



# STALEMATE IN TURKEY'S RELATIONS WITH IRAQ: IRAN-BACKED MILITIA GROUPS

MEHMET ALACA

## INTRODUCTION

**R**elations between Turkey and Iraq have gained significant dynamism in recent years. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the world, US-Iranian tensions, the economic crisis, and the fluc-

tuations in oil prices, the trade volume between the two countries exceeded 20 billion dollars in 2020<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, although the commercial relations between Turkey and Iraq have gained a strong basis, it is very difficult to say that the political relations in the political field have reached a similar level.

<sup>1</sup> "Bağdat Büyükelçisi Yıldız: Irak'la ticaret hacmimiz 2020'de 20 milyar 666 milyon dolar," Anadolu Ajansı, 8 February 2021.

In this period, when the New York Times' published an article titled "Nuri Kamal al-Putin?", al-Maliki's aggressive anti-Turkey and anti-Sunni policies became one of the motivations for Ankara to pursue relations on a local scale, thus forcing Turkey to prioritize relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) over the central government.

That is because the main issue that Ankara has to deal with is the political competition in the country, in addition to many political and security problems that it has to face in Iraq.

The main reason for the difficult political relationship between Turkey and Iraq is that Ankara has to maintain its relations with Baghdad through two different channels. The first of these channels is the legitimate Iraqi government led by the current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, while the other is the pro-Iranian groups that are militarily strong on the ground and are also represented by one of the most influential groups in the parliament. In particular, the competition between these two channels directly affects Turkey's economic, political and military presence in Iraq and its relations with legitimate actors. The course of Ankara's relations with pro-Iranian political and armed groups causes it to exert more effort in its contacts with the Baghdad government. On the other hand, the fact that the course of Turkey's relations with Iran naturally corresponds to this equation is another factor that affects the dynamics.

## SHIFTING RELATIONS WITH THE FIRST CHANNEL

Turkey did not allow the US to enter Iraq through its territory in 2003, thus it could not develop a sufficient presence in Iraq in the first years of the occupation. Despite that, Ankara resumed its activities during the election and constitution-drafting process in 2005 in order to make an active effort to reintegrate the Sunni society, which was excluded from politics after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, into Iraqi politics. Turkey's primary channel of communication with Iraq can be defined as the unstable elected Iraqi governments. Although the relations tend to shift and vary due to the unstable conditions, Ankara took care to maintain dynamic relations with Baghdad.<sup>2</sup>

As of 2005, when Iraq entered a new phase, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist organization according to the US, the UK, and Turkey, resumed its terrorist activities, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Mesut Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, who died in 2017, were unable to develop good

<sup>2</sup> "Türkiye-İrak İlişkilerinin Dönemsel Dinamikleri ve İlişkilerin Geleceği," Bilgay Duman, ORSAM Analiz No: 232, July 2019, p.3-8.



Voting has begun in the polls for the general elections in Iraq. Nouri al-Maliki, Vice President and former Prime Minister of Iraq, cast his vote in the al-Rashid Hotel in the Green Zone, Baghdad.

relations with Turkey. These conditions brought Ankara closer to the Baghdad government. A High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established between the two countries in 2008, during a period when many agreements were made in the fields of security, energy, education, transportation and health. However, while Ankara was initially hopeful that the Sunnis would regain power in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the sectarian politics and pro-Iranian orientation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who took office in 2006-2014, bringing tensions along the Ankara-Baghdad line.

Although the Iraqiyya List led by the secular Shiite leader, Iyad Allawi, which was supported by Turkey against al-Maliki, came first in the elections held in March 2010, the re-appointment of al-Maliki as Prime Minister negatively affected the next four years of

bilateral relations. Desiring to fill the power vacuum that will arise due to the withdrawal of the US from Iraq in 2011, Turkey's desire to strengthen its contacts with the Iraqi Kurds, coinciding with the peace talks it had in the domestic sphere on the solution of the Kurdish issue, further strained relations with the Iraqi central government. In this period, when the New York Times' published an article titled "Nuri Kamal al-Putin?"<sup>3</sup>, al-Maliki's aggressive anti-Turkey and anti-Sunni policies became one of the motivations for Ankara to pursue relations on a local scale, thus forcing Turkey to prioritize relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) over the central government.

