

Recent Trends in Turkish Policy Toward Kurdish Region of Iraq and Its Interpretation

Yichen Liu

*School of Politics and Public Administration, Northwest University of Political Science and Law,
Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710063, China*

Keywords: Turkey, Kurdish region of Iraq, Neo-ottomanism

Abstract: Turkey's foreign policy toward the Kurdish region of Iraq is characterized by flexibility and autonomy, with tense and conciliatory relations between the two sides at times. The most recent trend in Turkey's policy toward Kurdish region of Iraq is the development of cooperation between the two sides in a variety of fields, as evidenced by the strengthening of political trust, military cooperation in combat, and economic mutual benefits. Turkey's neo-Ottomanism political philosophy has influenced this trend. Turkey's diplomacy with the Kurdish region of Iraq is driven by Turkey's practical diplomatic needs, including its desire for strategic autonomy, national security interests and energy supplies, and willingness to challenge US external dominance over Kurdish region of Iraq affairs. Given the region's current complex international political relations and power dynamics, Turkey will face significant uncertainty in the future.

1. Introduction

The Kurdish issue is one of the Middle East's most contentious and difficult issues. In recent years, Turkey has taken a number of steps to increase its actual influence in the Kurdish region of Iraq (hereinafter referred to as "KRI"), demonstrating a more visible political ambition. The latest developments in Turkey's policy toward Kurds in northern Iraq are one of the most pressing issues in the Middle East right now, as well as a hot topic in international circles. An examination of Turkey's initiatives towards the Kurdish region's political philosophy and diplomatic needs can provide some useful references for a rational understanding of Turkey's diplomatic direction with the Kurdish region.

2. Turkey's Multifaceted Initiatives in Relation to the Kri

There are now several significant areas of cooperation between Turkey and Kurdistan Regional Government (hereinafter referred to as "KRG"), as indicated by the regular interchange of high-level visits and the growth of political mutual confidence. Tayyip Erdoan was successfully re-elected as Turkey's president in July 2018, making him the country's first president since switching from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Necirvan Barzani, the former prime minister of KRI, was asked to attend such a significant inauguration ceremony by Turkey, which represented a turning point in the restart of political collaboration between Turkey and KRG [1]. In

subsequent meetings, the complexity of themes covered by the two sides has increased, underlining the historical pinnacle of their ambitions to collaborate and anticipating the realization of the goal of preserving a long-term strategic alliance between them [2].

Increased energy trade and reciprocal economic gains. The government of the Iqaluit area regards the establishment of healthy economic and commercial links with Turkey as a crucial component for the territory's internal stability [3]. Energy trade between the two sides is dominated by hydrocarbon resources, with almost all of the oil in KRI being exported through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. At the peak of their relations, KRI became the second largest contractor market [1] and the third largest export market for Turkish oil [4]. The commercial connection between KRG and Turkey has generated billions of dollars in revenue for Turkey and its leaders. Turkey's trade with KRG reached \$5 billion in the first half of 2017 alone, and the two are even referred to as a “undeclared economic community.” [5]

Military cooperation in combat against the PKK. Turkey is actively developing a military-security cooperation grid with KRI and engaging in KRI security governance issues, which is warmly welcomed by KRG. During August 2019 visit to Turkey, President Nechirvan Barzani stated unequivocally that he will fiercely oppose the PKK's armed activities against neighboring countries from northern Iraq, particularly to preserve Turkey's border with Iraq [1]. In reaction to the tight and unpredictable international and regional environment, Turkey launched a cross-border strike against PKK militants in northern Iraq on 18 April 2022. Notably, according to a statement by the KRG, the military operation was decided upon following discussions between President Erdogan and Prime Minister Masroo Barzani on the situation in Iraq, and the KRG welcomed Turkey's “expanded cooperation for security and stability” in northern Iraq. While the Turkish military's cross-border campaign against the PKK has never ceased, and the undeclared war against the PKK forces is inherent in this period of turmoil, it will also bring more uncertainty to the complicated international situation.

3. Neo-Ottomanist Political Orientation

Under the influence of Kemalism, Turkey's diplomacy adhered to the guiding principle of “world peace, domestic peace” at the beginning of its existence. After the Second World War, Turkey began to “turn west” towards the West. During the Cold War, Turkish diplomacy was one-dimensional, passive and lacked independence. After the end of the Cold War, Turkish diplomacy began to transform under the political philosophy of neo-Ottomanism, showing an aggressive diplomatic trend and the pursuit of strategic autonomy [6].

