

AN OVERVIEW OF TURKEY-KRG RELATIONS AFTER THE 2017  
INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM INITIATIVE: FROM SECURITIZATION  
TO COMPARTMENTALIZATION

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INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM INITIATIVE: FROM  
SECURITIZATION TO COMPARTMENTALIZATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **AN OVERVIEW OF TURKEY-KRG RELATIONS AFTER THE 2017 INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM INITIATIVE: FROM SECURITIZATON TO COMPARTMENTALIZATION**

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The thesis concentrates fundamentally on Turkey- KRG bilateral relations after the 2017 independence referendum, based on a brief historical background in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although Turkey-KRG relations had faced several hardships stemming from the domestic politics of both sides, regional conflicts, and problems at the international level, bilateral links developed consistently between 2007-08 and 2017. This study examines the factors that convinced the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to hold an independence referendum and Turkey's reaction to it. However, it is argued that both domestic and regional conditions compelled Turkey and the KRG to cooperate after the referendum. The study concludes with the argument that Turkey does not accept any independent Kurdish political entity in the short or medium term. However, Turkey and the KRG have learned to materialize their mutual interests, establishing functioning relations in certain areas without satisfying Kurdish political aspirations'. This is defined as the compartmentalization of relations.

**Keywords:** KRG's independence referendum, Turkey-KRG relations, Turkish Foreign Policy in post-2016, compartmentalization of relations.

## ÖZ

### 2017 BAĞIMSIZLIK REFERANDUMU GİRİŞİMİ SONRASI TÜRKİYE- IKBY İLİŞKİLERİNE GENEL BAKIŞ: GÜVENLİKLEŞTİRMEYEN KOMPARTMANTALİZASYONA

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Bu tez, Türkiye- IKBY ilişkilerinin 1990'lar ve 2000'li yıllarını tarihsel bir arka plan içerisinde değerlendirerek, temel olarak 2017 bağımsızlık referandumu sonrası Türkiye-IKBY ikili ilişkilerinin seyrine odaklanmaktadır. Her ne kadar ikili ilişkiler her iki tarafın iç politik dinamikleri, bölgesel gelişmeler ve uluslararası düzeydeki sorunlardan kaynaklı çeşitli zorluklarla karşılaşmış olsa da, ilişkiler 2007-08'den 2017 yılındaki referanduma kadar istikrarlı bir şekilde gelişmiştir. Bu çalışma, Irak Kürt liderliğini bağımsızlık referandumu yapmaya hangi faktörlerin ikna ettiğini ve Türkiye'nin bu karara olan tepkisini incelemektedir. Öte yandan hem iç hem de bölgesel dinamikler, referandum sonrasında Türkiye ve IKBY'yi iş birliği yapmaya zorlamıştır. Bu tez, Türkiye'nin kısa veya orta vadede herhangi bir bağımsız Kürt siyasi varlığını tanımayacağı argümanını ileri sürüyor. Bununla birlikte, Türkiye ve IKBY ilişkilerini kompartmantalize ederek ve iki taraf arasındaki politik tutum farklılıklarını bir kenara koyarak sürdürebilmektedir. Türkiye, Irak Kürtlerinin siyasi emellerini tatmin etmeden, ikili ilişkilerin merkezine enerji, ticaret, diplomasi ve güvenliği koyarak iki taraf arasındaki bağları güçlendirme ve ileriye taşıma gayretindedir.



**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İKBY'nin bağımsızlık referandumu, Türkiye-İKBY ilişkileri, 2016 sonrası Türk Dış Politikası, ilişkilerin kompartmantalizasyonu.

*To my beloved parents, sister*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
BOTAŞ	Turkey's Petroleum Pipeline Corporation
CHP	Republican People's Party
EU	European Union
HDP	People's Democratic Party
IKF	Iraqi Kurdish Front
IMK	Islamic Movement of Kurdistan
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organizations
IOCs	International Oil Companies
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNA	Kurdish National Assembly
KNC	Kurdish National Congress
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MGK	National Security Council
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
MIT	National Intelligence Organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OPC	Operation Provide Comfort
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units
PSCs	Production Sharing Contracts
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SNC	Syrian National Council
TAL	Transitional Administrative Law
TBMM	Turkish Grand National Assembly

TSK	Turkish Armed Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States of America
YBS	Sinjar Protection Units
YPG	People's Defense Units





## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the emergence of the Kurdish-controlled autonomous region out of the control of Baghdad in the north of Iraq in 1991, Turkey has had particular concerns about the possible spill-over effects of that nascent area on its decades-long Kurdish question. Specific ups and downs have frequently occurred in the short history of Turkey-Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) relations due to the autonomous region's recalling effect on one of the old fears of Turkey: the culture of insecurity (Kösebalaban, 2020; Sarı, 2022). That's why Turkish decision-makers prioritized putting the security dimension at the center of Turkey- KRG relations from the early 1990s to the 2007-08 period to deal with possible security-related problems stemming from that area.

Although the leadership of both sides sometimes used harsh expressions about each other, and even the bilateral relations were carried out under very tense circumstances at various times, both the Turkish and the Kurdish sides did not intend to break the links altogether. Nonetheless, the security dimension has been one of the foremost aspects of bilateral relations due to the particular fears and reservations of the Turkish state. Other aspects have also come forward in time, and the links are diversified in several areas like energy, trade, diplomacy, etc. Significantly, the improvement of relations mainly around the thriving economic transactions has accelerated with the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) ascendance to power in Turkey in late 2002. Besides, thriving economic relations were promoted vigorously by Kurdish leaders. For instance, then President of KRG Masoud Barzani stated that “Good economic relations between Turkey and Kurdistan Region will create the necessary conditions for building political understanding between two sides” (Barzani, 2015). Despite the ruling AKP having pursued traditional foreign policy objectives of Turkey towards the Kurdistan

Region of Iraq (KRI) in its first term between 2002 and 2007, AKP's critical stance against the Turkish state's traditional policies towards Iraqi Kurds and testing the limits of those policies determined the frame of relations in years to come. For instance, AKP's discomfort with these policies (Moustakis & Chaudhuri, 2005) and searching for alternative policies was voiced by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He stated that “The relations with the KRI cannot be seen just from the security perspective” (Pusane, 2017).

Under the tenure of AKP, bilateral ties diversified and progressed, comprising various areas from energy to trade. From the 2007-08 to 2017 independence referendum in the KRI, the bilateral ties experienced their golden years. Turkish policymakers intentionally abstained from specifying KRI as an existential threat to Turkey in this period. Close ties gradually took root within this time frame amid the de-securitization of Turkey- KRG relations (Pusane, 2017). It can be claimed that several aspects of relations built between 2007-08 and 2017, other than the security dimension, have played an essential role in rehabilitating damaged ties after the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum's negative impacts on Turkey-KRG affairs.

Then in the early 2010s, the Arab Spring came to the scene, which exacerbated the instability and insecurity in Iraq and the Middle East. As Baghdad and regional countries bogged down with escalating security issues and internal turmoil, Iraqi Kurdish leaders believed that domestic, regional, and international circumstances would strengthen Kurds' gains in negotiations with the federal government in Baghdad by holding an independence referendum (Akreyi, 2017). Nevertheless, neither Turkey, other regional states, nor international powers supported Iraqi Kurds' independence aspiration. President Erdoğan stated, “We call the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government to desist from the referendum. That move would cause new conflicts in the region” (Güder & Kaplan, 2017). However, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership did not step back. In the referendum, the question, “Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?” was put to the constituencies in the

KRI and the disputed territories. The turnout was 72 percent, and 93 percent voted in favor of independence (Independent, 2017).

Turkey did not welcome the independence referendum. The process weakened Turkey- KRG ties. However, it was not a complete breakdown of relations. Particular political developments in domestic and regional politics influenced Turkey's harsh stance against the referendum. The referendum materialized in an environment of re-securitization of the Kurdish question at home and abroad because of the breakdown of the so-called Kurdish Initiative in Turkey and the start of the armed conflict between Turkish armed forces and PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Furthermore, the YPG (People's Defense Units), which is seen as the Syrian branch of PKK by Turkey (Altuğ, 2013), was armed as a proxy against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) by Turkey's Western allies (Taşpınar, 2018; Fox, 2021). In addition, Gezi Park protests in the summer of 2013, the loss of general elections in June 2015, and the rise of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkish politics were perceived as one of the most critical challenges to the AKP's unrivaled electoral authority since the party came to power (Adisonmez & Onursal, 2022). Apart from that, the new governing structure arose out of the alliance of AKP and ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) after the 2016 failed coup attempt, and the replacement of the parliamentary regime with the “Turkish type” presidential regime led to the acceleration of already started re-securitization of the Kurdish issue and created a fertile ground for assertive policies in dealing with the Kurdish question. On the other hand, it can be claimed that in the second half of the rule of the AKP, which started in 2011, Turkey's regional threat perception considerably increased, and it became more inclined to use military means to deal with those perceived threats (Altunışık, 2020). Rising Kurdish demands for more autonomy and/or independence in Syria and Iraq are considered one of those imminent threats by Turkish officials. Altunışık states that “Kurdish quest for political autonomy or independence led to Turkey's domestic re-securitization of the Kurdish question. As in the 1990s, Turkey's policy in its immediate neighbors has been substantially driven by the Kurdish issue” (Altunışık, 2020).

Nonetheless, although mutual distrust had dominated the relations for some time in the wake of the referendum, either the Turkish or Kurdish side did not have in contemplation losing the other. Both parties looked for a way out of that stalemate, and the bilateral relations were positively influenced by Nechirvan Barzani's invitation to President Erdoğan's inauguration ceremony in July 2018 (Rudaw, 2018). Moreover, Nechirvan Barzani's first official foreign visit was to Turkey in July 2019 after being elected as the second President of the KRG, which was a significant move to ameliorate damaged ties. Those visits were followed by Turkish business and political circles' official or unofficial visits to the KRI (Pusane, 2019). From the early 2000s, but especially after 2019 onwards, one thing has been obvious: Turkey has desired to have functioning and cordial relations around the growing economic affairs without approving the ultimate political aspiration of Iraqi Kurds: independence.

This thesis focuses primarily on Turkey- KRG bilateral relations from 2017 to 2021, based on a brief historical background of the 1990s and early 2000s. During the period under the examination, bilateral relations faced various difficulties arising from the domestic policies of both parties, regional conflicts, and problems at the international level. However, despite difficulties, the relations continued to develop steadily. The fundamental goal of the thesis is to mainly explain the factors that have played a role in the sustainability of Turkey-KRG relations. It will primarily focus on why and how the relations were compartmentalized and maintained, especially after the 2017 independence referendum, by putting aside all kinds of political disagreements. This study, on the one hand, argues which factors were effective in the recovery of bilateral relations after the 2017 referendum; on the other hand, it presents a possible outlook for the course of bilateral relations in the coming years by compartmentalizing the relations.

In this study, since the author does not know the spoken language in KRI, it is impossible to access primary Kurdish sources. However, this handicap is overcome by utilizing the English-language publications of some media outlets or journalists close to the KDP and PUK. Besides, the spectrum in the selection of

the news is kept broad. Moreover, as the publications are generally limited in quantity and content in the post-2017, think tanks' articles are used deliberately. Also, since the data showing the economic volume of bilateral relations are quite limited after 2017, the Turkish diplomatic missions release data is exploited.

This thesis comprises three chapters in addition to the introduction: In the first chapter, the historical background of Turkey- KRG relations and the evolution of Turkey- KRG relations from the early 1990s to 2007-08 are discussed. Here, the emergence of the autonomous region and how Turkey perceived the emergence of that nascent region were examined. It is tried to show that Turkey's foreign policy stance towards the Iraqi Kurds gradually changed with the AKP's ascendance to power. Besides, the principal reasons that opened the way for improving bilateral relations during the AKP's first tenure are analyzed.

In the second chapter, the general outlook of Turkey-KRG relations between 2007-08 and 2017 within the de-securitization of Kurdish questions at home and abroad are examined. In that part of the thesis, the main reasons for the 2017 independence referendum were discussed. Moreover, changing Turkish foreign policy post-2016 and the question of why Turkey did not accept that referendum were analyzed carefully. The question of why the Iraqi Kurdish leadership miscalculated the possible outcomes of the referendum is evaluated. In the last part of that chapter, the critical developments in the wake of the referendum, which led to the recovery of bilateral relations, are explained. In addition, three critical areas (security, energy-trade, diplomacy) that Turkey- KRG cooperation could rely on to realize mutual interests in the upcoming years while sidelining both sides' irreconcilable political differences are examined.

In conclusion, after briefly summarizing the findings of the previous chapters, it can be possible to link them to the general arguments of the thesis. Finally, the conclusion chapter provides insights for the future projection of Turkey-KRG relations in the short and medium term, leaving a margin of error due to the unpredictable developments.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, TURKEY-KRG RELATIONS FROM 1991 TO 2008: FROM THREAT TO A NEW OUTLOOK**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

The relations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) can be seen as complex. There have been ups and downs in the relations, but still, it is a promising relationship due to mutual interests of both sides. The autonomous Kurdish region out of the control of Baghdad in northern Iraq emerged in the early 1990s in the wake of the First Gulf War. The circumstances that Iraq dragged into were worrisome for the then Turkish policymakers. From early 1990s to 2008, Turkey's relations with the Kurds living in Iraq had been limited and also the already existing relations were conducted within narrow security perspective. Turkey had always been concerned with the spillover effect of the Kurdish issue in the Middle East. For the Turkish policy makers, any change about the Kurds in neighbouring countries could lead to circumstances in the east and southeast of Turkey that cannot be controlled by the Turkish state. This mentality had been the primary motive that had shaped the Turkish state's attitude towards the Kurds in neighboring countries, especially Kurds in Iraq.

In the wake of the Gulf War in 1991, Turkey under the rule of Turgut Özal had cordial relations with Iraqi Kurdish leaders, especially with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its leader Masoud Barzani. However, after the death of Özal, Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurds had been conducted within the narrow security perspective as hawkish policies got stronger in Ankara. When Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in late 2002, and the 2003 Iraqi invasion by the US-led coalition ushered in pivotal changes not only in Turkey but also in

the Middle East. Although bilateral relations with the KRG were continued within the narrow security oriented outlook from 2003 to 2007-08 period, the relations began to change starting from 2007-08. Following parts are going to elaborate on Turkey- KRG relations from early 1990s up until 2007-08.

## **2.2. The emergence of autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq (later the KRG) in the early 1990s and the division of the region between the KDP and the PUK**

The fate of Iraqi Kurds began to change when Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein decided to invade the neighboring Kuwait in 1990. Although the Kurds were expected to rise against Baghdad in the period following the invasion of Kuwait, the Kurds avoided such an action. Likewise, the memory of Halabja was still fresh. For instance, Izzat Ibrahim al Duri, deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the highest executive body of the Iraqi Republic headed by Saddam Hussein, openly threatened the Kurds, “If you have forgotten what happened in Halabja, I am personally ready to evoke you that we have enough capacity to recur the operation” (McDowall, 2004). Yet change in the course of history had commenced for the Kurds, and at the end, this process led to emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

On February 28, 1991, Iraq's absolute defeat by the United States-led international coalition forces offered an opportunity for the Kurds to revolt. On March 4 in Raniya, a popular uprising took place. In a short period of time, other critical Kurdish towns and cities followed suit. In fact, in the wake of the Gulf War, Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south of Iraq revolted against the decades-long repressive Baath regime (Jüde, 2017). Although the regime had difficulty in preventing the Kurdish revolt in the first place, the developments were reversed in a short time. By March 28, 1991, on the ground military developments started to turn against the Kurds. Baghdad started to regain its control over the Kurdish rebel-controlled areas with the help of their helicopters. Flying helicopters was not prohibited by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 (UNSCR 688)

while using warplanes was restricted. Thus, with the help of the helicopters, the Iraqi forces launched a massive attack on Kirkuk, and the city was soon taken under Iraqi control. There was no force left to resist the Iraqi army. The Iraqi army managed to take control of Dohuk and Erbil within three days and, in early April, Sulaymaniyah and Zaho were under Iraqi control as well (United Nations, 1991b; Yavuz, 2019). Due to the deteriorating circumstances and incapability of Kurdish armed resistance against Saddam's army, thousands of Kurds fled to Iran and Turkey for saving their lives.

Although the regime forces were able to suppress the uprising in the Kurdish populated areas, it failed to maintain stability and control in densely populated regions. In the end, in October 1991, the regime was forced to withdraw its forces from the north. Within a short period of time, opposing Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan united under the name of Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF), composed of eight different groups/parties (Gunter, 1996), and took control of the vast areas that included the major cities such as Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani had played important roles for paving the way of autonomous Kurdish region (Leezenberg, 2015). Those parties quickly consolidated their powers within designated areas. The PUK mainly controlled Sulaymaniyah, and the KDP mainly controlled Erbil and Dohuk.

On the diplomatic side of the developments, in the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Iraq had lost most of its international backing, and comprehensive international sanctions had been imposed upon Iraq by the United Nations resolutions. For instance, within four months, from August to December 1990, there were 12 resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against Iraq. These resolutions had undermined the sovereignty of Iraq as an independent state (Rafaat, 2018).

UNSCR 688 was extremely essential to determine the relations between the Kurds and Baghdad. Because this resolution did not define the Kurdish issue of Iraq



within the frame of internal affairs of a member state and could be seen as a first example of humanitarian intervention. The resolution requested Iraq to halt its attacks on the Kurds immediately. Also, the UNSCR 687 stated that “the statement by Iraq threatening to use weapons in violation of its obligations under the Geneva Protocol” and “grave consequences would follow any further use by Iraq of such weapons” (United Nations, 1991a). This was an international answer to the retaliation threat of Baghdad towards the Kurds.

According to Aram Rifaat, the UNSCR 688 had five important implications. First, the Kurdish question was internationalized by the intervention of the UN. Second, the resolution made it possible to intervene in the internal affairs of Iraq. Third, the Iraqi sovereignty was compromised by authorizing the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to provide aids to the Kurds. Fourth, UNSC granted UN-sponsored patronage to the Kurds. Lastly, it offered a framework for international organizations and allies to act as a patron of the Kurds in defiance of the Iraqi sovereignty. UNSCR 688 was the first example of the UN intervention into the domestic affairs of a sovereign state on behalf of a non-sovereign region and people (Rifaat, 2018).

Based on this resolution, a safe haven for the Kurds in Iraq was formed by the US-led international coalition, and its code name was Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). The primary mission of the OPC was to prevent the Kurdish refugee influx into Turkey and Iran, and to prepare specific conditions for the refugees to return to their homes. For this reason, no-fly zone (NFZ) was formed under the name of humanitarian aid to Kurds in the North and the Shia’s in the south within the scope of UNSCR 688 (Hiltermann, 2012). This NFZ covered the north of 36th parallel and the south of 32nd parallel in Iraq, which paved the way for the foundation of a Kurdish autonomous region in the north of Iraq (Rifaat, 2018).

Within the designated territories in order to strengthen its legitimacy and fulfill the power vacuum, the Iraqi Kurdish Front (IKF), called for an election on May 19 1992. This decision opened the way to the formation of a parliament and a

functioning government in Iraqi Kurdistan (Rafaat, 2018). Although there had been some claims about the election's irregularities, international observers announced it as free and fair. In the elections only the KDP and the PUK got seats in the parliament; each party got 50 seats, and remaining five seats had been reserved for the non-Muslim communities (Logan, 2009). No other party passed the seven percent threshold. Resources, ministers, and the deputy ministers were divided among KDP and PUK equally. That is why society called it a 'fifty-fifty' agreement. The result of the election was the result of a negotiation continued between the politburos of the two powerful parties, rather than the voting box (Gunter, 2014a).

On October 4, 1992, the newly founded parliament, the Kurdish National Assembly (KNA), announced its decision to become a federal state, Federated State of Kurdistan, which covered Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah provinces within the borders of Iraq (Logan, 2009). The weakness of the central government in Baghdad after the Gulf War defeat was the most important dimension for the emergence and survivability of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Mohammed & Owtram, 2014). Besides, Iraq had lost its international support during the invasion of Kuwait and politics in the wake of the Gulf War. In addition, the sanctions imposed on Iraq restrained its ability to continue its military operations in the north of the country (Rafaat, 2018).

In this time frame, the KDP and the PUK avoided any conflict that could develop over the results of the elections. This attitude was obvious in the presidential elections as well. The parliamentary elections and the presidential elections were held at the same time. After the absence of a winner in the first round of presidential elections, the second round of the presidential elections was not held (Gunter, 2014a). Both parties did not want their rival to become stronger, and they also avoided possibility of any conflict which would undermine Kurds gains.

