

THESIS COLLECTION

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Kurds on the other side.

**Continuity and change in the relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds
(1991–2017)**

Ph.D. thesis

Supervisor:

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1. Research background, objectives, and rationale for the topic

1.1. Definition and relevance of the topic

This dissertation analyses the relations between the Iraqi Kurdish and the Turkish political leadership. In exploring this topic, I aim to explain the changes in relations with regard to both internal (Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish) and external (regional and global) causes. In this dissertation, I analyze the military, political (diplomatic), and economic aspects of the relations between the two actors, mainly from a Turkish perspective. In contrast, the social and cultural ties between Turkish citizens and Iraqi Kurds are relegated to the background. The dissertation examines the challenges and opportunities that have shaped the relationship between the two sides in chronological order, both within Iraq and Turkey and regionally (in the Middle East) between 1991 and 2017.

On the one hand, Turkey's relationship with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership highlights Ankara's changing regional position and the extent of its regional isolation. The case study outlined here can be seen as one of the most successful and sustained directions of Turkish foreign policy in the last two decades. The 'passivity' in Turkish foreign policy has been transformed into activism with ambitious regional and global goals. Although hard power elements have come to the fore in Turkish foreign policy since the Arab Spring and Turkey has been confronted by most of its neighbors, the relationship with the Kurdish leadership in Iraq has remained relatively stable. To understand the nature of continuity and change in the relations, it is necessary to assess the reasons for the 'durable' ties between the two sides.

On the other hand, this topic illustrates how resilient is this recently established and consolidated bilateral partnership in the rapidly changing regional context of the Middle East.

Several factors make this topic, and the political developments directly linked to it, timely. These include the fact that in recent years there has been a strong interest not only in Turkey but also in the political situation of the Kurds. While the growing international and academic attention to Turkey can be linked to the start of the country's accession negotiations to the European Union (1999), the Kurds in Iraq first came to the attention of the international political and academic community, albeit to a much lesser extent than Turkey, in the context of the 1991 Gulf War. Following the US invasion of Iraq (2003), this attention intensified as Iraqi Kurds officially gained autonomous government and were empowered by the new Iraqi constitution (2005). Subsequently, the substantial improvement in the situation of Iraqi Kurds (mainly in the field of economy, with favorable investment and development opportunities) and their quasi-democratic political establishment has sustained international interest towards them. In recent years, both Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds have attracted the attention of the academic community and the media because of the conflict in Syria and its regional repercussions. While the Turkish government has engaged in intense fighting against Kurds in Turkey and Syria, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership has been engaged in an existential struggle with the Islamic State. This

“baptism of fire” raised the prospect of independence for the Iraqi Kurds, followed by a unanimous rejection of this claim by international actors in 2017. In light of these developments that have fundamentally shaped the dynamics between the parties analyzed here, examining the political, geopolitical, economic, and social relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds is particularly timely and relevant.

1.2. Questions, hypotheses

Looking at nearly three decades of relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds, one of the most relevant issues is the process of transformation of relations between the two sides in the few years before and after 2010. In examining this, we can distinguish three focal points by applying the three main theoretical schools of international relations to this case. Through these, the dissertation essentially seeks to answer the questions: how did the transformation of relations occur, and what factors played a role in this process? To fully explain the changes and transformations, it is necessary to explain bilateral relations multifacetedly, applying several theories simultaneously.

The first hypothesis of the dissertation is based on the approach of the three major schools of international relations (neorealism, neoliberalism, constructivism):

1. The relationship between Ankara and Erbil transformed from conflictual to cooperative, and the cooperation continued (deepened). The following factors may have contributed to this:
 - a. Both the international system and the regional structure. (neorealist approach)
 - b. The ideological community between the leaderships in Ankara and Erbil and the growth of economic and social ties between the countries. (neoliberal approach)
 - c. The parties modified the rejectionist discourse for a pragmatic, inclusive discourse (theoretical level), and the two sides developed new behaviors based on the changed perceptions (practical level). (constructivist approach)

Further hypotheses:

2. Relations between Turkey and the KR (Kurdistan Region) are imbalanced (asymmetrical).
3. There is continuity in Turkey’s interests in Iraq and the capacity to enforce these interests.
 - a. Although Turkey’s approach to the Iraqi actors has varied from era to era, its primary goals and interests in Iraq have remained the same between 1991 and 2017.
 - b. Turkey’s ability to enforce its interests inside Iraq has remained weak.
4. Both Ankara, Baghdad, and Erbil are balancing their actions and acting within certain limits, to be identified below, and restraining their actions that could harm others (narrow margins for maneuvering). They, therefore, use delicate balancing to avoid inflexibility, uncertainty, and risk in their foreign policies.

