
Normalisation in Ankara-Baghdad Relations: A New Era?

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The Iraqi and Turkish leadership have restored direct contact, thus providing an opportunity for dialogue. However, the extent to which this can lead to a sustainable normalisation process and furthermore to a deepening of their relationship is highly questionable. This policy brief argues that the main problem lies with the fact that a win-win scenario of overlapping or complementary interests does not seem to be driving the leaderships' actions. Instead, it is ad hoc developments external to their bilateral relationship that have a positive effect for the time being, such as the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey, and subsequently a concerted attempt between Russia, Turkey and Iran to stabilise the region.

The tone of Turkish-Iraqi relations since 7 January seems to have changed with the unexpected formal visit of the Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, to Baghdad after a phone call between the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the Iraqi Prime Minister, Hayder Al-Abadi a week before. On his return to Ankara, [Binali](#) announced that “In a nutshell, a new period has started in the Iraqi-Turkish relations. In this period, we will assess closely together all the issues regarding both our economic and political affairs, and security in the context of good neighbourly relations”.

The meeting between the two Prime Ministers took place in the context of the [High Level Strategic Cooperation Council](#) (HLSCC) that was established between the two countries back in 2008. The HLSCC has so far concluded a number of agreements stipulating different types of collaboration in an array of policy areas, including security, energy, economy and bureaucracy. The HLSCC had been convened twice before, with the last meeting taking place in 2014 between the then Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, and the Iraqi Prime Minister, Hayder Al-Abadi. The third HLSCC, which was planned for 2015, never took place due to deteriorating relations between the two leaderships. The acidic statements by the Turkish President, [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), and the Iraqi Prime Minister, [Hayder Al-Abadi](#) were indicative of the new lows in Iraqi-Turkish relations.

These diverse developments beg the questions; first, what induced the two leaderships to seek normalisation at this point in time and, secondly, whether this development marks a sustainable path of growing collaboration over bilateral issues in the field of politics, security, economy and energy. To address these issues one would need to consider the great volatility in Turkish-Iraqi relations in the past few years and [their divergence](#) predominantly in political and security matters, such as the political future of Nineveh and the role of Iraqi armed militias.

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What induced normalisation now?

The concept of normalisation can have many different meanings. In the case of Ankara-Baghdad relations, it signifies the restoration of direct contact between the two leadership without resorting to acrimonious public accusations and the reinstatement of a degree of cooperation. A possible explanation for these developments could be a win-win scenario of bilateral overlapping or complimentary interests in the field of security, politics and economy/energy.

Turkish Interests

From Turkey's perspective, the main focus in Iraq has been on weakening the role of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This became especially central after the PKK and affiliated forces from both Qandil and Syria moved into the Sinjar area in order to create a safe corridor for Yazidis during the Islamic State's assault in August 2014. As a result, the PKK has been influential among the Yazidis whilst establishing at the same time the Yazidi militia Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS). [Turkey](#) is vehemently opposing the creation of a "second Qandil" in Iraq from which the PKK can plan attacks against it. For Turkey, Baghdad's condemnation of the PKK presence in Sinjar, but most importantly its potential presence through the Iraqi Army and the federal police in the area, is key in limiting the PKK's activities.

From a political point of view, the [Turkish leadership](#) is trying to convey regionally but also internationally that it is serious when it purports to increase its number of friends and decrease its enemies after a period of increased tension with Russia, Israel and Baghdad. Most importantly, normalising relations with Baghdad can debunk the idea that it serves a sectarian agenda and therefore strengthen its profile in the Middle East as a source of stability.

In terms of economy/energy, since the [Justice and Development Party](#) (AKP) came into power in 2002 the economy has been one of the main factors determining its foreign policy. Iraq offers a big market for consumption and investment despite the current economic hurdles in both countries. In addition, over time Turkish governments, including [the AKP](#), have tried to turn Turkey into an energy hub. The country could elevate the importance of Ceyhan port by exporting not only Kurdish oil, but also a portion of Baghdad's.

