

Kurdish leaders see Turkey as their strategic depth

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Suleimania airport, its surroundings and the roads leading to it are crowded with people in anticipation for the arrival of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani from his medical treatment that lasted over two weeks. In the absence of Kurdistan Regional Government President Massoud Barzani, who was away in Saudi Arabia as an official guest of the king, the prime minister of the regional administration, Nechervan Barzani leads the reception committee.

After seeing us, he asks, *"How huge a priority are the elections for the Turkish government?"* I say, "It is the top priority. There is nothing more important." *"Don't you think there will be some progress on problems that concern us in the near future?"* The way he asks the question gives me the impression that he desires some sort of dialog between them and Turkey as soon as possible. The failure to hold the meeting between Nechervan Barzani and Turkey's Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, or more appropriately its suspension for the foreseeable future left a bitter taste among Kurdish leaders here. I had listened to both Nechervan Barzani and Massoud Barzani's foreign policy advisor the day before on how much importance they had attached to the meeting. I had learned that Nechervan Barzani had prepared for the meeting with no strings attached and an open mind. It was said that at the meeting, Barzani was supposed to present a *"very interesting"* package full of concrete proposals. The details were kept from us and probably no one will know until the meeting actually takes place.

However, we have an idea about what the priority of Barzani was. Instead of the expected Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Kirkuk issue, we know the Kurdish administration has a higher priority. The reason why the PKK is not a priority is that if Turkey asks them to fight against it, they'll want nothing to do with it. Kurdish Parliament Spokesman Adnan Mufti said: *"We won't fight the PKK but we don't help them either."* When we remind Mufti that pesmerga forces linked to both Talabani and Barzani had helped the Turkish military in its fight against the PKK in the 1990s, he says, *"The reason why we fought against the PKK then was its efforts to dominate the entire region."* In other words, as long as the PKK doesn't form a threat to the Kurdish authority in northern Iraq, they'll have no urge to strike at them. One person who has been following the developments in the region for some time said, *"If the PKK had been a threat to them, northern Iraqi Kurds wouldn't have wasted a second going after them,"* noting that he believed the PKK was too weak to constitute a threat.

There are also other reasons why Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq don't go after the PKK. According to the information we collected in the region:

1. Iraqi Kurdish leaders are not too sure about the determination of Turkey to fight the PKK. They don't see Turkey taking any risks and are suspicious about it asking them to do so. The reason why they feel this way is the apparent ease with which jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, incarcerated in the İmralı Island in Marmara Sea, can manage the group.
2. While not openly voiced, they want to keep the PKK as a trump card against Turkey as long as the bilateral relations remain aggressive.
3. The most important reason is their fear of the PKK. While the PKK is not a threat to their authority in northern Iraq, it still has the capability to create instability in the region if attacked.
4. Iraqi Kurdistan is not immune to the rising nationalist fervor dominating the region, especially Turkey.

In this context, the PKK is perceived as part of the *“national political structure,”* and Kurdish leaders don’t want to be seen divided at a time when Iraq is dominated by a Sunni-Shiite clash.

So what would have Barzani offered to Gül if they had met? Massoud Barzani’s political advisor said, *“All Kurdish leaders know that Turkey provides them with a strategic depth.”* This can be understood as: *“Sunni Arabs have the Arab world, Shiites have Iran and Kurds have Turkey.”* No matter how suspicious Turkey is of Iraqi Kurds, this is a geo-political fact. It appears what Nechervan Barzani really wanted to discuss with Gül was what would happen if Iraq is divided and Iraqi Kurdistan suddenly found itself on Turkey’s lap. Barzani was then going to make an *“interesting proposal,”* depending on the way the discussion went. Despite the current focus on the election, Turkey needs to make time to deal with its *“strategic problems.”* While doing this, we should be careful not to deceive ourselves and see facts as they are.

The Iraqi region neighboring Turkey is called Kurdistan. But it is also northern Iraq. Northern Iraq also includes Mahmur, Mosul and even Kirkuk, but these provinces are not Kurdistan. Kurdistan, according to the Iraqi constitution, is formed of the provinces of Dohuk, Arbil and Suleimania. It is not the *“so-called Kurdistan.”* It is truly Kurdistan with its institutions, border controls, flag and most importantly its right to make agreements on oil exploration and exploitation. If Turkey does not create links to Kurdistan via north Iraq, it won’t have any reach to the rest of the Middle East and will find it hard to maintain internal stability.