The fact that Turkey and Iraq took different approaches to the Syrian civil war, on the other hand, harmed relations between Ankara and Baghdad. In particular, the two ad-

<sup>3</sup> "Nuri Kamal al-Putin?," Kyle Crichton, The New York Times, 18 September 2008.

While the most efficacious period in Ankara-Erbil relations was experienced between 2009 and 2014, the said interval is also recorded as the worst period in Ankara-Baghdad relations.

versaries of the Syrian conflict have become even more distant from each other due to the influence of Iran. Thus, Ankara and Erbil started to establish agreements in the fields of energy and trade<sup>4</sup>. While Turkey added political, economic, and energy dimensions to its security approach towards the KRG, a joint pipeline project was signed between Ankara and Erbil, which enables the export of oil to Turkey independent of the Baghdad government<sup>5</sup>. In addition, relations have deepened even further when hundreds of Turkish companies started operating in the region. In the political sphere, former KRG President and KDP leader Masoud Barzani became one of the biggest supporters and mediators of Turkey's ongoing Kurdish peace process<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the Erbil government, which was also affected by regional geopolitical dynamics between 2007-2014, when energy and political co-operation intensified, turned to Ankara in order to balance the Baghdad government, with which it was experiencing tensions due to its policy of autonomy and against Tehran due to

worries about its hegemony<sup>7</sup>.

While the most efficacious period in Ankara-Erbil relations was experienced between 2009 and 2014, the said interval is also recorded as the worst period in Ankara-Baghdad relations. Al-Maliki's sectarian policies deepened the social fault lines in Iraq while demands for autonomy emerged in Sunni-dominated regions such as Mosul, Anbar and Saladin. Furthermore, violent protests against al-Maliki started at the end of 2012 in Mosul, Saladin, Kirkuk, Anbar, and Diyala, where the majority of Sunnis live. As a matter of fact, al-Maliki's desire to control the security bureaucracy in the last period of his prime ministry, as well as his sectarian policies, caused a security vacuum that opened up space for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). In June 2014, when ISIS, a terror group that emerged as an offshoot of al Qaeda in 2014, captured Mosul, the Iraqi army left the city and fled, leading ISIS taking control of almost a third of the country. Despite this negative scene, al-Maliki did not give up his insis-

<sup>4</sup> "Iraq's Maliki threatens to cut funds if Kurds pipe oil to Turkey," Reuters, 12 January 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "Finding a way forward in the Baghdad-Erbil oil dispute," Omar Al-Nidawi, Middle East Institute, 6 March 2019; "Erbil, Ankara Finalize 'Historic' Oil Pipeline Agreement," Rudaw, 7 November 2013; "Turkey and Iraq's Kurds agree a 50-year energy deal," Middle East Eye, 12 February 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Iraq's Kurdistan backs Turkey peace efforts," Aljazeera, 17 November 2013.

<sup>7</sup> "Enerji ve Güvenlik Ekseninde Türkiye-İrak İlişkileri (1990-2018)," Tolga Demiryol & Hasan Deniz Pekşen, Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi, Cilt: 5, Sayı: 2, pp.127-157, p.130.





President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi of Iraq.

tence on being the prime minister for a third term, yet he had to leave his office to Haider al-Abadi.