Although the PUK and the KDP had avoided possible friction, in December 1993, clashes broke out between the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) and the PUK

in the Halabja region (Gunter, 2014a). In the beginning, Barzani made a call to both parties to calm down, but it did not work out. Even he indicated that “the fighting harms everybody and undermines the credibility of the burgeoning Kurdish administration and erodes the world's understanding of our cause” (Gunter, 1996). Eventually, the KDP became involved in these conflicts in May 1994, and the conflict soon evolved into a power struggle between the PUK and the KDP that has been going since the mid-1970s. In fact, the conflict between the KDP and the PUK was based on the distribution of custom revenues and control of the land (Jüde, 2017). Besides, it was obvious from the outset that KRG's first cabinet, where every position was equally divided between the KDP and the PUK, would not live long. The absence of Barzani and Talabani in the cabinet seriously harmed the credibility and problem-solving capability of the government. The division of all ministries and deputy ministries between the two parties increased the factionalization between the groups. In addition, the replacement of Fu'ad Masum with Kosrat Rasul, the senior PUK executive, as prime minister in July 1993 and the increase in PUK weight in the cabinet brought a different dimension to the PUK-KDP controversy (Gunter, 1996). Despite calls for peace from regional and international powers, clashes continued in urban centers, especially in Erbil, and claimed the lives of thousands of civilians. According to Amnesty International, there had been severe human rights violations and extrajudicial executions, which had been done by both sides (Amnesty International, 1995).

The civil war between the PUK and the KDP continued at intervals, and eventually, the two sides decided to sign a peace agreement in 1998 under the mediation of the United States in Washington, DC. Also, both sides pledged to unite their administrations and hold an election within a year. Although those pledges had been made by the leaders of two prominent Kurdish parties, they did not honor their pledges at the end of the day. Following the civil war years, the division among the KDP and the PUK deepened. Even, Iraqi Kurdistan had been ruled by two de-facto capitals in Erbil and in Suleymaniyya. Both sides did not sign the unification agreement until 2006, and in 2012 the KDP and the PUK agreed to unite government ministries (O'Driscoll & Baser, 2019).

In 2004, a year after the invasion of Iraq by the US-led international coalition, Iraqi transitional government established the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) which officially recognized a Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its institutions for the first time in Iraq's history (Hama, 2018). Article 53 of the TAL states that the KRG consists of the Kurdistan National Assembly, the Kurdistan Council of Ministers, and the regional judicial authority in the Kurdistan region. In 2005, the Iraqi constitution was proclaimed and Article 53 of TAL was replaced with the Article 117 of the new constitution (Hama, 2018). In this way, while following the policies of the federal government in foreign affairs, security and budgetary issues, the KRG strengthened its autonomous status and secured itself constitutionally.

### **2.3. Turkey's threat perception towards the KRG from 1990s to 2007-08**

The Gulf War in 1991 changed the course of history in the Middle East. Turkey had found itself caught in a dilemma whether to support its NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies or to prevent the disintegration of its immediate neighbour. Also, Turkey's traditional foreign policy principles towards the Middle East affected deeply Turkish decision-makers minds. According to Altunışık, Turkey traditionally advocated the status quo in its region. So, preservation of the existing borders and respecting the territorial integrity of the states were the forefront principles of Turkish foreign policy. Likewise, Turkey had been committed itself to the regional balance of power and opposed any power having the aim of the change the balance in the Middle East. For instance, the rise of Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s had worried Turkey due to its detrimental effects on the delicate balance of power in the Middle East. Furthermore, Turkey had perceived the region as unstable. Even the region was identified with the word "quagmire" in Turkish domestic politics (Altunışık, 2009). Moreover, the adaptation of the French laicism (Leezenberg, 2017) as one of the main pillars of republican regime, break away with the Ottoman past, and advocating of West-oriented modernizing reforms had put certain distance

between Turkey and Middle Eastern states since the inception of republic (Zürcher, 2015).

During the Gulf War, Turkey was supporting the policies of the US (United States of America) and its western allies although it had certain reservations. Especially, the then President Turgut Özal and his close entourage had supported the US-led initiative. Özal tried to have good relations with the US in order to increase Turkish exports to the US market, and to attract foreign investment into Turkey (Tuncer, 2015). Other than that, Turkey had certain reasons to support the US-led international coalition against the Baghdad. First, after the end of the Cold War, the importance of Turkey in the eyes of the western capitals had diminished. So, Turkey aimed to show its usefulness to the West, especially to the US (Larrabee, 2021). Second, Iraq had been a significant foreign policy subject in Turkey because of the PKK terrorism. Turkey asked to take part in the restructuring of Iraq after the war (Balci, 2018).

During the Gulf War, Özal and the Turkish government had frequently contacted with the Kurdish leaders in Iraq (Fuller, 1993). On 14 June 1991, President Özal met with Jalal Talabani for the first time in Ankara. On this visit, the difference of opinions among the military and civil bureaucracy became more apparent. Some members of the military wing of the bureaucracy accused President Özal of betrayal. Nevertheless, it can be said that the hawkish wing dominated the moderate attitude represented by President Özal. So much so that three cross-border operations carried out against PKK between August and October 1991 was a clear show of strength for the hawkish decision-makers in Ankara (Firat & Kürkçüoğlu 2002).

In July 1992, Talabani and Barzani came to Ankara at the request of President Turgut Özal. Turkey granted diplomatic passports to Talabani and Barzani and allowed them to open their parties' representative offices in Ankara (Pusane, 2016). On the other hand, Kurdish leaders aimed to eliminate the objections of Turkey to the burgeoning federal government in northern Iraq. For this reason,

they agreed to cooperate with Turkey to prevent the strengthening of the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, the PKK was pushed out of the federated state formation process in northern Iraq. At the same time, PKK caught the fire of the Peshmerga forces and Turkish Armed Forces (TSK in Turkish acronym). Thus, PKK had to retreat to the areas which were controlled by Baghdad (Firat & Kürkçüoğlu 2002).

Thus, Barkey states that “cooperation with the KRG has also achieved some of the Turkish goals that had been unattainable earlier, mainly the realization of Iraqi Kurdish pressure on the PKK” (Barkey, 2010). Oddly enough, the creation of a quasi-state in northern Iraq paved the way for the cooperation between the Iraqi Kurdish leaders and Turkey against the PKK. In this way, Turkey obstructed any Kurdish coalition against itself (Fuller, 1993).

Although Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds have cooperated from the early 1990s onwards, there had been lack of trust between the parties that led Turkey to conduct unilateral military operations in the areas where PKK harbored (Pusane, 2016). Therefore, from the emergence of the autonomous Kurdish controlled area in early 1991 to 2007-08 period, Turkey has seen the Kurdish entity in Iraq as a threat to the integrity of the Turkish state, and something needs to be contained and suppressed because of its possible spillover effects on Turkey (Yadirgi, 2017). That’s why, for some time, they declined to recognize the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. By doing this, Turkey’s main motive was to contain the PKK terrorism and avoiding emerging of any Kurdish state-like entity across its borders (Romano, 2015a).

As a result of this, the first stage of the relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey started with Turkey's ad hoc conservation of the Kurds against the constant aggression of Baghdad toward its Kurdish population. Ankara repeatedly stated its willingness to protect the Iraqi Kurds from Saddam. For instance, Turkey showed its willingness to defend Kurdish refugees and played its role in preventing a possible humanitarian disaster by taking part in Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). However, this did not mean Turkey followed a structured and

institutionalized foreign policy toward the Iraqi Kurds. This unstructured foreign policy status toward Iraqi Kurds continued till 2007-08 (Charountaki, 2012).

In addition, the Gulf War had left several important consequences for Turkey. First, imposing severe economic sanctions on Iraq negatively affected the Turkish economy. It was estimated that Turkey lost 100 billion dollars because of the sanctions (Balçı, 2018). Also, the economically underdeveloped part of Turkey, east and southeast regions, adjacent to Iraq severely affected by disruption of cross border trade. Second, Iraq had become an important regional player, especially after the Iran-Iraq war. The threat which stemmed from Iraq was eliminated by the Gulf War. Third, the PKK found a power vacuum to fill, and in this way, the PKK easily operated its terrorist networks towards Turkey. For Turkey, the period following the Gulf War had exacerbated Kurdish nationalism at home and in Iraq. PKK activities in northern Iraq had created a concern among the Turkish policy makers (Somer, 2004) As it is widely known, the 1990s, especially the first half of it, were the darkest years of PKK terrorism in Turkey (Fırat & Kürkçüoğlu 2002). Lastly, Turkish policymakers have a suspicious the goodwill of its allies, especially the US, about their active support to the Kurds. So, this negative memory in the 1990s led to March 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 memorandum in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM in Turkish acronym). With March 1<sup>st</sup> memorandum, Turkey did not allow American troops to utilize Turkish soil during 2003 Iraqi occupation (Taydaş & Özdamar, 2013; Balçı, 2018). Thanks to March 1<sup>st</sup> memorandum, the role of the Kurds in the invasion of Iraq became more pivotal for the US (Barkey, 2011).

With the Gulf War and the emergence of the Kurdistan autonomous region, the Kurdish question gained an international attention, and it ceased to be only a domestic issue of the countries where Kurds resided. In this sense, as the internationalization process of the Kurdish question accelerated, the problem entered the field of intervention of extra-regional forces. In a sense, the internationalization of the Kurdish problem has made it very difficult to solve this

problem peacefully with the internal capabilities of the countries where Kurds live and has made the problem inextricable.

## **2.4. Turkey and the KRG relations between 2003 and 2008**

### **2.4.1. The ascendance of the AKP to the power and its foreign policy understanding**

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was founded under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on August 14, 2001, and came to power on November 3, 2002, less than a year and a half after its establishment (Park, 2016). Yalçın Akdoğan, one of ideologues of the AKP, defines the ideology of the AKP as a “conservative-democratic party”. In a speech in 2004, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan describes the conservative-democratic line of his party as follows: “a modernity that does not exclude tradition, a universality that accepts local, rationality that does not deny the meaning and a non-fundamentalist change” (Avrupa Birliği Başkanlığı, 2004; Bora, 2017).

In the first years of AKP rule, the necessary moves for the start of the accession negotiations with European Union (EU) and the acceleration of democratization in domestic politics brought prestige to the party in the eyes of the domestic public and the international arena (Karpas, 2017). During these years, the AKP received remarkable support from the EU and the US in its struggle against the Kemalist bureaucratic elites (Bora, 2017).

The AKP governments proposed to reformulate Turkey's position in global affairs by constructing a new set of foreign policy principles (Kara & Sözen, 2016). The AKP had distinguished foreign policy objectives as it was compared to previous governments. The most prominent features of the AKP's foreign policy between 2003 and 2008 were: prioritizing the EU accession process, emphasizing soft power, “zero-problems with neighbors” and neo-Ottomanist discourse, enhancing



economic and political cooperation with the neighbouring countries, pragmatism, and utilizing foreign policy for boosting its survival at home.

First, as soon as AKP came to power in 2002, its main foreign policy goal was to join the European Union (EU). Becoming a full member of the EU was conventional wisdom in Turkey at that time. In this way, the AKP tried to extract a new form of legitimacy in the eyes of the society and bureaucratic elites (Bora, 2017). Besides, with the stimulus that the AKP governments had extracted from the EU, cutting the military spending and promoting economic prosperity were become possible by de-emphasizing the role of the military in domestic and foreign politics (Ottaway & Ottaway, 2014; Dağı, 2015). Although significant steps were taken towards becoming a member of the European Union, the negotiations did not progress at the desired level due to Turkey's internal dynamics and change of political attitude in Europe since 2006 (RAND Corporation, 2008).

Second, using “soft power” was one of the trademarks of the AKP foreign policy between 2003 and 2008 (Uzgel & Yaramış, 2009). Until the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010, Turkey promoted itself as a role model to the Middle Eastern states because of its strong economy, democratic system, and Muslim identity. By utilizing several soft power instruments and initiatives, AKP solidifies its positions and offers itself as an inspiration for democratizing the state mechanisms in the Middle East (Volfová, 2016). The then Foreign Minister and President Abdullah Gül had mentioned the leverages of Turkey in terms of its soft power: consolidating democracy, respecting human rights, the rule of law, and a functioning market economy (Kara & Sözen, 2016). On the importance of the soft power in Turkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, Murat Ülgül states that “Turkey's prestige and reputation had grown as a result of public diplomacy and soft power efforts to cultivate good relations with its neighbors” (Ülgül, 2019a).

Third, with the rise of political Islam in Turkey in the 1990s and 2000s, neo-Ottomanism became a favorite ideology for the conservative circles, which considered it an antithesis of Kemalism. In those years, Kemalism was seen as

outdated and an idea that was sure to be transformed. Ahmet Davutoğlu was the intellectual mind behind the foreign policy of the AKP (Uzgel & Yaramış, 2009). According to Davutoğlu, republican Turkey abandoned its Islamic identity while Kemalist elites put a wedge between the republican era and its Ottoman past. (Balci, 2018) Davutoğlu criticized the fundamental principles that guided Turkish foreign policy from its inception (Gokay, 2015) and assessed those policies as passive and defensive. According to him, as Turkey remembers the religious and historical elements that it is built upon, it will find its own identity, psychology, and political culture more easily (Balci, 2018). According to Altunışık, neo-Ottomanist foreign and domestic policy can be seen as a reversal from the Kemalist nation creation process, which prioritized the “Westernized” foreign policy understanding (Altunışık, 2009).

On the other hand, Nagehan Tokdoğan argues that although neo-Ottomanism manifested in the 2000s, it is not peculiar to the AKP governments. Different governments have circulated this concept (neo-Ottomanism) as a practical political discourse throughout the different moments of the republican era. What makes the AKP government unique in terms of neo-Ottomanism is that it wants to transform neo-Ottomanism into a fundamental component of the alternative national identity construction process, both social and political (Tokdoğan, 2020).

Fourth, enhancing economic and political cooperation with the neighboring countries had been one of the crucial features of the ruling AKP (Kirişçi, 2009; Kalin, 2012). Growing transnational relations in business circles impact the conduct of Turkish foreign policy (Gürdal, 2022). Thereby, the economy was one of the essential motivations for making and conducting Turkish foreign policy (Bache, 2018). Özdemirkıran states that “the case of relations between Turkey and KRG shows how the mobilization of economic resources can play a central role in solving political problems caused by previous conflicts” (Özdemirkıran, 2015). On this point, Ozel Volfova states that “AKP's neo-Ottomanist foreign policies are driven partly by economic pragmatism and partly by Islamic ideology”. She also underlines that AKP's neo-Ottomanism is a neo-liberal economic doctrine that

aims to increase Turkey's economic well-being by promoting free trade in the region (Volfová, 2016). In addition, Balcı states that the “zero problems with neighbors” policy of the AKP can be evaluated within the scope of neo-liberal economic understanding, which promotes the principle of interdependency among countries. (Balcı, 2018)

Fifth, pragmatism had been another vital side of the AKP’s foreign policy understanding (Pope, 2010). For instance, the AKP used the EU accession process as leverage for consolidating its power at home against the Kemalist civil and military bureaucracy. Furthermore, Ankara had framed its relations with the Middle Eastern states within the scope of economic relations. However, in time, Turkey had exploited these good economic relations and acted toward political convergence (Pope, 2010). Thus, Turkey- KRG relations’ economic side outweighed the political sides, but the economic sides gave impetus to political actors in Turkey to enhance the political relations with Iraqi Kurdistan (Özdemirkıran, 2015).

Lastly, the AKP utilized foreign policy in domestic policy for its political survival and electoral successes. According to Altunışık and Martin, the AKP used foreign policy issues in order to consolidate its power inside Turkey. For instance, especially from 2007 to 2011, the AKP aimed to solve the Kurdish problems in Turkey by increasing its relations with the Iraqi Kurds (Altunışık & Martin, 2011)

In the first years of the AKP rule, Turkey took the goal of membership in the EU, which had started during the previous governments, one step further. Turkey officially started EU membership negotiations in 2005. This situation directly affected many areas, from domestic politics to foreign policy. Consequently, this change also affected the relations between Turkey and the KRG. The economic and commercial relations that developed within the framework of the “zero problems with the neighbors” policy was at the center of the relations between Turkey and the KRG. In addition, as the power of the Turkish Armed Forces and the Kemalist bureaucracy, which had been the biggest obstacle to the improvement

of relations with the Iraqi Kurds in years, declined, AKP's hand in foreign policy was getting stronger.

#### **2.4.2. Turkey-KRG bilateral relations between 2003 and 2008 under the AKP rule**

Turkey-KRG relations between 2003 to 2008 were deeply affected by the invasion of Iraq by the US-led international coalition and the ascendance of the AKP to power in Turkey (Karakoç, 2010). Ankara would not desire to accept an independent Kurdish state (Fuller, 1993). Yet, Turkey had to adapt itself to the new reality and look for a new relationship with the Iraqi Kurds after the invasion.

Turkey had already started to change its foreign policy towards the Middle East before the AKP came to power in late 2002. During the coalition government and under İsmail Cem's foreign ministry, Turkey tried to improve its relations with the neighboring countries while sustaining close relations with the west (Altunışık, 2009). Nevertheless, when the AKP came to power, Turkey's changing foreign policy towards the Middle East moved to another stage (Yeşilyurt, 2013). On the other hand, up until the 2000s, Turkey's engagement in the region was primarily based on security issues, and it was limited to the immediate neighboring countries. Things began to change in the 2000s, and Turkey's action in the region went beyond its immediate neighbors and security concerns. Because the AKP's ultimate goal in foreign policy was to make Turkey a central country in its region, and in this way, one day, Turkey would be a global power (Gokay, 2015). Altunışık and Martin claim that "unlike the 1990s, the AKP policy moved to form a deeper relationship with the region and aimed for regional leadership" (Altunışık & Martin, 2011).

After the 2003 Iraqi invasion, diplomatic, military, and political policymakers in Ankara were alarmed due to the several reasons. The prospective outcomes of the civil war in Iraq, the collapse of the trade with Iraq, the rise and spread of jihadi terrorism, the possible uncertainty of Iraq after the withdrawal of the US forces,

and the increased Iran's zone of influence in Iraq were the primary concerns of Turkey (RAND Corporation, 2008). Besides, the existence of the PKK, its guerilla warfare in eastern and southeastern Turkey, and PKK's ability to sabotage the crude oil pipelines continued to concern Turkish policymakers (Fidan, 2016). Broadly it can be said that two main axes determined Turkey's policy towards Iraq after the invasion. First, security policies focused on the north of Iraq; the second is economic and political policies for the reconstruction of Iraq.

In those years, Turkey feared that any Kurdish presence in Iraq would have a spill-over effect in the region (Altunışık & Martin, 2011) and on Kurds living in Turkey. For instance, this concern was found voice in the General Staff of Turkey. İlker Basbuğ, then Deputy Chief of General Staff of Turkey, mentioned that “an ethnic-based federal structure in Iraq will bring more difficulties and blood” (Gunter, 2017).

In other respects, the Erdoğan government's relations with Iraqi Kurds can be traced back to 2005. At that time, meetings were held between the head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Emre Taner, and Iraqi Kurdish leaders. These attempts could not bring the desired outcomes/changes in foreign policy. Because in this period, the government and the Turkish Armed Forces were thinking differently about Iraqi Kurdistan. For this reason, Turkey's Iraqi Kurdistan policy had contradictions between 2005 and 2007. For example, while Prime Minister Erdoğan said in February 2007 that relations with the KRG should be improved, he also described Masoud Barzani as a “tribal leader” due to domestic pressures. Because then Chief of General Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt had a hard stance against the Iraqi Kurds and looked positively toward conducting military ground operations into northern Iraq (Pusane, 2017). There was confusion within the state about how the post-2003 situation in Iraq should be handled and how its relations with the Iraqi Kurds would unfold. The AKP government, on the other hand, advocates improving relations with the Iraqi Kurds, and there were several reasons for this. First, the US invasion of Iraq limited Turkey's option for military intervention. Secondly, the government was planning to move the Kurdish

problem in Turkey away from a securitization by establishing cordial relations with the Iraqi Kurds. Third, the government did not want the TSK to play a critical role in this transition period. (Pusane, 2017).

Since 2007-08, Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds have moved to another stage. The AKP's discourse emphasizes the importance of Turkey's becoming a regional and global actor, its desire to expand its sphere of influence, its pursuit of an active, dynamic, and multifaceted foreign policy, and its efforts to solve peacefully its problems with its neighbors play a critical role in improving the relations with Iraqi Kurds. (Pusane, 2017) For example, the then President of Turkey Abdullah Gül invited then President of Iraq Jalal Talabani to Ankara in March 2008. It is a clear sign of the policy change of Turkey towards the Iraqi Kurds. Because according to Talabani's former chief adviser Kamran Karadağı, Talabani had desired to make an official visit to Ankara as the President of Iraq, but this request was not welcomed in Ankara before Gül took the office (BBC, 2008). After Talabani's visit, the National Security Council (MGK), one of the most important institutions that had (re)produced the military tutelage over the civilian governments in Turkey since 1960, decided to have contact with all groups in Iraq, including the Kurds (Efeğil, 2008).

