The Turkish Factor in Syria and Iraq

In response to Turkey’s recent policy in the Levant, criticism against Ankara’s actions is growing in the region.

For example, at the end of July, the al-Nasr coalition in the Iraqi parliament called to end all Turkish interference in Iraq’s internal affairs, especially the Turkish military occupation and other forms of interference in politics, security, and economic affairs of the country. Al-Nasr is led by former Iraqi Shiite Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who criticizes Turkey’s military presence on Iraq’s border. He expresses particular concern about the statements and actions of Turkish pro-government groups seeking to restore Turkish control over Kirkuk and Mosul.

Many other Iraqi politicians have expressed disappointment over the Turkey-Iran scandal after Iranian diplomats said Ankara was undermining Iraqi sovereignty. At the same time, official Baghdad itself seems to have sided with Tehran. The statement made by the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic in Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, publicly stressed that the leadership of his country is categorically against the Turkish intervention in Iraq. He also called on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to withdraw his military presence on the territory of that state and to respect the international borders. What made these remarks particularly irritating in Ankara was that they were made in an interview with the Kurdish news agency Rudaw. The Turkish Foreign Ministry then took the scandal to the diplomatic arena by providing a formal submission to the Iranian Ambassador in Ankara, Mohammad Ferazmend. And Turkish Ambassador to Baghdad Fatih Yildiz has publicly stated that Tehran will be the last to deliver a lecture
This scandal was preceded by harsh statements by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif about Syria. However, in recent years, there has been a close tactical partnership between the two countries and the Iranian side some time ago, according to unconfirmed reports, supported the Turkish actions against Kurdish fighters, a threat to Tehran too. Thus, according to some media reports, in February, Mohammad Javad Zarif called Turkey’s approach to build relations with neighboring Arab states erroneous. “We reject Turkey’s military presence in Syria and Iraq and consider Ankara’s policy toward Damascus and Baghdad to be wrong,” Zarif said. Iran and Turkey’s disagreement over regional politics is most notable in Syria, where Turkey supports the Syrian opposition in the civil war that began in 2011, while Iran fully supports the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

However, it seems that the time comes when Tehran and Ankara diverge. Now Iran seems to have refused to support more Turkish operations in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan and has tightened its approach to Turkish influence in Sinjar, where the Yazidi branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party operates. Turkey has expanded its presence and bases in the Kurdish region in recent years against the background of operations against the KWP. Last October, an agreement was reached between Erbil and Baghdad to remove Iranian-backed KWP-loyal militias from Sinjar, which Turkey supported, but Iran and the KWP strongly opposed. Even though Turkey and Iran form a tactical alliance and, together with Russia, are part of the “Astana format” of the Syrian settlement, analysts believe that the contradictions between the two Middle Eastern states can only worsen over time. The potential for conflict has increased by goals shaped by shared geography, although neither country openly seeks confrontation.

Cairo has also joined in the Arab opposition to Turkey’s moves in Syria over the past year. The leaders of Egypt and Iraq, Fattah al-Sisi and Barham Saleh respectively, believe that the Turkish counter-terrorism operation, directed primarily against the Kurds, only worsens the crisis in the region, with a negative impact on the territorial integrity of Syria, its regional security, as well as the course of the political process. Egypt and Iraq hold regular bilateral consultations to support Arab efforts to counter this move by Turkey and preserve the integrity and unity of Syria.

Recently, a particular reason for accusing Ankara was deploying additional military groups in Syria and Iraq “to fight against the Kurdish militias” and constructing two military bases there. At the same time, the regional media began to report that Turkey, not without the apparent participation of London and Washington, allegedly establishes control over oil supplies from Syria to Iraq for the United States and from Iraq and Syria to Turkey. Moreover, the Turkish military base in Iraq, located at the intersection of the two streams in Mosul, allegedly plays an active role in this.

According to the Defense Outlook 2017 report published by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) of the United Kingdom, Turkey is the second most active army overseas after the United States, with several military bases in the region. In Iraq, for example, Turkey has several military bases in various cities of that country, which Ankara explains by “the fight against the Kurdish group of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.” Of these, the Bashika base stands out, which causes disputes between the leadership of Turkey and Iraq from time to time. The number of Turkish troops is 2,500. Back in 2017, Baghdad said that Turkey would withdraw its troops from Bashika after the operation in Mosul. In early January 2020, the Iraqi government demanded the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country whose troops are in the country without a request from the Iraqi authorities. However, judging from the situation, Turkey has no current plans to officially end its military presence in the country.

Turkey has conducted several major military operations in Syria since 2016: Operation Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, Operation Spring Shield. Each time Ankara has increased its military power, leaving a large territory in northern Syria under its control along its southern borders. It is estimated that there are more than 30,000 Turkish troops in Syria.

In addition to the Turkish military presence, the population in Syria and Iraq periodically make claims against Ankara for the artificial use of the water supply factor in some cities in the region to influence the situation there. As reported in a statement of the Foreign Ministry of Damascus on April 25, the Turkish military has left more than 1 million residents of al-Hasakah, the administrative center of the Syrian province of the same name, without drinking water. “The Turkish occupation forces and their mercenaries cut off the water supply to the city and its surrounding areas for 16 days, stopping the operation of the Alluk water pumping station north of al-Hasakah,” the document states. Another criticism of Ankara in this regard was voiced on August 3 because Turkey and the Syrian opposition under its control continue to deprive one million residents of al-Hasakah Governorate, as reported by the Syrian news agency SANAA. According to the Director-General of Al-Hasakah Water Corporation, Mahmoud Al-Akla, the water flow to the al Hemmeh station is unstable because the Turks control the water pumping operation and do not
allow employees to stay inside the station for more than two hours.

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