I use the term ‘balancing’ in two senses. On the one hand, in the “classical sense,” it is about the (re)balancing of power to preserve the *status quo* and refers to the cooperation between actors to

counterbalance those who improved its capabilities. On the other hand, there are many instances of balancing (poising) actions within the topic under consideration. This means that actors define their interests and practical policy actions only within a relatively narrow framework of action. This is also essentially a way of maintaining the status quo, but the actor restricts itself rather than counterbalanced by other actors (as in the first case). It is a self-constraining policy that prevents the upsetting of the equilibrium among the participants and the over-extension of any actors within the system. In other words, actors are against systemic change and are interested in limiting both themselves and the potentially destabilizing actions of others.

2. Methodology

The dissertation uses qualitative research methods, i.e., the tested hypotheses and the answers to the research questions do not typically contain quantitative data. I sometimes supplement the qualitative explanatory schemes with quantitative elements to evaluate the relevance of a phenomenon within its context (e.g., bilateral trade, economic, demographic data). Qualitative methods include textual analysis and, to a lesser extent, discourse analysis. I mainly rely on non-interventionist analysis based on primary and secondary sources (documentary analysis, literature analysis, narrative analysis), including Hungarian, English, and Turkish sources, as well as various press products, economic and political analyses, and published personal statements and recollections. In this research, following the Weberian conception of science, I do not intend to evaluate the phenomena under study according to a particular value system (normativity). Still, my main goal is to understand and explain the bilateral relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds (positivist conception). The present research does not aim to take a moral stance on the issues raised here, and in fact, its fundamental aim is to avoid moralization as far as possible.

In order to achieve the necessary explanatory “depth and context,” I use the triangulation method for the data collection, the theories for interpreting the data, and the analytical techniques (multilevel analysis), i.e., I use a multi-aspect source base, several theories, and multiple analytical methods simultaneously within the dissertation. (Evers-Staa 2010, pp. 749–750)

As a research strategy, I rely on a single case study to investigate a specific contemporary phenomenon, using its context and the wide range of sources associated with it. (Robson 1993, p. 146) A case study is an excellent way to shed light on policy decisions, describe the subject under investigation in a ‘dense’ way, and understand the explanations and consequences of the phenomena under investigation (Ebneyamin-Moghadam 2018, pp. 2–3). A case study allows for a context-sensitive analysis of the phenomenon or series of events.

The most appropriate method for testing the claims made in the hypotheses and answering the research questions is the so-called explaining-outcome process tracing (Willis 2014, p. 3; Yanow et al. 2010, p. 112). More recently, a similar methodological tool has been used in a dissertation by (Pénzváltó 2020, p. 23). Case study process tracing aims to explore the causal chain, or the causal mechanism, i.e., to understand the causal processes between the independent and dependent variables. (Bennett-Checkel 2014, p. 6) Process tracing is used to investigate the effects at work in the interaction of actors and the theory(es) that might explain these effects. (Paterson 2010, p. 971) Process tracing is typically a qualitative method applicable to a case study. It can also be described as a colligation, which “works as a historical explanation in tracing and discussing a complex consequence of events in a narrative form.” (Samaan 2019, p. 14) In such a case, the outcome is already known, and the research question arises from how the outcome was reached. The present dissertation is a

close-ended analysis in both time and space. In this dissertation, I present the changing relations between Ankara and Erbil as a specific case study. For this purpose, I conduct a synchronic (spatial) and diachronic (temporal) analysis within the case. (Willis 2014, p. 1)

The dissertation applies a pluralistic approach, taking into account the internal dynamics of each actor, the role of the individual and systemic factors, as well as material and normative considerations. (Charountaki 2011, p. 3) In order to understand the strategy and motivations of an actor, internal relations must also be taken into account. It is possible only in this way to understand how an actor shapes and manifests its interests. In their dissertations, both Rada (2016a) and Pénczváltó (2020) emphasize the importance of considering both the internal political environment and external influences when analyzing changes in Turkish foreign policy. Examining domestic policy shows how preferences within a given actor evolve and sheds light on the process of how the ‘national interest’ and strategy are created. (Milner 1992, p. 493) Typically, elite perceptions play a significant role in the domestic perception of bilateral relations. (Milner 1992, p. 490) Contextual events are essential when they induce changes in actors’ interests, capabilities, and beliefs.