#### **2.4.3. What were the reasons that paved the way for the improvement of relations between 2003 and 2007-08?**

From coming to power in 2002 until 2007-08, Turkey under the AKP put an effort to improve cordial and active relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). (Pusane, 2017) Several motives led to the eventual improvement of bilateral relations. Those motives were (1) security and the presence of the PKK in the north of Iraq, (2) a growing volume of economic and energy relations, (3) the vanishing role of the TSK in the foreign policymaking process, (4) the ideological closeness of the AKP and the KDP, (5) encouragement of the US, (6) the KRG and Turkey's regressive relations with Baghdad and (7) the KRG's prospective role in a peaceful resolution of Turkey's decades-long Kurdish question.

The first reason behind the rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG stemmed from the security-related issues and the presence of the PKK in the north of Iraq. PKK has, in fact, been one of the significant issues that determined Turkey's relations and the KRG (Zulal, 2012). Turkey's ultimate aim has always been to eliminate the PKK presence on its soil and in the KRI, but the method for achieving such a goal changed over time. Before the AKP, Turkey put coercive demands on the Iraqi Kurdish side to contain and eliminate the existence of PKK presence in Iraq. (Romano, 2015a) As Turkey's perception toward the KRG changed under the rule of AKP, the KRG had turned into Ankara's one of the key regional allies in containing the PKK and its growing trans-border affiliates (Natali, 2013).

Kurdish leaders have not intervened in the Kurdish problem in Turkey in favor of the PKK (Romano, 2015a). Even Kurdish leadership, especially Masoud Barzani and the KDP, had worked closely with Turkey and the US against the PKK despite Kurdish society's sensitiveness and peshmergas' unwillingness to take a stance against the PKK or another Kurdish group (Zulal, 2012). For instance, in 2008, Turkey, the United States, and the KRG established a Trilateral Mechanism to cooperate in containing the PKK. In this way, the general feeling in Turkey about the Iraqi Kurds' support for the PKK was broken, and it paved the way for the improvement of cooperation in security areas.

The economy and energy politics was the second significant reason behind the improved bilateral relations. Motivated by its expanding economic need after the implementation of liberal economic policies in the 1980s, the economic relations with the neighbors have been prioritized by Turkish policymakers over the security concerns (Altunışık & Martin, 2011; Aydın & Dizdaroğlu, 2018). Thus, the economic relations between Turkey and the KRI could be considered within this general context. The outcome of the liberalization of the Turkish economy has had two important consequences for the Turkish foreign policy: transition to the export-oriented strategy in the economy, diversification of Turkey's export

goods/services and export destinations. (Altunışık & Martin, 2011) Especially the economic crisis in 2007-08 in Europe, the biggest export market of Turkey for decades, pushed Turkey to look for a stable and promising new markets (Gür, Tatlıyer, & Dilek, 2019). For this reason, the KRG was seen as one of the important places that Turkey would export, invest, etc. This was especially significant for the southeastern region of Turkey which had cultural links with the KRI and eager to develop economic relations.

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the KRG was one of the few places that were not severely affected by the ongoing turmoil in Iraq. In fact, the KRI had been considered as one of the most stable places in the Middle East in terms of offering favorable conditions for economic development. These favorable circumstances in the region let Turkey create new relations with the Iraqi Kurds from the mid-2000s onwards (Pusane, 2016). In addition, the KRG's relatively secure and stable circumstances had strengthened by legal infrastructure. 2006 KRG investment law, the 2007 oil and gas law (Ottaway & Ottaway, 2014), visa-free regime (Fidan, 2016) were just some necessary legal arrangements that encouraged Turkish businesses to invest. Besides the creation of a liberal business and investment environment devoted to the international private sector, the entrepreneurial capabilities of the Turkish private sector, coupled with the termination of UN-led sanctions on Iraq, and the end of the internal sanctions on KRI by the Baathist regime, culminated in substantial economic cooperation which was unimaginable a decade ago. Moreover, the closeness of the KRG market, increasing consumer demands in the KRG, and transborder commercial activities of Turkish business circles led to the immense economic interdependency between Ankara and Erbil (Fidan, 2016).

Energy had been another important area that shaped bilateral relations. From the mid-2000s onwards, Turkey's energy demand has constantly been increasing. Thus, policymakers in Ankara have been looking for new energy resources (Pusane, 2016) to guarantee secured energy supplies (Bilgin, 2015). As it is known, 70 percent of Turkey's energy demand is met by imports which creates the



most significant expense item in country's budget (Güney, 2015). Turkey tried to overcome this energy dependency by following specific policies. First, Turkey has been aiming to have a reliable energy exporter country and receive energy at reasonable price. Second, Turkey has been aiming to diversify of its energy supply (Güney, 2015). Although Iraqi Kurdistan had so little to offer regarding industry, it had abundant oil, gas, and other precious minerals, which were considered very vital for the well-being of the Turkish economy (Zulal, 2012).

In 2003-2008 period, the KRG had become one of the largest trading partners of Turkey. As of 2007, Turkey's export to Iraq was around 2.9 billion dollars, and 50 percent of it went to the KRI (Fidan, 2016). Turkish policymakers encouraged enhancing economic relations because they knew that the richer Iraqi Kurdistan would bring more economic benefits to the Turkish business world (Zulal, 2012). The growing export in the region would abate the economic underdevelopment of the east and southeast of Turkey and decrease unemployment in the adjacent regions to Iraq (Altunışık & Martin, 2011). Also, the AKP did not want to carry out bilateral relations and accompanying problems with the KRG from a narrow "security" perspective. Business and trade-oriented actors' role in shaping foreign policy increased (Kirişçi & Kaptanoğlu, 2011). Aydın Selcen, then Consul General of Turkey in Erbil, states that "Diplomacy essentially walked the path paved by businessmen, contractors, and oilmen" (Selcen, 2019).

Sustainable bilateral relations with the KRG can also be considered within the context of domestic policy in Turkey. The sustainability of economic prosperity/growth would increase the electoral survivability of the AKP in Kurdish populated areas and generally in Turkey. (Aydın & Dizdaroğlu, 2018) According to Tezgür and Grigorescu, "the AKP governments' achievement of sustainable economic growth rates and consolidation of its power in domestic politics accompanied an increasingly multifaceted and visible foreign policy" (Tezcür & Grigorescu, 2014). On the other hand, the KRG's need for Turkey was also crucial. In order to maintain political stability and economic gains in Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG needed Turkey (Gürbey & Yildirim, 2019).

The decreasing role of the TSK in foreign policy-making process was the third motive behind the improvement of bilateral relations. The AKP pursued a new understanding of Turkey's foreign policy, which was mainly based on the normalization and desecuritization of foreign policy. (Kara & Sözen, 2016) Turkey's attitude towards the KRG and its concerns about it, in fact, had constituted one of the main justifications about increasing role of the TSK both in domestic and foreign policy. Thus, foreign policy tilted to change from its "defensive" attitude because of the priorities of the ruling AKP (Baudner, 2014). From 2003 to 2008, two critical developments had played a significant role in curbing the TSK's intervention in foreign policy-making process: first, the EU accession process, and second, trials and investigations to prevent the so-called coup d'état.

It is better to begin with Turkey's accession process to the EU. The military's outstanding role in Turkey's political affairs had been criticized by the EU and specified as one of the crucial obstacles to Turkey's full membership in the EU. The AKP took remarkable measures to meet the Copenhagen criteria of the EU also in order to curb constant interference and the autonomous role of the military in politics. For instance, the defense budget used to determine by the Turkish Armed Forces came under the parliament review. The seats allocated to military representatives in the National Broadcast Authority and Higher Education Council were terminated (Taspinar, 2007). Also, the balance between the civilian and military in the MGK shifted in favor of the civilians. These measures became possible due to the EU accession process (Altunisik, 2005).

The strength of the military was also curbed by a series of trials and investigations (Olson, 2008), which aimed to prevent the so-called coup plots. Those investigations and trials ended in the imprisonment of one-fifth of Turkey's generals. Even the then Chief of Staff, İlker Başbuğ, was imprisoned for life. Although, at the end, it was argued that the Gülenist organization manufactured all those plots. However, the end result was that the military's influence on policy-

making was broken. From that time on, the military could not have the capacity to counter the governments' foreign political initiatives (Park, 2015).

After coming to power, the AKP managed to deactivate the Kemalist bureaucratic cadres in less than ten years. Mainly, they phased out the military's role in shaping the foreign policy issues in time. These changes paved the way for the reorientation of foreign policy (Romano, 2015a). Initially, the relations between Turkey and the KRG deteriorated in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi invasion because Turkey has opposed autonomy for the Kurds. However, in the medium term, a rapprochement materialized between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds (Jüde, 2017) as TSK was neutralized politically at home. The relations with the KRG in a way became an arena for the struggle between the AKP and the military. In the early years of the AKP rule the military continued to express its view on critical issues. For instance, on January 25, 2005, İlker Başbuğ, then Vice President of General Staff, stated that Turkey would not act idly if Iraqi Kurds tried to take control of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk or suppressed the Turkish-speaking minority in northern Iraq (Jenkins, 2007). According to Doğan Gürpınar, the AKP initially adopted a more pro-western and pro-EU foreign policy orientation in order to break the tutelage of the military over the politics in Turkey (Gürpınar, 2020). Besides, as the military's role was declining in politics, the AKP's eagerness and self-confidence in domestic and foreign politics increased, leading to the pursuit of more ideological foreign policy (Gürpınar, 2020).

The fourth significant motive that enabled the improvement of bilateral relations between Turkey and the KRG was the ideological closeness of the AKP and the KDP and its leader Masoud Barzani. In Barzani, the AKP was observed as a socially conservative political leader who accepted Turkey's thesis about the PKK, which had a distaste for the secular, Marxist-Leninist PKK because Barzani considered the PKK as a tough rival for the leadership of the Kurdish nationalism. Bill Park indicates Masoud Barzani and his party, the KDP, was seen as the "Good Kurds of Ankara" (Park, 2016).

The KRG leadership had been consonant with the AKP in utilizing the cultural closeness and a shared religious legacy to take bilateral relations forward (Zulal, 2012). Islam, from an instrumental perspective of the AKP, was used to get in contact with the Iraqi Kurds. In this way, Iraqi Kurds perceived the AKP better interlocutor than the traditional secular power holders in Turkey (Oğuzlu, 2008).

The fifth important motive pushing Turkey and the KRG to have stable relations was the encouragement of the US. The US tried to increase further cooperation between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds and eventually played an essential role in the improvement of relations (Loizides, 2010; Park, 2012). Iraqi Kurds see the US as their vital partner and even the reason for their very existence. In this way, Turkey as a member of NATO and the candidate of the European Union, could offer a lot in strategic, political, and economic areas. (Barkey, 2010)

The US presented itself as a broker in the improvement of relations. Washington had close relations with the Iraqi Kurds, it did not ignore Turkey's concerns towards an independent Kurdish entity in the north of Iraq or the disintegration of Iraq. So, the US did not advocate the independence of the Iraqi Kurds because it assessed that it would further destabilize and lead to the possible dissolution of Iraq. Furthermore, while the US considered the KRG a friend or a de-facto ally, it did not see it as crucial an ally like Turkey. Therefore, the US's message was evident for the Iraqi Kurds: Iraqi Kurds must get along with Turkey (Gunter, 2011a).

Moreover, Americans tried to keep Ankara and Erbil together as potential allies against the Iranian-led coalition, which stretched from Iran to Lebanon and called themselves an axis of resistance (Charountaki, 2012). The US also wanted Turkey to exhilarate its economic relations with the KRG instead of doing business with Iran because of sanctions (Romano, 2015a). Although Turkey's aspirations and expectations about Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan do not always cohere with the US, both countries still needed each other in Iraq. All actors- Washington, Ankara,

Erbil, and Baghdad- aimed to create a stable and prosperous country while keeping its pluralistic differences alive. (Barkey, 2010)

The sixth motive that facilitated the rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG was their regressive relations with Baghdad. Right after the proclamation of the Iraqi constitution and the official emergence of the KRG in 2005, specific problems appeared between Baghdad and Erbil. Controlling the oil fields (Hiltermann, 2012) and sharing oil-generated revenues (Fidan, 2016), distribution of powers between Erbil and Baghdad, the future of disputed territories, and the sectarian and nationalist attitude of Baghdad toward Iraqi Kurdistan had been the main problems areas between Erbil and Baghdad (Wolff, 2010). Although, after 2003, a Kurd, Jalal Talabani, became the President of Iraq and tried to entrench the gains of the Kurds (Gunter, 2011b), it did not produce the desired results.

On the other side, Turkey-Iraq relations were not also at desired level after 2003. Iraq was dragged into constant turmoil due to the invasion. These ongoing circumstances provided the necessary room for Iran to create a zone of influence in Baghdad as Tehran and Baghdad were getting closer, which pushed Ankara and Erbil to enhance their cooperation further. Also, Erdoğan's desire to play for the leadership of the Sunni Muslim world against Tehran and Baghdad increased Turkey's intention of having good relations with the Iraqi Kurds (Romano, 2015a). According to Denise Natali, as Ankara's affair with the KRG developed, its relations with Baghdad worsened because of the "Sunnification" of Turkey's foreign policy and the sectarian attitude of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Furthermore, she mentioned that the KRG associated itself with Erdoğan's attempt to facilitate a Sunni-Arab and Kurdish alliance to undermine the Iranian-backed Maliki government in Baghdad (Natali, 2013).

The seventh important reason that brought Turkey and the KRI closer was the KRG's potential role in a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey. The Kurdish question in Turkey emerged in the late Ottoman period (Yeğen, 2015). The Kurds make political demands beyond cultural demands. These demands constitute the most important dynamic of the existing Kurdish problem

(Çiçek, 2018). In addition, from the mid-1980s onwards, there had been an armed conflict between the Turkish state and the outlawed PKK.

In the republican history, different governments at different times perceived the causes of the Kurdish question differently, but Erdoğan's Diyarbakır speech in 2005 had a special place. He openly criticized the wrongdoings in the past, and he courageously faced all those wrongdoings carried out by the state. In Diyarbakır, Erdoğan stated, "There have been mistakes in the past, and we are strong enough to solve these mistakes. The Kurdish Problem is not just a problem of one part of this nation; it is a problem for all of us" (Köse, 2017). In the early 2000s, the AKP aimed to solve the Kurdish question within the EU accession process by advocating human rights and ameliorating the level of democracy at home. Besides, the AKP tried to desecuritize the Kurdish question in Turkey while creating good relations with the Iraqi Kurds (Pusane, 2020).

The AKP needed the support of the KRG in order to consolidate its relations with the Kurdish minority in Turkey. This need had surfaced apparently during the "Kurdish Initiative" of the ruling AKP to end decades-long armed clashes between the PKK and the Turkish state. David Romano states, "The more trouble Ankara has with Turkey's Kurdish minority, the more it needs Iraqi Kurdish assistance" (Romano, 2015a). KRG was brought forward to convince the PKK to lay down the arms in return for the Turkish government delivering more political rights and autonomy for the Kurds in Turkey (Zulal, 2012). Iraqi Kurds advocated the dialogue between Turkey and the PKK to reach a lasting solution (Mamshae, 2019).

Ertan Efeğil states that until the mid-2000s, Turkish policymakers had seen the PKK terrorism, the Kurdish question in Turkey, and the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan as independent and separate matters (Efeğil, 2008). For this reason, Turkey did not develop either a comprehensive solution to the Kurdish question at home or a structured foreign policy toward the KRG. Turkish political atmosphere had been driven by the fear that any significant concession to Kurdish demands at

home, whether political, economic, or cultural, would ultimately lead to greater demands at a future date that could end with the breakaway of Kurds from Turkey and disintegration of Turkey (Barkey & Fuller, 1997). The government headed by Erdoğan ameliorated this fear and reservations in Turkish society and the state by creating new relations with the Iraqi Kurds and started a new process in Turkey to solve the decades-long Kurdish question in the 2000s (Muftu, 2014).

## **2.5. Conclusion**

An autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq had appeared on the maps of the Middle East in the wake of the Gulf War in 1991. Initially, the emergence of the autonomous Kurdish region alerted the Turkish policymakers due to its prospective spill-over effects on the Kurds living in Turkey. So, bilateral relations continued in accordance with the security-oriented policies for quite some time. It can be said that Turkey's relation with the autonomous Kurdistan region has experienced various ups and downs from the early 1990s to 2007-08.

Although relations had been grown in different areas between early 1990 and 2008, the character of the relations had been given by the security policies. Nevertheless, things began to change in late 2002 amid the ascendance of the AKP to power. Although the AKP had followed the traditional foreign policy of Turkey, which prioritized the security policies towards the Iraqi Kurds at first, the AKP's objections had determined the future of bilateral relations. Erdoğan stated, "The relations with the KRI cannot be seen just from the security perspective" (Pusane, 2017). According to Altunışık, soft power made Turkey more robust and influential in its region (Altunisik, 2005). Thanks to new principles of the AKP, the relations were developed. As a result, the years 2007 and 2008 were referred to as the groundbreaking years of bilateral relations.

Also, the improving relations were supported adamantly by Turkey's Kurdish counterparts. For instance, Masoud Barzani stated that, "The hope is that good economic bilateral relations between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey will assist in building political understanding between the two sides" (Stein, 2021). The AKP

followed a more structured and multifaceted foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds without sidelining the security sides of the relations. The economy and energy politics, the vanishing role of the TSK in the foreign policymaking process in Turkey, the ideological closeness between the AKP and the KDP, the US factor, regressive relations of both Turkey and the KRG with Baghdad, the objective of peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey and the KRG's role in it were all reasons that paved the way for carrying forward the bilateral relations from 2003 to 2008.



## CHAPTER 3

### ROAD TO REFERENDUM AND TURKEY'S REACTION TO IT

#### 3.1. Introduction

From 2008 to 2017, close relations between Turkey and the KRG were established differently than in previous years, both in discourse and behavior, which instigated the de-securitization of bilateral ties. During these years, Turkish policymakers avoided describing Iraqi Kurdistan as an existential threat to the unity of Turkey. In these years, domestic and regional conditions necessitated solid bilateral relations and obligated both sides to cooperate in materializing their shared interests in areas from energy to trade.

Then the decision to hold an independence referendum was taken by Kurdish leadership, which had detrimental effects on Turkey- KRG relations. Kurdish leaders assumed that domestic, regional, and international conditions provided favorable conditions for holding a referendum. It was thought that the referendum would strengthen the hand of the Kurds in negotiations with the federal government to increase the power of the autonomous region (Akreyi, 2017). If Israel was kept apart, the referendum was not welcomed by any regional or international powers, including Baghdad. Before the vote, Turkey officially urged the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to cancel the referendum. For instance, President Erdoğan stated that “We invite the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government to renounce the referendum. Such decision would lead to new conflicts in the region” (Güder & Kaplan, 2017).

Nevertheless, the independence referendum was held, and it weakened bilateral relations. The referendum materialized when the Kurdish Initiative in Turkey ended in a fiasco (Özpek & Mutluer, 2016). The rise of the YPG in Syria had

already re-securitized the Kurdish question at home and abroad. Besides, the new government coalition formed by AKP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in the wake of the 2016 failed coup attempt and replacing the parliamentary regime with a “Turkish” type presidential regime has provided fertile ground for assertive diplomacy, especially in Kurdish question (Pope, 2017).

However, bilateral relations took a positive turn when Nechirvan Barzani was officially invited to the inauguration ceremony of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2018 (Huff, 2018; Rudaw, 2018). After being elected as the President of the KRG, Nechirvan Barzani made his first official foreign visit to Turkey in June 2019 which initiated the improvement of bilateral relations. Moreover, Turkey and the KRG have tried to compartmentalize their relations after the referendum. Both Turkey and the KRG wanted to set apart their political differences and forge a new relationship around mutual interests, primarily economic and security cooperation. This chapter will analyze Turkey-KRG relations and identify the fundamental dynamics of bilateral relations between 2007-08 and 2021.

### **3.2. Turkey- KRG relations between 2007-08 and 2017: Desecuritization of bilateral relations**

Kurdish national awakening in Iraq has been a worrying subject for the Turkish decision-makers. Nevertheless, bilateral relations began to change in 2007-08. Turkey made a vital endeavor to improve cordial and active relations with the Iraqi Kurds during this period (Pusane, 2017). It can be said that from 2008 onwards, close relations have been established both in terms of discourse and behavior. During this period, Turkish policymakers abstained from describing Iraqi Kurdistan as an existential threat to the unity of Turkey; instead, Turkey embraced Iraqi Kurds as their brothers (Pusane, 2017) and neighbors (Pusane, 2020).

By the time the independence referendum was proclaimed in Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey's attitude towards the Iraqi Kurds had drifted apart from the traditional security-oriented perspective to return to “normal diplomatic relations” built

around the burgeoning commercial ties. (Pusane, 2020) Several causes led to the enhancement of the relations between Turkey and the KRG from 2008 until the 2017 referendum. The beginning of official diplomatic relations with the establishment of the Turkish consulate general in Erbil, the attempts at peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey and the KRG's role in it, Arab Uprisings and subsequent developments in Syria and Iraq, and enhancing economic and energy relations were main areas that shaped bilateral relations between 2008 and 2017.

