

Turkey and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Relations: A Soft Power Approach towards Kurdish Question

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ABSTRACT

Turkiye's long sentiments and old paradigm against Kurds have reflected both parties' relations. Animosity against Kurds, whom they see as a homogenous entity that could threaten its territorial integrity and national security, has led Turkiye to deploy military solutions (hard approach) toward the Kurds issue. This article attempts to analyze why there has been a paradigm shift and enhancement in Turkiye-KRG relations, especially during AKP tenure, while analyzing the extent to which the effectiveness of the Turkiye-KRG relationship can help Turkiye resolve its Kurdish issue in peaceful ways. This research uses offensive realism as an analytical tool while deploying qualitative methods through explanatory and descriptive approaches in answering the problems raised. The study shows that the paradigm shift and the enhancement in Turkiye-KRG relations can occur because Turkiye seeks to pursue its goal, being a regional hegemon. In this way, Turkiye can guarantee its survival, increase welfare, and preserve its political doctrine. However, the enhancement of Turkiye-KRG relations shows less significant effectiveness in overcoming the Kurdish issue. As the Kurdish question is a domestic issue, it is Turkiye itself that must find a solution to

ABSTRAK

Sentimen lama Turki dan paradigma lama terhadap Kurdi telah mencerminkan hubungan kedua belah pihak. Permusuhan terhadap suku Kurdi, yang mereka anggap sebagai entitas homogen yang dapat mengancam integritas teritorial dan keamanan nasionalnya, telah mendorong Turki untuk menerapkan solusi militer (pendekatan keras) terhadap permasalahan Kurdi. Artikel ini berusaha menganalisis mengapa dapat terjadi perubahan paradigma dan peningkatan pada relasi Turki-KRG, khususnya di masa kekuasaan AKP. Selain itu, artikel ini juga berupaya untuk menganalisis sejauh mana efektivitas relasi Turki-KRG dapat membantu Turki mengatasi persoalan minoritas Kurdinya dengan cara-cara damai. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan realisme ofensif sebagai pisau analisa dan metode kualitatif melalui pendekatan eksplanatori dan deskriptif dalam menjawab persoalan yang dikemukakan. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa perubahan paradigma dan peningkatan pada relasi Turki-KRG dapat terjadi karena Turki berupaya untuk mengejar tujuannya, yaitu menjadi hegemon regional. Dengan cara ini, negara dapat menjamin keberlangsungan hidup, meningkatkan kesejahteraan dan melestarikan doktrin politiknya. Pada akhirnya, peningkatan relasi Turki-KRG tidak dapat memberikan efektivitas yang signifikan dalam mengatasi persoalan Kurdi. Hal ini karena persoalan Kurdi adalah masalah domestik yang harus ditemukan solusinya oleh Turki sendiri.

Introduction

Turkiye has long regarded Kurds as a homogenous entity that could threaten its territorial integrity and national security. They always feel uncomfortable about the emergence or development of Kurdish nationalist movements in neighboring countries, in northern Iraq, for example. Ankara is concerned that the achievement of the Kurdish nationalist movement could increase separatism and encourage Kurds in its territory to take similar actions in demanding autonomy or even independence.¹ Thus, Turkiye's foreign policy and its previous relations with the Kurds are often marked by mistrust and a harsh reaction.²

Nearly in the past two decades, there have been dramatic and radical shifts in Turkish-Kurdish relations. Turkiye has sought to abandon old sentiments towards Kurds, minimize the military approach and seek an alternative approach (soft power) in overcoming the Kurdish issue. Under The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule, Turkiye commences to forge friendly bilateral relations with Iraqi Kurds and views the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a strategic partner.³ The approach contradicts how Turkiye treats Kurds in Syria and at home.⁴ Turkiye's relations with and its

foreign policy shift towards the KRG occurred in the 1990s. However, Turkiye had no direct contact with the KRG at the time.⁵

Turkiye's paradigm shift towards the Kurds through relations enhancement with the KRG is a fascinating topic. Previous research has also studied the relations between Turkiye and the KRG. Some focus on an analysis of Turkiye's foreign policy towards the KRG,⁶ Turkiye's motives for increasing cooperation with the KRG and its impact on the region,⁷ and internal and external dynamics in energy cooperation.⁸ Although there have been many studies discussing the Turkish-KRG relations, few studies discuss the paradigm shift in Turkiye's foreign policy towards the Kurds (KRG in particular) through a realism approach. Although realism is not the only theory, and many new views have grown and developed in International Relations to examine state behavior in international politics, realism can still be considered a relevant theory to examine state behavior in international politics. Therefore, this article seeks to analyze why Turkiye can change its paradigm and past sentiments towards the surrounding Kurds by enhancing its relations with the KRG.

Meanwhile, some studies argue that the Turkiye-KRG relations are Turkiye's strategy to solve the Kurdish issue at home through more peaceful means.⁹ Regarding

¹ Hannes Černy, *Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK and International Relations: Theory and Ethnic Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 30; Özlem Kayhan Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government," *MERIA Journal* 20, no. 2 (2016).

² Ali Sarikaya, "Turkey-Iraqi Kurdistan regional government relations within the frame of Syrian Civil War" (paper presented at the Security and Sovereignty in The 21st Century, Budapest, 2018).