Since 2002, the leaders of the Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party of Turkey have seen the West, and the US in particular, as a fading power. The multipolar system of the 21st century offers Turkey more opportunities to carve out a diplomatic path that is more in line with Turkish interests. While Turkey still maintains relatively close relations with the Western powers, the consciousness of the pro-Islamic Turkish elite is heavily influenced by a neo-Ottoman identity. They have abandoned their past fascination with the West and have established only purely transactional and beneficial relations with the US and the EU, without any common basis of standards as a strategic guideline. This new foreign policy, also known as neo-Ottomanism, constituted a new form of 'Islamic-Ottoman-Turkish nationalism' [7]. The essence of Turkish neo-Ottomanism is to revive the yearning for a glorious past by affirming the history and cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire in order to fuel Turkey's primordial desire for autonomy and the legitimisation of its claim to regional power status. Its emphasis on the transformation of Turkish diplomacy and Turkey's status as a central state in several regions is in fact an alternative perception of the route to power by a section of the non-Kemalist elite within Turkey. In the process of

reconstructing a neo-Ottoman identity, the founding philosophy of the present-day republic was reformulated by Turkey. The fragments of history provide the basic means for the reconstruction of Turkey's identity, and the capture of real national interests provides the source of motivation for the planning of its foreign policy.

Neo-Ottomanist politics is an ideological or political movement, moreover it is an expression of social, cultural and religious values by the Turkish elite and population, and a convergence of the diplomatic demands of the Turkish government. The political philosophy of neo-Ottomanism therefore plays an important role in our understanding of the factors that influence contemporary Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's geopolitical imagination derives to a large extent from its understanding of the Ottoman Empire, and this identity underpins Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy in the hope of making a difference in neighbourhood diplomacy. At the same time, access to oil resources, the need to prevent separatist effects from spilling over into the country, and the need to weaken the external dominance of the US in the Iraqi Kurdistan region were also important influences in the formulation of Turkish foreign policy and a practical need for Turkish diplomacy guided by a neo-Ottomanism tone.

4. The Specific Needs of Turkish Diplomacy with KRI

4.1 Turkey's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy in the Hope of Making a Difference in the Field of Neighbourhood Diplomacy

Turkey's foreign policy framework during the Cold War, which used North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Abbreviated as NATO) as a reference point, is no longer sufficient to enable Turkey to address the new demands and challenges in security and international relations. NATO and the United States have lost their appeal for Turkey. Turkish officials and the public generally believe that the time is ripe for Turkey to exercise its strategic autonomy. This notion is deeply rooted, especially when the Turkish government instills in society nostalgia for the historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire. In this way, neo-Ottomanism has become the new message of Turkey's emphasis on independence and national identity as a way of articulating the principles of Turkish foreign policy in the 21st century, thus ensuring that Turkey is not induced by external pressures. The current rapid expansion of Turkey's comprehensive national strength has laid the foundations for a radical shift in its foreign policy. Under President Erdoğan, Turkey is pursuing a realistic and "aggressive" foreign policy, proactively engaging in regional and global affairs in its neighbourhood. Turkey's political, economic and military policies in KRI are one of the outward manifestations of its overall diplomatic transformation and a concrete example of its intention to seize the initiative in the region. The KRI is an important arena for Turkey to flex its muscles in the Middle East and a testing ground for the transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's foreign policy trajectory shifted from "zero problems with its neighbours" to an assertive foreign policy of "Islamic realism" and "sub-hegemony" [8], with the intention of restoring the "neo-Ottoman heyday" to its former glory. Turkish leaders and officials have also made repeated public statements promising to recapture Kirkuk and Mosul as part of an expanded neo-Ottoman empire [9].

4.2 Turkey's Huge Demand for Energy Resources in the KRI

From Turkey's point of view, energy interests are central to its diplomatic interests and it is without energy concerns that the political philosophy of neo-Ottomanism can be implemented. As we all know, Turkey is a country with relatively scarce energy resources and is largely dependent on energy imports. As the economy continues to grow, Turkey will face a significant increase in demand for energy. Although Turkey has started to explore and develop new energy sources in the

