

The crisis in Iraq and the twists and turns of Turkish Middle East policy

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The spectacular offensive by Islamic radicals in Iraq this June has led the country to the verge of collapse, and is another scene of the deep crisis in the Middle East, in which Turkey is entangled. The immediate consequence of this is a severe crisis of prestige after the kidnapping by terrorists of Turkish diplomats and Ankara's inability to resolve the situation; in the long term consequences include escalation of the Kurdish problem, and a further increase in threats to the security of Turkey itself as well as the fundamental principles of its foreign policy. Both Ankara's options and its political will to actively respond to the crisis are extremely limited. Yet again in recent years, the current crisis, the broader situation in the Middle East, and finally the position of Turkey in the region elude unambiguous assessments and forecasts – these are prevented by the scale and growth of the reappraisals and tensions in the region. The only undoubted fact is that Turkey is strategically and irreversibly entangled in the Middle East's problems, which are an important factor affecting the transformation of the state which the ruling AKP is implementing; and in the near future, this state of affairs will only deepen.

The ISIS offensive in Iraq – a new phase of the crisis in the Middle East

The deepening instability of Turkey's southern neighbourhood over recent years – from the two US-led interventions in Iraq, the 'Arab Spring' and civil war in Syria (since 2011), the accompanying turbulence in the region, along with the spectacular offensive by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in June – has entered a new, dangerous phase. Within a month, the forces of one of the most radical terrorist organisations in the region took control of most of the area of Iraq inhabited by Sunni Arabs, the transport routes in western Iraq, and the country's second largest city of Mosul, and has brought the fight to the immediate vicinity of Baghdad. Simultaneously with the ISIS offensive, the Kurds of northern Iraq occupied the rich, disputed Kirkuk oil fields as well as a number of towns in the vicinity

of the Kurdistan Region. The situation appeared to have been brought under control: ISIS stopped at the border of the Shiite-dominated areas, and it is unlikely that they will continue their offensive in the near future; the prospect of expelling ISIS from the areas they have occupied is supported by both Iraq's influential neighbours (Iran, Saudi Arabia, but also Syria), and the US and Russia. Despite this, however, this can be seen as a deep crisis, if not the potential collapse of the Iraqi state.

Baghdad's attempts to regain control of the territory have not been successful. The shocking ease with which small ISIS units occupied vast areas of Iraq in June has called the rapid restoration of the state's authority over the lost areas into doubt, both among the army and the general public. Also, the Kurds have promised that not only will they remain in the cities they have occupied (especially Kirkuk), but also that

they will a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan. Now less than 40% of the country is under the effective control of Baghdad. The problems are as follows: the stability and legitimacy of government; the current (Shiite-dominated) authoritarianism of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki; the prolonged paralysis of the parliament elected on 30 April (which has since been boycotted by Kurds and Arab Sunnis); and the uncertainty of the compromise among the main political forces, which was forced on them by external forces at the end of July.

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The successes for ISIS have created a new political reality in Iraq and throughout the region. A leading terrorist organisation has taken control of significant areas of the state, acquired large quantities of weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army, has gained a huge injection of cash (since the occupation of Mosul, they have acquired approximately US\$2 billion in cash, counting income from the occupied oil fields in Iraq and Syria, for example), and finally they have significantly raised the bar of their political aspirations, proclaiming the restoration of the caliphate (announcing the creation of an Islamic state and the appointment of a caliph on 29 June), aspiring to sovereignty over all the world's Muslims (including al-Qaeda itself, along with other terrorist groups), and aspiring to the extermination of Shiism as a heresy. One immediate effect of the new state of affairs was the July offensive by ISIS in Syria – against the Kurds, the competing opposition groups and the forces of the regime – using the heavy equipment they gained in Iraq. In parallel, the question of possible ISIS

expansion into the territories of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon became urgent.

The current crisis in Iraq is only one part of a deep crisis in the region, which includes the bitter conflict between Sunni and Shia (which is an element of the strategic Saudi-Iranian conflict), the problem of political stability and control of territory in almost every country of the region, the empowerment of non-state players (from terrorist organisations to ethnic groups, especially the Kurds), and social dynamics (the displacement of about 11 million refugees from Syria and Iraq during the last three years). An additional element is the collapse of the existing system of security and alliances related to the weakening of the US presence, among other factors; the crisis in Egypt; rising tensions between countries; and finally, the potential uncertainty about the future of US-Iranian relations (including the ongoing dialogue about the future of the Iranian nuclear programme).

Turkey balancing on the precipice

A direct consequence of the ISIS offensive in Iraq for Turkey was the occupation of its Consulate General in Mosul and the taking of 49 hostages (diplomats, family members, security guards and others), as well as the detention of 31 Turkish truck drivers. This situation, fatal for the country's image and potentially politically dangerous (in the pre-election period, raising controversy about Turkey's Middle East policy), has been hushed up in Turkey by banning the publication of information on this topic in the media. Turkey has not emphasised the issue in international relations (including with NATO during the visit by its secretary general in June), and in fact undertook secret negotiations with ISIS, which led to the release of the detained drivers (4 July). The talks which the Turkish government held with the United States and Iran regarding the situation in Iraq have brought no clear or practical results. Official statements are dominated by a tone of serious concern about the situation

in Iraq and declarations of support for the unity of the country (although in June surprising suggestions were made that Turkey should recognise the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan).

In a broader sense, the current crisis in Iraq is part of the fundamental challenges that Turkey faces in the Middle East; its stake is rising significantly, and is influencing Turkey's strategic situation and the assumptions of its foreign policy over the last twelve years (i.e. since the AKP took power).

The Middle East, with which Turkey's relations had been limited and cool until 2002, has provided the AKP with an opportunity for a strategic diversification from its dominant relations with the West: Ankara's political activity aimed at close cooperation and economic activity, based on the search for new markets and sources of energy and investments, was intended to strengthen Turkey's position both *vis-à-vis* the West and globally. Although the effects of the 'Arab Spring' significantly reduced Turkish ambitions, in 2013 Iraq (*de facto* the Kurdistan Region in Iraq) was the second largest export market for Turkey after Germany, and was a key land route in the Gulf region and the Indian Ocean basin. The destabilisation (and especially the prospect of the collapse) of Iraq, in the light of the ongoing conflict in Syria and related complications, has called the reality of Turkish policy towards the Middle East into question, and brings with it the risk of measurable economic losses (from export restrictions, and thus production and logistics, to an expected increase in energy prices). Worse, possible economic turmoil in Turkey, as well as a rise in tension on its borders, threaten a deterioration of its image in the eyes of key investors and lenders in the West.

From the AKP's perspective, the Middle East was a natural zone of Turkish influence based on its historical (Ottoman) and cultural (Islam) heritage, as well as the political and economic success of Turkey, which drew creatively and effectively on Western models while preserving

its cultural identity (the so-called Turkish model). Turkey aspired to the position of a model for of change in the region, at the expense of the aspirations for regional supremacy of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Turkey's impressive successes in this field, obtained by 'soft power',

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were interrupted by the civil war in Syria. Here, however, Turkey took up the challenge, aspiring to the position of the main mediator, and over time it became the patron of the armed Syrian opposition. This policy ultimately suffered a painful defeat: the Assad regime not only remained in place, but also initiated counteroffensive; and radical terrorist organisations linked to groups in the Persian Gulf began to dominate among the opposition. In the end, Turkey was exposed to serious problems: almost a million refugees after incidents involving the Syrian armed forces, and terrorist attacks and sabotage carried out by the Kurdish PKK. At the same time Turkey's relations with almost all the countries of the region (including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq) definitely worsened; whereupon Iran and Saudi Arabia, not Turkey, came to set the tone for Middle East policy. Turkey's image as an attractive mentor and patron for the Middle East has been severely tarnished.

The current crisis in Iraq seems to confirm and deepen the processes outlined in recent years; Turkey is not seen as a player capable of significantly influencing the stabilisation of Iraq (especially in the light of its helplessness in the hostage crisis), and nor does it now aspire to such a role; and it has even been accused of actually making possible (in extreme cases deliberately so) and fuelling the Iraqi crisis.

In the present situation it is highly likely that Turkey itself will be affected by the negative consequences of the collapse of Iraq and the strengthening of the terrorist para-state covering a large part of Iraq and Syria, and directly bordering on Turkey. In practice, this would mean the reversal of Ankara's role as the West's proxy in the Middle East (to which Turkey openly aspired as late as 2011), in favour of that of a petitioner demanding protection against the challenges in its neighbourhood.

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The Middle East has finally come to have a direct impact on one of Turkey's most important domestic problems: the Kurdish issue. For almost its entire existence, the nationalist Turkish Republic denied the existence of the Kurdish people, and from the mid-1980s it fought ruthlessly against the rising autonomist/separatist ambitions of the Kurds. The common fear of Kurdish separatism significantly reduced the tension between Turkey and Iran, Iraq and (to the least extent) Syria, the other countries which also faced this problem. As a result of the first and second Gulf Wars, the Iraqi Kurds gained actual and formal autonomy; as a result of the civil war in Syria, the Syrian Kurds have effectively won autonomy (Rojava, western Kurdistan, the *de facto* Kurdish state in Syria). And although the AKP has undergone a profound revision of its policy towards the Kurds (liberalisation of domestic policy, and a start to the difficult peace process, in parallel with close economic and political cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan), the Kurdish problem is actually

