

# Turkish Presence in Northern Iraq: A Situation with Broad Regional Implications



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## **About**

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# Turkish Presence in Northern Iraq: A Situation with Broad Regional Implications

## Introduction and Background

On December 3, 2015, a Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) regiment of 150 troops and 25 tanks deployed to the Iraqi town of Bashiqa, north of Mosul with the mission to reinforce members of the Turkish military already there training the Kurdish Peshmerga and Hashd al-Watani<sup>1</sup> forces in the lead-up to liberating Mosul from the Islamic State (IS). What followed was a series of accusations by the Iraqi government regarding the legality of the Turkish presence in Iraq and demand for their withdrawal, with Turkey denying any wrongdoing and citing an agreement with the Kurdish local authorities that permits the TSK to deploy troops there to reinforce against the IS. After a few days of tension, the troops and tanks were withdrawn but the TSK personnel already present remained, continuing the training mission<sup>2</sup>.

The incident and the reactions that followed have exposed the political and strategic differences between Baghdad, Erbil and Ankara even as they fight against a mutual enemy in the form of the Islamic State. However, neither the TSK deployment, nor the reactions that followed are an aberration. Erbil's support and Baghdad's denouncement of Ankara and, in turn, Ankara's denouncement of the

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1. "National Mobilisation Forces" – Milita group made up from predominantly Sunni Iraqis from Mosul and the greater Ninevah province. Formed by former governor of Ninevah, Atheel al-Nujaifi. It receives training and support from Turkey which believes that it is a better alternative to Hashd al-Shaabi in regards to retaking the Sunni parts of Iraq from the Islamic State.

2. "Biden Welcomes Turkish Troops' Withdrawal from Iraq's Bashiqa Camp: White House", Daily Sabah, 14-December-2015, <<http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/12/14/biden-welcomes-turkish-troops-withdrawal-from-iraqs-bashiqa-camp-white-house>>, [Accessed 27-January-2016]

Hashd al-Shaabi and the support of the Hashd al-Watani are all reflective of how the relations between Erbil, Baghdad and Ankara have developed over the years, as well as Ankara's broader goals regarding Iraq and Syria.

This report is aimed at analysing the actions of the three main actors involved, The Turkish Government, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil and the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. It looks at how Ankara's relations with Baghdad have deteriorated and with Erbil improved over the years and looks at the internal and external reasons behind such alignment, explaining how Ankara feels Baghdad can no longer be influenced to be in line with its interests and believing a Sunni Arab-Kurdish bloc in northern Iraq is more conducive to its interests. It explains how Turkey seeks to use this bloc to create a friendly buffer zone between itself and Baghdad and keep the KRG on its side even as the conflict between PKK and Turkish security forces is escalating in the Turkish southeast. It then looks into how Ankara might be looking to balance its two regional proxies in the region, the KRG and the Hashd al-Watani, to leverage a favourable outcome for itself, especially in the area around Kirkuk in which Turkey has a historic claim. Lastly, it looks towards Turkey's broader regional goals with regards to the Syrian Civil War and how the Turkish realignment with the KRG and its efforts to create a friendly buffer in northern Iraq relate to the on-going conflict in Syria.

### **Impacts of the Turkish Incursion into Northern Iraq**

- *Impacts on Turkey's Relations with Baghdad*

The Turkish deployment of troops into northern Iraq had a significant impact on the already-chilly relations between Ankara and Baghdad. Although the two governments were engaged in rapprochement following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Turkey was given favourable status for trade

and investment; Turkey's repeated intrusion on Iraqi territory over the years (Ostensibly to pursue Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) fighters); the increased use of sectarian rhetoric with regards to Sunnis and Shias (and attempts to influence Iraqi politics on corresponding lines); its growing partnership with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) at a time when the KRG and Baghdad were suffering from increased friction<sup>3</sup>; as well as Turkey's ambivalence towards the Islamic State following its offensive in 2014; and, its political miscalculations following the Arab Spring have resulted in rising tensions between Ankara and Baghdad<sup>4</sup>. The Turkish deployment at Bashiqa and Baghdad's reaction to it can therefore be viewed as a continuation the two governments' existing trajectory of relations.