³ Till F Paasche and Howri Mansurbeg, "Kurdistan Regional Government–Turkish energy relations: a complex partnership," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55, no. 2 (2014).

⁴ Sara Salahaddin Mustafa and Sardar Aziz, "Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan Federal Region: Bonds of friendship," in *Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern*

Politics, ed. Alex Danilovich (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ F Stephen Larrabee and Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Kurdish challenge," *Survival* 53, no. 4 (2011).

⁶ Marianna Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2012); Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government."

⁷ Gallia Lindenstrauss and Furkan Aksoy, "Turkey and northern Iraq: tightening relations in a volatile environment," *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 3 (2012).

⁸ Remziye Yilmaz, "Turkey-KRG energy relations: internal and external dynamics," *Journal of Global Analysis* 7, no. 2 (2017).

⁹ Paasche and Mansurbeg, "Kurdistan Regional Government–Turkish energy relations: a complex partnership."; Ömer Taşpınar and Gönül Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds: From predicament to opportunity,"

those views, this article seeks to analyze how effective the Turkiye-KRG relations are to help Turkiye deal with its Kurdish issue, particularly in toning down PKK armed attacks. This article also try to anylise why there has been a paradigm shift and enhancement in Turkiye-KRG relations, especially during AKP tenure.

Research Method

In conducting this research, the authors used qualitative research methods as they can provide a lot of descriptive and explanatory details in elaborating research results in the social field related to the phenomena that occur in them. This method provides a detailed description of what is happening in the investigated setting.¹⁰ Using qualitative research methods, this article sought to understand the meaning, process, and deep context of an event or social behavior observed.¹¹

Qualitative research, furthermore, could provide a variety of data sources that can be processed and given meaning in a comprehensive, complete, and accurate manner.¹² This article used such data sources as document-based data and the internet. The authors tried to collect factual information related to Turkiye-KRG relations from various documents such as books, journals, and scientific reports. We then strengthened and support these sources by those originating from the internet, such as online news pages. Either document-based or internet-based is relevant in writing this article because several advantages are offered in overcoming resource limitations and problems encountered during research.

US–Europe Analysis Series, no. 54 (2014); Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government."

¹⁰ Alan Bryman, *Social research methods*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford university press, 2012).

¹¹ Umar Suryadi Bakry, *Metode Penelitian Hubungan Internasional* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2016).

¹² John W Creswell, *Research design pendekatan metode kualitatif, kuantitatif, dan mixed*, 4 ed. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2019).

Finally, the collected data were analyzed using the analytical method developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Hubberman. According to Miles and Hubberman, as Lune & Berg (2017)¹³ quoted, there are three stages in analyzing data: data reduction, presentation, and conclusions.

Result and Discussion

Turkiye's Paradigm towards Kurds

Turkiye is a country with the largest Kurdish population. About 50% of the Kurdish population resides there, whereas Kurds make up 20% of the population. The country's borders are surrounded by Kurdish populations living in neighboring countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran. As a result, Turkiye always concerns that the spread of Kurdish demography may become a major threat to the loss of its territorial integrity.¹⁴

Since the formation of the modern Turkish Republic, the centralist and nationalist policies of the Kemal Ataturk regime attempted to make Turkiye a homogeneous, monolingistic, and secular nation-state. Consequently, social and cultural freedoms are restricted for those who opposed to Kemalis' policies, particularly and the Kurdish minority.¹⁵ Turkiye then regarded Kurds as a potentially divisive element. Thus, every Kurdish activity, such as ethnonationalism and administrative demands for self-government, is considered "separatism" that must be prevented, even though it is still in the embryonic stage.¹⁶

¹³ Howard Lune and Bruce L Berg, *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*, 9 ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2017).

¹⁴ Bill Park, "Regional turmoil, the rise of Islamic State, and Turkey's multiple Kurdish dilemmas," *International Journal* 71, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁵ Mariam Jooma Carikci, *Kurdistan: Achievable Reality Or Political Mirage* (Craighall: Afro-Middle East Centre, 2013).

¹⁶ Cengiz Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020).

The doctrine of Kemalism led to massive repression of Kurds in various aspects of political, social, and cultural life. Kurds were even treated like foreigners and only regarded as 'Mountain Turks.' During the early period of the republic, Turkish authorities strictly prohibited the use of the Kurdish language and did not allow Kurds to express their culture freely. Historical works, literature, and stories containing Kurdish references were destroyed and obliterated.¹⁷ Turkiye, then, interpreted the existence of and recognition to Kurds as a threat to the national security, territorial integrity, and unity of the state. As a result, the articulation of Kurdish political demands or rights was regarded a crime to the constitution, while individuals and political parties demanding special rights of Kurds were prosecuted.¹⁸

Recognition of Kurdish identity, from the language to the geographical name of their inhabited land (Kurdistan), is considered a violation of the foundation of the Turkish nation. Therefore, there has always been a consensus that the Kurdish issue is the main challenge for the state's survival. Turkiye is the only country that strongly regards the word Kurdistan as taboo. This contradicts other countries' views on which the Kurds live. In Iran, despite the restrictions on fundamental Kurdish rights, the word of Kurdistan is used as a province; in Iraq, the term "Kurdistan" or "Kurdish" as an ethnic identity with linguistic and even administrative rights was never even banned or denied; and in Syria, the use of those terms has never been a matter of persecution.¹⁹

¹⁷ Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds ascending: The evolving solution to the Kurdish problem in Iraq and Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Nezan Kendal, "Kurdistan in Turkey," in *People without a country: the Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaliand (London: Zed Press, 1980).

