
A NEW PAGE IN TURKISH-IRAQI RELATIONS

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Ya?ar Yak??

Because of the fluidity of developments in the Middle East, almost every actor in regional crises may have opposed another actor at one stage, while having cooperated with them at another stage. This is true of Turkey and Iraq in recent years.

Ankara turned a deaf ear when Baghdad expressed reservations about oil exports by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). But the KRGs independence referendum prepared the ground for Turkey and Iraq to turn a new page; they are now genuinely cooperating.

Turkish-Iraqi ties were heavily affected by Ankaras relations with the KRG. Baghdad did not oppose these relations, but brought to Turkeys attention that according to Iraqi laws, oil produced in the country is the property of the Iraqi nation, and one segment of its population (the Kurds) is not entitled to appropriate oil revenue.

Details of deals made by the KRG with several countries have been reported by the media for several years. Reuters has been publishing articles on this subject since 2014. According to these articles, oil produced in Iraqi Kurdistan is exported via a pipeline that runs from Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean harbor of Iskenderun.

The US imported its first crude oil cargo from the region in May 2014; Israel has done so since the start of that year. Baghdad threatened to sue any company involved in this trade. Israels Energy Ministry declined to comment.

Turkish company Powertrans is the broker for the KRG and selling oil via tenders to traders. The deal involved many international commodity traders, including Trafigura, one of the worlds leading independent commodity trading and logistics houses. A spokesman for Trafigura also declined to comment.

An oil tanker, Marinoula, unloaded 265,000 barrels Iraqi oil in Houston in May 2014. The identity of the buyer was unclear. The oil was loaded by the trading company Petraco in Dortyol, Turkey. The company declined to comment. These refusals to comment are more telling than a detailed account of what is going on.

For the time being, Turkey and Iraq are genuinely cooperating because they have converging interests. But an issue that casts a shadow on bilateral relations is a Turkish battalion of around 600 soldiers stationed in Bashiqa, northern Iraq. It is more of a symbolic presence, but since Baghdad is uneasy about it, the issue is likely to be on the agenda sooner or later.

Despite having several issues to tackle, such as Kurdish oil exports and water security, hopes are high that Turkey and Iraq can capitalize on new opportunities for cooperation.

When Iraq demanded that Turkey withdraw these soldiers, the latter said they were stationed according to an agreement with the KRG. In the present circumstances, Ankara can hardly justify it on those grounds.

Another critical issue, which is on the backburner for now, is water. The water of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is a source of longstanding conflict between Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The Euphrates part of the issue is more controversial with Syria. The Tigris part is mainly an issue with Iraq because the river does not cross Syrian

territory.

Turkey should be able to solve this problem with Iraq, since it cannot use much of the Tigris water for irrigation because the terrain is not suitable for this purpose. Dams that Turkey is building on the Tigris are mainly for power generation, meaning that water has to be released downstream in order to generate power.

Despite this, Iraq opposed construction of the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris, and persuaded Austrian banks to block the credits that Ankara was going to receive from them. Turkey is now constructing the dam with its own funds, though it is impeded from time to time by harassment by the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadis visit to Turkey after the Kurdish referendum augured well because he focused on positive aspects of future cooperation without raising thorny issues. Post-crisis periods usually open up new opportunities for cooperation. Hopes are high that Turkey and Iraq will be able to capitalize on them.

Kaynak/Source: