliance with the Kurds of the neighboring state (Meier, 2002, p. 15). The end of the Shah regime in 1979 provoked important changes regarding these alliances and the stability of the region.

As early as 1984, the PKK had established rear bases on the border between the two countries, in the mountains of Qandil, in Iraqi territory. Over time, the two major

Kurdish movements in Iraq, the PDK and the PUK have welcomed PKK militants. The three then faced simultaneous operations by the Iraqi army and the Turkish army (Picard, 1991, p. 108). From 1988, Barzani and Talabani began discussions with Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal and the PKK then became the only Kurdish movement capable of deploying fighters in the Turkish-Iraqi border area (Gunter, 1990, p. 51).

The numerous clashes with the PKK show the transnational character of the confrontation that is being played out. Northern Iraq acts as a rear base for PKK militants and must be considered alongside the areas of Syria controlled by the PYD, an ally of the PKK. These two border regions have become areas of frequent intervention by the Turkish army. The transnationalization of the conflict between the PKK and Türkiye and its implications for Iraq require an understanding of its political dynamics (Meier, 2022, p. 88).

In 1991, the collaboration between the PKK and Saddam Hussein's regime was revealed. Since 1987, Baghdad has been supplying the PKK with weapons in exchange for information on the American bases in Incirlik and on the PDK (Cerny, 2018, p. 19). The PKK is isolated because the Kurds of Iraq will approach Ankara (Meier, 2022, p. 91).

In 2003, the United States offered to help create a buffer zone 40 km deep into Iraq for Türkiye to pursue the PKK, but the parliament's refusal to commit militarily offered the Iraqi Kurds an opportunity to assume the role of an ally of Washington in the area, which is a paradox, according to Cerny (2018, p. 101). Ankara therefore looked for allies among Iraqi

political actors and will do everything to diversify them, as we will see.

Another notable fact is that the Turkmen of Iraq are descended from Turks who remained in Iraq after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and number around 500,000 people. It was not until the 1990s that Ankara supported them and tried to co-opt them into defending its interests, particularly in Kirkuk, where they are most present. An Iraqi Turkmen Front (FTI) was created in 1995 with financial assistance from Ankara, but the divisions between Shiites and Sunnis and their marginal weight on the political level mean that the FTI won only 0.7% of the vote in the 2005 elections (Cécillon, 2011, p. 83).

Türkiye is also close to the Iraqi Sunnis. During the 2010 legislative elections, the country supported the list of the Al-Iraqiyya Movement, which brought together the main Iraqi Sunni movements and the Shiite Ayad Al-lawi, against Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki. In addition to shared membership in Sunnism, Turkish interest in the Al-Iraqiyya coalition is the result of complex political calculations. Türkiye feared that Al-Maliki, a Shiite who wanted to exclude the Sunnis from power, would provoke a return of violence with a possible contagion effect on Turkish territory. Al-Iraqiyya could also serve to reduce Kurdish ambitions in northern Iraq. In the province of Kirkuk, the movement won six seats in 2010, the same number as the Kurdish coalition. The close result of the 2010 elections, 24.7% of the vote for Allawi against 24.2% for Al-Maliki's list, prevented Al-Iraqiyya from forming a government, for lack of a majority. After seven months of negotiations, a government

led by Al-Maliki was formed. It was made up of members of the main lists in the running, including Al-Iraqiyya. Allawi took the head of a "strategic council" with unclear skills. Even if Türkiye saw its candidate fail, it nevertheless contributed to international pressure to allow the integration of certain members of the Al-Iraqiyya list into the government, which Al Maliki initially refused (Cécillon, 2011, p. 75).

Türkiye also tried to get closer to Moqtada Al-Sadr, known, with his Mahdi army, for his radical positions against the American occupation. If the Turkish method favored compromise and soft power, this rapprochement demonstrates the Turkish desire to play a role in the Iraqi political game because the Sadrists are opposed to too strong a federalization of Iraq, like Ankara. Turkish leaders received Moqtada Al Sadr in 2009 during a "Shiite summit" in Istanbul and Sadrist representatives even attended protocol courses in Türkiye (Cécillon, 2011, p. 85).