3. Structure

The diachronic (temporal) and synchronic (spatial) frameworks of the case studied here are highlighted below. These provide the system of analysis, supplemented by events of global significance and Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish historical events that preceded the period in question. These elements, albeit with minor significance in the overall analysis, serve as explanations and background for understanding the issues discussed in detail.

3.1. Timeframe

The timeframe of the topic is determined by the growing activity and international legitimacy of the political leadership of the Iraqi Kurds (*de facto* since 1991, *de jure* since 2005). In practice, from these dates onwards, we can speak of Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish bilateral relations, which cannot be described as classical inter-state relations since one side is a state and the other one is a non-state actor. Until 2005, the Iraqi Kurds did not have any official government representation; they were basically controlled by two parties, the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Kurdistan Patriotic Union), which can be seen as political actors acting on behalf of the community. In addition to the dominant role played by these parties, since 2005, this system has been complemented by a system of autonomous self-government, rather than state-level representation, in which the two major parties (and several smaller parties and representatives) have established a joint parliament, legal institutions, and government within the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan. Since 2005, the KR has been considered a sub-state actor with state characteristics (quasi-state) (Natali 2010), which, apart from its legal

dependence, is a member of the international system. As for the time limitations of the dissertation, the end of 2017 as the upper limit of the analysis is justified by two reasons: on the one hand, the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum and the subsequent ‘reintegration’ signified an ‘end of an era,’ and on the other hand, this date can be distinguished from the most recent developments of the bilateral relations, thereby enabling sufficient distancing between the researcher and the object of analysis.

I have divided the period between 1991 and 2017, which marks the cornerstones of the dissertation, into sub-units to simplify the handling of the topic. In her article, Marianna Charountaki (2012, p. 203) divides the relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership into three phases. Based on the extension of this framework, the dissertation adopts the following periodization for the analysis of the topic:

Phase 1: 1991-2003: occasional cooperation between the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish leadership.

Phase 2: 2003-2008: a period of “denial” (Turkish foreign policy isolates itself from the Iraqi Kurds and faces obstacles in engaging with them).

Phase 3: 2008-2009: diplomatic relations between Turkey and the KR.

Stage 4: 2010-2014 is a period of direct and institutionalized relations between the parties (the “golden era”).

Stage 5: The “*annus horribilis*” (Zaman 2016, p. 14) of 2014 can be defined as the beginning of the last period, which brought new (primarily economic and military) challenges to the lives of Iraqi Kurds. The end of this phase is marked by the independence referendum of 25 September 2017 and the immediate international reactions.

3.2. Spatial frameworks

As the KR is a federal region within Iraq, it seems appropriate to extend the analytical framework spatially to the whole territory of Iraq. The Syrian crisis, the cross-border challenge of the Islamic State, the growing influence of Iran in Iraq, and the presence of the United States in the region (or its waning presence from 2011 and its temporary return after 2014) all justify that the analysis must be conducted in the context of the interests and actions of these additional actors. In this respect, the regional geopolitical contest between Iran and Turkey for greater influence over Iraq (mainly after 2003) cannot be ignored. This contextual perspective is essential to go beyond the ‘traditional’ bilateral frameworks (Turkey-Iraq, Turkey-Iraqi Kurds) and provide an analysis that uses context as an explanatory tool, thus reflecting the multidimensional nature of the international system. In such a system, the actors that determine bilateral relations are drawn from the local, sub-state, inter-state, state, regional and global levels (Charountaki 2012, p. 203), and the Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish bilateral relation itself is materialized in a web of interactions between these levels and actors at each of these

levels. Indeed, because of the specific Kurdish geographical reality, the political, economic, social, military, and legal situation of the Kurds is a complex international issue affecting multiple countries and mobilizing multiple actors in a multitude of relations. Thus the examination of these external dynamics is essential in the study of Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish relations.

3.3. Thematic frameworks

Within each period mentioned above, I discuss the evolution of relations under three headings: actors, developments and challenges, and conclusions.