country, which to a certain extent can ease the momentum of Turkey's tight oil and gas resources, in the long run, oil and gas resources play an indispensable role in Turkey's energy consumption structure. The Turkish government has always regarded the KRG as an important partner in its energy trade. As Turkey is the hub that connects KRI with the rest of the world [10], Turkey's energy trade with the Iqaluit region has three main benefits in economic terms. Turkey's energy trade with KRG has three main economic benefits: firstly, it diversifies its energy imports, reduces its high dependence on one country for energy and ensures the security of energy supply; secondly, it satisfies its need for large quantities and low prices of energy imports; and thirdly, it enhances its position in the world energy strategy, making itself a transit country for energy from the Middle East, the Caucasus and the energy-poor regions of Europe, and earning lucrative transit fees through oil and gas pipelines. The Turkish government has seen the potential of the Iqaluit region as a major source of energy. It is in recognition of the rich natural resources and economic potential of the Iqaluit region that the Turkish government has suspended its conservative security policy in order to establish a relatively solid partnership.

4.3 Turkey Guards Against Spillover of Separatist Effects into the Country

The volatile situation in the Middle East has given the Kurds great scope for their cause of autonomy. Faced with the rise of Kurdish nationalism, Turkey has been adopting anti-terrorism policies in recent years to minimize the direct threat of PKK and Kurdish separatist forces in its country. Turkey's military repressive measures against the PKK in northern Iraq are necessary to prevent the spillover of separatist effects into the country and to maintain regional stability. In Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflict, Kurdish separatism, supported by a number of state and non-state actors, has begun to destabilise the nation-state regime. Kurdish revisionist actors have filled the gap created by the collapse of central authority, expanding their own geopolitical influence and gaining legitimacy in power. There is also the threat of Kurdish rebel groups within Turkey. These separatist groups, while calling for separation from Turkey to create an independent Kurdistan, sought to secure autonomy and greater political and cultural rights for the Kurds in the Republic of Turkey. Turkey sees the separatist nuisance as an existential threat and has imposed a heavy hand on the KRI to undermine the Kurds' bid for political power. Turkey's expanded military presence in northern Iraq is primarily aimed at crushing the growing Kurdish political presence in the region. In order to prevent the PKK from affecting the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, restrain the Kurds' growing ambition for autonomy, safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and guarantee national security [11].

4.4 Turkey's Intention to Weaken the External Dominance of the Us in the Affairs of the KRI

Weakening the external dominance of the United States has become an important external factor for the Turkish government to seek cooperation with the government of KRI. In the case of the Middle East countries, the US is using the Kurdish issue to pursue its own interests, seriously affecting the internal unity and border security of neighbouring sovereign states. In the case of the US, there are huge differences and conflicting interests between the US and Turkey in the KRI. As the US is well aware that Turkey's taboo is the independence and autonomy of the KRI, the Kurdish issue has become a political tool for the United States to contain Turkey and prevent it from deviating from its interests in the Middle East [8]. No sovereign state wants its country to get out of control, and the chaos and disorder in the KRI could lead to the imprisonment of its border areas and neighbouring countries, which is already a core national interest for Turkey. Therefore, in order to avoid the KRI government being used by the US, Turkey must strengthen its own presence in the KRI and increase its dominance. If the KRG is able to work closely with Turkey and cooperate with

many parties, it will not be eager to deepen its relations with the US, which is not only in line with Turkey's regional interests in the KRI, but also in line with Turkey's overall diplomatic transformation path. In order to maintain the national and national security, Turkey must seize the first opportunity, compete for strategic initiative, and strive for the relative dominance in the KRI, so as to counter the mediation and induction of the United States in KRI and exclude the interest competition of the United States in the region.

5. Conclusion

All countries are guided by national interests and national goals. The Turkish government has been on high alert against the Iraqi Kurds, fearing that their political struggle poses a security threat to its own and domestic Kurds, and has therefore repeatedly launched cross-border military operations against the PKK in the KRI. On the surface, the Turkish government's cross-border operations are only aimed at clearing out the PKK organisation in the KRI, combating terrorist groups and preventing the PKK forces from establishing an independent state. But on a deeper level, there is a motivation for Turkey to flex its muscles in order to increase its real influence in the region. Turkey's choice to launch a sustained military campaign against the PKK can be interpreted as a "show of muscle" to increase its influence in the KRI and its voice in the Middle East, and to strengthen the national consensus on neo-Ottomanism in the country, which is a triple whammy. Of course, this Turkish strategic intent will also inevitably require the exclusion of interference from the US and related neighbouring forces. Since 2018, Turkey has established in-depth diplomatic relations with KRG in various fields. The implementation of this policy is still based on realistic interest considerations, such as energy and security interests. Turkey has not abandoned its security defences against the Kurdish issue, and national security issues have always been of primary importance.