¹⁸ Cengiz Gunes, "The Rise of the Pro-Kurdish Democratic Movement in Turkey," in *The Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. Michael M. Gunter (New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁹ Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*.

The taboo in using Kurdistan term in Turkiye has made Kurdish questions a security issue by the political elite and the military throughout the Republic's history. As a result, Turkiye often puts forward a "hard power" approach to deal with the Kurds.²⁰ Such an approach is the anxious feeling of the Ankara elites regarding the Kurdish nationalist movement in neighboring countries. Elites fear that those movements could encourage Kurds in Turkiye to take similar action and demand autonomy or even an independent Kurdish state.²¹ This concern is rooted in Turkiye's opinion, which constantly views the Kurds as a homogeneous entity even though they have spread across several countries such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria.²²

Considering the explanation above, it is not a strange phenomenon if those trying to solve and push for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem would be eliminated. The political elites even exploit the securitization of the Kurdish issue to seek superiority over one other. President Özal is an example of this case. His death is undeniably related to his stance on the Kurdish issue.²³ His policy, which is in stark contrast to the traditional Turkish sentiment towards Kurds, is when he supports the establishment of "safe haven" for Iraqi Kurds in the northern region of the country, near the Turkish-Iraqi border, as a shelter for Kurdish refugees protecting them from the repressive actions of the Saddam's regime during the Anfal Operation in Halabja.²⁴

²⁰ Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'," *Middle East Critique* 27, no. 1 (2018).

²¹ Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government."

²² Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'."

²³ Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*; Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'."

²⁴ Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government."h

After the Özal era, Türkiye returned to the old paradigm. The state's reaction to the Kurdish issue at home and the rise of the Kurdish national movement in neighboring countries has become more violent. The military approach to the Kurdish issue was re-applied as a primary step in Türkiye's policy.²⁵ However, Türkiye's attitude towards the Kurds has change again in the AKP era. Motivated by the prospects for integration into the European Union (EU), Türkiye slowly brings about a softer political solution to the Kurdish issue in tune with EU norms and principles.²⁶

During the AKP's tenure, the Turkish government subsequently made significant efforts to defuse the Kurdish issue. Since coming to power, the Erdogan government has introduced a number of reforms designed to improve relations with its Kurdish community and that in the surrounding countries. For example, in August 2002, Kurdish broadcasts were introduced on a limited basis, and soon the Kurdish language was allowed to be taught in schools on a limited basis. In addition, one of the essential components of the reform is the shift in Türkiye foreign policy towards the KRG in northern Iraq.²⁷

This article argues that Türkiye's paradigm shift towards the Kurds during the AKP era is inseparable from the AKP interests. Domestically, the AKP and Erdogan are eager to increase the Kurdish voter support, which makes up about 20% of Türkiye's population, to stay in power. The Kurdish vote is crucial to maintain the AKP domination as the ruling party and to keep Erdogan's power for a long time. Kurdish support is crucial for the constitutional referendum, which meant to change parliamentary to the presidential system. Meanwhile, internationally, the shift in Türkiye's policy towards the Kurds, in this case towards the KRG, is the manifestation

of Erdogan's interest in pursuing a "neo-Ottoman" to make Türkiye an important regional actor.

Despite The paradigm shift towards Kurds both domestically and internationally, Türkiye's policy toward Kurds remains bias. Ankara's negative response to the PYD's autonomy gain in northern Syria demonstrates this situation.²⁸ Ankara remains concerned about the rise of the PYD, which they regard as the PKK affiliation.²⁹ According to Weiss (2016), the rise of the PYD is Türkiye's primary concern. The PYD gain in northern Syria may reignite its Kurdish secession ambitions.³⁰

Indeed, Türkiye's tendency to hold the old paradigm towards PYD status is related to the national security issue. However, this might also relate to the interests that Ankara wants to pursue. If security issues are still a priority, Türkiye's attitude towards the KRG, of course, will be the same as that towards the PYD. What makes this different is that the KRG is the basis of Türkiye's interests in energy resources and economic sectors to achieve its primary goals. Thus, the state's goal becomes the mainframe of Türkiye's paradigm towards the Kurds in its territory or the surrounding countries. To further understand Türkiye's interest in the KRG, the remaining sections of this article will discuss the enhancement of Türkiye-KRG relations and the effectiveness of those relations in overcoming the Kurdish issue.

The Enhancement of Türkiye-KRG Relations as A Soft Power Approach

The initial relations between Türkiye and the KRG had long taken place since Türkiye supported the establishment of "Safe

²⁵ Lindenstrauss and Aksoy, "Turkey and northern Iraq: tightening relations in a volatile environment."

²⁶ Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*.

²⁷ Larrabee and Tol, "Turkey's Kurdish challenge."

²⁸ Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'."

²⁹ Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government."

³⁰ Matthew Weiss, "From constructive engagement to renewed estrangement? Securitization and Turkey's deteriorating relations with its Kurdish minority," *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016).