Since 2003, the Turkish strategy in Iraq has been motivated by its desire to find allies to fight against the PKK to prevent the independence of an Iraqi Kurdistan and block the annexation of Kirkuk to the GRK. To achieve this, the Turkish government is ready to discuss and negotiate with all the Iraqi political parties, which gives it an advantage over Riyadh and Tehran, which do not seem to want to go beyond religious divisions in the choice of their interlocutors.

That being said, tensions exist and persist between the two countries. Water management is an important topic for the neighbors. As proof, in 2009, the Iraqi Parliament refused to approve a free trade agreement with Türkiye

for lack of guarantees on the water supplies of the Tigris and Euphrates. An Iraqi law ensures that the question of water be raised during each official bilateral meeting (Cécillon, 2011, p. 75).

Since 2018, the Kurdish legislative elections have confirmed the weight of the two major parties and the election of Nechirvan Barzani as president of the GRK has further developed the relationship with Turkey, due to commercial interests (Marcou, 2019, p. 23). Between 2020 and 2022, Hakan Fidan, director of MIT, was personally involved in the Iraqi case. Türkiye has succeeded in bringing together several Sunni parties, within the “Sovereignty Alliance”. However, they were subsequently divided. The mediation of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in October 2021, between Mohamed Al Halboussi and Khamis Al Khanjar seemed to have worked and the president proposed that Al-Halboussi retain his seat as Speaker of Parliament, and that Al Khanjar become Vice-President of the Republic (Saadoun, 2022, p. 61).

A BILATERAL RELATION BETWEEN PERMANENT TENSIONS AND NECESSARY COOPERATION

Borders under permanent tensions: Turkish intrusions against the PKK

The border region between Türkiye and its southeastern neighbor has long been marked by tensions and conflicts, particularly regarding the presence of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Türkiye has consistently pursued a policy of combating the PKK’s activities

within its borders, often leading to military intrusions into the neighboring country’s territory. This ongoing struggle against the PKK has created a state of permanent tension along the border, with significant implications for regional stability and security.

Moreover, as early as November 2001, the United States spoke of an intervention in Iraq, which meant that the PKK, for the first time in its history, no longer had any allies among the states of the region. The system of parallel diplomacy, highlighted by Hamit Bozarslan (1997), could no longer function. Added to this were genuine fears about the transnational character of the organization, since the European Union was threatening to include the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations, which would be effective from May 2002. The political context was therefore particularly restrictive for Abdullah Öcalan’s organization, which had to both rethink its strategy and adapt to this new environment.

At the same time, from 1996-1997 onwards, the PKK integrated more and more Kurds from Iran and Iraq, which can be explained in particular by the disappointment of certain segments of the Kurdish population with regard to the traditional parties: the KDP and PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the KDPI and *Komalah* (Committee) in Iranian Kurdistan. If the PKK, hosted by Damascus between 1982 and 1998, had made it possible to channel Kurdish claims in Syria from the early 1990s, many Kurds in this country who had been victims of new repression would have joined Mount Qandil after 1998-1999. The first process of regionalization, something very novel in Kurdish history, can be included

within the gradual diversification of the origin of the Kurds within the PKK (Casier & Jongerden, 2011).

Finally, the beginning of the 2000s corresponds to a crucial moment in the redefinition of the PKK's political objectives and methods of struggle, following the capture of Öcalan in 1999. There was no longer any question of independence or autonomy for the Kurdish regions of Turkey: the demands articulated the concept of "democratic civilization" and the "Democratic Union of the Middle East", which became the project of the Democratic Confederation of the Middle East from 2003. These ideological adjustments accompany and make it possible to legitimize the renunciation of armed struggle, with the aim of moving to a strictly political struggle that would therefore go beyond the territorial borders of Türkiye and include all parts of Kurdistan.

The PKK, founded in 1978, is a Kurdish separatist group seeking greater autonomy or independence for the Kurdish population in Türkiye. Over the years, the group has engaged in various forms of armed resistance, including guerrilla warfare and terrorist attacks, targeting Turkish security forces and civilians. The Turkish government views the PKK as a terrorist organization and has taken significant actions to counter its activities.

In its efforts to combat the PKK, Türkiye has undertaken military incursions into neighboring countries, which has at times been met with international criticism and raised concerns about violations of territorial integrity. These incursions have targeted PKK bases, training camps, and supply routes, aiming to weaken the group's capabilities and disrupt its

operations (Ahmadzadeh & Stansfield, 2010, p. 25).