growing. In 2011-2012, there was an eruption of clashes with Kurds in Turkey, which may also be seen as inspired by Damascus as a retaliatory measure against the involvement of Turkey in Syria. Today – for yet another year – the autonomy of Syrian Kurdistan is strengthening, which is especially dangerous for Turkey as it is based on the structures of the PKK, which is the most anti-Turkish of the forces among the Kurds, and has for thirty years been directing the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey. Meanwhile, in June the Iraqi Kurds took Kirkuk (despite their excellent cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds, Ankara warned against such a move as offering a potential reason for military intervention), and have announced moves towards full independence. A Kurdish state in Iraq (and perhaps Syria in the future) would spell the inevitable growth of the Turkish Kurds' ambitions, and by extension a serious escalation of tensions within Turkey itself. Despite the seriousness of the current situation in Iraq (and more broadly across the region) it is difficult to expect the government in Ankara to take decisive measures. Even in the case of the Syrian conflict, Turkey – to its considerable embarrassment – has acknowledged the unrealistic assumptions of its own policies, and also that these has been relatively ineffective, or even counterproductive. Furthermore, it has had to contend with criticism on the domestic scene from part of the elite and the media, while stating at the same time that the Turkish public are not particularly interested in Middle Eastern politics, and does not make its support for the government conditional on any successes in this area. As a result, Ankara has significantly reduced both its ambitions and its actions regarding Syria. The current crisis in Iraq seems to reinforce the conclusions coming from Syria: Turkey seems unable and uninterested in actively working to take advantage of the crisis, and is not even ready to raise the stakes regarding the diplomats held captive by the ISIS. Given that Turkey's first general presidential election is to be held on 10 August this

year (and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is counting on victory in the first round), and parliamentary elections next year (in which the AKP can also count on a decisive victory), Turkey should maintain its defensive position and focus on minimising the losses which it may incur from the current crisis in Iraq.

Has the game just begun?

Both the situation in the Middle East and Turkey's policies have for several years now posed serious challenges of interpretation. This is an area of dynamic change and redefinition, which eludes precise assessment, not to mention explicit predictions which can be confirmed; this has been reflected, inter alia, with regard to the 'Arab Spring', the civil war in Syria, the evolution and goals of Turkey's policies, or US regional policy – which hitherto had been relatively predictable. One hypothesis explaining this state of affairs may be that the assumptions adopted in the West considering the situation, intentions, estimates and circumstances of the regional players have been inadequate. This also applies to Turkey itself.

First of all, since the AKP came to power, Turkey has been undergoing profound transformations, both domestically as well as in redefining its foreign policy. One of the assumptions of the latter is the belief, formulated over many years, of an imminent crisis and subsequent revision of the political order (internationally, but also socio-culturally) in the Middle East – a position that is also becoming increasingly popular in the West. In the assumptions of the main ideologue of foreign policy, the foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, this will of course create opportunities for Turkey to restore its historic role as a real political and civilisational power covering its neighbourhood, but also as a significant force on the global scale. From the end of the Cold War to now, this diagnosis of the Middle East has been confirmed. These processes are independent of Turkey, and inde-

ed somewhat inevitable – they are beyond the unequivocal control of any other country, and pose a serious challenge and a potential threat to all of them. In other words, Turkey's involvement in the problems of its immediate vicinity is inevitable, and the scale and dynamics of these processes do not allow us today to clearly assess when the final turning point will arrive, not what its result will be. Turkey's situation currently seems to be unfavourable, and to offer it very limited room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, the hand Turkey has to play is better (thanks to its influence in Iraqi Kurdistan), and even the risks arising from the current situation in Iraq are less for Ankara than for Saudi Arabia, which is directly threatened, Jordan, Iraq itself, Syria, Egypt, Iran (which previously was the leader in the game for the Middle East), and the United States.

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The second question involves an assessment of the activity and efficiency of Turkish policy in the region, especially in Iraq. Here the question arises of Turkey's lack of allies in the region, as well as the actual deterioration of its relations with every country in the region over the past three years. It also indicates Turkey's erroneous calculation to support the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt and Syria) and its risky policy towards the Kurds. As a result, Turkish policy has come to be seen as unrealistic and ineffective. However, if we consider the issue through the lens of the evolutionary yet thorough reconstruction of Turkish policy in the region, there are both

real and potential achievements. The change in Ankara's approach (liberalisation) towards the Kurds has given it the chance to gradually resolve the issue in Turkey itself; in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, meanwhile, it is crucial for maintaining the region's stability and political and economic development – which is especially apparent against the background of its neighbours. For Turkey itself, Iraqi Kurdistan is a field of economic expansion, including in the strategic energy sector (the weakness of the government in Baghdad greatly facilitates this cooperation), as well as a strong buffer on its southern borders inhibiting the expansion of terrorists and (to some extent) counterbalancing the Kurds affiliated with the PKK (which is in fierce competition for predominance with the Barzani family which rules Kurdistan; the PKK enjoys broad support, especially among Turkish Kurds).