How Ankara views its relations with Baghdad and the policies it has followed before and after the troop deployment at Bashiqa can be explained through three assumptions Ankara appears to have regarding Baghdad: The first is that due to its Shia majority and affiliation Baghdad is under disproportionate influence from Iran. This also applies to the irregular groups such as Hashd al-Shaabi which Ankara has accused of being "fully Shiite and guided by Iran", not mentioning that Sunnis, Turkmens and Christians have also fought as part of the Hashd al-Shaabi<sup>5</sup>. The second assumption is that since Turkey and Iran have been on the opposite ends of the Syrian Civil War and both Iran and Syria are close allies with Russia (with whom Turkey's relations deteriorated rapidly following the shooting of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey in November 2015), Baghdad is

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3. Denise Natali, "Is Turkey Losing Iraq?", Al-Monitor, 25-September-2012, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/is-turkey-losing-iraq.html>>, [Accessed 7-January-2016]

4. Semih İdiz, "Turkey Downplays IS Threat but Concerns Grow", Al-Monitor, 8-August-2014, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/idiz-isis-turkey-iraq-mosul-davutoglu-ambivalent-syria-consul.html>>, [Accessed 7-January-2016]

5. Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara's Mosul Miscalculation", Al-Monitor, 9-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-bashiqa-mosul-military-deployment.html>>, [Accessed 12-January-2016]

unlikely to act as a reliable ally for Turkey or be susceptible to its influence<sup>6</sup>. The fact that Russia immediately declared support for Baghdad against Turkey following the latter's troop deployment<sup>7</sup> likely reinforced that assumption. The third assumption is that Baghdad, with the sectarianism Ankara accuses Baghdad of fostering, has no legitimacy among Iraq's Sunni citizens who are afraid of repercussions of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) or Hashd al-Shaabi liberation of IS occupied Sunni cities<sup>8</sup>. In conjunction, with Ankara's championing of the Sunni cause in Iraq (with an emphasis on Sunni and de-emphasis on ethnic identities such as Kurds, Turks and Arabs)<sup>9</sup> and having a vested, historic interest in Mosul<sup>10</sup>, likely sees itself as the most legitimate regional actor to determine the fate of Mosul.

This report argues that as a result of these assumptions, Ankara has concluded that Baghdad is not friendly to its interests or receptive to its influence and has de-prioritised its relationship with Baghdad in favour of other regional actors it can influence. These include the KRG and the Hashd al-Watani militia around Mosul. Although Ankara does not appear to be intent on directly antagonising Baghdad, Ankara's reasoning that it cannot withdraw from Bashiqa because it needs to train the troops in the area against the Islamic State shows

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6. Metin Gürcan, "Turkey Sticks Its Neck Out Again, This Time in Iraq", Al-Monitor, 7-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-becomes-third-largest-army.html>> , [Accessed 12-January-2015]

7. Semih İdiz, "Why is Turkey Stirring the Iraqi Cauldron", Al-Monitor, 8-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-troops-deployed-in-bashiqa-stirs-cauldron.html>> , [Accessed 12-January-2016]

8. Salah Nasravi, "The Fate of Mosul in Turkey's Hands", Al-Jazeera English, 15-December-2015, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/analysis-fate-mosul-turkey-hands-151213105749003.html>> , [Accessed 12-January-2016]

9. "Erdogan: Turkish Troops in Iraq on PM Abadi's Request", Al-Jazeera English, 10-December-2015, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/erdogan-turkish-troops-iraq-pm-abadi-request-151209215017789.html>> , [Accessed 12-January-2016]

10. Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara's Mosul Miscalculation", Al-Monitor, 9-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-bashiqa-mosul-military-deployment.html>> , [Accessed 12-January-2016]

that where it is forced to choose between these actors and Baghdad, it will lean towards the former<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, it is not unprecedented for Turkey to follow such a policy as it has done so in the past, the most recent case being its support for parties such as the al-Iraqiya or the al-Hadba Group and candidates such as Atheel al-Nujaifi<sup>12</sup> in opposition to the then-Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki<sup>13</sup>. This was reiterated by former US Ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill who noted in 2009 that Ankara had “played an unhelpful role in recent Iraqi political elections” with its tendency to intervene in Iraqi politics<sup>14</sup>. Ankara’s decision to intervene in Iraq and legitimise its actions on grounds of supporting its allies is not unprecedented and in-line with previous Turkish actions.