Haven” for Iraqi Kurds in the early 90s following the Halabja tragedy. This support aimed to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the influx of Kurdish refugees into Turkiye’s territory. Besides, such a policy was Turkiye’s strategy to get US approval to operate in northern Iraq, deploying about 100,000 armed forces along the Turkish-Iraqi border to catch up with PKK rebels.³¹

On the other hand, the initial relations between Turkiye and KRG also occurred as KRG’s two dominant parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), often assisted Turkiye to deal with PKK issues. Either KDP or PUK perceives PKK’s political maneuvers and violent attacks as a threat to their achievements on the Iraqi political stage and an obstacle to rapprochement with Turkiye.³²

Bilateral relations between Turkiye-KRG have shown significant development during the AKP tenure, following diplomatic talks between the Turkish Ambassador Murat Ozelik and Masoud Barzani in October 2008 and January 2009. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and PM Erdogan then visited Erbil in 2010 and 2011 to hold a meeting with Barzani. As a result, Turkiye opened a consulate in Erbil and started operating direct Turkish Airlines flights from Istanbul to Erbil and Sulaimaniya. That was a firm action from Turkiye regarding its diplomatic relations with the KRG.³³

The opening of diplomatic relations between Turkiye and the KRG reflects a shift in Turkiye’s foreign policy towards surrounding Kurds. Turkiye then deploys more non-coercive method, soft power approach in this case, to pursue its goal. Opening talks with KRG, Turkiye seeks to have KRG to voluntarily do what they would

like them to do to a variety of policies, qualities, and actions in more direct and noncoercive method.

This change is motivated by the interests and goals that Ankara wants to pursue. The basis of interest is indeed an essential element in making domestic and foreign policies to achieve the state’s goals. For a state, nothing is more important and endurance than the interests themselves. As Palmerston stated in Frankel (1970)³⁴: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no eternal enemies. Our interests are eternal, and those interests are our duty to follow.” In line with this statement, President de Gaulle’s also stated that “nations have no feelings but only interests.” From this argument, the authors point out that Ankara is willing to leave old sentiments against the Kurds and establish relations with other Kurdish entities because they desire to pursue their interests in order to achieve their main mission and goals.

Interest has become the primary concern of realists while describing the states’ behavior in international politics, especially in pursuing their main goals.³⁵ The main goal of every state is to gain power over others. Why does the state require more power than its rivals? The answer is because by having higher power, the state can guarantee its survival. As Mearsheimer argues, the more powerful the state, the better its chances for survival, and the best guarantee for survival is to become a hegemon. No other country can seriously threaten a strong and hegemon state.³⁶

States are constantly in fear because no agency or guarantor will always protect them from others’ threats or aggression. The fear derives from the five basic assumptions of realism in general; 1) the international

³¹ Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government."; Park, "Regional turmoil, the rise of Islamic State, and Turkey's multiple Kurdish dilemmas."

³² Larrabee and Tol, "Turkey's Kurdish challenge."

³³ Özbek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From ‘Clash of the Titans’ to ‘Game of Thrones’."

³⁴ Joseph Frankel, *Key Concepts in Political Science: National Interest* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970).

³⁵ Jill Steans et al., *An introduction to international relations theory: Perspectives and themes*, 3 ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2010).

³⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

system is anarchy, 2) the military capabilities of all states make them aggressive, 3) the intentions of each state are uncertain, 4) survival is the main goal of the states, 5) the states are a rational actor. Thus, the only assumption that can explain the specific determination of states' behavior and motivations in international politics is their goal for survival.³⁷

Then, how can states survive? The ideal situation, in this case, is how states become a hegemon through various means such as economy, diplomacy, and military. States seek to gain advantages and power over their potential competitors as much as possible they can. Maximizing power is the best way to survive in such a dangerous world. Indeed, becoming a global hegemony is a difficult achievement. Thus, the best thing that a state can achieve is controlling an accessible and closest land area to become a regional hegemon.³⁸

Maximizing power to become a regional hegemon is the core of offensive realist discussions, such as Mearsheimer's, as that is the best way for states to survive. To achieve this goal, states need to seek greater economic prosperity or wealth. In Turkiye's case, enhancing relations with the KRG is a strategy of pursuing wealth. If Turkiye has much wealth, it can build a more powerful military to achieve its goal, becoming a regional hegemon within the "neo-Ottoman" spirit. As wealth (latent power) is the foundation of military power, then only in gaining much wealth can Turkiye guarantee its survival in such a dangerous world. Thus, this article argues that the Kurdistan region of Iraq is the best arena for Turkiye to realize its goal.

The Kurdistan region of Iraq is Turkiye's primary market for export activities. About 80% of goods traded in the KRG are produced in Turkiye, while about 1,200 Turkish companies currently operate in northern Iraq (mostly in construction, but

also oil exploration companies).³⁹ Turkiye's significant involvement in the KRG's economy, this article argues, is an attempt to improve the state's wealth. In this way, Turkiye might make its dream come true – being a regional hegemon – to guarantee its survival. On the other hand, Turkiye could make KRG dependent on its investment and export activities.