Although the emergence of ISIS changed the priorities of the parties, the KRG's oil exports to Turkey via the Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, independently from Baghdad, not only strained Ankara's relations with Baghdad, but also contributed to Erbil's desire for economic independence. Abadi, who became prime minister in September 2014 on this legacy, was unable to progress in his relations with Ankara on a healthy basis in the early periods of his term. On the other hand, the fact that Abadi had to shoulder the negative legacy left behind by Maliki also affected his approach to Ankara. In addition

to these, the deployment of Turkish soldiers to the Bashiqa military base near Mosul in December 2015 escalated the tension between the two countries<sup>8</sup>. Turkey provided training support to the KRG's Peshmerga forces, as well as Sunni and Turkmen groups that joined the anti-ISIS coalition by sending 700 troops to Bashiqa. However, Abadi demanded Turkish soldiers be withdrawn from Iraqi territory to preserve the sovereignty of his country, despite the knowledge of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense about the Turkish soldiers. In addition, when the Baghdad government brought the Bashiqa issue to the agenda of the United Nations (UN), it was decided that the issue was to be resolved between the parties involved<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> "Iraqi PM says Turkey not respecting agreement to withdraw troops," Reuters, 30 December 2015.

<sup>9</sup> "BMGK'dan 'Irak'taki Türk askeri' kararı," Habertürk, 19 December 2015.

However, the independence referendum of the KRG in 2017 caused Ankara's predominantly local policy to completely turn towards Baghdad.

In addition to the reaction of the Iraqi government, Iran also stated that the Turkish army did not have the authorization to enter Iraq. In this process, the umbrella formation of the militia groups in Iraq, the Hashd al-Shaabi, which is a new phenomenon that Turkey had to face in Iraq, started to emerge. The pro-Iranian militia groups operating under the Hashd al-Shaabi, which was established to fight against ISIS, played a significant role in consolidating and bifurcating the existing instability between Ankara and Baghdad.

However, the independence referendum of the KRG in 2017 caused Ankara's predominantly local policy to completely turn towards Baghdad. The disapproval of the referendum by both sides with a common discourse and even the joint operations on the Turkey-Iraq border played an important role in the restructuring of Ankara's relations with Baghdad<sup>10</sup>. In addition, a common stance against Erbil was declared to the public when Prime Minister Abadi visited Ankara, shortly after Iraqi security forces seized almost all of the dis-

puted territories between Erbil and Baghdad, including Kirkuk, from the KRG on October 16, 2017. Therefore, Ankara, which developed its relations with Erbil in order to balance Baghdad during the al-Maliki period, began to adopt a policy that considers the two actors as complementary to each other rather than as alternatives. As of that period, relations have strengthened considerably. In fact, at the International Conference on the Reconstruction of Iraq held in Kuwait in February 2018, Ankara committed \$5 billion USD to Baghdad<sup>11</sup>.

Economic and political relations between Ankara and Baghdad, which developed rapidly after 2017, also increased during the short term of office of Adil Abdul Mahdi, the successor of Abadi, between October 2018 and May 2020. Mutual visits<sup>12</sup>, which increased during the term of Abdul Mahdi, also left a positive scene for the period of Mustafa al-Kadhimi. As a matter of fact, al-Kadhimi, who took office in May 2020, signed the "Agreement to Prevent Double Taxation in Income Taxes and Prevent Tax Evasion" and

<sup>10</sup> "Iraqi and foreign reactions to Kurdish referendum plan," Rudaw, 9 June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> "Turkey to provide \$5 billion in credit for Iraqi reconstruction," Hurriyet Daily News, 14 February 2018.

<sup>12</sup> "President Erdoğan, Iraqi PM Abdul-Mahdi discuss bilateral ties in Ankara," Daily Sabah, 15 May 2019.

"Cultural Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding" between the two countries during his visit to Ankara with a large delegation in December 2020. Furthermore, it was announced that the Iraq High Level Strategic Cooperation Council meeting would be held<sup>13</sup>. It was also stated that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would visit Iraq during al-Kadhimi's visit, where cooperation in the fight against terrorism was discussed. However, while the political and military contacts between the two countries are getting stronger, the actions/alliances of the Iran-backed Shiite militias turn into a more serious problem in Ankara's relations with Baghdad.