As I have already indicated, the actors included in the scope of the analysis in this dissertation go beyond the bilateral relations of Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. On the one hand, a ‘triangular framework’ (the addition of the Iraqi government in Baghdad to this essentially bilateral analysis) is necessary because of the specific situation of the Iraqi Kurds. Examples of this framework can be found in the literature, such as Bengio 2014, p. 267; Park 2014; and typically, Balçı, Gürler, and Baykal 2016; Gürler and Baykal 2017. In addition, I devote a separate section to the key actors of the period (those interested and involved in the Ankara-Erbil relations), bearing in mind the domestic and foreign policy changes that affected Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish relations. I do not deal specifically with Iran and the United States as actors, but I do deal with the regional prominence of these two countries.

I define foreign policy as how an actor pursues its objectives outside the actor’s own sovereign space. In this process of engaging the international arena, I assume rationality in the actions of each actor. This does not, of course, imply that the actor in question acts in the ‘most optimal’ way. In examining the policy of each actor in a given period, I focus on three fundamental factors and their variations. An actor’s willingness to cooperate or engage in conflict depends on these factors, and in bilateral relations, the interaction of these factors between the actors is crucial.

1. The actor’s capabilities: the capabilities derived from its geopolitical situation. – What can the actor do?
2. The actor’s interests, preferences, goals (either acknowledged interests or interests inferred from the actor’s political behavior) – What does the actor want?
3. The actor’s perception of the other party, beliefs (trust or distrust) about another actor. This is the perceived or the actual knowledge about the relations between actors. – What can the other actor do, and what does the other actor want?

The analysis of the (domestic) changes within each actor partly explains the continuity and change in the relations between Ankara and Erbil; it also sheds light on the actor itself. None of the actors can be considered “unified,” as we witness the formulation and clashing of various political opinions, interests, and objectives within each actor. After analyzing the actors, the following section in each

chapter deals with the main events of the period and discusses how the actors reacted to those developments.

The issues affecting the actors in the Ankara-Erbil-Baghdad triangle can be defined as the most critical developments in the period in question. In practice, they are regional or local events that challenge the relationship between the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish leadership. In discussing them, I will pay particular attention to the responses (reaction) and interests expressed by the actors in relation to these developments (actions). In each case, the question is: to what extent do the dynamics of the developments and challenges change the actors' interests, and how do they have a lasting impact on the actors' relationship?

At the end of each era, I summarize the challenges mentioned during the analysis of the actors and the events. This section also discusses the correspondence and divergences of interests between the actors and the overlapping areas of interest between Ankara and Erbil. Which interests dominated the most, and for whom did the period offer greater advantages? How did each actor's ability (position) to assert its interests change by the end of the period? Which interests were realized, and which were not? Did the interests of the actors change?

4. Findings of the dissertation

Hypothesis 1: The relationship between Ankara and Erbil has changed from conflictual to cooperative, and cooperation has been sustained (deepened).

In the light of Turkey's internal political struggles, it can be said that between 2005 and 2008, two different lines of thinking clashed over the issue of Turkey's political relationship with the KR. During this period, this internal rivalry was a significant factor in Ankara's somewhat contradictory (incoherent) policy towards Erbil. (Pusane 2020, p. 401) The issue was resolved in 2008 when on the one hand, the AKP managed to assert its political dominance in the Turkish domestic political arena. On the other hand, the so-called public diplomacy actors (public opinion, media, *think tanks*, NGOs, business people) played a crucial role in influencing Turkish foreign policy discourse and broke the monopoly of traditional political diplomacy actors in foreign policy making.

After 2008, Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq reached the point of a 'policy of distinction': the 'separation' of Baghdad and Erbil, and the PKK and Erbil in the mind of the Turkish decision-makers, undoubtedly represented the overcome of a significant 'psychological barrier.' (Ertem 2011, p. 64). From this point on, Turkish foreign policy thinking on Iraq has been mentioning three approaches, separating the policies related to the Shiites (central government), the Sunni Arabs (Northwest Iraq) and the Kurds (Northeast Iraq).