One notable example of Turkish intrusions is Operation Claw, launched in May 2019, which involved cross-border operations against PKK positions in northern Iraq. The operation aimed to deny the PKK a safe haven and to damage its infrastructure in the region. Similarly, Operation Olive Branch in 2018 targeted the People's Protection Units (YPG), an offshoot of the PKK operating in Syria, with the aim of establishing a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Turkey's military actions against the PKK have received mixed reactions from the international community. While some countries, particularly those facing similar security threats, have shown understanding and support for Turkey's efforts, others have expressed concern about the potential escalation of violence and the impact on civilian populations (Grojean, 2013, p. 21). Calls for restraint and diplomatic solutions have been made, emphasizing the need to address the root causes of the conflict.

The persistent tensions and military actions along the Turkey-PKK border have broader regional implications. The conflict has strained relations between Türkiye and its neighboring countries, as well as affecting the stability of the wider region (Quesnay *et al.*, 2013, p. 144). Additionally, the presence of the PKK has had repercussions for the Kurdish populations in the region, who often find themselves caught in the crossfire between the group and Turkish forces.

The Turkish intrusions against the PKK along the border have created a state of per-

manent tension in the region. While Türkiye considers these actions necessary for its national security, they have generated significant challenges in terms of territorial integrity, regional stability, and the protection of civilian populations. Achieving a lasting solution to the conflict requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying grievances and incorporates diplomatic efforts alongside security measures.

Ambitious Türkiye-Iraq Economic Cooperation: Turkish Trade and Investments

In the Turkish political imagination, Iraq evokes several dilemmas: security, identity and territory, the combination of which form a continuum that is both traumatic and familiar. The Turkish-Iraqi border itself exhibits to a certain conceptual vagueness due to the common presence of Kurds on both sides of the border (Library of Congress, 2006, p. 122) and partly maintains the idea of territorial continuity between Türkiye and Iraq, a myth that is also anchored at the heart of Turkish national history. At the time of the creation of modern Türkiye in 1923, Ankara claimed the former province (vilayet) of Mosul (McDowall, 1996, p. 33). Despite the Turkish-British agreement of 1926 by which Ankara abandoned its claims, some in Türkiye still consider northern Iraq as lost territory (Middle East Report, 2008, p. 93).

This new proximity between Ankara and the KRG has also allowed Türkiye to establish itself as a very powerful economic player on the ground. Within a few years, it became the KRG's largest trading partner and investor in the region. Most of the approximately \$6 bil-

lion in Turkish exports to Iraq in 2010 went to Iraqi Kurdistan (Kalkan, 2011, p. 88). Turkish companies built the airports of the two largest cities in the KRG, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Two Turkish airlines, Turkish Airlines and Atlas Jet, operate regular flights between Erbil and Istanbul. Energy is also obviously at the center of the exchanges with many Turkish companies lining up to exploit the KRG's energy resources, both oil and gas (Tejel, 2009, p. 42). A quarter of Iraq's oil production passes through the pipeline between Kirkuk and the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Türkiye is also present through the educational network of Fethullah Gülen, which gained a foothold in northern Iraq in 1993 and has opened many schools since 2003, and even a university in Sulaymaniyah (Grojean, 2013, p. 51).

The growing economic interdependence between Ankara and Erbil has important political effects. For Ankara, the more exchanges that develop, the more the hypothesis of an open confrontation – whose effectiveness has never been proven, neither to eliminate the PKK, nor to prevent the empowerment of the region – recedes. For the KRG, trade with Türkiye is vital, hence the appointment of Sinan Chalabi, a Kurd with dual Turkish and Iraqi nationality, as Minister of Trade and Industry.

For Ankara, this rapprochement brings other positive diplomatic benefits – starting with a strengthening of Turkish influence in Baghdad.

The industrial and manufacturing sectors remain embryonic in Kurdistan. On the other hand, the private sector, which is booming, is developing largely through import-export trade activities with neighboring countries

and China. Thus, the establishment of many import-export companies in Kurdistan is noticeable as soon as you cross the Iraqi border when leaving Turkey. The five or six kilometers of road linking Ibrahim Khalil's post to the entrance to the town of Zakho are flanked by warehouses for the storage of goods, offices of multiple trading companies and exhibition shops of companies specializing in this activity (Yildirim, 2008, p. 105). The Kurdish cities serve as a distribution platform for the autonomous region, as a relay to the rest of Iraq – because, as we have seen, Iraqi transport companies come to refuel there – but also as a place of supply for the Iranian market as we will see later.

