



**Middle East
Research Institute**

www.meri-k.org

Policy Brief

3 January, 2019. Vol. 4, No.27

EU-Turkey policies in Iraq and Syria: Challenges and opportunities for convergence and cooperation

Dlauer Ala'Aldeen*

Turkey is in every way ideally placed to bridge the EU with its southern neighbours and together tackle their common challenges and myriad business opportunities. The question is, can they align priorities and policies to make the most of the opportunities? The answer is: not easily. Given the complexity of and uncertainty in Turkey and Iraq, as well as Syria's security dynamics, sustained EU-Turkey convergence in all areas of common interest is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Although both Turkey and the EU have adopted multifaceted foreign policies vis-a-vis the Middle Eastern countries, yet they have converged only on specific issues, such as dealing with the Iran nuclear deal. Both sides consider the US withdrawal from the deal as a "matter of concern", believing that maintaining the deal and keeping Iran engaged through diplomatic and economic means instead of sanctions or military threats is crucial even after the US withdrawal. Otherwise, Turkey and the EU diverge on the overall approach to the most troubled neighbours, namely Iraq and Syria, which have been sources of grave concern to all.

Iraq continues to be a fragile country, struggling to keep its integrity. The country was at the brink of failure between 2014-2017 after the emergence of the so called Islamic State (IS), and further threatened by the Kurdish referendum for independence in 2017. Iraq was pulled back to survival, mainly by international assistance. Interestingly, in 2018 Iraq saw two transformative general elections, one for the Federal and the other for the Kurdistan Region's Parliament. The outcome of these elections brought about a degree of change in the political landscape, a sense of optimism for future recovery and a clear promise for creating new business opportunities for international partners. However, in keeping with the past, the formation of government in both Baghdad and Erbil became protracted and

* President of MERI, The Middle East Research Institute, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

problematic. These features indicate that the Iraqi leaders remain ill focused on the country's priorities in terms of state-building and provision of services or addressing the root causes of its fragility.

Turkey and the EU share the objectives of accessing Iraq's market and energy supply, and prevent onward migration of the displaced populations. Of course, the EU is to a large extent dependent on Turkey to achieve its goals. Therefore, it would make sense for the two sides to converge and cooperate on these issues. However, Turkey's foreign policies in the southern neighbourhood are driven primarily by its own domestic and border security considerations and - importantly - Turkey sees the economic, political and security issues as inextricable.

While Iraq has lost its state monopoly over legitimate violence and is incapable of securing its borders, Turkey often takes matters into its own hands by invading or intervening in Iraq, both directly and indirectly (through proxies). Of course, the Iraqi government considers Turkey's interventions as acts of aggression and violations of its borders, but is unwilling to take measures against them. For Iraq, Turkey is a regional power and an indispensable neighbour. It has control over part of Iraq's oil exports, water supply and trade routes. The EU, on the other hand, considers Turkey's interventions as acts of self-defence but frowns upon them as destabilising factors, adding to the fragility of Iraq.

In Syria, the political landscape and security dynamics are very different from Iraq, but the EU-Turkish policies follow similar patterns. Syria remains a failed state with its regime struggling to secure survival and regain control over its territories. Meanwhile, Turkey has become increasingly interventionist in Syria via direct military invasion and through proxies, culminating in the occupation of a significant area west of Euphrates, and threatening to occupy the Eastern side too. Turkey has put extreme pressure on the USA for permission to remove the Syrian Democratic Front (SDF) and its lead organisation (Democratic Union Party, PYD) from governing North East Syria (also referred to as Rojava). However, the EU and USA consider the SDF and PYD indispensable in the fight against IS and fear the Turkish interventions may have grave consequences. Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission recently emphasised that "Turkey is a key partner of the EU", and that the EU expect the "Turkish authorities to refrain from any unilateral action likely to undermine the efforts of the Counter-IS Coalition". Therefore, EU-Turkey divergence or even conflict with some EU Member States is possible over Syria.

Article Citation: Ala'Aldeen, Daa (2019) EU-Turkey policies in Iraq and Syria: Challenges and opportunities for convergence and cooperation MERI Policy Brief. vol. 4, no. 27.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of MERI.