Iraqi Interests

From Baghdad's perspective, the defeat of IS can become a missed opportunity to stabilise Iraq, if the government is not able to engage with the Sunni element in political and economic terms (as already happened with "the Sunni reawakening" of 2006). This includes the future political and legal status of Sunni areas, such as Nineveh and Anbar, and their reconstruction. Towards that end, normalising relations with Turkey is a necessary condition for Abadi's government to build trust with the Sunni element and counterbalance the sectarian discourse and agenda of Nouri al-Maliki - the main contender for the Prime Minister's post in Iraq. In addition, [Turkey](#) can have a positive role in future negotiations over Nineveh in terms of bringing competing local actors to the same negotiating table, such as the KRG the former governor of Nineveh, Atheel Nujaifi, and the government of Baghdad.

Furthermore, Iraq is experiencing a debilitating economic crisis and the [country](#) is in need of loans and foreign direct investment. Despite [the economic instability](#) in Turkey due to the currency volatility and the growing current account deficit, the government forecasts that the economy will grow by 3.2 % this year. In case the forecasts come to fruition, Turkey could potentially provide financial help through loans to Baghdad as it did

in the case of the [Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) (KRI). Moreover, the vibrant private sector of the country could potentially expand its investments beyond the KRI where most of its activities are currently concentrated in Iraq.

The Importance of External Dynamics: Russia and Turkey

However, one could plausibly argue that this scenario of overlapping or complimentary interests could have been realised long before the process of normalisation and certainly they would not justify a period of enmity. Therefore, without suggesting that the aforementioned factors cannot be a basis for deepening the relationship, they do not seem to explain the timing of the normalisation. What, however, seems to have jeopardised the realisation of this scenario is [divisive competition](#) between Turkey and Iran and their respective local actors, such as Erbil and Baghdad, over the political future of Iraq. What seems to have changed this dynamic, however - at least for the moment - is the latest rapprochement between Russia and Turkey and [their close cooperation](#) over the Syrian problem to impose ceasefire on the ground and restart negotiations for its political future in Astana. The [concerted efforts](#) between Russia, Turkey and Iran cannot have any tangible effects on the ground if the competition between Turkey and Iran casts its shadow over Iraq. This would give breathing space to IS as a force that was born and grew in the cracks of sectarianism. In addition, Syria and Iraq are interlinked in a de facto way due to IS existence in both countries. The eradication of IS thus requires synchronised action on both fronts.

How sustainable is this new beginning?

Looking at the results of [the 3rd HLSCC](#) in terms of security and politics, one cannot be very optimistic. There is reluctance on both sides to commit to a tangible and forward-looking agenda. Baghdad made some public statements against the presence of the PKK in Sinjar, but did not commit to any plan to expel the group. Turkey, in turn, made statements about respect for Iraq's unity and sovereignty, but without committing to an unconditional withdrawal of its forces from Bashika. Instead, there was a tacit threat from the [Turkish Prime Minister](#), namely that if Baghdad and Erbil do not force out the PKK in Sinjar, then Ankara may act unilaterally. Finally, Ankara and Baghdad did not come to a conclusion about the role of Iraqi Shia militias in post-IS Nineveh and that of former Mosul governor Atheel Nujaifi and his militia. [The main issues of contention](#) question the internal dynamic of the normalisation process.

For the time being, in the best case scenario, the two leaderships will keep some level of direct contact and cooperation without making antagonistic public statements against each other. However, it is difficult to imagine how they can deepen this relationship. The ad hoc Russian, Turkish and Iranian initiative in Syria seems to be the single dynamic that is affecting the bilateral relationship positively. Therefore, for as long as Russia's actorness in the region brings competing regional countries together and placates their mistrust for each other, it will be possible to retain that level of normalisation.

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