## COMPETITION WITH THE SECOND CHANNEL

Although Turkey has recently developed good relations with the prime ministers and governments in Iraq, these relations cannot be permanent due to the instability of the cabinets in Baghdad. That is because the Iran-backed Shiite political and militia groups in Iraq, where there are efforts to transform into a second

Iran, affect the decision-making mechanisms, as well as provoke the tension areas between the regional powers. Pro-Iranian militias, which can be described as the second channel in Iraq, are targeting Ankara's military presence in the north of the country in order to disrupt its fight against the PKK and training efforts against ISIS. It is underlined that pro-Iranian militias are becoming a permanent phenomenon that interferes with/obstructs the course of relations that Ankara is trying to establish with the governments in Baghdad. Although Prime Minister al-Kadhimi prioritizes the sovereignty of Iraq and desires to limit Iran's influence in the country, and creates a positive attitude toward Turkey, the continued influence of Iran-backed forces seems to narrow Turkey's long-term range of action in Iraq<sup>14</sup>.

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the eight-year Prime Minister's term of Nouri al-Maliki and the emergence of ISIS allowed Iran and the Iran-backed groups to play an active role in Iraq. The Hashd al-Shaabi, which was established upon the call of the greatest Shiite

Although Prime Minister al-Kadhimi prioritizes the sovereignty of Iraq and desires to limit Iran's influence in the country, and creates a positive attitude toward Turkey, the continued influence of Iran-backed forces seems to narrow Turkey's long-term range of action in Iraq.

<sup>13</sup> "Ne Türkiye'nin ne Irak'ın ne de Suriye'nin geleceğinde bölücü teröre asla yer yoktur," Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 17 December 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "Terror, water, stability: Turkey, Iraq revive ties," Muhittin Ataman, Daily Sabah, 23 December 2020.

Iran-backed militia groups started to gain a foothold in local and regional geopolitics as they received increasing support in the field and politics as a result of their effective struggle against ISIS.



The Shiite militia and the Iraqi Army clashed with ISIS in Nebai, North of Baghdad.

authority in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as the umbrella organization of militias from various factions in June 2014, initially achieved significant progress against ISIS together with the US and the international coalition forces. Afterwards, the group came under the influence of Iranian-backed militias over time. As a matter of fact, after the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the disagreements between the Iran-backed militias and the US forces sparked tensions, which led to the killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Head of the Hashd al-Shaabi delegation, and the Iranian commander, Qassem Soleimani, as a result of the American attack in Baghdad in January 2020. The US also

included most of the militia groups or leaders within the Hashd al-Shaabi in the terrorist/sanction list and decided to impose sanctions on the Chairman of the Hashd al-Shaabi delegation, Faleh al-Fayyad, within the scope of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The successor of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the Hashd al-Shaabi's Chief of Staff, Abu Fadak, was designated on the Special Global Terrorist List<sup>15</sup>. In this sense, although Turkey's relationship with the Hashd al-Shaabi shifts in this dynamic picture, Turkey's presence in Iraq drew further criticism/inconvenience from the militias over time.

Iran-backed militia groups started to gain a foothold in lo-

<sup>15</sup> "Leveraging U.S. Sanctions on Faleh al-Fayyad," Michael Knights, The Washington Institute, 8 January 2021; "The U.S. Designation of Kataib Hezbollah's Abu Fadak," Michael Knights, The Washington Institute, 13 January 2021.



cal and regional geopolitics as they received increasing support in the field and politics as a result of their effective struggle against ISIS. Especially in 2016, when the Baghdad government decided to integrate the Hashd al-Shaabi into the security forces, with a view to reining in the pro-Iranian militia, Iran's already existing influence on the Iraqi security mechanism was further reinforced<sup>16</sup>. In addition, political groups supported by pro-Iranian militias reaped the fruits of their contacts with society during the fight against ISIS in the elections. The Fatah Alliance, formed by these forces, obtained a decision-making position in the Iraqi Parliament as the second coalition that won the most seats in the May 2018 elections, and indirectly boosted Iran's influence on the Iraqi political scene<sup>17</sup>. This situation hinders Turkey's pursuit of expanding its political, diplomatic and economic influence in Iraq, which is at completely different poles in the regional equation, although it does not have a direct confrontation with Iran.