First, starting official diplomatic relations between Turkey and the KRG was a critical development that further advanced bilateral relations. Then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's official visit to the KRI in October 2009, the first official visit by a Turkish Foreign Minister to the KRI since its inception, paved the way for the opening of Turkey's consulate general in Erbil in 2010 (Pusane, 2017). Moreover, during Davutoğlu's historic visit, then President of the KRG Masoud Barzani stated, "The Turkish Foreign Minister's visit to Erbil is a crucial step, indeed a historic move. We acknowledge that Turkey has played an important role in our development, and this relationship requires special attention. I am, therefore, delighted to announce that Turkey will open a Consulate General in Erbil" (Fidan, 2016). Although Turkey officially recognized the KRG in 2008 (Charountaki, 2012), the foundation of the Turkish consulate general in Erbil took bilateral diplomatic relations to another stage.

In 2011, then Prime Minister of Turkey and incumbent President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, made an important visit to Iraqi Kurdistan. He attended the opening of the Erbil International Airport, which was built by Turkish construction companies. During Erdoğan's visit, Masoud Barzani stated that "We (Iraqi Kurds) consider that visit a historic moment. We are convinced that this visit will build a concrete bridge between Iraq and Turkey and (especially) between the KRI and Turkey" (Fidan, 2016).

In other respects, Erdoğan's Iraq visit in 2011 achieved several symbolic firsts. Erdoğan was the first foreign leader who addressed the Iraqi Parliament, the first Sunni leader who visit a sacred Shia shrine, and the first Turkish Prime Minister to visit the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Barkey, 2011). Erdoğan's all contacts in Iraq directly reiterated Turkey's message to counterparts in Baghdad and Erbil: Turkey is committed to territorial integrity and the unity of Iraq and fears the emergence of any independent Kurdish political entity in Iraq (Pusane, 2020). In addition, these visits once again clarified the acceptance of the federal structure of Iraq by Turkey (Pusane, 2017).

After the official visits of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu to KRI, Masoud Barzani and then Prime Minister of KRG Nechirvan Barzani, Masoud's nephew, made official visits to Turkey to maintain and accelerate the economic and diplomatic relations further. (Fidan, 2016) On one occasion, when Nechirvan Barzani underlined the importance of diplomatic relations with Turkey. He stated that the KRG-Turkey relations are “strategic,” and Kurds have more constructive relations with Ankara than Baghdad (Park, 2012). According to Henri J. Barkey, policy change toward the Iraqi Kurds was tilled by the domestic political atmosphere (Barkey, 2011). In addition, Fuat Keyman states that “Turkey under the AKP rule has aimed to be an active, engaging and assertive both regionally and globally” (Keyman, 2017). This foreign policy management was more multi-layered, multi-actor, and multi-dimensional in regional and global affairs. This mentality in foreign policy directly affected Turkey- KRG relations.

Second, the AKP government attempted several times from 2009 to 2015 to peacefully solve the Kurdish question at home. Furthermore, from the perspective of the AKP elites, the KRG and, especially the KDP and its chairman Masoud Barzani, could play a significant role in a peaceful resolution of the decades-long armed conflict in Turkey. According to Henri J. Barkey, although the AKP's aspiration to become an influential regional and global power was crucial for the rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG, the domestic political atmosphere,

primarily Turkey's Kurdish question, was also one of the fundamental reasons behind that rapprochement (Barkey, 2011).

In November 2013, Erdoğan and Barzani participated in several ceremonies in Diyarbakır. In this meeting, then PM Erdoğan referred to the KRI as the “Kurdistan region” for the first time. The AKP had two main motives for having the support of Barzani for the Kurdish Initiative. Firstly, AKP tried to increase the commitment of Turkey's Kurdish community to the Kurdish Initiative amid consolidating its base within the Kurdish constituency. Secondly, the AKP aimed to enlarge the division within the Kurdish nationalist camp between PKK and the KDP while supporting the latter (Simsek, 2013). Moreover, multiple interactions at the level of states, emerging non-state actors in Iraq and Syria, and Kurds' situation there forced Turkey to follow a cross-border/regional approach to solving the regionalized Kurdish question (Çicek, 2018). For this reason, Barzani was seen as necessary as a promising actor to back Turkey's thesis on the Kurdish question and being an ally against the PKK.

Although the AKP verbally declared its commitment to giving an end to decades-long Kurdish question, it did not have any coherent plan to follow. As Ofra Bengio mentions, the AKP did not have any Plan B for maintaining the Kurdish Initiative (Bengio, 2011). That lack of planning eventually convinced the AKP elites to apply traditional methods, where there is no risk, in dealing with the Kurdish question. After the general election, which was held on June 7, 2015, the clash between Turkish armed forces and the PKK commenced in July 2015. Turkey began to experience another re-securitization of the Kurdish question at home. Erdoğan took a step back and stated, “There is no Kurdish question, but the problem of Kurdish people” (Anadolu Ajansı, 2015). The problematic architecture of the Kurdish Initiative, the limits of the AKP and state's traditional methods of dealing with the Kurdish question, the limits of Kurdish politics and PKK, the gap between the political agendas of the Turkish and Kurdish sides, international dynamics, and emerging of new geopolitics in the region were the main reasons that led to the failure of the Kurdish Initiative (Çicek, 2018).

Third, Arab Uprisings and the developments in Syria and Iraq were critical dimensions that determined the frames of Turkey- KRG relations between the early 2010s and 2017. From late 2010 onwards, the Arab world was shaken by the continuous uprisings, dubbed as the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia and eventually reached to Syria and Iraq (Ayata, 2015). Within a short time, the power of Baghdad and Damascus were undermined by opposition or terror organizations, and those newly emerged groups began to control a large swath of territories.

In June 2014, Mosul fell into the control of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In a short time, ISIL fighters came to the doorstep of KRI's capital, Erbil. After those devastating developments, a US-led coalition against ISIL was formed, but Turkey initially refused to join this coalition because ISIL had Turkish hostages in its hands. Although Turkey joined the anti-ISIL coalition at the NATO Summit held in September 2014 (Oztig, 2019), Turkey's initial weak reaction to the enlargement of ISIL in Iraq disappointed its Kurdish counterparts. (Pusane, 2016) Renowned Kurdish journalist Hiwa Osman stated that “Until the emergence of ISIL, we (Iraqi Kurds) assumed that Shi'as of Iraq had Iran, Sunni Iraqis had Sunni Arab states, and the Kurds had Turkey. But it turned up that Turkey did not back us” (Osman, 2015). Then relations bounced back because of Turkey's help, growing trade relations, and the common threat perception emanated from Syria.

In Syria, although the PKK founded PYD in 2003, the name of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was heard in the world due to the besiegement of Kobane by the ISIL in 2014 (Abdullah, 2020). The former head of PYD, Saleh Muslim, conveniently acknowledged that “We (PYD) apply Öcalan's, imprisoned PKK leader, philosophy and ideology to Syria. We propound a political project: democratic autonomy” (Gunter, 2014b). That is why for the Turkish policymakers, the PKK and the PYD are the different sides of the same coin, and they are as dangerous as the ISIL. Turkish President Erdoğan stated, “For us, the PKK is the

same as ISIL. It is wrong to consider them as different from each other” (Park, 2015).

PYD-led “Federal democratic system” recalled one of the old fears of Turkey (Kösebalaban, 2020), and Turkey's priorities in Syria began to change. From that time on, ruling party officials and political decision-makers in Ankara endeavored to persuade Turkey's western allies not to give support to PYD because of its linkage with the PKK. Despite Turkey's harsh criticism, the US and other western states advocated PYD politically and militarily and used it as its ground forces against ISIS by the policy of “no boots on the ground” (Altunışık, 2020).

The establishment of three geographically discontinuous cantons, Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira, in early 2013, known as Rojava (West Kurdistan in Kurdish) (Gabreldar, 2015) by PYD, has been aggravating Turkey and the KRG (Lawson, 2014), (Sever, 2020). Both Turkey and the KRG reacted harshly to the declaration of democratic autonomy in Syria in 2013 and aligned on the same political standing against the PYD (Pusane, 2016). Moreover, amid the rise of the PYD in Syrian politics, Masoud Barzani, with the support of Turkey, tried to bring the Syrian Kurds together under an umbrella organization, the Kurdish National Congress (KNC), an alignment of thirteen Syrian Kurdish parties formed under the sponsorship of himself and KDP in October 2011 (Federici, 2015) by keeping the PYD out (Romano, 2015b).

Nevertheless, things did not go well as planned because the KNC was a more powerless organization than the PYD. The KNC, which was established by a coalition of many Syrian Kurdish parties, could not obtain the power it wanted against the PYD due to the lack of a specific ideological stance, the inability to have a strong leader, and the lack of proper armed forces (Federici, 2015), lack of popular support and organizational capacity (Kaya & Whiting, 2017). That is why Barzani's KDP had not imposed its political understanding on Syria's Kurdish populated areas (Pusane, 2016). So, Turkey's control of the Kurdish political sphere in the Syrian Civil War had been limited due to the Barzani-sponsored

KNC's weak appearance among Syrian Kurds. Besides, several attempts of Turkey to incorporate some Kurdish groups into the Syrian National Council (SNC) (Altuğ, 2013), the Syrian opposition coalition based in İstanbul, had failed. Since the Kurdish uprising began in Syria, it has not maintained a collaborative relationship with the Arab opposition. The main reason was that the Syrian Arab opposition took a nationalist attitude toward the Kurds and could not respond positively to the Kurdish demand for autonomy. Although Barzani and broader KRG leadership tried to unite and bring Syrian Kurds under the SNC (Park, 2012), these efforts did not achieve the desired outcome.

Besides, the Syrian Civil War has accommodated the promotion of Kurdish nationalism in Syria and Iraq, and Turkey (Natil, 2016). Escalating tension in Syria between the PYD and the ISIL and Turkey's unwillingness to help Syrian Kurds had increased discontent among Turkey's Kurds (Lawson, 2014). For instance, in September-October 2014, mass demonstrations started with the name “support for Kobani” in different cities of Turkey after ISIL intensified its attacks on the Kobani region of Syria. Thirty-seven people died due to these protests (Kamer, 2021).

Lastly, one of the most critical repercussions of the PYD's rise in Syria had been the re-securitization of the Kurdish question (Kösebalaban, 2020). Altunışık states that “The growth of Kurdish quest for political autonomy or independence in Syria and Iraq led to the re-securitization of the Kurdish issue domestically in Turkey. As in the 1990s, Turkey's policy in its immediate neighbors has been substantially driven by the Kurdish issue” (Altunışık, 2020). In addition, according to Karakoç, the Kurdish question had reached a point that Turkey cannot ignore in the construction of its foreign policy (Karakoç, 2010).

Fourth, enhancing economic and energy relations was one of the crucial factors that brought the KRG and Turkey closer. Under the rule of the AKP, Turkey had the pursuit of becoming a “central-country” in its region by emphasizing “zero-problems with neighbors”, which promoted deeper bilateral and multilateral



relations, including enhancing economic transactions with neighbors (Kirişçi & Kaptanoğlu, 2011).

The KRI has been one of these economically promising lands because the KRI has welcomed new businesses, entrepreneurs, and foreign direct investment (FDI) (Bache, 2018). Up until the emergence of ISIL and looming chaos after its emergence in the mid-2010s, KRI had provided a better business environment than the rest of Iraq. KRI had been a more secure region than the rest of Iraq; its investment laws (2006 Kurdistan Investment Law) had promoted the FDI to flow into KRI; also, infrastructure investments were increasing. (Sümer & Joseph, 2019) On the other hand, the lack of viability and the internal and external dependency of the economy were the fundamental weakness of the KRI's economy (Rafaat, 2018).

In order to alleviate the external and internal dependency of KRI's economy, Kurdish leaders had aimed at creating a legal framework for the exploration and production of oil and gas. In this way, the KRG paved the way for “oil diplomacy”. Then PM of the KRG Nechirvan Barzani stated that “Economic and commercial ties can induce the decreasing political tension with neighbors. Coordination and cooperation with Turkey, but especially in energy, is one of the crucial foundations of the KRG” (Rafaat, 2018).

Turkey and the KRG have several motivations to accelerate their energy cooperation further. For the Turkish side, Turkey's ultimate goal is to meet its increasing energy demand with a long-term partnership (Bilgin, 2015) and diversification of its energy exports with lower prices (Güney, 2015). Besides, Turkey's energy agreements with Iraqi Kurds have provided good opportunities for Turkey, such as consolidating its regional status and responding to its essential security issues. For the Kurdish side, KRI tries to guarantee its autonomous status in Iraq and one day looks for an opportunity to carve out an independent state by increasing its economic independence (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014).

In 2013, Turkish PM Erdoğan and the KRG President Barzani agreed on key deals that would allow KRG oil to be transported through Turkey via a newly built pipeline. In this way, Turkey's oil imports from Iraq raised from 10 percent to 32 percent by 2013 (Pusane, 2020). On the other hand, the KRG-Turkey energy deals led to the regression in Ankara-Baghdad ties. Due to the absence of national carbon law in Iraq, which offers a legal framework to export oil and gas, Baghdad had perceived Turkey-KRG energy relations as illegal (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014). In order to mitigate the rising tension between Turkey and the Iraqi central government, then Energy Minister of Turkey Taner Yıldız stated that “Turkey is well-aware of Baghdad’s concerns. Moreover, Turkey would not allow the shipment of Iraqi oil without having the approval of the Iraqi federal government. Besides, Turkey would not intend to violate its energy agreements with Iraq” (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013). Despite various positive messages from Turkey, Iraq followed the “choose your side” policy. Thus, Baghdad canceled the research license of Turkish company, Turkey's Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAŞ), and blocking several Turkish origin companies (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014).

### **3.3. What were the reasons for the referendum in the KRG in 2017?**

On September 25, 2017, an independence referendum was held, and the question of “Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?” was asked to the voters in the KRI and disputed territories (DW, 2017). Turnout to the referendum was around 72 percent, and 93 percent of those who participated voted in favor of independence (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). Kurdish leaders had supposed that high support for independence would strengthen the Kurds' hands in negotiation with the federal government to enhance the autonomous region's power (Kaplan, 2019). Shortly after the referendum, however, Shiite militias and Iraqi armed forces, taking advantage of the division of the Kurds, captured Kirkuk. Kirkuk's loss damaged the KRG economically, politically, and psychologically. Its loss deepened the intra-Kurdish clashes and the loss of vast oil fields (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). Besides, while the Kurds planned to accrue the international community's

endorsement against ISIL for the referendum, they both lost international support and drew the harsh reaction of the regional powers, primarily Turkey and Iran (Bengio, 2018; Kaplan, 2019).

Iraqi Kurds have never been away from the idea of independence. In the draft constitution prepared for Iraqi Kurdistan and the Federal Republic of Iraq by the Iraqi Kurdish leadership in 2002, it stated that "...Kurds had the right to self-determination like other nations" (Gunter, 2017). Some say that conditions for creating an independent Kurdish state in Iraq had never been as favorable over the past century as in 2017, amid the traditional power center in Baghdad was deadlocked in internal conflict (Salih, 2016). Romano states that "if Kurds felt that geopolitical situation would let it, most Iraqi Kurds would go for independence" (Romano, 2010). Specific reasons pushed Kurds to hold an independence referendum in 2017. The problematic relations between Baghdad and Erbil, the emergence of ISIL as a non-state actor, and the Kurdish nationalism as a reaction to it, suppressing the opposition against KDP and Barzani in domestic politics with the greatest Kurdish aspiration: "independence", the leadership struggle of Barzani and KDP with their rival Kurdish parties, and finally Iraqi Kurdistan's developing regional and global relations can name as the main reasons for the emergence of the independence referendum.

First, Baghdad and Erbil's tense and discordant relations were the foremost motives for the Kurdish independence referendum. Tensions had arisen on several issues: the status of disputed areas, revenue sharing and control of oil, budget, and financing of Peshmerga and border guards (Romano, 2010). When the US forces began to withdraw from Iraq at the end of 2011, then Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki endeavored to centralize his power. Masoud Barzani had been complaining of increasing the autocratic tendencies of Maliki (Gunter, 2011b). He stated, "We do not approve the return of dictatorship, and we are only partners in governance by name. If Iraq were democratic, federal, and plural, it would coalesce. We are not threatening the unity of Iraq; it is the dictatorship that threatens the unity of Iraq" (Özpek, 2012).

Maliki tried to centralize his power by controlling the military, economy, and strategic ministries while excluding the Kurds and Sunnis. These moves weakened the de-facto power-sharing structure of federal Iraq (Özpek, 2012). In addition, Maliki's attitude towards the Kurds had encouraged them to enhance the autonomous region's power or go for independence (Gunter, 2011b). Özpek states that “the more Baghdad utilizes its power over the KRG, the more KRG officials use the word independence” (Özpek, 2012). Apart from that, after the departure of Jalal Talabani from the political stage, the tension had risen uncontrollably between power centers. Once, Talabani, as the President of Iraq and head of the PUK, had mediated between Baghdad and Erbil and played an important role in mitigating tensions between Barzani and Maliki until he had a stroke in 2012 (Leezenberg, 2015).

One of the controversial issues between Erbil and Baghdad was the over control/status of the disputed territories, mainly the Kirkuk (Mills, 2013). During the Saddam era, the population of Kirkuk had changed with a deliberate Arabization policy, which contained the “redistricting” of Kirkuk, removal of Kurds and Turkmens, and settlement of predominantly Shia Arabs from the south of Iraq (Wolff, 2010; Kirmanj & Rafaat, 2021). That policy did not prevent Turkmen and Kurds from having claims over Kirkuk (Kirmanj, 2014). Besides, it has symbolic meanings to various ethnic groups; Kirkuk sits on top of a vast energy source estimated as 10 percent of Iraq's hydrocarbon reserves (Wolff, 2010).

After the 2003 invasion, the future of disputed lands became one of the hotly debated issues in Iraq. According to Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which came into force in 2005, a referendum was foreseen for the future of Kirkuk and other disputed territories by the end of December 2007 in order to determine the will of the people who reside in these territories (Wolff, 2010). Nevertheless, this referendum was not held (Romano, 2015b). Thus, the status of disputed regions, especially Kirkuk, could not be decided. That had held Kirkuk as one of the forthcoming focal points in the intra-Iraq debate.

Revenue sharing and oil control was the other crucial conflictual point between the federal government and Iraqi Kurdistan. The federal government and the KRG did not reach a federal hydrocarbon law despite many attempts. Two fundamental clashing points why the parties had not reached a durable agreement: disagreements on the power of granting contracts and the future of existing oil contracts known as Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) (Zulal, 2012).

On May 20, 2012, Turkey and the KRG signed an agreement without the recognition of Baghdad to construct oil and gas pipelines (Özpek, 2012). From June 2015 onwards, Iraqi Kurdistan unilaterally started to export its oil via the Ceyhan Port of Turkey with the excuse that the central government did not give 17 percent of the Iraqi federal budget to the KRG (Pusane, 2016). After the broke down of negotiations for reaching a federal hydrocarbon law with the federal government, the KRG began to develop its hydrocarbon sector in defiance of Baghdad (Hiltermann, 2012). Kurds sought to sign oil contracts with IOCs to secure a reliable source of income outside of the federal budget (Hiltermann, 2012). Baghdad did not welcome KRG's oil contracts with International Oil Companies (IOCs). So, the federal government had implemented the policy of blacklisting the IOCs, which operated in the KRG from involving any bidding for contracts in the south of Iraq (Mills, 2013). However, in 2011, the KRG had signed an oil contract with ExxonMobil, one of the biggest oil companies in the world. According to this contract, ExxonMobil gained the right to invest in six oil exploration fields in Iraqi Kurdistan. Signing a contract with ExxonMobil limited the blacklisting policy of the federal government (Mills, 2013).

The last oil-related dispute was the ambiguity that stemmed from the Iraqi constitution over the control of new oil fields. The Iraqi constitution states that the Iraqi federal government has exclusive rights over the existing oil fields. However, it left ambiguity about who had the final say over the new oil fields. Both the KRG (Gunter, 2011b) (Gunter, 2014b) and Baghdad had claimed that they were authorized to manage the new oil fields (Ottaway & Ottaway, 2014). That is why

the Kurds insisted on signing contracts with IOCs without recognizing the federal government. On the other hand, Baghdad evaluated these contracts as undermining the unity of Iraq. Nevertheless, Kurdish leaders in Iraq had seen the reaction of Baghdad as an intervention into the internal affairs of the KRG (Özpek, 2012).