What happened between the KR and Turkey in the late 2000s is a textbook example of "de-securitization" (Černý 2018, p. 222). According to Özcan (2010, p. 129), "The most striking development in Turkey's policy towards Iraq was the steps taken by Ankara to end the dominance of security issues in bilateral relations." In my view, however, security issues (stability, fighting against the PKK) remain paramount in Ankara's relations with Baghdad and Erbil. The change is manifested in the subject of security: from that point on, the KR has been removed from the list of real security risks. Therefore, the de-securitization of relations does not mean that security has been completely removed from relations as an area of cooperation. (Pusane 2020, p. 408)

The paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds must also be seen in the context of neorealist and neoliberal analytical frameworks. The former includes changes in Turkish domestic politics that have allowed the leadership to move away from the former military-influenced paradigm, thus providing the possibility for peaceful cooperation and greater room for foreign policy maneuvering. Non-state actors in Turkey, on the other hand, also contributed to the changes that took place after 2007: traders and businessmen (active shapers of community diplomacy) managed to deepen the day-to-day relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, so the consolidation effect of the sub-state on the state (the emergence of the so-called 'merchant state' phenomenon) is also an important aspect of the transformation; a phenomenon that can best be described by a neoliberal approach to international relations. From a neorealist perspective, we can mention the continuing need

to cooperate against the threat posed by the PKK, energy policy and trade interests, and the aims of gaining a better regional position (against Iran in Iraq and, in later years, against Baghdad's hostility, and in the Kurdish question in Turkey and Syria, with the help of Erbil). All in all, a 'perfect combination of idealistic and realistic motives' was at play, with the costs and benefits of the foreign policy shift being balanced. (Ertem 2015, p. 295) Furthermore, while Turkey was undoubtedly late in establishing formal relations with neighboring Erbil, it has made up the ground lost since 2008 by leaps and bounds.

According to my supposition, there is a need for theoretical pluralism in analyzing relations between Ankara and Erbil. For example, if only power capacities were taken into account, after 2005, the Iraqi Kurds would have been the biggest threat to Ankara of all Kurdish actors, given their size and international position (extensive diplomacy and legitimacy, autonomous status). (Wuthrich 2018, p. 87) However, since 2008, the Turkish leadership has begun active and cooperative political relations with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, contrary to the aforementioned neorealist assumption. According to Mark Haas (2005, p. 1), leaders' ideological perceptions of themselves and others play an essential role in determining who counts as friend and foe. In this way, leaders and governments operating according to the same principles (epistemic community) find it easier to understand each other in the international arena. (Milner 1992, p. 478) Culture (language, religion, customs), economic and political systems determine each actor's identity, influencing how that actor creates international partnerships. (Bozdaglioglu 2003, p. 29) This consideration attributes a critical explanatory role to the ideological stance of a particular Kurdish actor and the resulting behavior in explaining why there is divergence in Turkish foreign policy towards different Kurdish-identified actors in the Middle East?

Based on the factors mentioned above, I consider the first hypothesis of the dissertation verified. I also take it as confirmed that three factors contributed to the realization of this hypothesis. First, it is the international system and the regional structure shaped by the actors. Second, the ideological and value community between the leaders in Ankara and Erbil was established, and economic and social relations between the two countries improved significantly. Thirdly, the parties changed the rejectionist discourse for a pragmatic, inclusive discourse (theoretical level), and they developed new (positive) attitudes based on the altered perceptions (practical level).

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region is unbalanced (asymmetric).

As we have seen, the KR is not a state but a "state-like" entity of international relations. This is one of the reasons why its bilateral ties with the sovereign Republic of Turkey have asymmetrical features. The relationship between Ankara and Erbil is far from balanced, as Turkey acts as a patron

over the KR and is interested in maintaining this subordinate relationship. The factors of this asymmetric relationship may include the following. Each of these is a binding force that is unchangeable or difficult to change concerning the KR's ability to assert its interests.

- the sub-state (federal) status of the KR and the resulting constraints on its sovereignty (within Iraq)
- the KR is vulnerable to Turkey (economically, geopolitically)
- KR as a landlocked territory
- security challenges in the immediate environment of the KR (Mustafa-Aziz 2017, p. 142)

Because of its asymmetrical nature, some have criticized the Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish relations. According to Noori (2016, p. 2), after the KR ceased oil shipments to Baghdad in 2014 and began exporting to Turkey, the KKK replaced its previous dependence on Baghdad with dependence on Ankara. In doing so, the KR chose an alliance with a regional power over an alliance with its fellow Kurds beyond its borders. (Khidhir 2017, p. 159) The extent to which Ankara's partnership with Erbil represents a negative patron-client relationship can be assessed as follows, based on Rafaat (2018, p. 204).

