

OPERATION CLAW AND THE FUTURE OF TURKEY-IRAQ RELATIONS

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 Analysis

For many years, to ensure the security of the southern border and the country as a whole, and to curb terror attacks; Turkey has organized operations in northern Iraq against the PKK. Turkey's operations in northern Iraq with the bilateral agreements signed with Iraq are legal in the eyes of international law. Iraq cannot stop the PKK's attacks on Turkey from its territory. In addition, the Baghdad government remains silent about the PKK's settlement in northern Iraq. In this case, Turkey has justified launching its operation in northern Iraq.

On May 28, 2019, Turkey launched a series of operations in northern Iraq named as Operation Claw. The aim of the operation was to destroy the PKK. In fact, the concept of changing security operations in Turkey as of 2015 was carried out in the operation. The new security concept is based on the strategy of finding and destroying terrorist organizations beyond its border.

Operation Claw was followed by Operation Claw-2 and Claw-3. Prior to Operation Claw, a meeting was held between Turkish and Iraqi officials regarding the operation. Unlike other operations, the Turkish Air Force (TAF) has adopted the strategy of establishing a permanent base in northern Iraq with Operation Claw. It is aimed to destroy the action and settlement areas of the PKK in the region. During Operation Claw-1-2-3, many high-level officers of the PKK were neutralized.

On the other hand, while Operation Claw-3 continues, the TAF has launched Operation Claw-Tiger on June 15, 2020 in northern Iraq. The depths of Iraq were reached with joint operations with air-ground forces participation. For the first time, Turkey launched its air operations inside Iraq, exactly 200 kilometers away from the border. The purpose of Operation Claw-Tiger is to expand the 40-kilometer area



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that was taken under control in northern Iraq through previous operations and to eliminate the PKK's camps and settlements established in Iraq. In addition, it is to prevent the PKK's transition to Syria and to cut the supply line to the PYD/YPG, which is the Syrian extension of the PKK. It is stated that the TAF established nearly 30 military bases during the operations.

However, after Operation Claw-Tiger, the Iraqi government began to criticize Turkey's steps in northern Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi who was former intelligence chief is unhappy about Turkey's continued operations against the PKK inside the Iraqi territory, which accidentally killed two high ranking Iraqi border guards in northern Iraq. Subsequently, the Iraqi PM lobbied Arab nations to gain support for what the Iraqi Foreign Ministry called a united front to force Turkey to pull out its troops that have infiltrated into Iraq. Iraqi leaders then made a serious diplomatic contact abroad against Turkey's military operations in Iraq.

Al-Kadhimi talked about Turkey's operations during a meeting with US President Donald Trump on August 20. The US advised Turkey and Iraq to negotiate to resolve all disputes related to the PKK and Turkey's operations against it. Two weeks after Kadhimi's trip to Washington, Macron visited Iraq to discuss the same issues with Kadhimi. Macron said that he supported Iraqi sovereignty in coordination with the United Nations and criticize Turkey's operations in northern Iraq. Also, the Iraqi President Barham Salih called on Turkey to stop violating Iraqi sovereignty during his meeting with Macron. Salih declared that Turkey's operations in Iraqi territory violate international law and good neighbor relations. Hence, Salih said, Turkey must respect Iraqi sovereignty. Meanwhile, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein discussed Turkish military operations with France, German, and the UK, calling for them to take an active role to stop Turkey's violations on Iraqi territory. In addition, Iraqi officials asked the Arab League to condemn Turkey's operations in Iraq. As a result, the Arab League

strongly condemned Turkey's operations and it urged the country to respect Iraqi territory.