To sum up, the development of the reservoir area is complicated, which is the ballast stone of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East, and also the heading mark of Turkey's policy adjustment. While Turkey is in a state of flux, KRG plays a conflicting two-way role in Turkey's Kurdish question. On the one hand, the KRI is a dangerous border zone for Turkey's Kurdish problem. The resumption of diplomatic relations between Turkey and the KRG could contribute to the continued growth and strength, leading to challenges for Turkey in resolving the Kurdish issue. Turkey needs to prevent the expansion of separatism in the KRI from intensifying. On the other hand, the KRI is a security buffer for the Kurdish issue in Turkey. After the referendum, KRG became friendly with the Turkish government, and the cooperation between the two sides in various fields was under the control of Turkey, which helped the Turkish government to stabilize the severe Kurdish situation in its territory. As Turkey's own policies are also changing, especially in the context of the Middle East powers and the reorganization of the regional order, Turkey needs to constantly adjust the relationship between "inside" and "outside" in the face of the KRI.

From the perspective of Turkey's domestic strategic decision-making, Turkey takes measures to enhance its autonomy in the affairs of the KRI. It is not only satisfied with becoming a regional power, but also tries to balance the influence of powers outside the region to a certain extent. Turkey's dominant national political philosophy is neo-Ottomanism, and its strategic blueprint is to become a core country in the "heartland" of the world. From the perspective of the neighbouring countries in the region, the Kurdish issue is not only an important bargaining chip for neighbouring countries to fight and exploit each other, but also a serious threat to the sovereign security of each country. In terms of changes in the international situation, the global situation is confusing and the game between major powers is intensifying. Due to differences in strategic vision and interests, Turkish-US relations are experiencing an unprecedented crisis that goes beyond the issues of the

two countries themselves. The Kurdish issue is an important factor in the divergence of Turkish and American interests. In the future, the overall relationship between the Turkish-US alliance will return to reconciliation, but old and new conflicts remain a stumbling block to the healthy development of alliance relations. In a world that has not undergone major changes in a century, the roles and interests of other countries and communities other than the United States have also brought more uncertainties to the current complex international situation and affected the concrete implementation of Turkey's foreign policy towards the KRI.

References

- [1] *Two years after the independence referendum: Are Turkey-KRG relations normalizing?* [online] Available: <http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/38/two-years-after-the-independence-referendum-are-turkey-krp-relations-normalizing>
- [2] *President Nechirvan Barzani meets with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan*, [online] Available: <http://austria.gov.krd/en/president-nechirvan-barzani-traf-den-tuerkischen-praesidenten-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>
- [3] *The inevitable conflict between the PKK and KDP in Iraq*, [online] Available: <https://menaaffairs.com/the-inevitable-conflict-between-the-pkk-and-kdp-in-iraq/>
- [4] Bahzad T. S., Daner M. A., Murtuzaliev S. Yu. *The economic relations of Kurdistan Region (KRG) with Turkey and Russia*. Vestnik MIRBIS, vol.4, no. 20, pp.40–53, 2019.
- [5] *Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth*, [online] Available: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-and-krp-undeclared-economic-commonwealth>
- [6] Yang ZhangFeng. *Turkish Diplomacy under the Influence of Neo-Ottomanism*. Journal of Shangqiu Normal College, vol. 33, no.2, pp. 80-82, 2017.
- [7] M. Hakan Yavuz. *The motives behind the AKP's foreign policy: neo-Ottomanism and strategic autonomy*. Turkish Studies, vol.23, pp. 1-22, 2022.
- [8] Evren Balta, Soli Özel. *Turkey's Foreign Policy: Opportunities and Constraints in a New Era*. An International Quarterly, vol.88, no.2, pp.539-560, 2021.
- [9] *Kirkuk under Iraqi-Iranian-Turkish influence: A Land of Lawlessness*, [online] Available: <https://dckurd.org/2018/03/27/kirkuk-under-iraqi-iranian-turkish-influence-a-land-of-lawlessness/>
- [10] *KRG intelligence chief: Baghdad must give us our rights*, [online] Available: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/02/masrour-barzani-iraq-kurdistan-region-independence-baghdad.html>.
- [11] Şaban Kardeş. *Turkey's Military Operations in Iraq: Context and Implications*. MIDDLE EAST POLICY, vol.28, pp.133-143, 2021.