

The conflict in Iraq has highlighted the benefits for Turkey in accepting a stable Kurdistan

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EU foreign ministers held a meeting on 15 August over the issue of providing military support to Kurdish forces operating in Iraq. [Marianna Charountaki](#) writes on the role of Turkey in the conflict, which not only shares a border with Iraq and Syria, but also has a large Kurdish population. She notes that relations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq have improved over recent years and that the current conflict underlines the potential benefits for Turkey in accepting a stable Kurdistan.



The last few months has seen the rapid emergence of a radical religious group, the Islamic State (IS), and its achievement of an unexpected and far-reaching victory over a geographically crucial area covered by key Middle Eastern states, Iraq and Syria. This incursion, regionally and internationally supported, has also affected the oil rich Kurdistan Region whose stability and security had lasted since the aftermath of the Iraqi War in 2003 and the region's subsequent further empowerment.

The Kurdistan Region's stability is not only a domestic issue but also an international and regional necessity given the economic and political interests that are now at stake in the region. This can be noted in Barack Obama's recent statement that the Kurdish region "is functional in the way we would like to see [therefore] we do think to make sure that the space is protected". In addition, a Middle East in turmoil is in need of an oasis of security and stability as an asset for the much desired preservation of the 'regional balance of power'.

This is the case for the traditional forces of power, whose control over the region is now being challenged. The forces presenting this challenge wish to restructure the regional balance of power and reshape existing alliances according to the new realities emerging from the current conflict, which is being shaped along ethnic and sectarian lines, including the Sunni-Shiite divide.

This is also a reflection of the regional powers' reactionary policies toward the role of external powers in Middle East politics. Under these conditions, regional powers attempt to maximise their influence and mediation in regional politics, and the Kurdistan Region is currently a suitable ground to exert those interests.

In view of the desperate regional and international efforts for a unified Iraq, territorially and politically, the Kurdistan Regional Government at the moment appears to the regional and international players as the only bridge to achieve the existence of a Federal Iraq as a united entity. Within this context, the US President's declarations of support can be understood. The same frame allows us to view Turkey's efforts for mediation *vis-à-vis* Ankara's calls to the US administration to lift obstacles preventing the sale of Kurdish oil, providing another input to the oil market.

The Kurdistan Region is thus seen not only as an economic partner, but also as a political one: as a facilitator through its mediating role and a capable actor in keeping Iraq united, as well as maintaining the regional equilibrium



Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Credit: Jan Sefti (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

rather than disturbing it. Therefore, the US on the one hand and France – which is historically sensitive to the Kurdish cause – on the other, eventually decided to support the Kurdistan Region against the expansion of IS and its supporters, thus instigating the urgent meeting of the EU foreign affairs council on Iraq on 15 August.

Though the EU has given the green light to arm Kurdish forces due to the humanitarian crisis that has broken out in Iraq, the EU is nevertheless not directly involved and none of its members, with the exception of France, has armed the Kurds so far. This is potentially a reflection of the fact that the EU is dealing with the Kurds through an Iraqi framework: the EU consists of state entities and thus prioritises Iraq's territorial integrity, recognizing collective rather than individual rights.

Within the same context Brussels' hesitance to recognise the Kurdistan Regional Government as a *de jure* state may also be explained as a balancing act between the excessive provision of aid and their concern that "to support the Kurds militarily could hasten a Kurdish breakaway and a Kurdish state". Human rights issues are only one factor; protecting Kurdish natural resources and preventing their exploitation are also key issues in the EU's condemnation of IS atrocities.

As far as Ankara is concerned, the strengthening of Turkish-Kurdish relations has been a reality since 2008. However, the current regional turmoil has now made Turkey aware, more so than ever before, of the benefit to themselves in accepting a stable Kurdistan. While Turkey would indeed prefer that regional issues and especially the Kurdish issue go through Ankara – as in the oil exports case – Turkey's aspiration to become a considerable regional power has made clear the need for a good neighbourhood policy, especially with the Kurds.

On the same basis, there is a 'vicious (or potentially virtuous) triangle' between Turkey's Europeanisation process, the Kurdish Issue, and democratisation. As I have [previously argued](#), this makes clear that Turkey's strategic relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government are informed by the need for co-operation – good relations can only have a positive impact on Turkey's peace process and thus on the resolution of its own Kurdish issue.

Within these parameters, Turkish involvement in the conflict between the Kurdish forces in Iraq and IS militants might hurt Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party politically, in view of the recent presidential elections on 10 August. On the other hand it would eliminate any possibility of Kurdish forces acting to put pressure on (Turkish held) Western Kurdistan, especially if anything were to go wrong with Turkey's peace process.

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