1. If the population of the patron state and the client state are ethnically or culturally different.
2. If the patron state is motivated not by the interests, rights, or identity of the client state.
3. If the patron state does not aim for the client state to become independent, nor does it intend to recognize its independence.

In the relationship between Ankara and Erbil, the first criterion is met only in the sense that Turkey as a patron state has the Turkish ethnicity as its primary identity element. However, Turkey and the KR share religious (Sunni Islam) and partly ethnic (Kurdish minority) identity characteristics. The second criterion is only partially met, as Ankara's and Erbil's interests overlap in several areas of cooperation between the parties (economy, security, and partly against the PKK). The third criterion is entirely valid, as Ankara has consistently opposed Erbil's independence (even if in certain circumstances it is rhetorically more permissive in this respect). All the criteria are therefore not met so that overall there is no negative patron-client relationship between Turkey and the KR. However, there is no doubt that the relationship between the two parties is asymmetrical and has certain interdependence features.

The correspondence of interests between Ankara and Erbil highlights the areas of interdependence between the two parties. For Turkey, the KR is important economically (trade, investment, and energy markets), politically (promoting influence in Iraq), and from a geopolitical-security perspective (countering Iran and the regional expansion of the PKK). In turn, Turkey is important for the KR economically (trade, investment, and energy markets), politically (KR influence on pan-Kurdish affairs through Ankara), and from a geopolitical-security perspective (against the regional advancement

of Iran, the PKK, and Baghdad's "overreach" and Turkey serves as a "patron" state for the KR in the international arena).

In light of this, I consider the second hypothesis of the dissertation confirmed.

Hypothesis 3: Turkey's interests in Iraq have remained unchanged, while its capacity for assertiveness has remained weak

Despite the asymmetric relations, Turkey's real influence - in terms of asserting its interests - has been relatively limited regarding the Iraqi Kurds. It would be an oversimplification to say that before 2008, the acquisition of Iraqi Kurdish autonomy (2005) could not be prevented by the security-oriented Turkish approach to the Iraqi Kurds, while the post-2008 dependency-based relations between Ankara and Erbil forced the Iraqi Kurds to avoid any attempts at independence until 2017. Although Turkey's wide-ranging cooperation with the KR theoretically allows it to control its partner more effectively and to pursue its objective towards its south-eastern neighbor more effectively than before (preventing the disintegration of Iraq and the emergence of an independent Iraqi Kurdish state), which has remained unchanged since 1923, in practice it has not been able to prevent Iraqi Kurdish independence aspirations. Much closer to reality is the claim that the status of Iraqi Kurds (*de facto* and *de jure* autonomy, independence) was never determined by Ankara:

- In 1991, an international coalition supported establishing the *de facto* self-governing state structures of the Iraqi Kurds (creating a no-fly zone) – an initiative not linked to Ankara but very much enabled by Turkey.
- In 2005, the United States was the midwife in creating Kurdish autonomy in Iraq amidst Turkish objections.
- In 2014, the rise of the Islamic State and the withdrawal of the Iraqi central government provided the KR territorial gains – resulting from a process outside Turkey's influence.
- In 2017, Iraqi Kurdish internal dynamics led to the independence referendum – meanwhile, Ankara failed to convince its partner not to follow through.
- In late 2017, Baghdad prevented Iraqi Kurdish independence, has actively opposed the Iraqi Kurds, while Turkey, Iran, and the United States "merely" assisted the reorganizing domestic processes in Iraq.

All these roles that Turkey has played at crucial moments in Iraqi Kurdish history are not insignificant. Still, in influencing the decisions and opportunities of Iraqi Kurds, Ankara has not been the sole and most decisive factor in any of them. This does not mean, of course, that the Turkish political approach towards Erbil since 2008 has been fundamentally ineffective. Indeed, Turkey has benefited significantly from its relations with the KR at the political, economic, and social levels, even though

Ankara's close connection with Erbil since 2011 has strengthened the Iraqi Kurds and weakened Ankara's relations with Baghdad.

Considering these factors mentioned above, I regard both parts of the third hypothesis of the dissertation to be verified.

Hypothesis 4: Ankara, Baghdad, and Erbil limit their own and each other's actions (balancing)

During the years of intensive ties between Ankara and Erbil, the interests of the parties and the limits of cooperation were crystallized in their interactions with each other and the external environment. Within the space of maneuvering defined by the interests and counter-interests, opportunities, and constraints, the actors were forced to balance or counterbalance in many situations in order to maintain pragmatic relations (avoiding losses).

