

By Zeynep Kaya

The competition for oil control in the Kurdish area of Iraq strains relationships between Turkey, Iraq and the Kurdish regional government of Iraq.

The oil dispute between the Iraqi central government in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq in Erbil, and the Turkish government is generally understood as an immediate manifestation of deeper underlying problems, such as Kurdish ethno-nationalist demands for independence. However, competition for the control of resources in the region in question should not only be understood as a consequence of problems related to the status of the Kurds. The oil dispute is probably best understood as an independent issue which is often the source of problems rather than being reducible to the consequence of other factors.

The relationship between Turkey and Iraq has been strained since the formation of the federal Republic of Iraq in 2003. Iraq has often accused Turkey of interfering in its internal affairs, particularly in relation to the Kurds in Iraq through cross border military activities and increased economic involvement in northern Iraq. Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraq's Kurdish population since 2000 has been shaped around opposition to increased Kurdish power and increased involvement in the Kurdish region, particularly in the sectors of construction and energy. Since the departure of American forces at the end of 2011, the Iraqi government has been going through a political crisis between the Shiite-led government and the country's Sunnis and Kurds. The crisis is making central government even more sensitive toward external interference from the likes of Turkey.

The Kurds in Iraq have autonomous status, including their own parliament, oil reserves and security forces. They even conduct some of their foreign relations themselves, notably with Turkey and the US. Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG and the leader of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), often mentions possible Kurdish separation in case of increased central government interference in the regional government's policies.

The oil dispute is an important source of tension between the central government in Baghdad and the semiautonomous Kurdish government in Erbil, and in principle, it is an issue over who has the right to sign contracts with foreign oil companies. It has significant implications for Turkey's relationship with Baghdad and Erbil. For instance, the Kurdish region's deal with Exxon, a deal conducted directly with the KRG rather than through Baghdad, disturbed the Iraqi government. As a result, Baghdad asked Exxon to cancel its deal with the KRG and sought US's support to discourage Exxon. As a result of the tension, the KRG decided to suspend its 90,000 barrels a day oil export through Baghdad at the beginning of April 2012. Last May, the oil minister for Iraq's Kurdish region, Ashti Hawrami, declared that Erbil would export its oil directly to Turkey through the planned pipeline that will reach the Turkish port of Cihan. According to the deal, the revenue will go to the Baghdad government, but the Kurdish region will be entitled to a significant share. But the problem is that some of this oil will be exported from fields whose ownership remains disputed between the Baghdad government and the Kurdish region

(<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/201252111272873513.html>).

Turkey justifies the deal with the KRG by claiming that this deal is for the benefit of all Iraq, not only the

Kurdish region. On the other hand, the KRG wants to expand its trade links through the use of its abundant source of oil. Iraq is Turkey's second biggest trading partner and most of this trade is taking place with the Kurdish region. Therefore, the oil dispute not only strains the relationship between the central government and the KRG, but also Iraq's relationship with Turkey. Although Turkey stresses that this deal is made with the Iraqi government, the latter perceives the deal as interference in Iraq's internal affairs because it was not directly made with the Iraqi government.

The New York Times sees the dispute over oil as an immediate aspect of the Kurdish issue that goes deeper to 'historical grievances and Kurdish aspirations for independence'

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/world/middleeast/displacement-of-kurds-tests-iraqs-fragile-unity.html?ref=oil>). Indeed regional states' denial of Kurdish cultural and political rights and Kurdish demands for political status throughout the region have been an important source of conflict between the Kurds and their regional states and have long threatened the security of all inhabitants of the region. Kurdish political groups requested autonomy or independence and engaged in military activity against the states they inhabit, especially in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, since the end of WWI. Military conflict, population displacements, genocide, killings on all sides, human rights abuses, and denial of cultural and linguistic rights marked the recent history of Kurdish people in the Middle East and have severely affected the lives of all peoples inhabiting the areas of conflict. In Turkey, as a result of the military conflict between the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party), the Kurdish nationalist organisation in Turkey, and the Turkish armed forces since 1984, 40,000 people died, numerous villages were destroyed by the Turkish army and by the PKK, and many people have been forcefully deported or have voluntarily migrated to other parts of Turkey or abroad. The PKK's demand for autonomy within Turkey has been the most significant aspect of its political rhetoric in the 2000s. The Kurds in northern Iraq also had a tumultuous time as result of the longstanding military conflict between Barzani forces and the Iraqi government in 1970s and 1980s and Saddam's Anfal campaign against the Kurds. In this period, the de facto semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq gained official status in the form of internationally recognised federal region with the formation of the new government after the intervention.