The third dispute between Baghdad and Erbil was related to the budget and financing of Peshmerga and the border forces of the KRG. Article 121 of the Iraqi constitution allows the KRG to establish its armed forces, thus legalizing the Peshmerga forces (Hama, 2018). Regarding the Iraqi budget law signed and ratified in 2007 and renewed in 2009, the KRG had to take 17 percent of its share from the Iraqi national budget (Natali, 2013; Fidan, 2016), plus additional fundraising for the Peshmerga and border guards. Nevertheless, Maliki then described these additional funds as unconstitutional. So, from 2007 to 2010, Iraqi Kurdistan had not taken any financial assistance for the Peshmerga forces and border guards (Özpek, 2012). In addition, problems with the budget worsened in the first half of the 2010s due to the separate oil contracts of KRG with the IOCs.

Second, the emergence of ISIL as a non-state actor in Iraq and Kurdish nationalism as a reaction to it created specific conditions for the referendum. The US military withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011 and ensuing instability in the wake of the “Arab Spring” had weakened the already weak institutional capacity of the Iraqi state (Luizard, 2018). The fall of Iraqi federal armed forces against the constant attacks of ISIL in the summer of 2014 had brought an opportunity to the Kurds to take control of abandoned positions of the central government. Although there was no unified Kurdish front, weakened authority in Iraq had provided a golden opportunity for Kurds to advance their self-determination aspiration (Romano, 2015b), (Park, 2016). In a short time, the KRG controlled practically all disputed lands between itself and Baghdad (Romano, 2015b).

ISIL's offensive in Iraq had several social and political consequences for the KRG. First, as the swath of territories controlled by ISIL grew in Syria and Iraq, it caused mass migration from inside and outside of Iraq toward the KRG. Different ethnic

and religious minority groups poured into Kurdish-held territories. This permanent state of immigration had increased the military and economic burden on the KRG's shoulders. Second, the incapability of Baghdad to cope with ISIL increased the anti-Arab sentiments among the Kurds. (Leezenberg, 2015) According to Barzani, ISIL was incited by chauvinist Arabs to attack the KRG to end the Kurds' self-determination hope and end the question of disputed lands in favor of Arabs (Barzani, 2015). Third, ISIL assaults on Kurds had instigated solidarity among the Kurds in the region and increased Kurdish nationalist sentiments within Iraq. It can be claimed that ISIL atrocities against Kurds enhanced the Kurdish nationalist fervor (Krajeski, 2016), and temporarily gathered different Kurdish organizations under the same banner to fight against the common enemy. For instance, Masoud Barzani did not abstain from visiting the PKK-controlled outposts in Makhmour to thank them for their assistance against the ISIL (Romano, 2015b). Besides, the effective war against ISIL allowed the Kurds to increase their control over territories in dispute with Baghdad. The power vacuum left by the retreating of the defeated Iraqi army against the ISIL provided an important chance for the KRG to capture the land that Kurds had long been claimed (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). Thus, the KRG had grown by 40 percent of its territory (Dalay, 2017).

The borders of the KRG emerged in 1991 when Saddam's forces withdrew from northern Iraq (Romano, 2015b). According to Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, a referendum was supposed to be held in Kirkuk and other disputed lands until December 31, 2007, but this referendum never materialized. Moreover, the KRG did not want to decide on independence without including Kirkuk and other Kurdish-majority areas within its borders (Kirmanj, 2014; Romano, 2015b). It can be claimed that Kurds were trying to seize the opportunity to materialize their historical thesis over Kirkuk (Ali, 2017). Also, the deployment of Peshmerga forces in Kirkuk after the sudden withdrawal of Iraqi armed forces against the looming ISIL threat and Masoud Barzani's announcement of a referendum that included Kirkuk had mounted the ethno-sectarian groups' fears in the city that Kurds were aiming to take Kirkuk by force (O'Driscoll, 2021).

Third, the ruling KDP and its leader Masoud Barzani aimed to suppress the growing opposition against himself and his party in domestic politics with the greatest Kurdish aspiration. In Iraqi Kurdistan, nepotism, corruption, and patronage are widespread (Leezenberg, 2017). That's why many people owed their position more to their loyalty to the KDP and PUK leadership than their qualifications. (Logan, 2009) So, Iraqi Kurds' frustration against the main political actors, parties, and corrupt system had dramatically increased in recent years (Gunter, 2011b; Leezenberg, 2015). In February 2011, frustrated masses organized by Goran Party, the main opposition in Iraqi Kurdistan, demonstrated their discontent with the governing coalition of the PUK and the KDP. Protests mainly took place in Sulaymaniyah (Gunter, 2011b), where Goran had a support base. When protestors grouped in front of the KDP headquarters in Sulaymaniyah, forces loyal to the KDP fired at protestors. Then many rioters were killed, and hundreds of rioters were wounded or arrested. As an example of the politicization of justice in northern Iraq, those responsible for the killings were not brought to justice (Leezenberg, 2015).

Besides, the decline in oil prices from mid-2014 (Güney, 2015), increasing security expenses due to the ISIL's offensives, soaring inflation, and growing unemployment rates had worsened the already dire socio-economic situation. Moreover, in the summer of 2013, before the regional elections in September, the regional assembly of Iraqi Kurdistan decided to extend Barzani's presidency for two years without relying on any constitutional clause (Leezenberg, 2015; Eppel, 2018). So, Barzani and his party decided to distract the growing disappointments of Kurdish society on political, economic, and social problems and tried to focus the Kurds on the ultimate goal of the Kurdish people: independence (Kirmanj, 2014; Jüde, 2017).

Fourth, the leadership struggle of Masoud Barzani and KDP with their rival Kurdish parties and Barzani's desire to be known as the leader who bestowed independence to the Kurds also played an essential role in holding the referendum. Barzani used the referendum purposefully to entrench his legitimacy over other



opposition parties, mainly Goran and the PUK (Salih, 2016; Entessar, 2018). He had aimed to become an undisputed leader of Kurdish nationalism who endowed independence to the oppressed Kurdish nation (Salih, 2016). For instance, Masoud Barzani stated that “I was born in the shadow of Kurdish flag, reference that he was born in the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran, I want to die in the shadow of the Kurdish flag” (Huff, 2018).

Finally, Kurds supposed that developing regional and global relations of Iraqi Kurdistan would be enough to induce the regional and international community for the Independent Kurdistan. ISIL's attacks on the KRI had prompted a quick response from the West, and these attacks had presented the Kurds as the most viable partner of the western states on the ground (Paasche & Gunter, 2016). So, the fight against ISIL increased the international sympathy for the Kurds (Akreyi, 2017). However, increasing sympathy of the international community was misperceived by Kurds that the world was ready to accept a Kurdish state.

Fuller states that the sense of independent Kurdistan was not accepted by the international community in the 1990s (Fuller, 1993). After two decades, the international outlook toward the Iraqi Kurds' independence had not changed. The international community has not welcomed the disintegration of any of its members and the ensuing violence and turmoil (Fuller, 1993). The international community and mainly the US were worried that the region and Iraq would turn into an even more unstable area with the decision of the Kurdish referendum. The international public thought that instability would benefit terrorist organizations, especially ISIL, which had widespread networks and support among the marginalized communities in Iraq and the region (Al, 2021).

In addition, Iran and Turkey made a joint military exercise with Iraq on the borders of the KRG before the referendum was held, and they openly reiterated their determination of Iraq's territorial integrity. Even Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared the Kurdish move for independence a betrayal of Turkey (BBC, 2017). Only Israel backed Kurdish aspiration, and then Israeli PM Benjamin

Netanyahu stated that “Israel will support the legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to achieve their state” (Wainer, 2017; Bishku, 2018; Ülgül, 2019b).

At the domestic level, Kurds did not get considerable support from other ethnic or religious minorities in Iraq to legitimize their cause. Arabs did not welcome Kurdish claims for greater autonomy or independence (Gunter, 2011b). Denis Natali states that Iraq's Arab and non-Kurdish population perceived critically Kurdish political maximalist attempts before the independence referendum. Even though Kurds had an anti-Maliki attitude toward other Iraqi groups, they did not get considerable support for their nationalistic matters, such as the status of disputed territories, the Peshmerga budget, and the law of oil (Natali, 2013).

On February 1, 2016, Masoud Barzani made a statement via his website “time has arrived, Kurdish people have a say on its fate”. This statement was given when Peshmerga forces played a crucial role in liberating Mosul from ISIL. In the final weeks of the battle against the ISIL in June 2017, the decision to hold a referendum was taken (Liga, 2016). War against the Islamic fundamentalists and increasing support to Kurds during that war, the collapse of Baghdad's authorities in central and north of Iraq and improving relations of Kurds with regional powers made Kurdish leadership believe that they had legitimate reasons and good conditions for their ultimate cause: independence.

Ten days before the vote, KRI Parliament had convened for the first time in two years to provide a legislative mandate for the referendum (Huff, 2018). In that parliament session, 65 of the 111 deputies voted in favor of the referendum (Bishku, 2018). Opposition Goran Party's MPs abstained, but on the day of the referendum, the party announced that its voters were free to vote as they pleased (Huff, 2018).

On the other hand, Iraqi PM Haydar al-Abadi stated that “the fait accompli will not work, and we will not allow the disintegration of Iraq” (Aljazeera, 2017). Likewise, Iraq's Supreme Court declared the referendum unconstitutional (Bishku,

2018) and ruled to void all consequences and results of the referendum (BBC, 2017). Also, the Iraqi federal Parliament had issued a mandate to send troops to the disputed territories. Within a short time, Iraqi armed forces and Shia militias took control of Kirkuk and nearby oil fields by withdrawing PUK's Peshmergas from the city (O'Driscoll, 2021). Accordingly, the strength of Kurds in Kirkuk and other disputed lands had significantly weakened.

As a result of that failed independent referendum attempt, Masoud Barzani stepped down from the presidency of the KRG on November 1, 2017, and was replaced by his nephew, Nechirvan Barzani (Eppel, 2018). In Kurdish domestic politics, division along the party lines mounted. Also, the collapse of national unity, lack of institutions capacity and functioning democracy, incapable governments, and leadership problems (Gunter, 2011b; Hama, 2018) made it difficult for the Iraqi Kurds to adapt to the new situation after the referendum. In addition, it has become even more difficult to heal the broken honor of the Kurds. In short, after the referendum, Kurds found themselves in a relatively weaker position compared to before the referendum. Kurds lost international support. Furthermore, Peshmerga forces weakened, and the problems with Baghdad were not resolved (Eppel, 2018).

### **3.4. Changing Turkish Foreign Policy in post-2016 and Turkey's reaction to the KRG's independence referendum**

#### **3.4.1. Changing Turkish Foreign Policy in post-2016**

There have been two different periods of AKP's foreign policy (from 2002 to 2011 and from 2011 to the present), and each period has distinctive political priorities (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022). Although AKP had prioritized soft power instruments and economic interdependence in its first years, in the post-2011 period, Turkey's regional threat perception has dramatically increased. It has become more prone to use military means to cope with those threats, being part of regional polarization ideationally and materially (Altunışık, 2020; Sever, 2020). Even though specific policy changes already began in 2011 (Öniş & Kutlay, 2021), the ultimate shape

of this new Turkish foreign policy was given after the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016. Aras states that “15 July does not symbolize a rupture but rather an adjustment in Turkish foreign policy in response to continuing political trends” (Aras, 2017). In the post-2016 period, coercive diplomacy, assertive foreign policy implementations, the militarization of foreign affairs, and strategic autonomy were critical concepts for Turkish foreign policy (Haugom, 2019). In addition, Dalacoura evaluated that period as “Turkey has been following a transactional, unplanned, ad hoc type of foreign policy based on expediency” (Dalacoura, 2017). According to Lars Haugom, in the post-2016 period, four significant developments have played a driving force for the forging of the new Turkish foreign policy: Changing regional and domestic security environment, the estrangement of relations with the Western allies, the concentration of executive power, ideological turn towards rigid nationalism (Haugom, 2019).

Firstly, changing regional and domestic security environment has been a critical indicator that motivated Turkish policymakers to implement a more assertive/coercive foreign policy. Regionally, the Arab Spring and developments in its wake have turned Turkey's Arab neighbors politically more unstable and unpredictable (Azimov, 2021). Syrian civil war and ensuing instability have increased the burden on Turkey's shoulders in terms of the refugee crisis, transit of Syrian and foreign fighters, etc. (Haugom, 2019). In addition, the emergence of the PYD/PKK-led Kurdish self-rule area in the north of Syria (Krajeski, 2015) (Orton, 2018) was perceived as one of the ontological security concerns of the Turkish state (Balta & Özel, 2021). Domestically, the AKP government perceived the Gezi Park protest in 2013 as an illegitimate challenge to its electorally created legitimate authority and regarded it as a matter of survival (Dagi, 2015). Besides, in the summer of 2015, the Kurdish Initiative and ceasefire with PKK were collapsed, and the country dragged into another armed conflict (Altunışık, 2020). Lastly, July 2016 coup attempt has radically changed foreign policy making in Turkey. In this way, survival problems and national security concerns dominated Turkey's foreign policymaking agenda.

Estranged relations with the Western allies have a crucial impact on directing Turkish foreign policy in the post-2016 period (Taspinar, 2018). Turkey's relations with the US have regressed due to the Obama administration's unwillingness to involve in the Syrian civil war in favor of opposition groups (Oğuzlu, 2020), America's gradual withdrawal from the Middle East, the purchase of Russian S400 surface to air missile system (Balta, 2018; Lesser, Unluhisarcikli, Katz, Bither & Cristiani, 2019), American material and political support to Kurdish PYD militias, which is seen as the PKK affiliated group and terrorist for Ankara (Üstün, 2020; Yilmaz, 2021). In addition, President Erdoğan and his ministers have repeatedly reiterated that “the US was behind the failed coup attempt,” although American officials declined such a claim (BBC, 2021b). On the other hand, Turkey and the European Union (EU) relations have recently been constructed around two issues: the refugee problem and terrorism. Nas states that “EU has viewed Turkey, not as a prospective candidate, but a state that meets the short-term security needs of the union” (Nas, 2019). Moreover, Washington and Brussels' criticism of AKP and President Erdoğan's increasing authoritarian tendencies (Atmaca & Torun, 2022), the decline of democracy and democratic institutions, and violation of human rights have further deteriorated relations triggered anti-American/western narratives in Turkey's domestic politics. Öniş and Kutlay state that “although the US and NATO have their places to be an important partner in security terms, and EU is a significant economic partner, Turkish ruling elite no longer sees the West as a substantial anchor or reference point” (Öniş & Kutlay, 2021). This downturn in relations with the West led to Russia-Turkey rapprochement because Russia-Turkey relations have built upon flexible conditions (Balta & Özel, 2021) rather than a long-term stable point.

The concentration of executive power has been a direct repercussion of regime change from parliamentary to presidential (Bilgin & Erdoğan, 2018; Oke, 2018). Five days after the coup attempt state of emergency was declared. It lasted more than two years. In this period, the structure of the state was altered with decrees declared by President Erdoğan (Çelik & Balta, 2020). With the regime change, decision-making power has been shifted from the cabinet, the TBMM, and certain

state institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, e.g.) to the presidential palace (Demirtaş, 2018; Haugom, 2019). As those institutions have been neutralized, the foreign policymaking process has been centralized in the hand of President Erdoğan and his close entourage (Esen & Gumuscu, 2018). As President Erdoğan has risen to sole decision-maker, he has been making important foreign policy declarations and handling substantial bilateral and multilateral negotiations (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019). The ultimate dominance of the President over foreign policymaking without any proper checks and balances has made way for the personalization of foreign policy (Balta & Özel, 2021). In addition, it can be claimed that during this period, Turkey's foreign policy has been calibrated in accordance with the interests of the ruling AKP (Tahiroglu, 2020) to legitimize the policies of the ruling party and demonize the policies of the opposition (Bulut & Hacıoğlu, 2021). Balta states that “dramatic changes and reorientation of Turkish foreign policy expresses that subordination of foreign policy to AKP in order to mobilize the public support of the party, tarnish the dissent voices at home and divert the public attention from AKP's failures to whatever necessary to hold it in power” (Balta, 2018). Kaliber and Kaliber define that situation as “the domestication of foreign policy issues” (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019). Consolidation of power has occurred at the expense of the Turkish state's plurality, international credibility, democracy, and institutional capacity (Adar, 2020).

Lastly, the ideological turn in domestic politics has indisputably affected the foreign policymaking in Turkey. AKP's governing coalitions have changed several times since the beginning of its rule. In the first half of AKP rule, the party had built upon a broad-based coalition that comprised conservatives, liberals, nationalists, Kurds, etc. (Özbudun, 2014; Haugom, 2019). As the coalition was broad, the party's room for political maneuver was also broad. Over time, that ruling coalition dissolved, and the party began to dominate by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his loyalists. After the 2016 failed coup attempt, with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) alliance, different voices within the AKP were silenced. The nationalist-conservative language began to dominate politics increasingly (Stergiou & Kollias, 2022). Taşpınar illustrates the AKP-MHP coalition as an

alliance of Neo-Ottomanists and ultra-nationalists. That alliance is based on shared values: Turkey's sovereign independence from the West and Turkish nationalism (Taşpınar, 2018). As the AKP-MHP alliance has consolidated its power at home, the gap between foreign and domestic policy has narrowed (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022). Besides the rise of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkish politics (Esen & Gumuscu, 2018), the collapse of the Kurdish initiative, and the escalation of armed conflict between Turkish armed forces and PKK, the developments in Syria by Kurdish dominated Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish Independence referendum in Iraq has furthered the narrative of “Turkey is under attack” and cemented anti-Kurdish attitude of the ruling coalition (Balta & Özel, 2021). Turkey's ruling elites have been viewing what occurs in domestic or international affairs through the lens of the state's survival. They have prioritized necessary moves by combining domestic and foreign policy tools to contain perceived threats. In this way, foreign policy has been considered the extension of domestic rivalries beyond the national borders (Mehmetcik & Çelik, 2022).

### **3.4.2. Turkey's reaction to the KRG's independence referendum**

After Masoud Barzani announced his intention to go on with an independence referendum in the KRG on 7 July 2017, the Turkish Foreign Ministry described that aspiration as a “grave mistake” that would avail the Iraqi Kurds nor the Iraqi federal government (Uyanik, 2017). Then, Turkish President Erdoğan publicly declared that decision's fallacy and sent the Turkish Foreign Minister and MIT Chief to convey his message to Barzani to persuade him not to do such a reckless act. In his address at United Nations General Assembly on 20 September 2017, Erdoğan stated, “We invite the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government to abandon referendum. Such decision would cause new conflicts in the region” (Güder & Kaplan, 2017). On the other hand, President Erdoğan had aimed to get closer with officials of Iraqi federal states and neighboring countries. Also, he tried to mend declining relations with former Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi. Erdoğan made a phone call with al-Abadi, reiterated Turkey's commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq, and guaranteed Turkey's full support for the containment of the referendum.

(Uyanik, 2017) However, Turkey's official stance towards the Kurdish referendum was announced at National Security Council (MGK) meeting on 22 September 2017. The MGK statement emphasized Iraq's territorial integrity and political unity and stated that “Iraqi Kurds' decision to hold a referendum was illegitimate and unacceptable”. Furthermore, the MGK statement reiterated Turkey's reserved rights in compliance with bilateral and international agreements (MGK Genel Sekreterliği, 2017).

On the day of the referendum, President Erdoğan said that “Regardless of referendum's outcome, the vote would be null and void” (Uyanik, 2017). And then, Ankara highlighted its position by coordinating military drills with the Iraqi army along with the Turkey-Iraq border areas. Moreover, shortly after the referendum, Turkish airline companies suspended scheduled flights between Turkey and the KRG, Turkish airspace was sealed off to any flights to or from the KRG, and the control of the Habur border gate was transferred from Iraqi Kurds to the federal government (Uyanik, 2017). Turkey's harsh response to the referendum had stemmed from several reasons: Turkey's increasing security threat perception and the possibility of disappearance of the borders with the Arab Middle East, Turkmen's rights in Iraq and the status of Kirkuk, and increasing nationalism and conjunctures of Turkish politics.

Turkey's increasing threat perception and the possibility of the disappearance of the borders with the Arab Middle East were important reasons behind Ankara's harsh reaction to the referendum. Since the Syrian civil war, Turkey has been handling several security threats, ranging from the refugee crisis to ISIL (Azimov, 2021). Turkey's threat perception reached another point once the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces began to carve out a de-facto statelet alongside the Turkey-Syria border. That is why Turkey's number one priority in Syria has dramatically changed after declaring the “federal democratic system” by SDF in March 2016 (Altunışık, 2020). Although Turkey had tried to contain such an effort by conducting several military operations since the summer of 2016, these operations did not mitigate Ankara's ontological threat perception. President



Erdoğan states that “We will not permit the establishment of any terror state in Northern Syria which threatens Turkey. The PYD and YPG were aiming to establish a state there, but all of this is just a dream” (BBC, 2017; Bianet, 2017; Abdullah, 2020). For Turkey, an independent Kurdish state not only wedges between Turkey and the Arab Middle East but also can have spillover effects on Turkey's Kurdish population. Therefore, Iraq's territorial integrity and unity have been and continue to be the backbone of Ankara's diplomacy toward Baghdad.