How Ankara’s relations with Baghdad progress from this point onwards is difficult to determine and reliant on a number of other regional factors such as Turkey’s relations with Iran, Russia and the KRG, the outcome of the wars in Syria and Iraq and the success of its proxies in these countries as well as the shape of Turkey’s internal politics. Although Ankara has used increasingly sectarian language in recent years, the purpose of such language has frequently been borne out of a need to guarantee support of the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) mostly conservative Muslim support base<sup>15</sup>. As Ankara’s sporadic

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11. “Turkey Refuses to Withdraw Troops Sent to North Iraq Base”, The Guardian, 7-December-2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/turkey-refuses-to-withdraw-troops-from-north-iraq-base-isis>>, [Accessed 13-January-2016]

12. Who was, at the time, the governor of Ninevah province.

13. Semih İdiz, “How Turkey Lost its Influence in Iraq”, Al-Monitor, 6-June-2014, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/krg-iraq-turkey-kurdish-oil-us-barzani-energy.html>>, [Accessed 12-January-2016]

14. Michael R. Gordon, “Meddling Neighbours Undercut Iraq Stability”, The New York Times, 5-December-2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/world/middleeast/06wikileaks-iraq.html?pagewanted=all>>, [Accessed 13-January-2016]

15. Fehim Taştekin, “Turkey’s Sunni Identity Test”, Al-Monitor, 21-June-2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/turkey-sunnism-sectarian-rhetoric.html>>, [Accessed 13-January-2016]

diplomatic overtures to Tehran in 2015<sup>16</sup> and more recently, its ambivalent reaction to the execution of the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr by Saudi Arabia<sup>17</sup> shows that it can tone down the sectarian language and act in a more conciliatory manner when pragmatism dictates it.

- *Impacts on Turkey's Relations with the Kurdish Regional Government*

Since March 2009, when Turkey's then-President Abdullah Gül visited Baghdad and the KRG<sup>18</sup>, relations between Ankara and Erbil have been improving steadily. Despite the tumultuous history of hostility between Turks and Kurds across Iraq and Turkey, the KRG's stability and rich energy resources made it an attractive business target for Turkey. It is therefore important to note that whereas Baghdad demanded that Turkey withdraw its troops that were deployed at Bashiqa Camp, Erbil spoke in support of Ankara, stating that the Turkish troops were deployed with the consent of the KRG and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) within the framework of the International Coalition against the Islamic State<sup>19</sup>.

The improved relations between the KRG and Turkey and the former's support for the latter during the disputes surrounding the troop deployment can be linked to mutual economic and political benefits their improving relations has provided them with. Economically, the KRG offers a source of close, cheap and high-quality source of energy for the energy-hungry Turkish economy while

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16. Cengiz Çandar, "Erdogan Focuses on Trade During Iran Visit", Al-Monitor, 8-April-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/turkey-iran-difference-between-speaking-ankara-tehran.html>>, [Accessed 13-January-2016]

17. Semih Idiz, "Saudi-Iranian Crisis Complicates Ankara's Regional Plans", Al-Monitor, 5-January-2016, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/turkey-saudi-arabia-iran-crisis-complicates-ankaras-plans.html>>, [Accessed 13-January-2016]

