



# Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



## TURKEY-KURDISH REGIONAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONS AFTER THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ: PUTTING THE KURDS ON THE MAP?

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The withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq at the end of 2011 left behind a set of thorny and unresolved problems in the relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) centered in Erbil, and the Federal Government of Iraq in Baghdad. The ethnically mixed areas in and around Kirkuk and along the “green line” between the KRG and the remainder of Iraq are still a source of dispute and tension, not least because the constitutionally promised census and referendum have not been carried out, and because these areas remain largely under the control of Kurdish political parties and security forces. The vague constitutional provision for a federal Iraq has been interpreted differently in Erbil, which has sought to maximize its autonomy from the center, and Baghdad. These differences have been given additional import by the KRG’s energetic attempts to develop its own oil and gas resources in the absence of a federal hydrocarbons law. Baghdad regards these efforts, and the deals Erbil has entered into with a large number of energy companies, including U.S. major companies such as ExxonMobil and Chevron, as illegal.

Less foreseeable was the dramatic shift in Turkey’s approach to the KRG. Ankara’s substantial trade with Iraq’s Kurdish north evolved into a close political and even strategic embrace. Ankara essentially has taken Erbil’s side in the latter’s energy dispute with Baghdad, has agreed to accept oil imports from the KRG, and a pipeline has now been constructed from the KRG into Turkey. This has contributed to and accompanied a pronounced cooling of the relationship between Ankara and the government of

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki which, similarly, was foreseen by few. This is largely a consequence of the increasing centralization of power in Maliki’s hands, and a belief in Ankara that Maliki’s actions will serve only to destabilize and divide Iraq further as a consequence of its alienation of Kurdish and Sunni Arab groups. Ankara even agreed to offer protection to former Sunni Arab Vice-President of Iraq Tariq al-Hashemi, who has been sentenced to death in absentia by Iraq’s courts.

The “Arab Awakening,” especially in Syria, has further contributed to the tensions between Ankara, Erbil, and Baghdad. Turkey’s support of the mainly Sunni opposition to the Damascus regime has been countered by the sympathies Tehran and Baghdad have exhibited towards the mainly Alawite Syrian government. Combined with Turkey’s unhappiness with Maliki and Tehran’s support of Iraq’s Shia leadership, a sectarian dimension has been introduced into these regional relationships. Furthermore, Turkey is also uneasy about the emergence of Syrian Kurdish groups seeking autonomy and deemed by Ankara to be aligned with its own troublesome Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). Although the KRG leadership has sought to bolster more amenable Syrian Kurdish groups, its support for autonomy for Syria’s Kurds has introduced some disquiet into Ankara’s relationship with Erbil. Developments in Syria’s Kurdish areas have combined with the very existence of the KRG and Ankara’s relationship with it, to put Turkey’s own domestic Kurdish problems under the spotlight. The investment of the major energy companies in the

KRG and the construction of pipelines into Turkey, possibly in the face of Baghdad's opposition, has raised the stakes in the region. Currently, Washington still appears to be aligning with Baghdad's view that the Turkey-KRG relationship has moved too far and too fast and that the development of Iraq's entire energy resources is, and should be, primarily Baghdad's responsibility. The United States is also contributing to Iraq's rearmament, which Erbil feels poses a direct threat to the KRG's security. This has created the paradox that Washington's perspective seems closer to Tehran's than to Ankara's or Erbil's. The United States is encouraging a search for consensus between Ankara, Erbil, and Baghdad, but it is unclear that this is a realistic prospect. Iraq's national elections are due in 2014, which is also the year that commercial decisions on whether to produce marketable quantities of the KRG's energy resources will probably need to be made, which will, in turn, require the identification of export routes and mechanisms.

With so many moving parts, prediction is impossible and unwise. However, a failure to address the outstanding difficulties in the Ankara-Erbil-Baghdad set of relationships could find regional tensions worsen, possibly leading to a serious challenge to the current map of the region; a failure to bring the KRG's significant energy resources to global markets; a burgeoning of Iranian influence in Iraq and in the wider region; an increasingly authoritarian, centralizing, unstable, Shia dominated and pro-Iranian government in Baghdad; and a challenge to Kurdish aspirations to wriggle free of some of those forces in

the region that have so long repressed their aspirations. Yet the plight and the aspirations of the Kurds of the region, and the energy resources of northern Iraq, are now firmly on the regional agenda and cannot be brushed aside. Furthermore, Washington is in danger of finding itself following policies or neglecting issues that could lead to outcomes in which its own interests and those of its friends in the region are seriously undermined.

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