Turkmens' rights in Iraq and the status of Kirkuk were the other important reason for Ankara's strong reaction to the Kurdish referendum. Historically, Turkey put an effort to preserve the rights of its ethnolinguistic cognates, and Turkmens have always been at the center of Turkey's Iraq policy (Kardaş, 2018). As Turkey's relations with the KRG improved in recent years, it substantially affected Turkey's relations with the Turkmens. Turkey tried to curb the Kurdish ambitions in favor of Turkmens (Kardaş, 2018). However, Turkey's balanced relations between Kurds and Turkmens had changed due to the emergence of ISIL and subsequent instabilities in the region. Kurds aimed to take advantage of instability to expand their soils into the disputed lands (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018), (Gabreldar, 2018). In April 2017, Kirkuk Provincial Assembly made controversial decisions in a parliamentary session boycotted by Turkmen and Arab members. First, it decided to hang the KRG flag alongside the flag of Iraq, and second, holding a referendum to annex the city to the KRG. President Erdoğan harshly criticized those decisions and stated, “The cost of claiming that 'it is ours' in Kirkuk will be high. That decision might deteriorate relations with Turkey” (BBC, 2017). On 14 September 2017, Presidential Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın stated that “Kirkuk was not a part of the KRG. Kurdish attempt to create such a de facto situation is unacceptable for us” (Uyanik, 2017). Turkey had opposed the Kurdish referendum to decide the final status of disputed lands in Iraq as the demographics of Kirkuk and some other disputed lands were altered by the Kurds (Kardaş, 2018). For Turkey, Kirkuk is not only the homeland of Turkmens in Iraq but also the city is seen as the lynchpin of territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq (Ali, 2017).

Increasing nationalism and domestic conjunctures of Turkish politics were also significant causes of Turkey's reaction. The emerging political rapprochement between AKP and ultra-nationalist MHP played a fundamental role in finishing the de-securitized structure of Turkey-KRG relations. This alliance increased the nationalist discourse in domestic and foreign policy, especially about the Kurdish question (Pusane, 2020). As Turkey went from one election to the next, the tone of the nationalist discourse gradually increased, and it came to a position to affect both domestic and foreign policymaking (Dalay, 2017). Failed coup attempt and subsequent development in domestic politics had consolidated Turkey's proactive stance in Syria and Iraq to protect the national interests (Kardaş, 2018). Turkey's firm stand against the independence referendum was deeply affected by the Kurdish question's re-securitization at home and the preferences of an emerging new governing coalition (Kardaş, 2018).

### **3.4.3. Kurdish leadership's miscalculations**

Barzani made several statements about his intention to hold an independence referendum since 2014 (Krajewski, 2016). Masoud Barzani and the KDP assumed that the internal, regional, and international conditions were available for an independent Kurdistan. Internally, although Kurdish society was politically divided before the referendum (Park, Jongerden, Owtram & Yoshioka, 2017), Barzani considered the referendum a vital instrument that united Kurds behind himself and delegitimized the opposition parties (Entessar, 2018). Also, the rise of ISIL and the sudden decline of federal authority in the central and northern parts of Iraq had wide opened the way for independence (Charountaki, 2018; Bengio, 2018; O'Driscoll & Baser, 2019).

Regionally, Syria and the Arab world have been destabilizing since the uprisings in 2011. In addition, Kurds had had good ties with important regional players, Iran and Turkey. Besides, AKP officials' statements further encouraged Iraqi Kurds to endeavor their ultimate aspirations. For instance, in 2014, then Spokesperson of the ruling AKP, Hüseyin Çelik, stated that “Unfortunately, the circumstances in

Iraq are not good, and it looks like it will be divided. If Iraq is divided and which is inevitable, they (the Kurds) are our brothers...” (Dombey, 2017). Barzani had supposed that Turkey could not take a firm stand on the referendum because of its deep economic ties in the region, oil revenues, and possible Iranian expansion at the expense of Turkey’s interests (Kardaş, 2018).

Moreover, diplomatically Turkey did not take a hard stand against the referendum until a few weeks before the set date (Dalay, 2017). Iraqi Kurdish leadership had interpreted these developments as Turkey's tacit approval of Kurdish independence (Dalay, 2017). So, Kurdish leadership misread the developments in Turkey. Internationally, ISIL offensives against KRG in mid-2014 promoted Kurdistan's position in the international arena. Kurds assumed that they had secured the support of the international powers, which they never had at such a high level in history (Akreyi, 2017). Although Iraqi Kurdish leadership presumed the conditions were mature enough for a Kurdish state, the referendum had disastrous outcomes. President Barzani resigned, expected international support never arrived, and neighboring countries took firm stands against Iraqi Kurds (Eppel, 2018). In the face of collective actions by Turkey, Iran, and the Iraqi federal government, the KRG ended up with a more isolated and helpless environment (Uyanik, 2017).

### **3.5. Improving relations between Turkey and the KRG after the referendum**

The Kurdish independence referendum was not welcomed by Turkey and weakened bilateral relations (Pusane, 2019). Because the referendum was held when the Kurdish initiative ended in a fiasco, and the rise of the YPG in Syria had already re-securitized the Kurdish question at home and abroad (Dalacoura, 2017). However, bilateral relations took a positive turn when Nechirvan Barzani was officially invited to the inauguration ceremony of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2018 (Huff, 2018). KRG spokesperson Safeen Dizayee described that visit as a “good step” to forward the relations (Rudaw, 2018).

Although President Erdoğan and Turkish officials had used harsh rhetoric against their Kurdish counterparts and the referendum, Turkey did not implement any severe sanctions against the KRG. The land border between Turkey and Iraq was not closed. In addition, economic sanctions were not enforced, although Erdoğan had reiterated several times that all options were on the table, including shutting off the pipeline (Pusane, 2019). Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that the referendum had “nothing to do with” economic relations with the KRG. Besides, then Minister of Economy Nihat Zeybekçi affirmed that trade relations would continue in their general course (Gurbuz, 2017). Those practices were the goodwill gestures of Turkey vis-à-vis the KRG to resume and even further the bilateral relations.

The elections in 2015 and the coup attempt in 2016 led to the reshaping of Turkey's domestic policy and a new ruling coalition (Hansen, 2017). This new ruling coalition has espoused nationalist and Islamist rhetoric in foreign policy making. Since 2015, the ontological security concerns of the Turkish state, especially the Kurdish issue, have profoundly affected Turkey's foreign policy towards Iraq and Syria (Balta & Özel, 2021). Moreover, the views of the opposition parties, which are seen as an alternative to the current government, toward the possible Kurdish independence in Iraq are not different from the AKP-MHP bloc's attitude (Yıldırım, 2021a). In other words, Turkey is not expected to respond positively to the Iraqi Kurds' demands for independence in the short or medium term. However, this does not mean that the broken relations after the referendum cannot be repaired. That is why Turkey and the KRG have tried to compartmentalize their policies toward each other. Because compartmentalization of relations had become a necessity arising from regional and local circumstances. Both Turkey and the KRG want to set aside their political differences and develop a new relationship around mutual interests, primarily economic and security cooperation. These mutual benefits were also emphasized by KRG President Nechirvan Barzani, who made his first official foreign visit to Turkey after he became President of Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani stated, “I was very pleased to meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. During the meeting, important issues for both sides were

discussed in detail. I believe that a new process will begin in the relations between the KRG, Turkey, and Iraq” (Okuducu, 2019). After the independence referendum, domestic and regional circumstances have drastically changed and pushed Turkey and the KRG to act closely in order to preserve their mutual interests (Pusane, 2019). There are certain areas in the interests of Turkey and the KRG that overlap: security, economy-energy, and diplomacy.

Firstly, security issues have been one of the critical intersections of mutual interests in Turkey and the KRG. Both sides have certain reservations about terrorist organizations such as PKK, PYD, and ISIL. Since the collapse of the peace initiative in 2015, Turkey has conducted an aggressive campaign against the PKK at home and abroad. Enabling by a securitized domestic political atmosphere and qualitative increase in military capabilities, Turkey prioritized the hard power elements in its new foreign policy (Kardaş, 2021b). After the collapse of the Iraqi army and the retreat of Peshmerga forces against the ISIL, PKK tried to enlarge its presence from Qandil Mountains along the Iraq-Iran border to Sinjar at the intersection of the Iraq-Syria border. That situation has increased the concerns of Turkey (Younis, 2021). In Sinjar, PKK created Sinjar Protection Units (YBS), enabling it to mobilize itself and find a safe haven there. In addition, the presence of PKK in Sinjar has provided it to find new partners, deploy, mobilize its forces, and exert its power across the border within the scope of the anti-ISIL campaign (Park, 2019; Hasan & Khaddour, 2021). Furthermore, PKK has cooperated with Iranian-led Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) against the KDP to reinforce its position in Sinjar. (Kardaş, 2021b). Besides, on October 9, 2020, Baghdad and Erbil signed the Sinjar agreement that envisaged giving an end to the presence of PKK and any entities associated with it in Sinjar. However, that has not been materialized yet (Jawad, 2021). Turkey has always been uncomfortable with the PKK's presence in Sinjar that procures its strategic depth. In January 2021, during his official visit to Iraq, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said, “We have expressed to Iraqi authorities that we are ready to help eliminate the last terrorist there if they ask” (Younis, 2021).

Turkey has tightened its land operations reinforced by airpower to eliminate the looming PKK threat in Iraq in recent years. These operations have been carried out in coordination with Turkey's operations against the PYD-led areas in Syria (Hale, 2019). In June 2020, Turkey launched the first phase of Eagle Claw operations from Qandil Mountains to Sinjar by installing several outposts in Bashiqa and Dohuk regions. Besides, those operations have been supported by KRG Peshmerga forces. (Kardaş, 2021b) Relations between KDP and PKK have been tense due to clashing interests in Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria (Caves, 2012) and the latter's increasing encroachment on Iraqi Kurdistan territories, which KDP traditionally considers within its zone of influence (Hasan & Khaddour, 2021). Despite Kurdish society's discontent, KDP's help to Turkey has also worsened the already tense relations between PKK and KDP (Van Veen, Yüksel & Tekineş, 2020; Glynn, 2021). Even these tense affairs led to the armed conflict, although that can be detrimental to the Kurdish achievements (Dri, 2021).

Other than that, the abrupt emergence and disappearance of ISIL within the Syria and Iraq theatre had furthered instability and complicated the security in the region. Although ISIL was defeated militarily in Iraq and Syria by the cooperation of international forces and Kurds as a proxy (Al, 2021), it did not entirely disappear. Nowadays, it is claimed that ISIL militants are reuniting (Yıldırım, 2021b) and have begun to act in small groups to attack checkpoints or energy facilities in Iraq (Guardian, 2021). In a word, ISIL has waged a war of attrition in Iraq. So, more than ever, KRG needs Turkey's help to cope with that looming Islamic fundamentalist threat.

The Middle East, especially Iraq and Syria, is now going through a particular instability even by its own standards. The ongoing economic and political instability will be expected to continue in the upcoming years (Handy, 2018). As KRG has served as a buffer zone against the instability in Fertile Crescent, it is considered by Turkey as a safe “island” in that uncertain region.

Furthermore, it has been evident that after the independence referendum, Turkey gave up its KRG-centered Iraq policy and tried to have balanced relations between Baghdad and Erbil to remove threats to its national security (Duman & Alaca, 2021). In addition to Turkey's increased security-oriented foreign policy in recent years, the incompatible relations between the KRG and the Iraqi central government gave many terrorist organizations, especially the PKK, opportunities to organize themselves in Iraq. That circumstance increased Turkey's military engagement in the region (Kardaş, 2021b). Besides, the US military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and its unwillingness to increase its military engagement in the region in upcoming years have increased the security vulnerability of the KRG. So, sharing mutual concerns over the PKK, PYD, and ISIL has brought Turkey and the KRG closer in the foreseeable future (Luerdi, 2019). It can be claimed that Turkey, Iraq, and the KRG cooperation supported by the US will be essential to contain and eliminate the aforementioned perceived security threats.

Secondly, the economic and energy partnership has been a critical intersection of mutual interests in Turkey-KRG relations. KRG has matured regions' economic situation by implementing specific policies. For instance, the 2006 Investment Law has granted foreign investors 100 percent ownership of their businesses, the right to repatriate their incomes, tax exemption, and chargeless or subsidized lands (Handy, 2018). In this way, the KRG got Turkish businesspersons' attention. As a result of this environment Turkey's economic relations with the KRI flourished. According to the Turkish Consul General in Erbil, 70 percent of Turkey's exports to Iraq end up in Iraqi Kurdistan. (Charountaki, 2012) At the height of bilateral relations, the KRI constituted Turkey's "third-largest export market" and "the second-largest market for contractors" (Pusane, 2019). Besides, more than half of the foreign companies operating in KRG are Turkish-owned (Akreyi, 2017).

KRG controlled areas without disputed territories projected to have 45 billion barrels of oil reserves, making it the sixth-largest oil reserve state had it been an independent state. Furthermore, it has 200 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas (Handy, 2018). Turkey's access to energy is essential due to two reasons. First,

Turkey has covered a great distance in industrialization and urbanization compared to its region. In addition, being a poor country in terms of energy resources makes it very critical to reach sustainable and low-priced energy. Besides, Turkey wants to diversify its gas and oil sources. In this way, it does not want to be dependent on any country. Moreover, as witnessed in the embargoes applied to Iran, Turkey desires to have an energy policy affected as little as possible by international developments. Secondly, Turkey aspires to be an energy hub by exploiting its geographical location between energy-poor Europe and energy-rich Middle East. So, KRG's oil and gas reserves can significantly meet Turkey's geopolitical expectations (Handy, 2018). Also, as the KRI is only one of the few areas of relative stability and peace in Iraq, its oil and gas fields discoveries have made it an ideal partner for Turkey to interoperate with (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014). Turkey's energy agreements with the Kurdistan Regional Government have strengthened its position as a regional actor and withstand its fundamental security challenges (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014).

Turkish and Kurdish sides have acknowledged the centrality of the economy in their relations. Businesspersons' growing activities since the 1990s led to the improvement of political relations between Turkey and the KRG (Özdemirkiran, 2015). Because both sides had witnessed that developing economic relations paved the way for better political affairs. Former President of the KRG Masoud Barzani stated that “Economic bilateral relations between the KRG and Turkey will assist in building political understanding between the two sides” (Barzani, 2015). Considering the importance of the economy in terms of bilateral relations, the participation of around 100 businesspersons from Turkey in a trade fair in Sulaymaniyah in 2018 and another group of businesspersons' visit to Erbil with the knowledge of the ruling AKP in 2019 were the signs of the recovery in political relations after the referendum (Pusane, 2019).

After the independence referendum, Turkey aims to forge new relations with the KRG based on an economy without satisfying Kurdish political demands. So, businesspersons and their organizations are qualified by their relatively privileged



place in Turkey-KRG relations (ÖzdemirKiran, 2015). Businessperson's actions, the outcome of their operations, and sometimes their opposition to ongoing political affairs have directly affected the political landscape (ÖzdemirKiran, 2015), (Duran, 2019). Lastly, by improving economic relations with the KRG, Turkey plans to recover Turkish companies' economic loss, which was lost mostly to Iranians, respiting the troubled Turkish economy (Huff, 2018) and paving the way for having more stable relations with the Kurds, which the economy is at the center. With growing bilateral trade deals and good relations, Turkey takes advantage of a new and developing export market while the KRG utilizes expertise and development (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014).

Thirdly, mutual interests in diplomacy have been quite significant in bringing Turkey and the KRG closer. Turkey had certain reservations about the KRG since its inception in 1991, but in time it has changed, especially with the ascendance of AKP to power. Turkey's former consul general Erbil Aydın Selcen states that “Diplomacy fundamentally walked the path paved by businesspersons, contractors, and oilmen, and then it paved the way for them” (Selcen, 2019). Thus, with Turkey's consulate general opening in Erbil in 2010, bilateral relations have moved to another stage.

As the ruling AKP consolidated its power at the expense of the foreign ministry and military in the foreign policy-making process, foreign policy making has shifted from more institutional structure diplomacy to personal diplomacy (Esen & Gumuscu, 2018; Ülgül, 2019a). So, personal relations between Erdoğan and Barzani were among the most important factors that shaped bilateral relations. Although personal relations still occupy an important place in Turkey and KRG relations, it can be said that relations have begun to gain structural characteristics. For instance, a delegation from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) made an official visit to the KRG in 2021, and the head of CHP's delegation Oğuz Kaan Salıcı stated that “the purpose of the visit was to strengthen the relations between Turkey and the KRG” (Hürriyet Daily News, 2021).

Diplomatic relations between Turkey and KRG are critical for both sides. Ankara sees Erbil as a balancing factor and an ally with which to cooperate in Iraq due to the growing influence of the Baghdad and Tehran axis. In addition, although it has increased in recent years with the coalition against ISIL, the US military presence in the region has been decreasing, Russia returned to the region years later, and the Arab Spring and a series of crises that followed increased instability in the Middle East. In all these conditions of instability and uncertainty, Turkish decision-makers see the KRG as an “island” of relative stability and security. Moreover, when Turkey's bilateral relations with the Middle East countries deteriorated, the KRG acted as a mediator and helped Turkey get closer with the countries in which it was in conflict. For instance, KRG President Nechirvan Barzani facilitated phone diplomacy between Turkey and United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s de-facto ruler Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nayhan in 2021 (Zaman, 2021).

Four years after the referendum, it appears that both Turkey and the KRG have reached that they can only realize their mutual interests via cooperation in a range of areas from anti-PKK stance to YPG's existence in Syria to energy and trade relations, etc. (Pusane, 2019). Furthermore, both sides are aware that they can only materialize their mutual interests through collaboration and dialogue, which necessitate the existence of durable diplomacy.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

Turkey and the KRG relations thrived from 2007-08 until the independence referendum in 2017. During these years, bilateral relations with the help of de-securitization of the Kurdish question at home had mainly developed around economic relations. Besides, other aspects of relations improved as well.

When Kurdish leadership in Iraq decided to hold an independence referendum in KRI and disputed territories, it was vehemently opposed by regional and international powers. Initially, Turkey's dissent was not that strong, which was

interpreted by Iraqi Kurdish leadership as Turkey's tacit approval of Kurdish independence (Dalay, 2017). However, as the date of the referendum got nearer, Turkey openly criticized the Kurdish aspiration for independence. Even Turkey President Erdoğan described that bold move of Iraqi Kurds as “treachery” to Turkey. Erdoğan said, “When we turn off the oil taps, all income of Iraqi Kurds will disappear. Besides, when our trucks stop going to northern Iraq, they will not be able to find food” (BBC, 2017). Furthermore, Turkey's official stance towards the referendum became apparent with the MGK statement on 22 September 2017. In this statement, Iraq's territorial integrity and political unity were emphasized, and the referendum was described as illegitimate and unacceptable (MGK Genel Sekreterliği, 2017).

The Kurdish independence referendum was held when the Kurdish initiative ended in a fiasco, and the rise of the YPG in Syria had already re-securitized the Kurdish issue at home and abroad. Furthermore, the AKP-MHP alliance, failed coup d'etat in 2016, and subsequent developments in Turkey cemented the re-securitization of relations with the KRG. However, the regressive bilateral relations began to change with the invitation of KRG PM Necirvan Barzani to the inauguration ceremony of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2018 (Huff, 2018).

After the referendum, Turkey changed its KRG-centered Iraq policy. Instead, it tried to have more balanced relations between Erbil and Baghdad. On the other hand, from 2019 onwards, Turkey and the KRG have compartmentalized their relations. Both Turkey and the KRG want to leave aside their political differences and promote a new relationship around mutual interests, mainly economic and security cooperation. Both parties are well-aware of the importance of collaboration to realize their collective interests against the pressing domestic and regional developments.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Since the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, Turkey-KRG relations have always been hard to evaluate because of their complex nature. The relations are not developed linearly but have experienced specific ups and downs in different periods. However, despite the fact that the bilateral relations had gone through some tense times, both sides never ceased their contact due to the promising nature of relations based on mutual interests. In addition, although the security dimension outweighs other aspects of relations, cordial ties have deepened in time in various areas, such as energy, trade, diplomacy, etc. In a way, good commercial ties and increasing trade volume gave Turkey and the KRG an impetus for closer relations. Even it can be claimed that the economic aspect of bilateral relations has played a fundamental role in recovering damaged ties in the wake of the 2017 independence referendum.