Therefore, Turkiye urges local companies to take part in the reconstruction of northern Iraq. As a result, bilateral commercial relations have strengthened, and trade volume has reached 7 billion USD in 2010.⁴⁰ In addition, the enhancement of Ankara-Erbil economic relations has also increased Turkish investment by about 16 billion USD in the Kurdistan region.⁴¹

Energy cooperation is another critical instrument in meeting the demands of Turkiye's economy. Having a relatively more stable condition in the region and having a cheaper energy price confirms that the KRG is Turkiye's ideal partner. Prior to this cooperation, Turkiye relied heavily on Russia's and Iran's oil and natural gas. Having the KRG as a partner, Turkiye can increase its bargaining position in energy contracts with Tehran and Moscow, allowing Ankara to adopt a more independent foreign policy. In addition, the Turkiye-KRG energy collaboration also allows Turkish oil companies to carry out energy operations in northern Iraq, thus allowing them to internationalize their energy activities.⁴²

Importing energy resources from the KRG would help Turkiye reduce its energy cost and trade deficit. This move might also increase Turkiye's potential position to become an energy hub, which, in turn, would

³⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

³⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

³⁹ Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government."

⁴⁰ Larrabee and Tol, "Turkey's Kurdish challenge."; Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'."

⁴¹ Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government."

⁴² Yilmaz, "Turkey-KRG energy relations: internal and external dynamics."

increase its regional power and global position. As offensive realists argue, the state's ultimate goal in pursuing interests is to become a regional hegemon. Becoming a regional hegemon and dominating a specific geographic area could guarantee states' survival. Therefore, the state should always look for opportunities to gain more power whenever possible because that is the best way to survive.⁴³

In order to gain more power to become a regional hegemon, Turkiye needs to ensure the level of its wealth. According to Mearsheimer, wealth is one of the essential elements of states' power. Without wealth, states cannot build a powerful military, and without money, they cannot afford technologies to equip, train, and continually modernize their fighting forces. How states achieve wealth? they seek greater economic prosperity to possess greater wealth. If they achieve this, it has significant implications for security because wealth is the foundation of military power.⁴⁴

Turkiye needs to enhance its relations with KRG in the energy sector. Not only can such a relations enhancement increase Turkiye's level of wealth but also ensure Turkiye's security and adequacy of its energy supply. These benefits could boost Ankara's prospect to become an energy hub in the region. Therefore, Turkish policymakers believe that it is crucial for them to diversify their energy suppliers through collaboration with KRG.⁴⁵ By becoming a strategic partner of KRG, Turkiye would receive economic benefits in the form of transit costs when sending Kurdish oil to the world market via Ceyhan.⁴⁶ At the end, such benefits might enhance the state's prospects for survival.

⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

⁴⁵ Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government."

⁴⁶ Yilmaz, "Turkey-KRG energy relations: internal and external dynamics."

Eventually, Turkiye started shipping KRG's oil from Ceyhan Port in May 2014. This move makes Turkiye play a crucial role in transferring KRG oil to international markets. In July 2015, oil exports from Iraq to Ceyhan reached 16 million barrels. Realizing the potential for energy cooperation with Turkiye, KRG Natural Resources Minister Ashti Hawrami in November 2015 announced the KRG's plan to export around 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas to Turkiye in the next two years. Since then, Ankara's relations with Erbil have materially improved in the context of Turkiye's growing economy, in particular the search for new markets and energy resources.⁴⁷

Once analyzing what underlies the enhancement of Turkiye-KRG relations, the authors argue that Turkiye must leverage these relations. KRG seems an ideal partner for Turkiye in realizing its desire to become a regional hegemon due to KRG's heavy dependence on Ankara regarding the economy and recognition as a legal Kurdish autonomous entity. In the end, Turkiye's interests with the KRG are generally similar to those of most states discussed by International Relations scholars, namely states' welfare, preservation of the political doctrine, resilience, and states' security (Frankel, 1970).

Turkiye's Response to Kurds Independence Referendum in 2017

KRG's decision to hold an independence referendum has faced many challenges. Baghdad, the allied countries, and the neighboring states vehemently expressed refusal. Ankara has at least shared the same response to the referendum as those opposed countries. Despite the fierce opposition, KRG eventually successfully held the independence referendum. About 93% of the 77% who cast their ballots chose

⁴⁷ Pusane, "Turkey's Changing Relations with The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government."

"yes" and supported secession.⁴⁸ Given the Turkiye-KRG relations, which have developed strongly, the referendum issue is an interesting topic to be analyzed more deeply, especially regarding Turkiye's response to the referendum and the impact of that event on Turkiye-KRG future relations.

Turkiye has very clearly stated the opposition to the independence referendum. Ankara even threatened to impose isolation sanctions if the KRG held a referendum.⁴⁹ Turkiye's fierce rejection of the referendum is its fearful reaction as the referendum would pose a serious threat to Turkiye's national security issue. The Kurdish referendum in Iraq can also fuel the PKK to revolt and implement more brutal separatism action.⁵⁰ Therefore, Ankara is trying to threaten KRG and will take all necessary steps to prevent the referendum.⁵¹

Threatening rhetorics against the referendum were fiercely expressed by Ankara's elite. President Erdogan has frequently responded to the referendum, threatening that Turkiye would close the pipeline that flows KRG's oil to international markets. In tune with Erdogan, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim previously also cited that Ankara would not hesitate to impose sanctions such as blockade both land and airspace and never recognize the referendum's result.⁵²