18. Making him the first Turkish head of state in 33 years to make an official visit to Iraq

19. "Iraqi Army Says KRG Authorised Turkish Army Deployment", NRT, December 2015, <<http://www.nrttv.com/EN/Details.aspx?Jimare=4324>>, [Accessed 13-January-2016]



simultaneously reducing Turkey's reliance on Iran and Russia for energy which has increasingly become a handicap in light of Turkey's worsening relations with both countries in recent years. The prospect of Turkey acting as a conduit for Kurdish energy exports into Europe and the economic rewards this brings provides an additional incentive for Turkey towards economic rapprochement with the KRG <sup>20</sup>. For the KRG, which was eager to highlight its stability and economic prosperity in post-Saddam Iraq, Turkish business investment and energy purchases have provided a source of income independent from Baghdad with which it had frequent disputes over budget share <sup>21</sup>. Although in the early years of rapprochement, Ankara tried to mediate the dispute between Baghdad and Erbil regarding the KRG's independent oil sales and was cautious against antagonising Baghdad<sup>22</sup>, as its relations with Erbil deepened and with Baghdad deteriorated, Turkey has played an increased role in KRG selling oil independently through the pipeline in Ceyhan that was completed in 2014 <sup>23</sup>. The rapid fall of oil prices; Baghdad withholding KRG's share of its budget due to disputes relating to the latter's independent sale of oil; and, reduced investments and increased military spending as a result of the Islamic State offensive in 2014 have all put heavy economic strains on the KRG, delaying payments of its public workers and causing a budget deficit. Turkey, for its part, has provided loans to the KRG to shore up its budget deficit of \$6 billion, linking the economic survival of the KRG with Turkish interests <sup>24</sup>.

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20. Gönül Toy, "Turkey's KRG Energy Partnership", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 29-January-2013, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/29/turkeys-krge-energy-partnership/>>, [Accessed 14-January-2016]

21. Keith Johnson, "Striking Pipeline, Kurdish Militants Deal a Blow to Fellow Turks", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 30-July-2015, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/30/kurdish-militants-strike-pipeline-deal-blow-to-fellow-kurds/>>, [Accessed 14-January-2016]

22. "Turkey: Keeping Iraq's Kurds in Check", *Stratfor*, 23-March-2009, <<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/turkey-keeping-iraqs-kurds-check>>, [Accessed 14-January-2016]

23. "Iraqi Kurdistan's Financial Trap", *Stratfor*, 21-July-2014, <<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/iraqi-kurdistan-financial-trap>>, [Accessed 14-January-2016]

24. *Ibid*

The rapprochement between Turkey and KRG was not just borne out of economic benefits but political benefits as well, linking into both internal and external ambitions. For Turkey, its economic links with the KRG has given the former significant leverage over the latter. Within Turkish politics, one of the main promises of the ruling AKP was to provide a resolution for the “Kurdish question” that has caused endemic tensions and sporadic violence in the country’s southeast for decades. To this end, the Turkish government began negotiations with the separatist PKK after the latter declared a ceasefire in March 2013 and began withdrawing its troops from its mountain strongholds. In conjunction, the AKP has used its reconciliatory platform to attract Kurdish voters against the MHP (Nationalist Action Party) and CHP (Republican People’s Party) both of whom have traditionally been more reluctant to grant the Kurdish minority its demands while simultaneously making armed separatism a less attractive option for Kurdish political groups<sup>25</sup>. Turkey’s partnership with the KRG in this equation worked towards displaying that Ankara was not against Kurdish economic or political interests<sup>26</sup> while simultaneously gaining leverage over the KRG to isolate the PKK which has traditionally received support and sanctuary from the KRG<sup>27</sup>. Ankara’s motivation to cooperate with the KRG is further bolstered by its regional policies, especially in regards to Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the PKK-affiliated PYD (Democratic Union Party) has emerged as one of the most successful actors of the Civil War, establishing and increasingly consolidating an autonomous region in northern Syria, along the Turkish border with the tacit consent of the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies, much to the concern of Ankara which has seen the rebel groups it supports in Syria lose ground

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25. Ceren Kenar, “Erdogan’s Kurdish Chickens Are Coming Home to Roost”, Foreign Policy Magazine, 4-June-2015, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/erdogan-turkey-elections-kurds-akp-hdp-executive-power/>>, [Accessed 19-January-2016]

26. Chase Winter, “Turkey’s Strained Kurdish Peace Process”, Foreign Policy Magazine, 11-December-2013, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/11/turkeys-strained-kurdish-peace-process/>>, [Accessed 16-January-2016]