The pro-Iranian forces, which try to prevent Turkey

from legitimizing its military presence in Iraq with the diplomatic ties established with Erbil and Baghdad, are displeased with the fact that a foreign country is taking action without their consent in Iraq. In fact, rocket and unmanned aerial vehicle assaults against the US and international forces, which have increased in recent years, especially after the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis in the American air strike in Baghdad, can be considered as clear examples of this situation. Consistent with its doctrine of eradicating terrorism in its roots, Turkey recently strengthened its military bases in northern Iraq and expanded its operations against the PKK on a large scale<sup>18</sup>. In addition to its military bases in Iraq, Turkey's hardening stance against the PKK presence in Sinjar, —a strategic district of the Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq— also disturbs the pro-Iranian militias. That is because Sinjar is on a critical route for the access of the Iran-backed militias to Syria, and they prioritize keeping Turkey's influence away from Sinjar. In particular, Ankara supports the agreement signed

The anti-Turkey attitude of the militia groups, which are under the Hashd al-Shaabi but act outside its chain of command, has started to become remarkably aggressive, as Turkey expanded its area of operations in northern Iraq within the framework of the fight against the PKK and signaled an operation against Sinjar.

<sup>16</sup> "Iraqi parliament recognizes Shiite Hashd as official force with army privileges," Rudaw, 26 November 2016.

<sup>17</sup> "Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response," Phillip Smyth, The Washington Institute, 11 June 2018.

<sup>18</sup> "Maximum Pressure: Turkey's Anti-PKK Counter-Terrorism Campaigns in Northern Iraq," Can Kasapoglu, Terrorism Monitor Volume: 19 Issue:9, The Jamestown Foundation, 7 May 2021.



The commemoration ceremony on the first anniversary of the killing of Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Deputy Head of the Hashd al-Shaabi delegation on January 3, 2020 in Baghdad.

between Baghdad and Erbil in October 2020, which aims to expel PKK and Hashd al-Shaabi forces from the region with a view to “restoring stability and normalizing conditions” in Sinjar. In fact, Turkish President Erdogan has made it clear for a long time now that Sinjar will never be allowed to become a “second Qandil”, referring to the PKK’s main headquarters<sup>19</sup>. That is because the tactical alliance between the Hashd al-Shaabi and the PKK in Sinjar is not a secret. It is known that members of the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) close to the PKK receive payments from Hashd al-Shaabi<sup>20</sup>.

The anti-Turkey attitude of the militia groups, which are under the Hashd al-Shaabi but act outside its chain of command, has started to become remarkably aggressive, as Turkey expanded its area of operations in northern Iraq within the framework of the fight against the PKK and signaled an operation against Sinjar. Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq threatened to go to war with Turkey if Ankara made a move in Sinjar<sup>21</sup>. Immediately afterwards, a message was conveyed to Turkey regarding its political, military, and economic presence in Iraq when an attack was launched against the Bashiqa military base

<sup>19</sup> “Erdogan says Sinjar will not be ‘new Qandil’ for PKK,” Anadolu Agency, 27 October 2016.

<sup>20</sup> “The Making of the Kurdish Frontier: Power, Conflict, and Governance in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderlands,” Harith Hasan & Kheder Khaddour, Carnegie Middle East Center, 30 March 2021.

<sup>21</sup> “Iran-backed militia leader threatens to take up arms against Turkey,” Daily Sabah, 7 March 2021.

near Mosul on April 14, 2021<sup>22</sup>. Even though there was no overt claim of responsibility for the attack on Bashiqa, Deputy Governor of Mosul Rafet Simo's statement that the missile launch pads targeting the base were located in the control area of the 30th Brigade of Hashd al-Shaabi, between the Shalalat and Baveza regions, indicates that Iran-backed militia groups are responsible<sup>23</sup>. Considering that Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's tacit consent to Turkey's operations creates discomfort for pro-Iranian groups, they seek to prevent Ankara and Baghdad from reaching a compromise on the fight against terrorism. The pro-Iran militias' wide range of attacks and targeting of Turkey's Bashiqa Base not only shows that the threats against Ankara have transformed from rhetoric to reality. The groups also aim to give a message to the Turkish public with their published videos in the Turkish language. In fact, the Harakat al-Nujaba, affiliated with the Hashd al-Shaabi, stated in the video that *"We, as people's resistance movement, are directly addressing the Turkish citizens, the media and their parties. Stop the Erdogan government before it's too late. Do not allow the experience of the coffins of colonial America to be repeated for your children. We really do not want the conflict to be carried into your country."*<sup>24</sup> The tone of threat indicates that the propaganda activities have moved to different dimensions and that will continue in the new period.