According to Park (2019), the elites' rejection and threats against the referendum are merely critical and tend to be 'nationalistic' rhetoric rather than actual actions. In fact, from the beginning until the referendum held, Turkiye did not apply such threats as closing the oil pipeline in Ceyhan, imposing a blockade, or even using military force to prevent the referendum. Park (2019) even further cited that Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, by contrast, said Turkiye-KRG trade relations and the referendum are unrelated while Turkiye has no plans to close the border.⁵³

Turkiye's threatening narratives and rejection of the referendum need to be understood in the context of the elites' nationalistic sentiments. According to Michael M Gunter (2018), elites' nationalistic rhetoric, Erdogan's rhetoric for example, is motivated by the political situation heading to the Turkish election. Erdogan certainly avoids other nationalist elites taking advantage of the government's indifference to the Kurdish referendum, leading those elites to take over the votes and support from AKP's voters.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, in a broader geopolitical context, Park (2019) argues that the government's harsh response to the referendum is shoved by Kurds' developments in Syria and also the Kurdish issue at home.⁵⁵

The absence of tangible manifestation from the elites' rhetorical threats to the referendum explains that Ankara is aware of KRG's role as a strategic partner in pursuing its main interests and goals. If Ankara takes such extreme measures as closing borders and imposing an embargo, the decision may paralyze the

⁴⁸ Bill Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?," *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2019).

⁴⁹ Dylan O'Driscoll and Bahar Baser, "Independence referendums and nationalist rhetoric: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 11 (2019).

⁵⁰ Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?."

⁵¹ Hawre Hasan Hama and Farhad Hassan Abdulla, "Kurdistan's Referendum: The Withdrawal Of The Kurdish Forces In Kirkuk," *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 3 (2019).

⁵² Umit Bektas and Ece Toksabay, "'We have the tap': Turkey's Erdogan threatens oil flow from Iraq's Kurdish area," Reuters, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-turke/we-have-the-tap-turkeys-](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-turke/we-have-the-tap-turkeys-erdogan-threatens-oil-flow-from-iraqs-kurdish-area-idUSKCN1C018V)

[erdogan-threatens-oil-flow-from-iraqs-kurdish-area-idUSKCN1C018V](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-turke/we-have-the-tap-turkeys-erdogan-threatens-oil-flow-from-iraqs-kurdish-area-idUSKCN1C018V).

⁵³ Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?."

⁵⁴ Michael M Gunter, "Erdogan's Backsliding: Opposition to the KRG Referendum," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 1 (2018).

⁵⁵ Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?."

economic activity of Turkiye's southeastern region. The result would increasingly affect Turkiye's fragile economy and politically harm the AKP regime's influence over Turkish Kurds, whose voice and support swing between the AKP and pro-Kurdish parties. The embargo and sanctions against the KRG would also weaken Barzani and KDP, thereby empowering opposition parties who will prefer Iran as KRG's next regional partner while broadly strengthening the PKK's influence in Kurdistan.⁵⁶

Turkiye indeed seeks to leverage its absolute advantage in its relations with KRG. As Mearsheimer argues, states will constantly ensure their position is much better and more profitable than their rivals. They also work to ensure that other states do not take advantage of them.⁵⁷ If Turkiye were to present its threats in actual action, Iran, the authors argue, could take advantage of the turbulence, making KRG Tehran's strategic partner. The circumstance would jeopardize Ankara's goal of becoming a regional hegemon. Thus, the rhetorical threat is more applied than the realization of concrete actions in order to maintain Turkiye's advantage in its relationship with the KRG while minimizing the demerits that potential rivals could take over. Besides, Turkiye's action is similar to Mearsheimer's "blackmail" strategy because it relies on the threat of force, not the actual use of force, to produce results at a relatively free cost.

From the above description, the authors believe that the Turkiye-KRG relationship will sustain regardless of the various events and dynamics as both parties have interdependency-complex. Turkiye nor KRG would avoid taking a high risk of losing one of its strategic partners, especially on energy and security issues. Turkiye's goals and economic interests in searching for new markets and resources determine its foreign policy. Finally, the desire to become

a regional hegemon through the "neo-Ottoman" mission for the state's survival and resilience confirms the continuation of Turkiye-KRG relations.

The Effectiveness of Turkiye-KRG Relations in Overcoming Kurdish Issues

The change in Turkish sentiment toward Kurds through improving relations with the KRG is widely seen as a subtle approach by Turkiye to resolve the Kurdish issue. The Kurdish issue has long been a significant challenge to the Turkish government. In the past, relations between Turkiye and the Kurds were not harmonious and colored with oppression and violence. Kurdish ambitions to establish an independent sovereign state have constantly threatened Turkiye. Ankara might lose control of its territory in the country's southeastern east, which is largely inhabited by a Kurdish minority. However, over the past decade, Turkish-Kurdish relations have changed dramatically.

In 2008, there was a breakthrough in Turkish-Kurdish relations. Under the AKP rule, Turkiye officially recognized the existence of the KRG and started bilateral relations. The AKP's policies regarding the KRG could even transform Turkiye's old paradigm and sentiment on the Kurds. The opening of the Turkish Consulate in Erbil in 2010 shows the KRG's vital role as Turkiye's strategic regional partner.⁵⁸ Both economic and security cooperation play significant role in enhancing Turkiye-KRG relations. Therefore, some academic works assessed that the Turkiye-KRG relationship could mediate Kurdish issues in Turkiye in a peaceful way. However, what we have to underline from this view is how effective the Turkiye-KRG relations can significantly overcome Kurdish issue in Turkiye, especially reducing the PKK's armed attacks in Turkish territory.