27. “Turkey’s Kurdish Strategy”, Stratfor, 17-September-2010, <<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/turkeys-kurdish-strategy>>, [Accessed 19-January-2016]

and influence. Amidst such concerns, a KRG leadership which banned pro-PKK political parties, arrested PKK politicians and closed down PKK offices has been invaluable to Ankara's anti-terror strategy against the PKK <sup>28</sup>. In addition, given Ankara's aforementioned deterioration of relations with Baghdad, Erbil likely presents itself as one of Ankara's main sources of influence in Iraq, providing not only a buffer zone between itself and Baghdad but also acting as a source of influence for a favourable outcome in the on-going conflict against the Islamic State <sup>29</sup>.

For the KRG, the economic benefits of the Turkish trade played a significant part in its growth and development even prior to Abdullah Gül's visit in 2009, allowing Iraqi Kurdistan to emerge as one of the more stable and prosperous parts of Iraq following the ousting of Saddam Hussein. Aware that the protection granted upon them by the coalition forces would not be permanent, the KRG worked heavily towards translating its economic gains into political ones in order to entrench their autonomy in their goal towards independence. In such a climate, Erbil's frequent clashes with Baghdad over oil sales and the nature of Kurdish independence resulted with Ankara being a convenient economic and political partner and an effective leverage against Baghdad <sup>30</sup>. However, Erbil's motivations for partnering with Ankara have a decisively internal element as well. Although the KRG is made of the union of two main Kurdish political parties, the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), they have historically been rivals and have even engaged with armed conflict against one another during the 1990s. In recent years, the support base of the PUK has been eroding and the KRG President Masoud Barzani (of the

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28. Gönül Toy, "Turkey's KRG Energy Partnership", Foreign Policy Magazine, 29-January-2013, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/29/turkeys-krge-energy-partnership/>>, [Accessed 14-January-2016]

29. Ibid.

30. "The Kurdish Alliance at Risk", Stratfor, 16-August-2012, <<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/kurdish-alliance-risk>>, [Accessed 20-January-2016]

KDP) sought to capitalise on this by positioning himself closely with Ankara, becoming its favoured politician for Turkey's dealings in the region and using the flow of finances to expand his own influence and patronages<sup>31</sup>. Over the course of 2012 many government institutions based in Sulaimaniyah (PUK stronghold) were reportedly relocated to Erbil (KDP stronghold) over the course of 2012<sup>32</sup>. Barzani's extension of his term for two years in 2013 (having been President since 2005) and refusal to step down since the ending of his term in August 2015 despite widespread protests and accusations of corruption has reinforced that impression among his opponents<sup>33</sup>.

The Turkish deployment at Bashiqa is therefore not a game changer but an indicator of the direction Turkey's relations with the regional governments. Much like how Baghdad's negative reaction is a reflection of its deteriorating relations with Ankara over the past years, the KRG's supportive reaction is a reflection of their how their partnership is proceeding. With both Ankara and Erbil increasingly hostile against Baghdad and getting somewhat isolated in the region, this report concludes that Turkish-KRG relations will deepen over the course of the near future, finding their arrangement mutually beneficial on economic, political and strategic grounds. This is supported by the fact that Masoud Barzani visited Turkey and was warmly received during the peak of Ankara's tensions with Baghdad<sup>34</sup> and KRG's continued insistence to export its oil independently around the same period<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, the fact that the KRG has (tentatively)

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31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Mohammed A Salih, "Political Turmoil Grips Iraqi Kurdistan", Al-Jazeera English, 13-October-2015, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/iraqi-kurds-deteriorating-quickly-151013080729534.html>>, [Accessed 20-January-2016]

34. "Barzani Gets Warm Welcome in Ankara amid Turkey-Iraq Tensions", Hurriyet Daily News, 9-December-2015, <<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/barzani-gets-warm-welcome-in-ankara-amid-turkey-iraq-tensions-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=92319&NewsCatID=510>>, [Accessed 20-January-2016]

35. "Iraq: Kurdish Government Will Cut off Oil To Baghdad", Stratfor, 5-January-2016,

sided with Turkey on its reignited conflict against the PKK despite heavy internal opposition also points towards a deepening of relations <sup>36</sup>.