It could be argued that as long as Turkey's presence in northern Iraq does not spread to the sovereignty/control areas of Iran and the

Iran-backed militia groups, it does not pose a threat or require priority. The main purpose of the Iranian-backed militias is to prevent Turkish soldiers and Peshmerga forces from approaching Sinjar, thereby setting limits. In this sense, pro-Iranian militias are trying to convey the message with the Bashiqa attack and their threats that Turkey's possible moves will have consequences, and that Turkey is not safe in Iraq. In addition, while Sinjar is a critical region for Iran's access to its militia network in Syria, it is also an important transit area for the PKK from Qandil to its northern Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), therefore, and it is a priority for Turkey to remove the PKK from the region. As a matter of fact, Turkey's recent point-blank operations against top PKK figures killed the PKK's Makhmur Officer, Hasan Adir, near Makhmur Camp on 11 June, and Said Hasan, one of the organization's influential figures in Sinjar, on 16 August. These operations show that Turkey keeps the region under surveillance and does not give up<sup>25</sup>.

However, the tactical cooperation of Hashd al-Shaabi militia groups with the PKK in the region forces Turkey to make a series of decisions that include confrontation with the Hashd al-Shaabi. When evaluating its decision, Turkey considers relations with Iran and the well-being of its contacts with Baghdad. That is because the Hashd al-Shaabi pro-Iranian militia groups that are active in Sinjar, such as Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat al-Nujaba, operate as an official element of the Iraqi

<sup>22</sup> "Iraq's Militias Send a Warning to Turkey," Mehmet Alaca & Bekir Aydogan, Fair Observer, 28 April 2021.

<sup>23</sup> "Başika üssüne yönelik saldırıda kullanılan fırlatma rampaları Haşdi Şabi bölgesinde bulundu," Anadolu Ajansı, 15 April 2021.

<sup>24</sup> "Haşdi Şabi'ye bağlı grup, Türkçe video ile Türkiye'yi tehdit etti: Türkiye ile İran arasındaki rekabet hali Irak'ta çok daha sert karşılık bulacak," Independent Turkish, 11 August 2021.

<sup>25</sup> "MIT'in nokta operasyonu ile KCK'nın sözde Mahmur sorumlusu etkisiz hale getirildi," Anadolu Ajansı, 11 June 2021; "SiHA'lardan nokta atışı: PKK'nın Sincar'daki en tepe isim öldürüldü," Sabah, 16 August 2021.

While the governments that came to power after 2003 in Iraq could not recover from the cycle of instability, the increasingly powerful pro-Iranian militia groups continue to be the main factor that determines Iraq's relations with other countries.

security forces. A rather complicated picture seems to have emerged as Ankara's tension with the Hashd al-Shaabi due to its relations with the PKK in a possible Sinjar operation may bring Ankara into confrontation with Baghdad. In this context, any attempt by Turkey to establish relations with or respond to Iranian-backed armed groups will affect the course of its relations with the Iraqi government, which has serious problems with the pro-Iranian militias within the Hashd al-Shaabi.

On the other hand, it would be an incomplete inference to relate Turkey's confrontation with pro-Iranian forces in Iraq only to the dynamics in Iraq. Even though Turkey enjoys good historical and economic relations with Iran, further regional geopolitical confrontation with Tehran affects the attitude of the militias in Iraq. The harsh rhetoric of pro-Iranian forces in Iraq should be viewed in the context of the ongoing rivalry between Ankara and Tehran on other foreign policy issues, including Syria and Azerbaijan. As a matter of fact, Iran's Baghdad Ambassador, Iraj Masjidi's criticism of Turkey for violating Iraq's sovereignty in February shows

how the official discourse and the statements of the militias overlap<sup>26</sup>. In this context, it can be expected that the relations between the parties, which are stuck in other regions, will resonate in Iraq in the upcoming period.