Iraqi Kurdish elite have played an important role in brokering peace talks

⁵⁶ Mustafa Gurbuz, "Does Turkey Really Want to Punish Iraqi Kurdistan?," Arab Center Washington DC, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/does-turkey-really-want-to-punish-iraqi-kurdistan/.

⁵⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

⁵⁸ Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government."

between Turkiye and the PKK. For example, Jalal Talabani served as an intermediary for indirect communications between Presidents Turgut Özal and Abdullah Öcalan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. From these talks, the PKK was willing to declare a ceasefire in 1993.⁵⁹ Although Iraqi Kurdish elites have made relatively many efforts to help Turkiye overcome its Kurdish problem, the progress of conflict resolution during the 2000s was still insignificant. Even though there has been a decline in violence cases between the PKK and the Turkish military in the last two decades⁶⁰ and the PKK has seemed weaker, violence occurred again, and the PKK could still launch deadly small-scale cross-border attacks targeting Turkiye.⁶¹

On March 14, 2010, PKK attacks took place in three different places. The attacks in Hakkâri and Batman provinces cost two Turkish soldiers' life and four others injured. In Siirt province, three soldiers got injured, whereas two PKK militants got killed. Then, on April 19, two Turkish policemen were killed when suspected PKK fighters opened fire on the police patrol car using automatic weapons in northern Samsun province. Furthermore, on May 1, 2010, the PKK again launched an attack on a Turkish army patrol group in Dersim. During 2010, more than ten different PKK attacks occurred in Turkiye, resulting in the deaths of around 100 military personnel (see figure 1 for more detailed information). From these series of attacks, it is indicated that the ceasefire process has been completely abandoned. Öcalan even stated from his prison that he officially left all rapprochement with Turkish authorities and left the task to his military commander.⁶²

In the following years, the massive PKK attack prompted the Turkish government to initiate a peace talk with the PKK. In early 2013, through its intelligence agency (MIT), Turkiye negotiated the terms and conditions of a peace agreement with the PKK.⁶³ The outline of the agreement between the two parties apart from the ceasefire declaration is the release of Turkish hostages captured by the PKK. In exchange, the Turkish government is expected to pass new laws, revising the definition of terrorism that will pave the way for the release of hundreds of imprisoned Kurdish activists.⁶⁴

Turkiye was willing to reach a peace agreement with the PKK in 2013. In order to attract the support of the Kurdish community in this peace effort, the then Turkiye's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, invited KRG President Masoud Barzani to a meeting in Diyarbakir Province. The two figures expressed their full support for the ongoing peace negotiations between the PKK and Turkiye.⁶⁵ President Massoud Barzani's important role in mediating the peace process between Ankara and the PKK cannot be denied. As a result, the PKK was willing to hold a ceasefire and withdraw its forces from Turkish territory to their base in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq.

The ceasefire, nonetheless, did not last long because, in the following years, the PKK constantly launch its armed attacks. On September 6, 2015, the PKK attacked a military post in Daglica, Hakkari Province. The attack has 16 Turkish soldiers killed while six others injured. In response to the attack, the Turkish army launched a counterattack, targeting PKK camps in the southeast. The strike inflicted heavy civilian casualties and caused major damage in

⁵⁹ İ Aytaç Kadioğlu, "The Oslo Talks: Revealing the Turkish Government's Secret Negotiations with the PKK," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 10 (2019).

⁶⁰ Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁶¹ Larrabee and Tol, "Turkey's Kurdish challenge."

⁶² Paul White, *The PKK: Coming Down from The Mountains* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2015).

⁶³ Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'."

⁶⁴ Taşpınar and Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds: From predicament to opportunity."

⁶⁵ Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'."

Diyarbakir, Irmak, Cizre, and Nusaybin.⁶⁶ All reoccurring incidents, since the summer of 2015 until mid-2017 (see figure 1), indicate the collapse of the peace negotiations and the increase in clashes between Turkiye and the PKK.

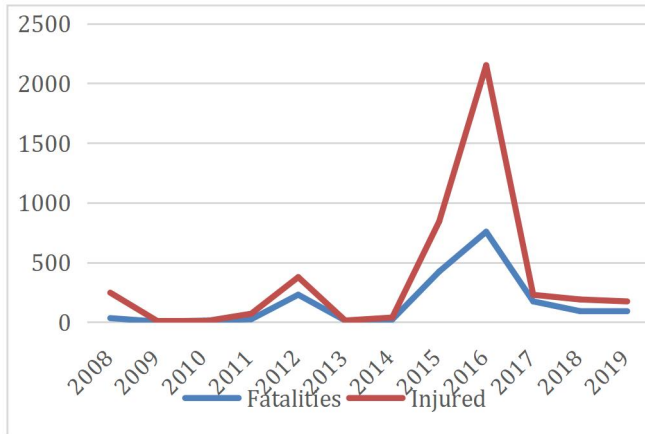


Figure 1: The Number of Incidents during PKK's Armed Attacks in Turkiye's Territory

Source: Global Terrorisme Database (n.d)[Global Terrorism Database, "All incidents Related to PKK's Attack on Turkey Territory," [https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/access/.](https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/access/)]

The PKK can constantly launch armed attacks on Turkish territory because they can change their attack strategy. For the time being, the PKK is directing attacks from the outermost areas to several cities in southeastern Turkiye. The PKK's move was primarily inspired by the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) strategy of controlling cities in northern Syria. The strong ties between the PKK and the PYD / YPG, which share a Marxist ideology with similar separatist goals, allow them to adopt the same strategy.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict*.