## **The Deployment in Turkey's Broader Geopolitical Strategy and its Implications**

- *Analysis of Turkish Presence in Northern Iraq as a Buffer Zone*

In light of Ankara's growing relations with Erbil and deteriorating relations with Baghdad, the troop deployment at Bashiqa is not an aberration but in-line with Ankara's strategic and geopolitical objectives in Iraq. Since 2003, Turkish policy on Iraq has been to build economic and political links with Baghdad to have a government that would be friendly to its interests and amicable to its concerns relating the KRG and areas of historic claim such as Kirkuk and Mosul. Finding itself rivalled by Iran for influence (especially following the worsening Turkish-Iranian relations following the Syrian Civil War), Ankara's tone turned increasingly sectarian, emphasizing the Sunni identity in politics<sup>37</sup> even as it accused Iran itself of fomenting Shia sectarianism <sup>38</sup>. The failure for a decisive Sunni Iraqi-Kurdish voting bloc to emerge in elections and the erosion of support Turkey's preferred candidates such as the al-Iraqiya Party and Atheel al-Nujaifi

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<[https://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/iraq-kurdish-government-will-cut-oil-baghdad?utm\\_source=paidlist-a&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=\\*\[DATE:\]\\*&utm\\_content=Daily+Intelligence+Brief%3A+Jan.+6%2C+2015](https://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/iraq-kurdish-government-will-cut-oil-baghdad?utm_source=paidlist-a&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=*[DATE:]*&utm_content=Daily+Intelligence+Brief%3A+Jan.+6%2C+2015)>, [Accessed 21-January-2016]

36. Keith Johnson, "Striking Pipeline, Kurdish Militants Deal Blow to Fellow Kurds", 30-July-2015, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/30/kurdish-militants-strike-pipeline-deal-blow-to-fellow-kurds/>>, [Accessed 20-January-2016]

37. Denise Natali, "Is Turkey Losing Iraq?", Al-Monitor, 25-September-2012, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/is-turkey-losing-iraq.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

38. Semih İdiz, "Why is Turkey Stirring the Iraqi Cauldron", Al-Monitor, 8-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-troops-deployed-in-bashiqa-stirs-cauldron.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

suffered further diminished Ankara's influence over Baghdad<sup>39</sup>.

It can be concluded that Ankara's strategy towards Iraq has, in essence, not changed. However, finding its influence in Baghdad diminished, it has focused its efforts on supporting the organisations and politicians it still has influence over: The KRG led by President Masoud Barzani and the Hashd al-Watani led by Atheel al-Nujaifi. Through these organisations, it is looking to establish a region within Iraq that will be friendlier towards Turkish interests, continue supplying Turkey with oil and enable Turkey to operate within while acting as a buffer between its own borders and Baghdad.

The deployment of Turkish troops at Bashiqah is in line with this strategy. Since the Islamic State takeover of Mosul in 2014, Ankara, Erbil and al-Nujaifi have laid the blame for the city's fall on Baghdad's policies<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, Ankara has repeatedly voiced its opposition to the Hashd al-Shaabi liberating the city, claiming them to be "fully Shiite and guided by Iran" and therefore having no legitimacy over the citizens of Mosul. It instead advocated the Hashd al-Watani as a legitimate force to liberate the city instead<sup>41</sup>. By training the Hashd al-Watani and the Peshmerga at the camp in Bashiqah, Turkey is not only legitimising its own presence in Iraq as part of the anti-IS coalition, it is also increasing the capabilities of these organisations with the intention to liberate Mosul under a

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39. Denise Natali, "Is Turkey Losing Iraq?", Al-Monitor, 25-September-2012, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/is-turkey-losing-iraq.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

40. Mohammed A. Salih, "More Than a Year On, Who Is to Blame For The Fall of Mosul", Al-Monitor, 25-August-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iraq-report-mosul-fall-maliki-abadi.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

41. Fehim Taştekin, "Ankara's Mosul Miscalculation", Al-Monitor, 9-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-bashiqah-mosul-military-deployment.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

Turkish-friendly government<sup>42</sup>. With a major urban centre in Northern Iraq (one with a historic Turkish claim nonetheless) secured, Turkey and Turkish-supported factions would find themselves in a much stronger position to claim de-facto autonomy from Baghdad.

