



Turkey and Iran Have an Eye on Iraq

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ISTANBUL -- Just a few months ago, Turkey shocked the West when it appeared to stand shoulder to shoulder with Iran in the row surrounding Tehran's nuclear programme. But now, the end of the US mission in Iraq is exposing major differences between Ankara and Tehran, analysts say.

"The region is in search of a new balance of power," Bilgay Duman, an Iraq analyst at the Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (Orsam), a think-tank in Ankara, said in an interview. "Turkey's role in Iraq is seen as a threat by the Iranians."

As the two countries try to extend their power and influence in Iraq, politicians in Baghdad criticised the interference of foreign countries. Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister, told the Italian daily Corriere della Sera late last month there was a "dangerous power vacuum" in his country: "When the Americans go, the Iranians, the Turks, the Syrians and many others come."

Last month, Mr Zebari said Turkey and Iran were the biggest players in the rush to gain influence. Turkish politicians have themselves made it clear that developments in Iraq are of great importance to Ankara.

"The Middle East is built anew. Our brother and friend Iraq is built anew," Ahmet Davutoglu, the foreign minister, said in June.

But Ankara and Tehran have very different ideas of how a newly built Iraq should look. Turkey is interested in a strong and stable central Iraqi government because it needs reliable partners for co-operation against Turkish-Kurdish rebels hiding in northern Iraq and because a strong government in Baghdad would help to keep Kurdish dreams of independence in check.

By contrast, Iran is aiming for strong Iraqi regions at the expense of the central government.

"The Iranians have even officially recognised the Kurdish government in the north" of Iraq, said Arif Keskin, a Middle East analyst at the Turkey in the 21st Century Institute, a think-tank in Ankara. When Mesut Barzani, the leader of the provincial Kurdish government in Iraq, pays a visit to Iran, "he is treated like a prime minister".

Mr Barzani cannot expect such flattery in Ankara. While Turkey has recently improved its relations with Iraqi Kurds, it is still anxious not to fan aspirations of Kurdish independence, because it fears a Kurdish state next door could increase unrest among its own Kurdish population.

Turks and Iranians are also at odds over the continuing role of the United States in Iraq and the future foreign policy outlook of the country. Mr Duman, the Iraq analyst, said that the interests of Washington and Ankara in Baghdad were "congruent". But Iran does not want Iraq to become a member of the pro-western camp.

Both countries supported different groups in Iraq's parliamentary elections in March. While Tehran threw its weight behind a Shiite bloc led by Nouri al Maliki, the prime minister, Turkey backed the secular Iraqiyya alliance of Ayad Allawi, which narrowly won the most votes.

Turkey says it is trying to maintain good relations with all of Iraq's ethnic and religious groups. Ankara has consulates in the Shiite south, in the central Sunni-majority city of Mosul and in the Kurdish city of Erbil in the north. Mr Davutoglu raised eyebrows last month when he went to Damascus and not only met Mr Allawi, but also the anti-US Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr.

Steps such as these have led to speculation that Turkey is trying to vastly increase its influence in Iraq at the expense of the Iranians. "Some people in the Middle East want to see Turkey as an alternative to Iran," Mr Keskin of the Turkey in the 21st Century Institute said. "And some Iranians feel that Turkey is stealing their country's role in the region."

Ankara has become much more engaged in Middle Eastern issues in recent years, organising indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel, trying to mediate between the Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah as well as sending troops to serve in an international peace-keeping force in Lebanon.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minister, has become a hero for some in the Middle East because of his tough stance on Israel. But for

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all its recent initiatives in the region and although its positions on issues concerning Iraq differ considerably from those held by Iran, Turkey says it does not want to engage in a power struggle with Tehran. "We are trying to co-operate with Iran regarding Iraq," said a high-ranking Turkish diplomat who asked not to be named.

"They have different ideas about any future government" in Iraq, he added. "But we are in close contact with everybody." Mr Keskin said that Turkey would be careful to avoid tensions with Tehran over Iraq. "The current government [in Ankara] does not want a rivalry with Iran, not over Iraq, and not over any other issue," he said.

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