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Interpretation of Turkish anger over KRG President Masoud Barzani:

The region has recently witnessed an unprecedented state of liquidity and accelerated events, which was remarkably reflected by the speedy changes in attitudes, alliances, and alignments, especially with regard to Turkey.

Two years ago, Ankara and Moscow were on the brink of war, but today they are cooperating and coordinating with each other in Syria, in addition to Turkey's purchase of the S400 missile system, which has angered its Western allies.

Also, in 2015, the official Turkish discourse criticized "Iran's expansionist policies on sectarian and ethnic grounds", to which the Iranian chief of staff responded by threatening to make "Syria a grave for the Turks". However, the two sides have recently achieved a remarkable convergence following the Gulf crisis and the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan Region Government (KRG).

But what is more striking is the relationship between Ankara and Erbil, which has changed 180 degrees in just a few months. Prior to the attack on Iraq's Mosul, Barzani was closer to Turkey than the central government in Baghdad, which then considered Turkey an "occupation force". But today, both sides are conducting military exercises on the border to pressurize their joint rival 'Barzani'.

Over the past years, Ankara's good relations with Erbil have aroused astonishment compared with its tense relations with the Democratic Unionist Party (PYD) in northern Syria, although both of them are almost seeking the same goal. The reason behind this is the state of rivalry/difference between Barzani and the Kurdistan Workers' Party

(PKK). However, the PYD is considered the Syrian offspring of the PKK, in addition to the good economic relations between Turkey and Barzani.

But since his early talk about the referendum, the Turkish discourse towards Barzani has completely changed and Ankara even threatened of intervening militarily against the Kurdistan Region Government (KRG), severed economic relations and closed the border crossing.

How can this radical change be interpreted?

First: The Turkish attitude towards the referendum on the independence of Kurdistan region is strongly related to its main goal. Turkey considered the KRG's secession track a regional event – not only a domestic Iraqi matter – as this step has its extensions in Turkey and other regional countries inhabited by the Kurds, especially in light of the recent developments in the Kurdish scene in Syria. In fact, this is not a theory of conspiracy, dependence on pure history, or citation of the Kurdish national dreams over decades, but it has much evidence in the current context, most notably: the inclusion of some Turkish provinces within “Kurdistan” borders in the weather forecast of Kurdistan region's Rudaw TV channel, which drew sharp criticism in Turkey (although it was not an emergency development), and the channel was removed from the Turksat satellite a few days ago. Therefore, Turkey seems very firm and sharp in rejecting the KRG's referendum for its possible negative repercussions on its internal Kurdish file.

Second: The Turkish statements, warnings and threats were mostly aimed at persuading Barzani to cancel / postpone the referendum. In fact, Ankara holds strong pressure cards on Barzani, including: the good trade relations, the Turkish military

presence in the region, the Turkish investments there, and the region's oil exports through the Turkish territory.

Third: Some articles and discussions say that Ankara is not very dissatisfied with the independence track of Iraqi Kurdistan region, which it believes will be reached one day. Therefore, Turkey is interested in maintaining good political and economic relations with it, but the current sharp attitude is only intended to satisfy the Turkish street, especially the national trend, under the political coalition between the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the imminent municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections in 2019.

Fourth: In fact, this interpretation is most likely for me so far – that Ankara was annoyed by Barzani's unilateral step that he has taken without consulting the Turkish government. Turkey had strengthened relations with Barzani, supported him, and provided arms and training to the Peshmerga ... etc. Also, Barzani may have pledged not to go to the referendum or the track of secession through a unilateral decision. This may explain Erdogan's talk about the “betrayal” represented by the referendum process without reference to his country.

Fifth: This interpretation can be put side by side with the previous one – that Turkey improved relations with Barzani and the Kurdistan region over the past years despite its awareness of the intentions and dreams of Iraqi Kurds as long as it is capable of aborting the path of independence and secession at any time, through: blocking oil exports, freezing trade and economic relations, and closing the common borders, especially as Baghdad and Tehran also reject this option. Therefore, Turkey's



maintaining of good relations with Barzani were only an incentive for him to stay within the federal Iraq. At the same time, Ankara has always been confident of its ability to undermine all the attributes of statehood if Barzani made such a decision, due to almost complete dependence of the Kurdistan region's economy on its relationship with Turkey. Perhaps this partly explains Erdogan's hint that the region would "starve" if the Turkish trucks stopped going there.

Anyway, Ankara continues to insist that Barzani should be "wise" and give up this path regardless of the referendum that has already been held. While Turkey suggests Barzani's dialogue with Baghdad as a solution to the crisis, it also threatens to impose economic, political, diplomatic and military sanctions against the Kurdistan region, in response to the occurrence of any undue developments such as border demarcation and / or harming the Turkmens and / or changing the status of Kirkuk.

In view of the recent statements, Barzani seems willing to engage in dialogue while he is armed with the referendum result. However, Baghdad wants Barzani to ignore the referendum completely. Therefore, it is logical to expect that the Turkish decisions will be shaped according to the course of the crisis itself and Barzani's choices in this context. But the most important question for Ankara is:

Does Turkey's interest lie in undermining the idea of the Kurdish state in Iraq even if it lost Barzani?

Or: Should Turkey avoid escalation in this regard, as weakening Barzani could strengthen and encourage his alternatives and rivals, particularly the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party, and Iran's ally, Talabani?

This is a fundamental challenge whose analysis and dismantling may contribute to predicting the course of the crisis in the future, which we will attempt to answer in the coming article.