The 2017 independence referendum did not abruptly come out of nowhere. Independence has always been a final goal on the political agenda of the Iraqi Kurds. However, the process that started with the Arab Spring led to new conditions in Iraq and the region. Those circumstances convinced the Kurdish leadership to take prompt action for independence. From the first moment Iraq gained independence, relations between Baghdad and the Kurds did not progress peacefully, and bloody clashes occurred between the Kurds and the central government. Although the collapse of the Baath regime and the ascendance of a Kurd to the Presidency of Iraq in 2003 raised hopes that an atmosphere of reconciliation would be formed between the Arabs and the Kurds, it did not last long. Especially with the withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, the Sunni-Shia and Arab-Kurdish division in the country gradually intensified with Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian administration and policies to

centralize political, economic, and military forces at his hand. In addition to all these, from 2005 to 2017, no noteworthy progress was made in solving the problems between the central government and the KRG. The status of disputed areas, revenue sharing and control of oil, KRG's federal budget share, and financing of Peshmerga and border guards continued to be the fundamental friction points between Baghdad and Erbil. In addition to growing disharmony between Erbil and Baghdad, Masoud Barzani and KDP aimed to suppress dissident voices with the supreme Kurdish ambition: "independence". Leadership competition among the Kurds and Barzani's goal to be the person who bestowed independence to his oppressed nation, the KRG's increasing regional and global relations, the rising Kurdish nationalism as a reaction to the emergence of ISIL, and Kurd's increasing sympathy among the international community due to the war against the fundamentalists were the forthcoming reasons that pushed Iraqi Kurds to hold an independence referendum.

Kurdish leadership assumed that high turnout and support for the referendum would cement the thesis of Kurds in negotiation with Baghdad to consolidate the autonomous region's gains. Although local, regional, and international conditions are thought to be available for having an independent Kurdistan by the Kurdish leadership, in the end, it did not emerge as planned. Then most of the disputed lands and Kirkuk were captured by Shiite militias and Iraqi federal armed forces, which accelerated the intra-Kurdish conflict. Besides, neither the Iraqi government, which declared the referendum illegal, nor neighboring states and international powers did not welcome the referendum. Although the Iraqi Kurdish leadership supposed that Turkey could not take a tough stance on the referendum due to the growing economic and energy relations (Kardaş, 2018), Turkish President Erdoğan referred to the referendum as a betrayal of Turkey (BBC, 2017). Turkey's official position towards the referendum emerged at National Security Council (MGK) meeting on September 22, 2017. MGK's statement accentuated Iraq's territorial integrity and political unity and emphasized that "Iraqi Kurds' decision to have an independence referendum was illegitimate and unacceptable".

Moreover, that statement reiterated Turkey's reserved rights under bilateral and international agreements (MGK Genel Sekreterliği, 2017).

After the referendum, bilateral relations went into a period of deterioration from September 2017 to mid-2019. Although Turkey- KRG relations weakened, bilateral relations had not experienced a complete breakdown. Despite President Erdoğan and Turkish state officials did not hesitate to use harsh rhetoric against the Kurdish leaders and the referendum, which sometimes stemmed from internal political needs, Turkey did not impose any significant sanctions on the KRG. Even Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that the referendum had “nothing to do with” economic ties with the KRG (Gurbuz, 2017). On the other hand, in July 2018, Nechirvan Barzani was invited to the inauguration ceremony of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which initiated for re-establishment of good bilateral relations. However, for bilateral relations to reach the pre-referendum level, it was necessary to wait for 2019. Nechirvan Barzani made his first abroad official visit to Turkey in June 2019 after being elected as the second President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. As the adverse effects of the referendum on bilateral relations began to wear off, bilateral relations started to show signs of recovery.

This study analyzed how and in what ways Turkey- KRG relations were carried out between 2017 and 2021, and it has reached certain findings about the Turkey- KRG bilateral ties. First, in this thesis, the handling of Turkey and KRG relations with some pragmatic concerns was evaluated as a “compartmentalization of relations”. The compartmentalization of relations enabled Turkey to take a stand against the Iraqi Kurds' demands for independence; it also paved the way for the continuity of bilateral relations, which are at a reasonable level in the fields of economy, energy, and diplomacy. In this sense, the sustainability and strength of bilateral relations in the coming years are closely related to the success of the compartmentalization of relations. In this context, Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish decision-makers shaped the compartmentalization of relations over three main areas: security, trade-energy, and diplomacy.

There have been many developments in recent years that have brought Turkey and Iraqi Kurds closer. The withdrawal of the US combat forces in Iraq after 2011, the chaotic environment created by the Arab Spring and the disastrous developments after it, and the shared stance against terrorist organizations, especially the PKK and ISIL, forced Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds to act together. In addition, the political and military instability in Iraq and the fluctuation caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the energy market added new ones to the existing challenges. With its rich energy resources, Iraqi Kurdistan can be an alternative not only to Turkey but also to the states that are dependent on Iran and Russia, which live in the shadow of embargos. Besides, KRG continues to be one of the important trade partners of Turkey. On the other hand, it is assumed that the region will continue to produce violence, and regional instability will become chronic in almost all of the projections about the future. In this obscurity, it would be appropriate and logical for Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan to deepen their cooperation in energy, trade, and especially security.

Second, it is assumed that Turkey, regardless of the political stance of the ruling party and/or coalition, will not respond positively to the political demands of the Iraqi Kurds in the short and medium term. Unless there is an extraordinary change in the existing regional and local dynamics, it will be challenging to establish a “Kurdish” state that Turkey disapproves of. This is a fact that the Iraqi Kurdish leadership is also aware of. That’s why it is inevitable for Turkey and Iraqi Kurds to work together and compartmentalize their relations to realize their mutual interests. Ankara aspires to build functioning bilateral relations around thriving economic ties without fulfilling Kurdish political demands.

Third, the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish sides do not want to lose each other and try to have a balanced and sustainable relationship as instability has become a de-facto component of the region. Fourth, before the referendum, Turkey prioritized Erbil over Baghdad when it came to its relations with Iraq. However, the diplomatic stance of Turkey slightly changed. After the referendum, Turkey followed a more balanced foreign policy between Baghdad and Erbil.

Fifth, it is not right to make significant inferences about what will be the long-term relations between Turkey and KRG. On the other hand, it can be argued that some variables and constants shape bilateral relations. The vibrant domestic political conditions of both sides and regional and international circumstances can be considered as variables that can profoundly affect the future of bilateral relations. However, it should be underlined that there are some constants in the relations. These constants, indicated by the compartmentalization of relations conceptualization, point out that the relations will appear similarly in the coming years without significant swings and ruptures. For example, both sides exhibit similar attitudes in security, energy, and trade areas, and it is assumed that this situation will be similar in the coming years. Developments that cannot be foreseen today become predictable with the “compartmentalization of relations”. In a sense, the concept of “compartmentalization of relations” helps to draw the relations between Turkey and KRG on a predictable basis, free from all possible or unforeseen cases.

In this work, the state of relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds after 2017 is discussed with references to the 1990s and early 2000s. Relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds experienced tense moments during the analyzed period, and bilateral relations followed a course of ups and downs. The developments in the internal policies of both sides and regional and global developments deeply affected the relations between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey and ultimately forced the two sides to cooperate. Although the independence referendum in 2017 caused a deterioration in relations, the adverse effects of the referendum were soon overcome. In this sense, the compartmentalization of relations played a vital role in overcoming the crisis after the 2017 referendum. Four years after the referendum, it can be claimed that Turkey and KRG can materialize their mutual interests through cooperation and dialogue, which requires the existence of durable and functioning diplomacy, strong economic relations, and willingness to cooperate in security.



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## APPENDICES

### A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

1991 Körfez Savaşı sonucunda Irak Kürdistan Bölgesel Yönetimi'nin (IKBY) ortaya çıkmasının ardından, Türkiye-İKBY ilişkileri iniş ve çıkışların olduğu karmaşık bir seyir izlemiştir. İkili ilişkilerde gergin dönemler yaşanmasına rağmen, karşılıklı çıkarlar üzerine kurulu ilişkilerin umut verici doğası gereği her iki taraf da birbirleriyle teması kesmedi. Öte yandan, güvenlik boyutu ikili ilişkide diğer boyutlara göre ağır bassı da zamanla enerji, ticaret, diplomasi vb. çeşitli alanlarda belirli bir ilerleme kat edilmiştir. Bir bakıma, iyi ticari bağlar ve artan ticaret hacmi, Türkiye ve İKBY'nin her türlü politik tutum farklılığına rağmen daha yakın ilişkiler kurması için bir neden olmuştur. Hatta 2017 bağımsızlık referandumu sonrasında yıpranan ilişkilerin toparlanmasında ilişkilerin ekonomik boyutunun temel bir rol oynadığı ileri sürülebilir.

Irak'ın 1990'da Kuveyt'i işgali ve müteakip gelişmeler bölgenin kaderini derinden etkiledi. 1991 Körfez Savaşı sırasında Türkiye, bu uluslararası müdahalenin olası sonuçlarına dair belirli çekinceleri olmasına rağmen ABD'ye ve batılı müttefiklerine yardım etti. Birincisi, o zamanlar Türkiye, Soğuk Savaş'tan sonra azalan jeopolitik önemi nedeniyle endişeliydi ve batılı ortaklarına faydalılığını gösterme amacındaydı. İkincisi, Türkiye, PKK'nın varlığı nedeniyle savaştan sonra Irak'ın düzeninin yeniden tesis edilmesinde rol almak istiyordu. Üçüncüsü, Türkiye 1980'ler sonu 1990'lar başında yaşadığı ekonomik durgunluğu atlatmak için yabancı yatırımları ve ekonomik yardımları almayı amaçlamıştı. Ayrıca Körfez Savaşı sırasında dönemin Cumhurbaşkanı Özal ve Türk yetkililer Iraklı Kürt liderlerle sıkça temasa geçmişlerdi. Türkiye, PKK'ya karşı işbirlikleri yapmaları karşılığında Irak Kürtlerinin partilerinin Ankara'da temsilciliklerini açmalarına izin verdi. Bunlar, Türkiye ile Iraklı Kürtler arasındaki ilk temaslardı.



1990'ların başından 2003'e (AKP iktidarının başladığı yıl) ve oradan 2007-08 dönemine kadar Türkiye-IKBY ikili ilişkileri güvenlik odaklı politikalar çerçevesinde yürütülmüştür. Türk politika yapıcılar IKBY hakkında çeşitli çekinceleri sahipti. Zira, Irak'ın kuzeyindeki Kürt devletçığının Türkiye'nin Doğu ve Güneydoğu'daki Kürt toplumu üzerinde yayılma etkileri olabilirdi. Bu dönemde Türkiye, IKBY'nin varlığını kendi toprak bütünlüğüne yönelik bir tehdit olarak değerlendirmiştir. Ayrıca Türk dış politikası geleneksel olarak bölgedeki statükonun korunmasına önem vermiştir. Mevcut sınırların korunması ve bölge devletlerinin toprak bütünlüğüne saygı gösterilmesi Türk dış politikasının temel ilkeleri olduğundan, Türkiye bölgedeki güç dengesini değiştirmeye çalışan her tür yapıya karşı tavır almıştır. Komşu bölgelerdeki herhangi bir istikrarsızlığın Türkiye'yi doğrudan etkileyebileceği varsayıldığından, Irak Kürt devletçığını varlığı, Türkiye üzerindeki olası etkileri nedeniyle kontrol altına alınması ve negatif etkileri bastırılması gereken bir alan olarak kabul edildi. 1990'lar başında Ankara'daki bu siyasi görünüm, önümüzdeki on yıllarda Türkiye-IKBY ilişkilerine hâkim olmaya devam etmiştir. Bu çekinceler nedeniyle Türkiye'nin Irak Kürtlerine yönelik yapılandırılmış ve kurumsallaşmış bir dış politikası olmamış, bunun yerine, Türkiye Irak Kürtleriyle geçici ilişkiler kurmayı tercih etmişti.

AKP'nin 2002 sonunda iktidara gelmesi ve ardından 2003 Mart ayında ABD liderliğindeki uluslararası koalisyonun Irak'ı işgali, Türkiye ve bölgede önemli siyasi değişikliklerin habercisiydi. 2003-2007-08 yılları arasında Türkiye-IKBY ilişkilerinin ekseni ağırlıklı olarak güvenlik odaklı politikalara göre belirlenmiş olsa da ilişkilerin diğer boyutları bu yıllarda şekillenmeye başladı. Bu yıllarda AKP, Türk dış politikasını yeni ilkeler etrafında, önceki yıllardan belirli süreklilik ve kopuşlarla yeniden formüle etti. Türkiye'nin yumuşak güç unsurlarını kullanmak veya komşu coğrafyalarla ticari ve ekonomik bağları derinleştirmek, AKP dış politikasının ilk yıllarındaki ayırt edici özelliklerinden bazılarıydı. AKP liderliğinde Türkiye, liberal piyasa ekonomisini, demokratik reformları ve Müslüman kimliğinin başarılı kombinasyonu olması nedeniyle Ortadoğu devletlerine bir model olarak taktim edilmekteydi.

Her ne kadar 2011 Arap ayaklanmalarından sonra Yeni-Osmanlıcı eğilimler daha belirgin hale gelmişse de Yeni-Osmanlıcı zihniyet 2003-2007-08 yılları arasında AKP'nin dış politikasını şekillendiren temel unsurlardan biri ola gelmiştir. AKP yetkilileri Kemalist dış politika prensiplerini modası geçmiş olarak nitelendirdi ve Kemalist dış politika paradigmasının Türkiye'nin acil ihtiyaçlarını karşılayamadığı için değişmesi gerektiğini savundu. Yeni-Osmanlıcı dış politika anlayışının arkasındaki en önemli figür olan Ahmet Davutoğlu, Türkiye'nin üzerine inşa edildiği dini ve tarihi unsurları hatırladığı müddetçe kendi kimliğini, psikolojisini ve siyasi kültürünü kolaylıkla bulabileceğini iddia ediyordu. 1990'ların aksine AKP liderliğindeki Türkiye bölge ile yakın ilişkiler geliştirmeye ve bölgesel liderlik arayışındaydı. Bu bağlamda, muhafazakâr Kürt lider Mesud Barzani ve partisi Kürdistan Demokratik Partisi (KDP), AKP'nin bölgesel liderlik arayışında Irak Kürdistan'ında önemli ortaklar olarak görüldü.

2003'ten 2007-08'e kadar güvenlikle ilgili konuların yanı sıra ekonomi, enerji ve ticaret alanlarında IKBY ile çok yönlü bir ilişkiler ağı geliştirildi. Bu yıllarda artan ekonomi ve enerji ilişkileri, Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri'nin (TSK) dış politika yapım sürecinde rolünün gerilemesi, ABD'nin Türkiye-İKBY ikili ilişkilerinin gelişmesine verdiği destek, AKP ve KDP'nin ideolojik yakınlığı, Ankara ve Erbil'in Bağdat ile gerileyen ilişkileri, Türkiye'deki Kürt sorununu güvenlikçi perspektiften uzaklaşması ve Irak Kürt liderliğinin Türkiye'nin Kürt sorununun barışçıl çözümünde alabileceği olumlu rol Türkiye ve IKBY ilişkilerinin gelişmesinde önemli etkenler olmuştur. AKP, Irak Kürdistanı'na yönelik ekonomiyi merkezine olan bir dış politika izledi ve 2003 sonrası Irak'ta ortaya çıkan yeni siyasi gerçeklere adapte olmuş bir siyaset izledi. Ekonomi odaklı bu ilişkiler, 2010'ların başında diplomatik bağların kurulmasının da yolunu açtı. Sonunda, ikili ilişkilerde çığır açan yıl olan 2007-08 geldi. Örneğin, Mart 2008'de dönemin Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanı Abdullah Gül, dönemin Irak Cumhurbaşkanı ve Kürdistan Yurtseverler Birliği (KYB) başkanı Celal Talabani'yi Ankara'ya davet etti ve bu davet, Türkiye'nin Irak Kürtlerine ve IKBY'ye yönelik siyasi tavrının değişmekte olduğunu açık bir işaretiydi.

İkili ilişkiler 2007-08'den 2017'ye yepyeni bir döneme girdi. Bu yıllarda AKP'nin kontrolündeki Türk dış politikası belirli değişikliklere uğramıştı. Açılım sürecinin bozulması ve 7 Haziran 2018 genel seçimlerinden sonra iç politikada Kürt sorunun tekrar güvenlikçi bir çizgide ele alınmasına rağmen AKP dış politikada Irak Kürdistanı ile normalleşmenin yollarını aradı ve ikili ilişkileri güvenlik odaklı politikaların ötesine taşımaya çalıştı. Bu yıllar boyunca Türk politika yapıcıları, Irak Kürdistanı'nı Türkiye'nin toprak bütünlüğüne varoluşsal bir tehdit olarak göstermekten kaçınmış ve Irak Kürtlerini Türkiye'nin kardeşleri ve iyi komşuları olarak nitelendirmişlerdir. Böyle bir siyasi değişimin ortaya çıkması, her iki tarafın değişen iç dinamikleri ve bölgesel koşullardan neşet etmekteydi. Hem Türk hem Kürt tarafı çeşitli noktalarda karşılıklı çıkarlarını gerçekleştirmek için yakın ikili ilişkilere sahip olmasını gerektiğini anlamışlardı.

Ekonomik ilişkilerin gelişmesi, Irak ve Suriye'de ortak güvenlik endişelerinin paylaşılması, Türkiye'nin on yıllardır süren Kürt sorunlarının barışçıl çözümü hedeflemesi ve İKBY'nin bu konuda oynayabileceği pozitif rol, 2007-08'den 2017'ye kadar Türkiye-İKBY ilişkilerinin merkezinde yer alsa da, üç kritik gelişme ilişkilerin genel yapısının şekillenmesinde kritik olmuştur: Birincisi, 2010 yılında Erbil'de Türk Başkonsolosluğu'nun kurulmasıyla resmi diplomatik ilişkilerin başlangıcı; ikincisi, enerji anlaşmalarıyla ilişkilerinin bir adım öteye taşınmak istenmesi; üçüncüsü, Arap ayaklanmaları ile IŞİD'in yükselişi ve bölgedeki müteakip gelişmeler.

2010 yılında Türkiye'nin Erbil Başkonsolosluğu'nun kurulmasıyla Türkiye ile İKBY arasında resmi diplomatik ilişkilerin başlaması, ikili ilişkileri ivme kazanmasında önemli bir gelişme oldu. Başkonsolosluğun açılışını, dönemin Türkiye Başbakanı Erdoğan'ın Irak ve İKBY'ye olan tarihi resmi ziyareti izledi. Erdoğan'ın ziyareti ile Türkiye, Irak'ın toprak bütünlüğü ve siyasi birliğine olan taahhütlerini vurguladı ve Irak'taki herhangi bir bağımsız Kürt siyasi oluşumuna karşı olacaklarını kararlı bir şekilde belirtti. Tüm bu gelişmeleri iç politika ve dış politikanın birbirini etkilediği bir açıdan da ele alabiliriz. AKP, iç politikada Kürt meselesini güvenlikçi çizgiden uzaklaştırdıkça, ülkenin Irak politikaları Türkiye-

İKBY ilişkileri ekseninde şekillendirildi. Ayrıca, Arap ayaklanmalarının başlangıcına denk gelen AKP iktidarının ikinci yarısında Türkiye'nin bölgesel sorunlarda aktif ve katılımcı bir rol üstlenmek arayışında olması, Türkiye ve İKBY ilişkilerinin ivme kazanmasında bir başka önemli unsurdu.

Büyüyen enerji ilişkileri, ikili ilişkilerin daha da geliştirilmesinin önünü açan sebeplerden bir başkasıydı. 2013 yılında, Türkiye Başbakanı Erdoğan ve ardından İKBY Başkanı Mesud Barzani, Kürt petrolünün yeni inşa edilen bir boru hattıyla Türkiye üzerinden taşınmasına olanak veren anlaşmalar imzaladılar. Böylelikle Irak'ın Türkiye'ye olan petrol ihracatı 2013 yılında yüzde 10 artarak yüzde 32'ye yükseldi. Öte yandan, Türkiye-İKBY enerji ilişkilerinin canlanma emareleri gösterdiği o yıllarda Bağdat-Ankara ilişkileri ise bir gerileme trendi içerisindeydi.

İkili ilişkilerdeki bu dönem (2007-08-2017) “Arap Baharı” ve sözde Irak ve Şam İslam Devleti'nin (İŞİD) ortaya çıkmasından büyük ölçüde etkilenmiştir. 2011 yılı sonunda ABD askeri güçlerinin Irak'tan önemli ölçüde çekilmesi ve Arap Baharı nedeniyle artan istikrarsızlık, Irak federal devletinin zaten zayıf olan kurumsal kapasitesini iyice kötüleştirmişti. Bu koşullar, İŞİD gibi devlet dışı aktörlerin koşulları istismar etmesi için olanaklar yarattı. İŞİD, Irak'ın ikinci büyük şehri olan Musul'u Haziran 2014'te kontrolü altına aldı ve çok geçmeden Irak Kürdistanı'nı tehdit etmeye başladı. İŞİD'in ani toprak genişlemesinden sonra uluslararası bir koalisyon kurulmuş olmasına rağmen, Türkiye bazı çekinceleri nedeniyle bu koalisyona ilk etapta katılmadı. Bu durum Irak Kürt liderliği için bir hayal kırıklığıydı. Ve çok geçmeden, Kürtler bağımsızlık referandumu kararıyla çıkageldiler.