⁶⁷ Emel Parlar Dal, "Impact of the transnationalization of the Syrian civil war on Turkey: conflict spillover cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2016).

The PKK's perpetual attacks clarify that Turkiye's relations enhancement with the KRG shows less significant effectiveness in overcoming the Kurdish issue in Turkiye, especially reducing PKK's armed attacks. Even though the enhancement of Turkiye-KRG relations has attention on security issues and both parties has cooperated on confronting the PKK, the PKK has still engaged in frequent terrorist attacks against the Turkish state.

This article argues that Turkiye pays more attention to pursuing economic interests in its relations with KRG rather than a security one. The desire to become regional hegemon within the spirit of "neo-Ottomanism" makes the state lay down its foreign achievement as a primary concern. Consequently, such an objective shows less significant effectiveness in dealing with domestic issues. It is Turkiye itself that must resolve the case and find the solution to its Kurdish issue. While Iraqi Kurd's elites could assist, their influence would not significantly affect PKK activities. For example, despite his enormous influence on Iraqi Kurds, President Barzani has no direct influence over the PKK. The PKK only regard Abdullah Öcalan as the only influential figure they can refer to in their nationalist struggles.

The core of the Kurdish question in Turkiye today lies in the reluctance of the Turkish authorities to find a more effective solution or a more strategic plan. Consequently, the PKK had no intention of putting down weapons. The PKK would not abandon its military approach unless Turkiye provides constitutional guarantees to the Kurds.⁶⁸ Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Turkiye's failure to pursue a more effective political solution to overcome the Kurdish issue clarifies the main reason why the PKK rebellion has been rampant for so long.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Charountaki, "Turkish foreign policy and the Kurdistan regional government."

⁶⁹ Gokhan Bacik and Bezen Balamir Coskun, "The PKK problem: Explaining Turkey's failure to develop

Finally, Turkiye's measures to end insurgent violence in its territory require effective responses and strategies. A combination of military and political approaches seems the better option. The authors agree with Pusane's view that the state must have clear political goals from the first time to deal with rebellious groups.⁷⁰ Apart from coercive measures, the state must adopt a straightforward political, economic and social program to reduce insurgent groups' acts of violence. If all these programs can be appropriately implemented, Turkiye may prevent loyalists and supporters of the rebel movement from its Kurdish people to join or support the movement.

Conclusion

A paradigm shift in Turkiye's foreign policy towards surrounding Kurds, especially KRG, took place radically during the AKP tenure. Turkiye even could abandon its past sentiment and no longer regards Kurds as a homogenous entity which they treat with mistrust and extreme hostility. The shift is motivated by Turkiye's desire to pursue its primary goal. States require power to survive in such a dangerous world, and the best way they can do to survive is to become a hegemon. Turkiye realizes that becoming a hegemon in the world is difficult. No other states can do. Therefore, Turkiye seeks to become a regional hegemon.

To become a regional hegemon, Turkiye has to ensure that it is considerably wealthier than its local rivals and must possess the powerful armed forces in the region. As the economy might is the foundation of military might, Turkiye prioritizes pursuing a powerful and dynamic economy. Not only does the economy enhances general welfare, but it is also a reliable way to gain military advantage over other countries.

Turkiye realizes that the Kurdistan region of Iraq is the best area to generate welfare as the region possesses potential energy resources and is highly dependent on other states for its economic activities. Besides, the region offers a potential market for Turkiye's export activities and its energy demand. Given such potential benefits, Turkiye is willing to abandon its past sentiment towards Kurds and enhance its relations with KRG.

Even though KRG's independence referendum made Turkiye-KRG relations bitter, Turkiye has yet to implement sanctions on KRG. Turkiye still deems KRG as a strategic partner to pursue its interests and primary goal. Besides, Turkiye also calculates advantages and disadvantages if it imposes sanctions while seeking to minimize and prevent rivals such as Iran from leveraging the situation.

Finally, the enhancement of relations between Turkiye and the KRG, deemed by several previous academic studies as a peaceful way for Turkiye to resolve the Kurdish issue, has shown less significant effectiveness in reducing violence and armed attacks from Kurdish rebel groups. The PKK armed attacks in Turkish territory are a domestic problem that Turkiye itself must resolve and find a solution to. The Turkish authorities must find a more effective solution or come up with a more precise and strategic plan to deal with this issue. A combination of military and political approaches can be a possible solution. Apart from using coercive measures, Turkiye must adopt a straightforward and well-implemented political, economic, and social program to win the hearts of its Kurdish population.

a political solution," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 3 (2011).

⁷⁰ Özlem Kayhan Pusane, "Turkey's Military Victory over the PKK and Its Failure to end the PKK Insurgency," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 5 (2015).

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