In the period and region under study, all the actors have survived and remained virtually "intact" compared to the beginning of the period. This fact proves that no actor can prevail over the others and establish absolute hegemony in this system because each is dependent on the others. Since no actor realistically expects to gain total dominance in the long term, no one should wholly undermine its relations with any other actor, which it may need at any time to balance its position. The minor actors (KDP, PUK, PKK, PYD, Turkmens) between states (Iran, Turkey, Iraq) have a soft balancing role in this system, and it is not possible to "destroy" any of them because this would cause conflict of interest with another, more prominent actor (patron). This balancing behavior can be observed in the region south-east of Turkey in two trilateral systems. Firstly, the Ankara-Baghdad-Tehran triangle and, secondly, the Ankara-Baghdad-Erbil triangle, which has been analyzed in the dissertation.

Therefore, I consider the fourth hypothesis of the dissertation to be verified, namely that Ankara, Baghdad, and Erbil are all balancing within certain limits of action (narrow margins) and therefore limiting their actions that could harm others. Therefore, these actors avoid inflexibility, uncertainty, and risk in their foreign policies through delicate balancing.

5. New findings

I highlight the following as new findings:

- The hypotheses of the dissertation, with particular reference to hypotheses 1, 3, and 4.
- The relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan are systematically examined in a new framework
- A few additional sub-statements can be highlighted as *novum*. These findings are not found elsewhere in the literature and cannot be linked to any hypotheses tested in the dissertation. I list them here, separately, and quote them from the main text:

1. Barzani had an interest in maintaining tense relations with Baghdad

“In parallel to the Iraqi crisis, Barzani faced challenges within the KR around 2012-2013 (issues related to the extension of his presidential mandate), so it was in his interest to maintain a tense relationship with Baghdad (without serious escalation), as this would allow him to call for unity among Iraqi Kurdish political actors and act as a defender of the unity of “the people” in the disputes with Baghdad. This enabled him to marginalize the opposition’s demands in the KR and thus to gain a dominant position over internal political relations. Barzani’s stance was also bolstered by Turkish support, which manifested itself in the political and economic (energy) spheres.” (p. 135)

2. The Iraqi Kurdish occupation of Kirkuk in 2014 is not considered a milestone on the road to Iraqi Kurdish independence for Ankara, but it provides Turkey an economic opportunity

“Ankara was faced with a dilemma over Kirkuk, which may have partly determined its decision not to criticize Erbil’s unilateral move to seize the disputed city. The dilemma existed between political and economic interests: on the one hand, the Kurdish annexation of Kirkuk was associated with the marginalization of the Turkomans (and thus harmed Turkish interests), whom Ankara supported, while on the other hand, capturing the oil-rich city facilitated the KR’s export of more oil to Turkey. Indeed, in early 2014, Ankara and Erbil were connected by a direct oil pipeline so that the oil to be extracted around Kirkuk could now reach Turkey. This was not an option before, but in mid-2014, Ankara turned a blind eye to the move of strengthening Iraqi Kurdish sovereignty and saw the annexation (but not the occupation) of the city not as a step towards Iraqi Kurdish independence but as an economic opportunity for Turkey as well.” (p. 166)

3. Independence is not in the political and economic interest of the KR

“Ankara’s calculations regarding the KR may have been similar to the attempt to settle the Kurdish issue in south-east Turkey. This was also reflected in the Turkish leadership’s support for the Iraqi Kurds and the prioritization of stability in the KR. The assumption was that through a vibrant investment and trade policy pursued by Ankara both concerning Kurds in Turkey and Iraqi Kurds, political demands (ultimate goal: independence) were supposed to be discouraged, as the Kurds would have