- *Balancing the Factions Within Northern Iraq and the Status of Kirkuk*

It is possible that Ankara also sees Hashd al-Watani as an alternative source of influence in the event the KRG cannot be relied upon. As detailed above, Relations between Turkey and KRG have steadily improved since 2009 and the KRG has been instrumental in isolating the PKK support in Iraq, even as clashes between the PKK and Turkish security forces in the Turkish southeast escalated<sup>43</sup>. However, President Barzani is facing stiff opposition over his support of Ankara over the PKK<sup>44</sup>, allegations of corruption and his refusal to step down from Presidency despite his term ending<sup>45</sup>. Atheel al-Nujaifi, who has also been a close Turkish ally in Iraq over the years, is not suffering from such constraints at the moment. Therefore, in the event of a Turkish-friendly buffer zone being successfully established, the Hashd al-Watani, trained and supported by Turkish troops in Bashiqa, would be able to act as Ankara's proxy even if the Turkish-KRG relationship turns sour. Such a force could also take on the PKK on a level the KRG would not be able to without risking political backlash. The existence

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42. Fehim Taştekin, "Turkey's Joint Front With Sunni Arabs, Kurds", Al-Monitor, 14-December-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/12/turkey-iraq-ankaras-joint-front-with-sunni-arabs-kurds.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

43. "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, İKBY Başkanı Barzani'yi Kabul Etti", Haber Turk, 9-December-2015, <<http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1164812-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ikby-baskani-barzaniyi-kabul-etti>>, [Accessed 26-January 2016]

44. Josh Wood, "Why Turkey-KRG Ties Will Likely Trump Kurdish Solidarity", The National, 27-July-2015, <<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/why-turkey-kr-ties-will-likely-trump-kurdish-solidarity#full>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

45. Tanya Goudsuzian, "Analysis: The Machiavellian Politics in Iraqi Kurdistan", Al-Jazeera English, 13-October-2015, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/analysis-machiavellian-politics-iraqi-kurdistan-151013094035698.html>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

of such a force is not entirely far-fetched, given that there are already reports of Arabic-speaking paramilitaries operating in the Turkish southeast against the PKK<sup>46</sup>.

Such an act of internal balancing likely has other benefits for Ankara as well: The statuses of Mosul and Kirkuk have been a source of historic contention for Turkey. The cities and the surrounding region (stretching from Sinjar in the West to Sulaimanyah to the east) were part of the Mosul Vilayet (governorate) of the Ottoman Empire and have significant Turkmen populations. Turkey made a bid for them to be part of its original borders after its founding but was unsuccessful<sup>47</sup>. In June 2014, Kurdish forces took over the city following the retreat of the Iraqi military against the Islamic State offensive. Although Turkey would have historically been unwilling to let Kurds control the city, the completion of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the continued flow of oil suggests that Ankara can tolerate Kurds governing the city as long as its interests are not violated<sup>48</sup>. However, the future of the city remains uncertain: Tensions between Kurdish, Arab and Turkish residents are escalating and the city is a source of contention between Erbil and Baghdad<sup>49</sup>. Under such circumstances, Ankara can present the Hashd al-Watani (or a similar, Kirkuk-based organisation) as a more palatable option for the city's residents in a bid to quell unrest and prevent Kurdish dominance over the city while simultaneously guarding the Kirkuk

46. Orhan Kemal Cengiz, "Who Are 'Allah's Lions'?", Al-Monitor, 25-November-2015, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/11/turkey-pkk-clashes-who-are-terrorizing-kurds.html>>, [Accessed 27-January-2016]