The Turkish presence in Iraqi Kurdistan is impressive. Its companies are particularly active in the field of construction and infrastructure projects; as such, Türkiye is also the main provider of skilled labor to the KRG. In addition, Turkey, which remains the main producer of consumer goods in the region, is omnipresent in the commercial sector, and a large number of shops and shopping centers offer products made in Turkey. The border checks at the Ibrahim Khalil crossing are the only visible part of a cross-border economy that has far more distant ramifications on Turkish territory. Kurdish traders from Iraq have been coming here for decades, but the beginning of large-scale commercial activity dates to the early 1990s. When Saddam Hussein dominated Iraqi Kurdistan, the border was open and functioning normally. However, many constraints did not allow the development of trade. For example, the use of the dollar was prohibited and a policy of protectionism of Iraqi products

overtaxed imported products (Babacan, 2011, p. 44). Only a few large wholesale traders had managed to develop activity before 1991 in the shadow of the old regime. It was therefore after the “Revolution” of 1991 that the development of trade between Iraqi Kurdistan and Türkiye reached a first level.

The operation of Younis, one of Zakho's largest import-export companies, perfectly sums up the organization of cross-border trade between Türkiye and Iraq and its footprint. An entrepreneur from Zakho founded Younis Cie in 1991; it now employs more than two hundred workers and managers mainly from the Zakho region. Its activity consists in importing cosmetic and household products into Iraq. While 80% of purchases take place in Turkey, the rest are made in Europe or Dubai. This company has a transit warehouse in Gaziantep, which is used to collect products from major Turkish cities (Istanbul, Izmir ...), as well as goods arriving by sea at the port of Mersin. All these goods are then transported by road, via Ibrahim Khalil, using containers in large warehouses in Zakho, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, before being distributed to local Kurdish merchants (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 54).

The Turkish-Iraqi border is a good example of regional integration that has rapidly evolved towards normalization between the two countries based on their commercial economic activity. Low taxes at the border have deterred the smuggling trade, which has been common in the past. Türkiye has a comprehensive and diversified economy that has found opportunities in a region of Iraq that is

rebuilding and has added liquidity (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 66).

CONCLUSION

In 2023, Türkiye will celebrate one hundred years as a republic. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's victory on May 28th set him up for five more years in power, with an AK Party-led alliance holding a majority in the parliament. In 2028, he will have been leading Türkiye for 25 years (11 as prime minister and 14 as president).

Over twenty years, the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan have forged close ties with the Turkish President. "The government of Kurdistan has always tried to have good relations with Turkey, which is their portal to the rest of the world" recalls Iraqi political scientist Mohamed Ezzedine. He underlines that "These reports were built on economic foundations" and "economically, there are mutual benefits" (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2023).

In addition, Iraq launched a \$17 billion project in May 2023 to link a major commodities port on its southern coast by rail and roads to the Turkish border. The Development Road will try to tie the Grand Faw Port in Iraq's south to Turkey. The goal is to turn the country into a transit hub for oil with two aims. The first one is to shorten travel time between Asia and Europe, while the second is to try to rival the Suez Canal (Azhari, 2023).

Border security, water security, diplomatic influence and economic strategy are the main topics that the Turkish government will need to manage seriously with Iraq. While "Turkey possesses ample material, ideational and foreign-policy

resources" (Ari & Munassar, 2020, p. 8), limitations still exist. For example, the borders could permit more regional integration through their active trade activity. However, the reality is that the control of the borders and the activity of the PKK will continue to be considered as the priority for Ankara. The "Kurdish question" is still a national security issue.

According to the researcher Kamel Omar, during Erdoğan's new five-year term, "the Turkish army will expand their military influence in Kurdistan and penetrate more deeply into the autonomous region". Despite the consequences, the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan can only accept the Turkish military presence due to the economic ties. In 2022, trade with Ankara amounted to 12 billion dollars, more than 50% of trade balance between Türkiye and Iraq (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2023). The bilateral relations will face multiple challenges in the next years. A new competition is starting in Iraq with the increasing role of the Gulf countries in its economic development.

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