no interest in separating from Iraq, which secures and shares the wealth with the KR and provides the framework for development. The dilemma of achieving Kurdish independence in Iraq can be summarised by considering the factors mentioned here (the link between economic prosperity and political goals). It is certain that the KR, neither as an autonomous region of Iraq nor as a potential independent state, cannot develop a sustainable and prosperous economy on its own without its neighbors. Thus, it cannot achieve independence in opposition to its neighbors if its position is economically weak (a ‘desperate’ attempt was made in 2017 exactly under such circumstances). If, on the other hand, the KR has become economically stronger, it proves that it has been properly integrated into the economic structure of its neighbors, from which it benefits significantly. This means that the KR has excellent relations with Baghdad or intensive economic connections with neighboring independent states (Iran and Turkey) and a less prosperous relationship with a weak Baghdad. In neither case, however, does independence seem to be a viable option: in the first case, independence would damage the extensive economic relations with Baghdad, and in the second case, Iraqi Kurds would lose the possibility of (political and economic) influence over a weak Baghdad (and possibly the prosperous relationship with Iran and Turkey). In this case, participation in the institutions of a weak central government would serve as an ‘extended hand’ for Erbil, which would cease to exist once independence is achieved.” (p. 190)

4. Applying Davutoğlu’s framework on the Ankara-Baghdad-Tehran triangle

“According to the strategy formulated by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey must be particularly sensitive to two tripartite balance systems in the Middle East and pursue a flexible policy towards the states involved. The first triangle is Turkey, Syria, and Egypt, and the second is Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. In both systems, Davutoğlu proposes, Turkey should aim to ensure that one of the other two powers is always on Turkey’s side, i.e., Turkey should not be left alone. According to Davutoğlu, by pursuing a policy of active neutrality, the Turkish leadership applied this principle excellently in the Iraq-Iran war (Davutoğlu 2016, p. 362). Later, while the Saddam regime was in place, Ankara could count on Iraq as a pragmatic and cooperative partner and had a working relationship with Iran at the same time. After 2003, however, this has changed as the Iraqi leadership was removed from the list of sovereign state actors (under US influence) and could not influence the region. By the end of the 2000s, however, Iraq’s autonomy had been restored, and a pragmatic relationship with Baghdad had been established, as well as with Teheran. However, after 2011, regional tensions increased, and relations with the Iraqi central government deteriorated, while the ties with the KR improved significantly. Pragmatic relations with the Iranians (avoiding direct hostilities, cooperating competitively) were present in the meantime. In many respects, regional tensions between these actors have receded following the common effort against the Islamic State. The threat of Iraqi Kurdish independence has even brought the leadership of the three states onto a common platform. Thus, in the triangle with Iraq and Iran,

Turkey, although not allied with either of the two parties, has successfully applied the Davutoğlu principle mentioned above during the period under analysis, and it has never alienated itself from the other two actors simultaneously. The political relations with the KR have played an essential role in this success since it has allowed Iraq never to be completely “lost” for Ankara. (p. 204)

5. I attempted to define the relationship between Turkey and the KR after 2007

“I define an alliance as formal security cooperation (defensive or offensive) between two or more actors. (Yalçın 2015, p. 399) If security cooperation is informal (not authorized by a treaty) and happening “tacitly,” it is an “alignment” of political actions. (Pénzváltó 2020, p. 40) In the case of short-term cooperation, the alliance is ad hoc. The stronger party can create the alliance by coercion as well. (Milner 1992, p. 469)

I speak of cooperation in the sense that the relationship between actors does not have a security content that is directed at averting some common danger. Axelrod and Keohane (1985, p. 226) define cooperation as “goal-directed behavior that entails mutual policy adjustments so that all sides end up better off than they would otherwise be.” Cooperation thus expresses the existence of some common goal or interest between two actors who coordinate their actions for some common gain (and/or loss of others). (Milner 1992, p. 468).” (p. 25)

“I argue that the relationship between Ankara and Erbil has evolved from cooperation to an informal alignment by 2014. The alliance between Ankara and Erbil cannot be made formal because a defense treaty cannot justify it due to the federative status of the KR. On the other hand, the parties are not interested in establishing an “inflexible,” “binding” military assistance agreement.” (p. 205)

6. Correction

“In the Hungarian translation of Davutoğlu’s work (2016), the word “*asabiyet*” used by the author is a mistranslation (“nervousness, irritability”). Its real meaning is “group solidarity” (Ibn Khaldún 1995), which is referred in the work of the 14th-century Arab philosopher-historian Ibn Khaldun. At that time, he observed group cohesion among members of a tribe in tribal society, while Davutoğlu uses it to refer to the “vicious circles” of blood feuds, whereby perceived or real antagonisms between different tribes can give rise to brutal, decades-long struggles and divisions that can serve the interests of external powers.” (p. 32)

6. The author's publications related to the topic

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