
The Kurdish Cause and Erdogan's Visit to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region

22-04-2024

Authors

Ziryan Rojhelati

Summary : Apart from economic reasons, however, the Kurdish cause has deeper roots for Erdogan. There is no doubt that Erdogan, who has remained in power longer than any other Turkish leader and has a chance of directing Turkish policy for at least another four years, has come closer to the Kurdish cause than anyone else. If we include the reforms for the European Union membership process, the AKP has put the Kurdish cause on the agenda of Turkey between 2002 and 2015, directly and indirectly during its 13 years of rule.

After 20 years, I was recently back in Baghdad, where officials are preparing to welcome Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This follows the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani to the United States and tensions between Iran and Israel - among the most important issues of Iraqi foreign policy that are directly related to the Kurds.

When it was founded, Caliph Abu Jaafar al-Mansour built four gates for the city, the main one facing Khorasan, which was called the gate of the state, but the gate of Baghdad was not only open to Iran and Khorasan. The struggle over the city, which meant "God's blessing - what God has given," had formed a major part of political life here. Neither side was able to win "God's blessing" alone for a long time. Today, despite the dominance of Shiite power and Iranian hegemony, which is clearly visible through the pictures and symbols hanging on the walls of Baghdad, I heard from at least four senior officials that Erdogan's arrival signifies a new stage for them. This shows that not only the Khorasan gate of Baghdad is open. Of course, water, economy, and security matters are among the top issues that Baghdad politicians want to discuss with Erdogan, but for the most part, the Kurdish cause is at the heart of the issues.

Some politicians in Baghdad seem to hope to achieve two things by providing economic and security interests. One is water, and the other is Turkey's direct dealings with Baghdad. First of all, despite the desire of some parties for Erdogan not to visit Erbil, his arrival to the city is a policy of balancing which seems to be related to the current situation of Baghdad.

Iraq is demanding that Turkey release 500 cubic meters of water per second, which some water experts say seems difficult, at least at this time. But Ankara may agree to release some more than the 130 cubic meters it currently releases to Syria and Iraq. The "Development Road" project, security issues, and the situation in the Kurdistan Region are also intertwined. Some politicians in Baghdad see these two issues as an opportunity for direct Ankara-Baghdad relations instead of Ankara-Erbil-Baghdad relations. However, contrary to this political view, I interestingly heard a different interpretation from several retired Iraqi army generals who attended a meeting of research centers in Baghdad. They argued that the Kurdish cause would affect the Development Road project from both sides of Turkey and Iraq and that the issue of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) could not be resolved militarily alone.

The Development Road project is one of the most important projects of the current Iraqi government, which has a major geo-economic and political dimension. The \$17 billion project, which is likely to witness several more agreements with the arrival of Erdogan, is an important dream for Iraq, but also a big risk. Within at least a 500-kilometer radius of the project, there are two main Sunni-Kurdish issues that could always cause problems if politics in Baghdad take on a purely religious dimension. The presence of ethnic and religious issues on the course of this project also makes it open to external intervention. That is, it could hypothetically give any regional force a big card to put pressure on Baghdad, especially when it does not like its policies. However, as much as the security issue of this road can create a strategic weakness for Iraq, it can also be an incentive for a moderate domestic policy and a balanced relationship with the outside world, which is in everyone's interest.

For Turkey, the Development Road project means participation in construction projects and economic achievements. This is in addition to resolving the security dimensions of the issue of Shingal (Sinjar) and Makhmour for Ankara, which sees it as an important point in the fight against the PKK. Turkey will not lose if Iraq or another country provides capital for the project, even if it is later hampered by a hypothetical security situation. This will also serve as a pressure card on the Spice Route project, from which Turkey was excluded.

Iraq believes there is no complete military solution to the PKK issue, although it wants to meet some of Turkey's demands by restricting access. Turkey wants to create a buffer zone within 30-40 kilometers of the border and keep the PKK away from its borders. The most effective step Iraq can for Turkey on the PKK issue will be on the area of Makhmour and Shingal if it does. Otherwise, as I heard from former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, "complete control of the mountains will be difficult for all forces, whether the Turkish army, the Peshmerga, or the Iraqi army." Under the previous

regime, Baghdad helped Turkey fight the PKK at least 20 times, and now the Baghdad government has taken a step that pleases Ankara by designating the PKK as a banned organization. However, it is difficult for Iraq to do its best against the PKK, at least in the short term, because it is neither able nor willing to do so now. It will probably satisfy Turkey and will not completely remove the PKK card. Therefore, it is expected that along with the military and security proposals to limit the PKK, especially in Shingal-Makhmour and the areas between the Zap Valley and Balinda near Amedi, the Iraqi government will also want mediation between the PKK and Turkey. Of course, it is difficult to discuss another round of talks between Turkey and the PKK, at least before some military operations, but in the long run it is not unrealistic. One of the reasons for this is that political conditions and the balances of power in the region have changed. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), between 1975 and 2017, foreign countries provided assistance to Kurdish forces in Kurdish conflicts about 108 times, with Syria topping the list with 29 times and Iran with 27 times. Syria has helped the PKK 15 times and Iran has helped the group nine times against Turkey.

Syria is now busy with its own affairs, and Iran appears to be trying to reduce its competition with Turkey because of tensions with Israel and the West. On the other hand, it may be clear to the PKK that continuing the fighting at this time is not useful because of these changes and the dominance of drone and airstrikes. For Turkey, which is in a difficult economic situation, an ongoing war means a huge economic burden that is not good news for Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which emerged with poor results from the last elections.

Apart from economic reasons, however, the Kurdish cause has deeper roots for Erdogan. There is no doubt that Erdogan, who has remained in power longer than any other Turkish leader and has a chance of directing Turkish policy for at least another four years, has come closer to the Kurdish cause than anyone else. If we include the reforms for the European Union membership process, the AKP has put the Kurdish cause on the agenda of Turkey between 2002 and 2015, directly and indirectly during its 13 years of rule. In 2003, it amended the Population Registration Act No. 1587 to allow Kurdish names for children, and in 2009, it passed a law allowing Kurdish broadcasting. These were symbolic steps for a country whose citizens at one point faced financial penalties for saying any Kurdish word. In 2005, Erdogan acknowledged the Turkish republic's past mistakes on the Kurdish cause, and in 2009, launched a process of "Kurdish opening." He then headed the Oslo negotiations between Turkey's National Intelligence Agency (MIT) and the PKK and conducted the solution phase between 2013-2015, during which he limited the role of the army and Kemalist views in the country, which were seen as the main obstacles to resolving the Kurdish and religious issues. Since 2015, due to the Gulenist coup and the distance between the AKP and the Kurdish side, the Kurdish cause has left the agenda of Turkey and another round of conflict has returned.

The Turkish president's remarks in Diyarbakir (Amed) ahead of the latest municipal election campaign in March this year, in which he expressed his readiness for dialogue, with the remarks of Selahattin Demirtas, Leyla Zana, and Ahmet Turk, Erdogan has been named as the source and the person capable of resolving the Kurdish issue, reviving hopes for another round of negotiations.

Iraq has important experience in mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the current timing is appropriate for dialogue to resolve the Kurdish issue in Turkey in terms of international politics. If it truly works for it, in particular, as an Iraqi official said, they have received a message from the PKK about their readiness for dialogue with Turkey.

Of course, Iraq can also benefit from the ability and willingness of the Kurdistan Region's political leadership to find a peaceful solution and end this war. This is in addition to the fact that the Turkish president, because in fact, as Ahmet Turk and Leyla Zana have mentioned, the address of the solution to the Kurdish issue is still Erdogan's strength and ability.