An understanding of Kurdish politics based on this brief description of Kurdish organisations' endeavours for independence or autonomy is simplistic. . Kurdish history is also shaped by mutual strategic support between Kurdish political organisations and their neighbouring regional states. The relationship between Kurdish movements in different states is rarely based on mutual support and, in fact, these movements often ally themselves with the governments of neighbouring states. Since mid-1960s, Iran has provided logistical and military support for Iraqi Kurds, particularly the KDP, and Syria supported Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KDP and PUK have had high-level representatives in Turkey since the 1990s. Turkish Kurds in the PKK have received the support of Syria and Iran. It has even been the case that Kurds in one state have sided with the rulers of neighbouring states against their Kurdish populations. For instance, in the past, Iranian Kurds allied themselves with Baghdad and even fought against Iraqi Kurds and Iraqi Kurds cooperated with Tehran against Iranian Kurds. The PKK and the KDP engaged in armed conflict when the latter removed its support to provide camps for the PKK in northern Iraq after a deal it made with the Turkish government. Turkey required Barzani and Talabani's support against the PKK in return for support for their organisations.

When these two different Kurdish political histories – on one hand, Kurdish aspirations and rebellions for independence in each country and on the other hand, strategic alliances between Kurdish groups and neighbouring states – are combined, a more accurate picture showing an awareness of the complicated nature of Kurdish politics emerges. The argument that the dispute over oil resources in northern Iraq is only an immediate reflection of deeper issues underestimates the complicated nature of Middle Eastern politics in relation to the Kurds. Mutual support between Kurdish organisations and other regional states, and conflict between Kurdish organisations and the states they inhabit are key and contradictory features of Kurdish

politics in the Middle East.

All in all, regional politics that take place among Kurdish political organisations in different countries indicate the importance of strategic and economic considerations such as rivalry over the control of resources, wealth and territory. The recent oil transport deal between Turkey and the Kurds of Iraq is just one of the examples of this. This dispute should be understood not only within the context of historical Kurdish demands but also in the context of the relationship between Kurdish political groups and regional states. The solution to the conflict over resources and territory is unlikely to be resolved through the fulfilment of Kurdish demands because the competition over resources is not merely an outcome of conflict over ethno-national demands. Understanding Kurdish politics in the Middle East only within the context of ethno-politics does not necessarily provide an enhanced understanding of the issue, which may impede sensible policy-making.

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2 Responses to *Oil dispute and ethno-politics in the Kurdish region of Iraq*

Robert says:

August 7, 2012 at 2:39 pm

The article makes a reasonable argument in favour of looking at Kurdish-related issues in the region from a broader perspective that includes the regional dynamics. Like other conflicts and disputes, it is important to look at issues against the backdrop of broader geopolitical developments and geostrategic relations.

A number of flaws should, however, be highlighted:

1. The author states: "Since the withdrawal of US troops, Barzani points, even more than before, at possible Kurdish independence if Baghdad does not give them what they need." This sentence and, specifically, the word "need" distorts the picture slightly. It is actually Baghdad's repeated attempts to undermine Kurdish security and economic interests that has provoked Barzani to threaten independence, in breach of the Iraqi constitution. This includes attempts by Baghdad to cut the KRG's budget entitlement, which stands at 17% of the Iraqi budget and is a figure/entitlement enshrined in the constitution. Further, this also includes Baghdad's provocative attempts to enter Kurdish controlled territory to the north. See the 2008 Khanaqin incident in Diyala province as well as last week's attempts to control a border crossing to the north.
2. The author states: "The Kurds in Iraq already have political status". They have an internationally recognised federal region officially named the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Of course, it really depends on what the author means by "political status".
3. The author states: "The Kurds in Iraq have semi-autonomous status". This is incorrect. The Kurds have fully or wholly autonomous status, there is nothing semi about it (as enshrined in the Iraqi constitution).

[Reply](#)

Zeynep says:

August 17, 2012 at 4:36 pm

Dear Robert,

Thanks a lot for reading my blog piece and commenting on it. This is very useful. 'Semi-autonomous' is an error, I will fix it. You are right about the more complicated nature of the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil in your first comment. But in my article I wanted to emphasise the importance of understanding the Kurdish demands in relation to other regional and international factors, rather than getting involved in a discussion of who is provoking who. Your last comment is rightly correct but I haven't actually written the phrase "The Kurds in Iraq already have political status" in the article.

Many thanks!

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