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In the present – and in the expected future – balance of forces, Iraqi Kurdistan will have no alternative but to orient itself towards Turkey. Ankara's faith in the power of its instruments has helped some politicians to formulate some opinions, shocking to recent Turkish policy dogmas and regional opinion, of possibly recognising the independence of Kurdistan (which is a *de facto* Turkish protectorate). Despite the far worse relations between Turkey and the Kurds of Rojava, who are directly linked to the PKK, political dialogue is taking place even here, and the scope for a strategic compromise between

Turkey and the Kurds is being examined (open conflict would have very bad consequences for Turkey, and disastrous results for the Kurds).

A separate issue is Turkey's relations with ISIS. Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkish territory has been a major transit route for foreign volunteers going to *jihad* in Syria, and Turkey has been their informal hinterland. Basically, this can be explained as either naivety or incompetence on the part of Turkey's politicians and security forces (under pressure from the West Turkey significantly tightened its security this spring). On the other hand, there have been regular accusations by the Assad regime in Damascus, the authorities in Baghdad, the Syrian Kurds, the Iranian media, and also by the Turkish opposition, informants from the Turkish security services and Western experts that Turkey is actively and consciously supporting the radicals (including ISIS), arming them, providing shelter and medical services, or tolerating oil exports from fields occupied by ISIS in Syria – and in extreme cases, that it is even inspiring their actions (including the recent offensive in Iraq). The charges are part of the chaos of information and immensely popular conspiracy theories which mask the obvious difficulty in interpreting the situation in the region. We can assume that there are very likely to be numerous channels of contact and interdependence between Turkey and ISIS; the continued existence of ISIS is being factored into Turkey's regional policy, and may indirectly enhance Turkey's position in the region (this element limits the Syrian Kurds, and is primarily a problem for Damascus, Baghdad and Turkey's regional rival, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are the main targets of the ISIS operation). Without a doubt, however, ISIS also poses a challenge and a threat to Turkey, as is shown both by the problems of Turkish policy in Syria and the incidents involving the organisation in Turkey, as well as the occupation of the consulate in Mosul and the hostage-taking.

The last key duality in Turkey's approach to the situation in the region stems from the nature of its domestic policy. Although the Turkish public is concerned about the developments in the Middle East, has been feeling the effects of the crisis, and is reluctant to see any active involvement by Turkey, in comparison with Europe it is well used to the volatility of its southern neighbourhood, as well as political violence in its own country (as a result of the bloody and long-standing conflict with the Kurds, a tradition of political and social tensions, and a certain regularity of terrorist attacks in Turkey). However, it is of fundamental importance that since coming to power in 2002, the ruling AKP has won each election with support of at least 40 per cent. Given the fundamental weaknesses of the opposition, the AKP is the clear favourite to win both the presidential election (10 August) and next year's parliamentary elections. The public's relative indifference to the crisis in the Middle East, their genuine support for the government, but also the increasing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey (including limiting access to information) make the government in Ankara fairly resistant to any socio-political pressures to alter its policy, remove it from public debate, and – for better or worse – allow it to plan and implement its strategy in the long term.

Conclusions and prospects

The current crisis in Iraq, which is the current stage of the wider crisis in the Middle East, is posing serious challenges to Turkey. The hypothetical gains (potential to strengthen Ankara's

influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, easier access to local energy resources) do not outweigh the current problems (the issue of the hostages taken by ISIS) and the expected flood of instability onto Turkey's territory. Both the negative result of Turkey's policy towards Syria in recent years, as well as the domestic context (presidential elections in August and parliamentary elections in 2015), mean that Ankara's policy towards Iraq and the region is most likely to be cautious and reactive, if it does not exacerbate the Kurdish problem in Turkey itself.

Neither the shortcomings of its current policy towards the Middle East, nor the risks associated with the dynamic and constantly deteriorating situation in the region, nor a cautious policy towards the region which would be ideal for the Turkish authorities over the next year, mean that Turkey is abandoning its regional ambitions. The country's ruling elite has ambitions to significantly strengthen its position in the Middle East in the long term, and is actively seeking political instruments which will be adequate to the situation.

However, even if the ambitions of Turkey could have been perceived in 2011 as a potential reinforcement for the Middle East policies of the West (the US, NATO, the EU), today this is less and less likely. The crisis in the Middle East is constantly deepening; the West is conducting a less active and consistent policy towards the region, and the community of perception and complementarity in action between the West and Turkey, which is fighting for a better place for itself in the Middle East, becomes weaker.

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