Prior to the tension in Turkey-Iraq relations, the TAF launched an air attack on regions of northern Iraq, targeting the PKK on August 11. During the attack, two high ranking Iraqi border guards and their driver were killed in the airstrike. According to local media, the Turkish drone strike had targeted the border guards while they were meeting the PKK in northern Erbil. Following these developments, the Iraqi government canceled the planned visit of Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar. Also, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry summoned the Ambassador of Turkey to Iraq Fatih Yıldız. The Iraqi Minister gave the ambassador a letter of protest calling on Turkey to stop its cross-border operations. Since the beginning of Turkey's operations, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry has given three letters of protest. However, Turkey rejected the protests and announced that the military operations would continue in Iraq, which it said were necessary for border security no matter where they may be. Turkey accused Iraq of not taking essential measures against the PKK on its territory.

Nonetheless, after Iraq's political steps against Turkey's operations, it has also taken some economic steps against Turkey. Iraq is Turkey's fourth-largest export market. Turkey wants to open a second crossing with Iraq to increase bilateral trade of approximately \$20 billion a year. But Iraq has suspended the plans to open the border-crossing. Also, the Iraqi government holds another critical economic card. Iraq argues that since 2014, without the permission of the Iraqi government, Turkey has been taking oil from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq hence violating the terms of the 1973 agreement. Therefore, it applied to the International Court of Arbitration (ICA) in Paris and demanded approximately \$25 billion in compensation from Turkey. Iraq can use this card, but this is not a suitable step. In 2019, when the Iraqi President visited Turkey, he discussed trade cooperation with the Turkish President.

Both leaders agreed to improve bilateral trade. Also, Turkey emphasized that it was ready to give financial and developmental support to Iraq. Additionally, Turkey mentioned that it was ready to provide a loan of \$5 billion to rebuild the country.

Even though there are strong ties between Iraq and Turkey, Baghdad has recently adopted a more cautious approach towards Turkish products on its domestic markets. Turkish agriculture and food products especially pasta and eggs have been banned in order to support local producers. The paramilitary formations within the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in particular want to react against Turkish policy through the banning of Turkish products. For this reason, this situation is critical and it requires internal political balances. The COVID-19 pandemic, the deterioration of the economy with the drop in oil prices, the increase in corruption, the continuation of attacks by Iran-backed Shiite militia groups against US bases, Iran's control of Iraq through its militia, assassinations of a protester, all of them summarize the state of instability in Iraq. In addition, the failure to identify the perpetrators of the violence that started in October 2019, in which more than 500 demonstrators lost their lives, should also be noted. This is because the protesters accused the Iraqi PM of staying passive about the incident. These are the main problems faced by the Iraqi PM.

Meanwhile, Iraqi PM Kadhimi made a series of strategic appointments by changing the managers of the Iraqi Central Bank, commercial banks, customs, ports, and airports, in particular to fight corruption. In addition, the call for early elections by the Iraqi religious leader al-Sistani

and the above-mentioned corruption are among the main issues that the Baghdad administration should deal with when it comes to public demands. The Baghdad administration is required to deal with the problem first. Creating tension with Turkey due to its operations in northern Iraq and to reflect that tension in the economy is not a policy to be adopted.

Although Iraqi politicians have shown their political reactions against Turkey, the discourse of radical steps taken towards Turkey should not be considered. The Baghdad administration should focus on diplomacy to solve the current problems. Baghdad has been in search of a balance against the Iranian factor in the country in recent years. Hence, if the Iraqi government follows an exclusivist policy against Turkey, it may worsen the current state of instability. Iraq does not want to directly confront Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey invited the leader of the regional Kurdish administration in northern Iraq Nechirvan Barzani to Ankara. Turkey did its homework in assessing its relationship with the regional Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. Also, Turkey wants to know Iraq's reaction. However, while Turkey declares its determination in fighting against the PKK in Iraq, it wants to keep the open-door diplomacy to resolve existing problems with the Baghdad administration. After Barzani's visit to Ankara, PM Kadhimi went to the regional Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. According to media reports, they discussed Turkey's operations and the latest development on the borders. Clearly, PM Kadhimi does not want to escalate tension with Turkey because of Iraq's current issues. Both countries are doing their best to keep calm and develop their relations.