### THE POSSIBILITY OF PRESERVING THE DELICATE BALANCE IN THE RELATIONS

While the governments that came to power after 2003 in Iraq could not recover from the cycle of instability, the increasingly powerful pro-Iranian militia groups continue to be the main factor that determines Iraq's relations with other countries. The fact that the pro-Iranian groups, despite the awareness that encountering Turkey in a possible operation will cause heavy costs, increasing their tough stance, the dose of threats and attacks against Turkey's military presence, bears traces of the future and dimensions of the Iran-Turkey tensions. While Turkey pays attention to the sovereignty of Iraq and observes the conjuncture for responding to the militias, which are the legal elements of the Iraqi security mechanism, it also does not want to harm its relations with Iran, which is po-

<sup>26</sup> "Turkey must leave Iraq, respect borders: Iranian ambassador," Rudaw, 27 February 2021.

sitioned at the intersection of this equation. For this reason, Ankara regularly prefers to give a message of cooperation with Baghdad in the current tensions. However, if attacks against Turkey's presence continue, it will be inevitable for Turkey to settle accounts with uncontrolled pro-Iranian groups. On the other hand, Turkey should also take into account that relations with the current Prime Minister al-Kadhimi and Baghdad governments may be temporary, while Iran-backed groups are likely to be permanent in the country in the longer term.

Although pro-Iranian militia groups directly target Turkey with their actions and rhetoric, Ankara will seek to resolve the issue at a state-to-state level. Therefore, easy development/normalization of relations with these actors does not seem likely in the short term. That is because, while the current Baghdad government is insufficient in dealing with militia groups, it should be taken into account that the possible tension and regional rivalry between Ankara and Tehran will have a response through the proxy forces in Iraq. For this reason, it should be evaluated that while Turkey is in confrontation with Iran in areas such as Azerbaijan and Syria, the mode of its relations with Gulf States or Israel will also provide challeng-

es to its presence in Iraq. Therefore, while Turkey cannot develop stable relations with pro-Iranian forces, it may opt for balancing pro-Iranian forces by developing relations with all communities in Iraq, such as Sunnis, Kurds or non-affiliated Shiites. In this context, it might be beneficial to develop contacts with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the greatest Shiite religious authority in Iraq, with a supra-sectarian discourse, as well as with Shiite actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim and Haider al-Abadi, who are relatively distant to Iran in this context.

On the other hand, Turkey can use its relations with Iran to limit the negative impact of Iran-backed political and armed groups on Ankara-Baghdad relations, knowing that Iran has ultimate power over these groups. However, since Iran is in a regional confrontation with Turkey, it will not be willing to try to rein in these groups. Therefore, Ankara may initiate back-channel diplomacy with leaders of Iran-backed political and armed groups, with a view to forming a limited way to circumvent crises with less damage. If Ankara fails to achieve that, its bilateral relations with Baghdad may prove to be fragile in the long run despite a positive dynamic in the short run.



## About the Author

### Mehmet Alaca

Mr. Mehmet Alaca is engaged in academic studies on Iraq, regional Kurdish politics, and Shia militias in the Middle East. He has worked for various media organizations and think-tanks.

He received his bachelor's degree from Istanbul University's Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Sciences, and obtained his master's degree in Politics and International Relations of the Middle East at Exeter University in Great Britain.

His works have been published in many national and international media organs, particularly The Washington Institute, The German Marshall Fund, LSE Middle East Center, The New Arab, Fair Observer, E-International Relations, Anadolu Agency-Analysis, and Daily Sabah. He is currently a diplomatic correspondent at Anadolu Agency and a non-resident fellow at ORSAM.



### Copyright

#### Ankara - TURKEY ORSAM © 2021

Content of this publication is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this publication reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.

#### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA  
**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20  
**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr  
**Photo** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)