2017 bağımsızlık referandumu birdenbire ortaya çıkmadı, uzunca bir sürecinin nihayetinde ortaya çıktı. Bağımsızlık, Irak Kürtlerinin siyasi gündeminde her zaman nihai bir hedef olagelmişti. Ancak Arap Baharı ile başlayan süreç Irak'ta ve bölgede yeni koşulların ortaya çıkmasına vesile oldu. Bu koşullar, Kürt liderliğini bağımsızlık için derhal harekete geçirmeye ikna etmişti. Öte yandan, Irak bağımsızlığını kazandığı ilk andan itibaren Bağdat ile Kürtler arasındaki ilişkiler

barışçıl bir minvalde seyretmedi. Kürtler ile merkezi hükümetler arasında uzun yıllarda boyunca kanlı çatışmalar vukuu buldu. Baas rejiminin çöküşü ve 2003 yılında bir Kürt'ün Irak'ta cumhurbaşkanlığı makamına gelmesi, Araplar ve Kürtler arasında bir uzlaşma ortamının oluşacağına dair umutları artırmışsa da bu olumlu atmosfer uzun sürmedi. Özellikle 2011 yılı sonunda ABD askeri güçlerinin Irak'tan çekilmesiyle birlikte ülke içerisinde Sünni-Şii ve Arap-Kürt ayrımı giderek arttı. Özellikle Nuri el-Maliki'nin mezhepçi yönetimi ve siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri güçleri merkezileştirme politikalarıyla birleşince zaten on yıllardır var olan toplumsal fay hatları daha da belirgin hale geldi. Tüm bunlara ek olarak, 2005'ten 2017'ye kadar, merkezi hükümet ile IKBY arasındaki sorunların çözümünde kayda değer bir ilerleme kaydedilmedi. İhtilafli bölgelerin durumu, petrol gelirinin paylaşımı ve petrol sahalarının kontrolü, IKBY'nin federal bütçedeki payı ve Peşmerge ile sınır muhafızlarının finansmanı gibi konular Bağdat ve Erbil arasındaki temel sürtüşme noktaları olmaya devam etti.

Erbil ve Bağdat arasında artan uyumsuzluğa ek olarak, Mesud Barzani ve KDP, Kürtlerin nihai amacı olan “bağımsızlık” ile Kürt toplumundaki muhalif sesleri bastırmayı hedefliyordu. Kürtler arasındaki liderlik yarışı ve Barzani'nin “mazlum” milletine bağımsızlık bahşeden kişi olma hedefi, IKBY'nin artan bölgesel ve küresel ilişkileri, IŞİD'in ortaya çıkışına tepki olarak yükselen Kürt milliyetçiliği ve Kürtlerin köktendincilere karşı savaşında uluslararası toplumun artan sempatisi Iraklı Kürt liderliğini bağımsızlık referandumu yapmaya iten temel başlıca nedenlerdi.

IŞİD'in Sünnilerin çoğunlukta olduğu bölgelerde artan saldırıları, 2014 yazında Irak federal silahlı kuvvetlerinin hızla geri çekilmesine/çökmesine neden oldu. Bağdat'ın orta ve kuzey Irak'taki otoritesinin çökmesi ve ardından gelen güç boşluğu, Kürtler için uzun zamandır beklenen fırsatı yarattı. Kürtler, tartışmalı bölgeleri ele geçirerek kendi kaderini tayin davasını ilerletmek niyetindeydi. Ayrıca, IŞİD'in saldırıları Kürtler arasında milliyetçi duyguları artırdı ve Irak'taki ve yurtdışındaki Kürtler arasında dayanışma ve birliğini ileri bir noktaya taşıdı. Bu noktada KDP lideri Mesud Barzani fırsatı değerlendirerek kendisine ve

partisine yönelik uzun süredir artan eleştirileri bertaraf etmeye çalıştı. 1 Şubat 2016'da Barzani, “Zaman geldi ve Kürtler kendi kaderleri hakkında söz sahibidir” dedi. Bu duyuru Peşmerge güçlerinin Musul'u IŞİD'den özgürleştirmeye çalıştığı sırada gelmişti. IŞİD'e karşı verilen savaş Haziran 2017'de son haftalarına yaklaşırken, bağımsızlık referandumu kararı alındı.

25 Eylül 2017'de bağımsızlık referandumu için IKBY ve Bağdat ile Erbil arasındaki tartışmalı bölgelerde sandığa gidildi. Referanduma katılım yüzde 72'yken ve seçime katılanların yüzde 93'ü bağımsızlık için oy kullandı. Kürt liderliği, referanduma yüksek katılımın ve verilen yüksek desteğin, Kürtlerin özerk bölgenin kazanımlarını pekiştirmek için Bağdat'la yapılacak müzakerelerde elini güçlendireceğini varsayıyordu. Kürt liderliği bağımsız bir Kürdistan'a sahip olmak için yerel, bölgesel ve uluslararası koşulların uygun olduğunu varsaysa da sonuçta seçimin sonucu dışında pek çok şey planlandığı gibi olmadı. Referandumu takip eden kısa süre içerisinde, tartışmalı toprakların ve Kerkük'ün çoğu Şii milisler ile Irak federal silahlı kuvvetleri tarafından ele geçirildi. Bu durum Kürtler arası çatışmayı hızlandırdı. Ayrıca ne referandumu yasa dışı ilan eden Irak hükümeti ne de komşu devletler ve uluslararası güçler Irak Kürt liderliğine aradıkları desteği vermedi. Irak Kürt liderliği, Türkiye ile artan ekonomik ve enerji ilişkileri sebebiyle Türk tarafının referandum konusunda sert bir tavır alamayacağını varsaydıysa da Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan referandumu Türkiye'ye ihanet olarak değerlendirdi.

20 Eylül 2017'de Birleşmiş Milletler Genel Kurulu'nda Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, “Irak Kürt Bölgesel Yönetimi'ni referandumdan vazgeçmeye davet ediyoruz. Böyle bir girişim bölgede yeni çatışmalara yol açacaktır” dedi. Ancak Türkiye'nin referanduma yönelik resmi tutumu, 22 Eylül 2017 tarihli Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (MGK) toplantısı bildirisinde açıkça ortaya konuldu. MGK'nın açıklamasında Irak'ın toprak bütünlüğü ve siyasi birliğine vurgu yapılırken, “Iraklı Kürtlerin bağımsızlık referandumu yapma kararının gayrimeşru ve kabul edilemez olduğu” belirtildi. Ayrıca, bahsi geçen açıklamada, Türkiye'nin ikili ve uluslararası anlaşmalar kapsamındaki haklarının saklı tutulduğu belirtilmiştir. Türkiye'nin

referanduma karşı sert duruşunun üç nedene dayandığı iddia edilebilir. Birincisi, Türkiye'nin son yıllarda artan tehdit algısı ve Arap Ortadoğu ile olan kara sınırlarının ortadan kalkma olasılığı, ikincisi, Kerkük'ün statüsü ile Türkmenlerin hakları ve üçüncüsü, Türkiye iç siyasetinde dozu yükselen milliyetçi söylem.

2011 sonrasında (AKP'nin iktidarının ikinci yarısında) Türkiye'nin tehdit algısı oldukça artmış, Türkiye fikrî ve maddî olarak bölgesel kutuplaşmanın bir parçası olmuştur. AKP'nin ilk yıllarında yumuşak gücü öne çıkaran politik tutumunun aksine sert güç unsurları, Türk politika yapıcılar tarafından algılanan tehditlerle başa çıkmak için dış politikanın önemli bir unsuru haline geldi. Her ne kadar Türk dış politikasında zorlayıcı diplomasi araçlarının kullanımına AKP'nin iktidarının ikinci döneminde başlasa da bu tarz nihai şeklini 15 Temmuz 2016'daki başarısız darbe girişiminden sonra almıştır. Darbe girişiminden sonra AKP aşırı milliyetçi Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) ile ittifak kurdu. Bu şekilde, milliyetçi-muhafazakâr diskur, diğer görüşler aleyhine olacak şekilde dış politika yapım sürecine aşamalı olarak egemen hale geldi. AKP-MHP koalisyonunun merkezinde Türk milliyetçiliği ve Türkiye'nin egemenliğini/özerkliğini güçlendirme vurgusu yer alsa da Kürt karşıtlığı da iktidar koalisyonunun iç ve dış politikadaki önemli politik tutumlarından biridir. Özellikle Kürt yanlısı Halkların Demokratik Partisi'nin (HDP) seçim başarıları, Kürt açılımının fiyasko ile sonuçlanması ve 2015 yılında PKK ile silahlı çatışmanın yeniden başlaması, Kürtlerin ana gövdesini teşkil ettiği Suriye Demokratik Güçleri'nin (SDG) Suriye'deki Türkiye için kabul edilemeyecek ilerleyişi, AKP-MHP koalisyonunun Kürt karşıtı tavrını daha da sağlamlaştırdı. Tüm bu gelişmelerin üzerine gelen İKBY'deki bağımsızlık referandumu Türk politika yapıcılarının “Türkiye saldırı altında” ve “Türkiye kuşatılıyor” tezlerini güçlendirdi.

AKP-MHP iktidar koalisyonu iç ve dış politikasında Kürt karşıtı bir politika izlemiş ve Türkiye'nin referanduma tepkisinin belirlenmesinde bu milliyetçi söylem etkili olmuştu. Fakat Türkiye farklı bir iktidar partisi ya da koalisyonun yönetiminde olmuş olsaydı da Türkiye'nin referanduma olan tepkisini farklı olmazdı. Cumhuriyet tarihi boyunca Türk devletinin iç ve dış politikasının

şekillenmesinde algılanan iki büyük tehdidin etkili olduğu belirtilebilir. Birincisi, devletin laik karakterine karşıt olan irticai bir harekettir. Zaman içinde, özellikle AKP'nin iktidarında, devletle İslamcıların uzlaştığı söylenebilir. İkinci olarak, Kürt ayrılıkçı hareketi devletin ve milletin bütünlüğünü önünde büyük bir tehdit olarak algılanan gelmiştir. Devlet ve İslamcılar “uzlaşıp” bir bakıma devlet siyasal İslamcı bir anlayışın denetimine girmişse de, ikinci korku devlet politikalarının şekillenmesinde belirleyici rol oynamaya devam ediyor. Ayrıca 2016 yılındaki darbe girişimi sonrasında kurulan ve “Türk tipi” cumhurbaşkanlığı rejiminin parlamenter rejimin yerini almasıyla gücü daha da tahkim edilen AKP-MHP koalisyonu, cumhuriyet kadar eski olan bu korkuyu hem iç hem de dış politika yapımında kullanmaktadır. AKP hükümeti iktidarının ilk yıllarından itibaren sürdürdüğü Kürt sorununu güvenlikçi bir alandan uzaklaştırma çabasını son erdirmiş ve Türk devletinin kadim korkusunu siyaset arenasına geri çağırmıştır. Altunışık, “Kürtlerin Suriye ve Irak'ta siyasi özerklik veya bağımsızlık arayışı, Türkiye'deki Kürt meselesinin yeniden güvenlikleştirilmesine katkıda bulunuyor. Ayrıca Türkiye'nin yakın komşularına yönelik politikası 1990'larda olduğu gibi büyük ölçüde Kürt sorununa yönlendiriliyor” diyor (Altunışık, 2020). Dolayısıyla iktidar partisi veya koalisyonun ideolojik ve siyasi tutumu ne olursa olsun, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti devletinin kısa ve orta vadede bağımsız bir Kürt varlığını kabul etmesi mümkün görünmemektedir. Bununla birlikte, mevcut bölgesel ve yerel dinamiklerde olağanüstü bir değişiklik meydana gelmedikçe, Türkiye'nin onaylamadığı bir “Kürt” devletini kurmakta zor olacaktır. Türkiye'nin çekinceleri, Irak Kürt liderliğinin de farkında olduğu bir şeydir. Yani, bir anlamda Mesud Barzani ve Irak Kürt liderliğinin referandum öncesinde Türkiye ve İran başta olmak üzere bölgesel güçlerin desteğini garanti etmemesi referandumun ölü doğmasına neden olmuştur denilebilir.

İkili ilişkiler, Eylül 2017'den 2019 ortasına kadar bir durgunluk dönemine girmiştir. Öte yandan, referandum nedeniyle Türkiye-İKBY ilişkileri zayıflamış olsa da ikili ilişkilerde tam bir kopuş yaşanmadığı söylenemez. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan ve Türk devlet yetkililerinin Kürt liderlere karşı sert söylemler kullanmaktan çekinmemesine, sert diskurlar çoğu zaman domestik siyasi



ihtiyaçlardan kaynaklanmıştı, Türkiye, İKBY'ye önemli bir yaptırım uygulamadı. Örneğin, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanı Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu referandumun İKBY ile olan ekonomik bağlarla ilgili olmadığını belirtmişti. Öte yandan, Temmuz 2018'de Nechirvan Barzani Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın Cumhurbaşkanlığı hükümet sisteminde göreve başlama törenine çağırılmış ve bu da ikili iyi ilişkilerin yeniden tesisi için önemli olmuştu. Ancak ikili ilişkilerin referandum öncesi seviyeye gelmesi için 2019 yılını beklemek gerekiyordu. Nechirvan Barzani, İKBY'nin ikinci Cumhurbaşkanı seçildikten sonra ilk yurtdışı resmi ziyaretini Haziran 2019'da Türkiye'ye gerçekleştirdi. Erdoğan ile yaptığı resmi görüşmenin ardından Barzani, “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan ile görüşmüş olmaktan oldukça memnunum. Toplantı boyunca her iki taraf için önemli konular ayrıntılı olarak müzakere edildi. İKBY, Türkiye ve Irak ilişkilerinde yeni bir dönemin başlamak üzere olduğuna inanıyorum”. Referandumun ikili ilişkiler üzerindeki olumsuz etkilerinin azalmaya başlamasıyla ikili ilişkiler toparlanma emareleri göstermeye başladı.

Ontolojik güvenlik kaygıları, stratejik kaygılar, yurtiçinde ve bölgedeki mevcut siyasi konjonktür ve mevcut iktidar partisinin veya iktidara alternatif olan partilerin siyasi tutumları dikkate değerlendirildiğinde, Türkiye'nin kısa ve orta vadede Irak'ta veya diğer komşu ülkede bağımsız Kürt devletini tanıması mümkün gözükmemektedir. Öte yandan, Irak içerisindeki şartlar ve bölgenin koşulları bağımsız bir Kürt devletine izin vermese de Kürtler siyasi iddialarından vazgeçmiş değillerdir. Ancak bu siyasi açmaz durumu, ikili ilişkilerin tamamen kopması anlamına gelmiyor. Hem Kürtler hem de Türkler, siyasi farklılıklarını bir kenara koyup ortak çıkarlarına odaklanırken, birbirlerine yönelik politikalarını kompartmantalize etmişlerdir. Ayrıca, iç ve bölgesel koşullarda meydana gelen değişiklikler, her iki tarafın da ortak çıkarlarını hayata geçirmek için karşılıklı iş birliğini zorunlu kılmaktadır. Bu anlamda, Türkiye'nin ve İKBY'nin çıkarlarının kesiştiği üç temel alan vardır: Güvenlik, ticaret-enerji ve diplomasi.

İlk olarak, ortak güvenlik kaygıları önümüzdeki yıllarda ikili ilişkilerin önemli bir boyutunu oluşturacaktır. Her iki taraf da PKK, PYD, IŞİD gibi terör örgütlerine

karşı kaygılar taşıyor. IŞİD'in yükselişi ve Irak ordusu ile Peşmerge güçlerinin geri çekilmesinin ardından PKK'nın varlığını İran sınırındaki Kandil Dağ sırasından Suriye sınırındaki Sincar'a kadar genişletmesi Türkiye'nin endişelerini artırdı. PKK, Sincar Direniş Birlikleri (YBŞ) kurarak Sincar'daki güçlerini tahkim etti. Ayrıca PKK, Kürt milliyetçi kampındaki hedefine ulaşmak için rakibi KDP'ye karşı İran liderliğindeki Halk Seferberlik Güçleri (Haşdi Şabi) ile iş birliği yapıyor. Buna ek olarak, 9 Ekim 2020'de Bağdat ve Erbil, PKK'nın ve PKK ile iltisaklı grupların Sincar'daki varlığına son verilmesini öngören Sincar anlaşmasına imzaladılar. Ancak PKK Sincar'dan henüz çıkmış değil. Bu ortak kaygılar, Türkiye ve KDP'yi birlikte hareket etmeye zorluyor. PKK dışında, IŞİD'in Irak ve Suriye'de bir anda ortaya çıkıp kısa süre sonra ortan kaybolması bölgedeki istikrar ve güvenlik ortamını sekteye uğratmıştır. IŞİD askeri olarak yenilmiş fakat ideolojisi canlı ve bazı gruplar için cazip olmaya devam ediyor. Bugünlerde IŞİD militanlarının Irak içerisinde yeniden toplandıkları ve bir yıpratma savaşına giriştikleri iddia ediliyor. 2011 yılından sonra ABD güçlerinin Irak'tan büyük ölçüde çekildiği ve Erbil'in Bağdat ile gerginleşen ilişkileri dikkate alındığında, IKBY'nin IŞİD ve diğer terör örgütleriyle mücadelesinde Türkiye'nin askeri ve siyasi desteğine her zamankinden daha fazla ihtiyaç duyduğu aşikardır. Öte yandan, bölgede istikrarsızlık her geçen an daha da artarken, IKBY bu belirsizlik içinde güvenli bir ada olmaya devam ediyor. Bahsi geçen terör yapıları üzerinde karşılıklı çekincelerin paylaşılması, Türkiye ile IKBY'yi onları kontrol altına almak ve ortadan kaldırmak için yakınlaştıracığa benzemektedir.

İkincisi, Türkiye ile KBY arasındaki ticaret ve enerji ortaklığı, karşılıklı çıkarların referans noktalarından biri olmaya devam edeceğe benziyor. Referandum öncesinde Türkiye'nin Irak'a yaptığı ihracatının yüzde 70'i IKBY'ye yapılmıştı. Ticari ilişkilerin zirvesinde, IKBY Türkiye'nin üçüncü en büyük ihracat pazarını ve müteahhitler için en büyük ikinci pazarını teşkil ediyordu. Ticari ilişkilerin yanı sıra, enerji anlaşmaları ile bağlar daha da güçlendirildi. IKBY ile yapılan Enerji anlaşmaları ile Türkiye, enerji fakiri Avrupa ülkeleri ile enerji zengini Orta Doğu arasındaki coğrafi konumunu kullanarak bir merkez haline gelebilir, dahası enerji kaynaklarını çeşitlendirmesi, güvenli bir kaynaktan ve düşük fiyattan enerjiye

ulaşması temin edilebilir. Referandum ekonomik ilişkileri olumsuz etkilese de ikili ticari ilişkiler tamamen çökmedi çünkü her iki taraf da siyasi ilişkilerin geliştirilmesinde ekonomik bağların önemlinin farkında. Ankara, Irak Kürtlerinin siyasi taleplerini yerine getirmeden gelişen ekonomik bağlarla fonksiyonel ikili ilişkiler kurmayı hedefliyor.

Üçüncüsü, yakın diplomatik ilişkilere sahip olmak, Türkiye-IKBY ilişkilerinin üzerine inşa edilebileceği önemli sütunlardan biri olacaktır. Türkiye, AKP döneminde IKBY ile olan ilişkilerini güvenlik odaklı politikalardan uzaklaştırmış, ekonomik ilişkiler etrafında yeni bir politik tutum inşa ederek resmi diplomatik ilişkilerin kurulmasının önünü açmıştır. Bu bağlamda, 2010 yılında Türkiye'nin Erbil Başkonsolosluğunun açılması çığır açan bir gelişme olarak tarihe geçmiştir. Uzunca bir süre Türkiye-IKBY ilişkileri Erdoğan ve Barzani arasındaki kişisel ilişkiler üzerinden okunmasına rağmen, durum artık kişisel ilişkilerin ötesine geçmiş ve daha yapısal bir boyu kazanmıştır. Örneğin, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) bir heyetinin 2021'de bölgeye yaptığı ziyaret bu tezi güçlendirecektir. Bu ziyaret bir kez daha göstermiştir ki, Türkiye ve IKBY arasındaki iyi ilişkiler Erdoğan ve AKP hükümetleri dönemiyle sınırlı kalmayacak ve bundan sonra da Türkiye'de hangi liderin veya partinin iktidar olmasına bakılmaksızın belirli bir seviyede olmaya devam edecektir. Bağımsızlık referandumdan dört yıl sonra, Türkiye ve IKBY sağlam ve faal bir diplomasiyle iş birliği ve diyalog kanallarını açık tutarak ortak çıkarlarını gerçekleştirebilir. Dahası her iki taraf da bu durumun farkındadır.

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