47. Reva Bhalla, "Turkey, Kurds and Iraq: The Prize and Peril of Kirkuk", Stratfor, 7-October-2014, <<https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/turkey-kurds-and-iraq-prize-and-peril-kirkuk>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]

48. "Iraq: Kurdish Oil Still Flowing to Ceyhan, Industry Source Says", Stratfor, 6-November-2015, <<https://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/iraq-kurdish-oil-still-flowing-ceyhan-industry-source-says>>, [Accessed 27-January-2016]

49. Reva Bhalla, "Turkey, Kurds and Iraq: The Prize and Peril of Kirkuk", Stratfor, 7-October-2014, <<https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/turkey-kurds-and-iraq-prize-and-peril-kirkuk>>, [Accessed 26-January-2016]



against Baghdad's claims. This would be in line with the neo-Ottoman sphere of influence Ankara is speculated to be pursuing under the AKP government <sup>50</sup>.

- *Northern Iraq and Turkey's Greater Geostrategic Concerns in the Region*

Ankara's desire to maintain a friendly buffer zone in Northern Iraq also likely relates to its greater strategy in the region, especially with regards to the Syrian Civil War. Since the start of the war, the Kurdish-majority Democratic Union Party has successfully carved out an autonomous region in northern Syria (Rojava). As PYD is a PKK-affiliate, it is viewed with suspicion by Turkey and the rebel groups Turkey is supporting in Syria have not only fought against the Syrian government, but clashed with the PYD forces as well <sup>51</sup>. However, despite active Turkish support for such groups and accusations of tacit Turkish support towards the Islamic State, the PYD has been gaining ground along the Syrian-Turkish border, potentially complicating Ankara's efforts to suppress PKK fighters within its borders <sup>52</sup>. In order to prevent a unified Kurdish territory that stretches across Syria and Iraq and covers its entire southern border, Ankara needs to retain its influence in northern Iraq and make sure that the KRG is opposition to the PKK and friendly to its interests. The Turkish-KRG rapprochement and the economic and political support Ankara has dispensed towards Erbil therefore not only serves towards balancing against Baghdad but also incentivising the KRG to choose Turkish patronage against a unified Kurdish region at the cost of a hostile Turkey.

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50. Kadri Gürsel, "Turkey Seeks Ottoman Sphere of Influence", Al-Monitor, 3-April-2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/turkey-normalization-israel-kurds-new-ottoman.html>>, Accessed 26-January-2016

51. Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Evolving Syria Strategy", Foreign Affairs Magazine, 9-February-2015, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-02-09/turkeys-evolving-syria-strategy>>, [Accessed 27-January-2016]

52. Aaron Stein, "PKKistan: Brought to You By American Close Air Support", War on the Rocks, 22-June-2015, <<http://warontherocks.com/2015/06/pkkistan-brought-to-you-by-american-close-air-support/>>, [Accessed 27-January-2016]

## Conclusion

This report has sought to explain how the Turkish deployment at Bashiqa is the result of Ankara's changing relations with both Baghdad and Erbil. It has shown that Ankara is, at present, more concerned with the immediate vicinity of its borders and ensuring that it has enough room to operate against actual and perceived threats that surrounding Turkey. Finding itself no longer able to influence Baghdad, carrying a vested interest in the outcome of the conflict in Mosul and needing reliable partners in the region, Ankara has chosen to concentrate its efforts on the KRG (which doubles as a way to divide the allegiances of the Kurdish factions in Iraq and Syria) and the Hashd al-Watani (which is led by long-time political ally Atheel al-Nujaifi), simultaneously balancing them against Baghdad and balancing them against each other while making sure that the situation in Iraq remains favourable even as the situation in Syria turns less and less in its favour.

The Turkish deployment in Bashiqa is not, on itself, a ground-breaking development and with majority of the troops pulled back, the incident has fallen off the media's radar. Here, the deployment itself is not what is significant; it is the events leading up to it and the implications for the future that bear significance. The divergent reactions the Turkish deployment has elicited from the KRG and the Iraqi Government highlight a source of potential tensions and even conflict that will determine the future of Iraq and the KRG. The outcome of Mosul and who liberates it will be a determining factor in the coming months.