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3/1

Egypt

Nicholas Voulelis

Turkey

Pantelis
Touloumakos

Saudi Arabia

Evangelos Venetis

Focus on *Iraqi-Greek Ties*

An Interview with

Burhan Jaf

The Ambassador of
the Republic of Iraq
in Greece

Monitoring

the Middle East

The New Mesopotamia:

*Seeking a Modus Vivendi
between Iraq and the region*

Baghdad and Erbil: A New
Conflict in the Middle East?

Ali Sonay

The Iraqi Issue and the Iranian
Role

Aref Alobeid

Middle East Mediterranean

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Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) is an unbiased bimonthly report of the *ELIAMEP Middle East Research Project*, focusing largely on geopolitical and economic developments, debates as well as policies, affecting the future of the Middle East. Having a global outlook MEM hosts analyses, commentaries, interviews and news, conducting research in the fields of politics, economics and culture in the Middle East and adjacent areas, such as the Eastern Mediterranean.

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CONTENTS

Analyses

Baghdad and Erbil: A new Conflict in the Middle East? **4**
Ali Sonay

The author unfolds the key role of Kurdistan in future strategic and energy developments within Iraq, highlighting relations between Baghdad and Erbil.

The Iraqi Issue and the Iranian Role **7**
Aref Alobeid

This analysis highlights the special relationship between Iran and Iraq and the repercussions this relationship has for Iraq and the region.

Comments

Iraq-Egypt Ties: Cairo Shows the Way **10**
Nicholas Voulelis

In spite of their different historical background, modern Egypt has almost always served as a precursor of political developments in Iraq.

A Puzzle with Not – Matching Pieces: Iraqi-Turkish Relations after 2003 **12**
Pantelis Touloumakos

The emphasis of this comment is given to the necessary reorientation of Turkish soft power foreign policy towards Iraq as a result of the political reality inside Iraq after 2003.

Facilitating Contact Between Iraq and the Saudis **14**
Evangelos Venetis

Given the growing Sunnite-Shiite dipole in the region, the relations between Baghdad and Riyadh are crucial for regional stability in the Middle East. In this context both countries need to overcome their mutual distrust and to establish a diplomatic rapprochement in order to make gains in various fronts.

Focus on Iraqi-Greek Ties **16**
Unfolding Iraqi-Greek ties as well as n important aspects of Iraqi-Greek ties as well as the role of Iraq in the Middle East. An interview with H.E. Burhan Jaf, the Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq in Greece.

Monitoring the Middle East **21**
A selection of news and comments on major developments in the region.

Analyses

Baghdad and Erbil: A New Conflict in the Middle East?

Ali Sonay,
University of Marburg

This analysis unfolds the key role of Kurdistan in future strategic and energy developments within Iraq, highlighting relations between Baghdad and Erbil.

The emergence of a Kurdish autonomous entity in northern Iraq in the wake of the Second Gulf War 1991 and the establishment of a federal Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion, asserting the autonomous Kurdish region in accordance with the new constitution, have brought about a novel interaction between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish region with its capital Erbil. Although, the new constitution of Iraq structures to a certain extent the geographical and political framework of the relationship between both sides, unsolved questions have been inflaming a conflict over territories and resources in northern Iraq.¹ This encounter has led even to the

deployment of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces opposing each other.²

Kurdish politicians have therefore declared their will to stay within Iraq, if the state guarantees its federal and democratic structure.³ But for the case this could not be maintained, they are aiming at extending their control over territories and resources, to declare independence if necessary in the future.⁴ To this end, a draft Kurdish constitution integrated areas south of the Green Line – which symbolizes the quasi-border between both sides – implying large energy resources, within the region of the Kurdish Regional Government

¹ Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble along the Trigger Line. In: International Crisis Group (ICG), Middle East Report N°88 – 08 July 2009.

² Ibid., 1.

³ Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit. In: International Crisis Group, Middle East Report N°120 – 19 April 2012, 3.

⁴ Ibid.

(KRG).⁵ Furthermore, in 2007 the KRG passed its own regional oil and gas law, whereby it has been seeking to prohibit Baghdad from carrying out hydrocarbons-related operations in the disputed territories without the KRG's approval, as long as these areas' status has not been resolved through a referendum.⁶ This referendum - especially concerning the oil-rich region of Kirkuk - should have been conducted already in 2007, but disagreements between Erbil and Baghdad and the various ethnic groups, as the Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens, have been thwarting this undertaking ever since.⁷

To underscore its operational autonomy, the Kurdish side insists on article 115 of the new Iraqi constitution, which stipulates that the regional legislation is superior to the one of the central government.⁸ The central government on the other hand claims that according to article 111 the national resources are belonging to the entire Iraqi population, meaning that Baghdad should have the final word.⁹

Within this context the KRG - referring particularly to its own oil

law - has signed several contracts with foreign oil companies - as for instance from Turkey, Norway and the US.¹⁰ But there was no approval of these contracts by the central government.¹¹ Recently, in October 2011 a contract has been agreed upon with the large US oil company ExxonMobile, concerning a field of which a third lies beyond the Green Line.¹² In mid-June 2012, the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki asked US President Barack Obama to intervene and prevent the oil company to take action.¹³ Maliki views the Kurdish oil deal illegal, because it circumvents central Iraqi authority and warned even of the outbreak of an armed conflict and the breaking apart of Iraq.¹⁴

Until recently, Baghdad has used its control over the national pipeline network, as well as its hold on the budget, to control Kurdish politics. Thus, the KRG has also to rely particularly on the 17 per cent share of the federal budget it receives from Baghdad, besides its dependence on the national pipeline.¹⁵

⁵ Ahmad, Mohammed M.A./Gunter, Michael M. (Hrsg.): *The Kurdish Question and the 2003 Iraqi War*. Mazda Publishers Inc. Costa Mesa, 2005, 79.

⁶ ICG: 19 April 2012, 5.

⁷ *Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds*. ICG., Middle East Report, No°80 - 28. October 2008

⁸ ICG: 08 July 2009, 16

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ICG: 19 April 2012, 3-4.

¹¹ Ibid. 5.

¹² ICG: 19 April 2012, 1-5.


¹³ Karim, Ammar: *Maliki warns of 'wars' over Exxon deal with Kurds*. In: Middle East Online June 19, 2012. Retrieved from: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=52916>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ICG: 19 April 2012, 7.

Nevertheless, concerning oil from the Kurdish region itself, an understanding between both sides was reached. In 2009, the KRG forced Baghdad to approve Kurdish exports of oil and thus, its contribution to the federal budget. This was realized as the central government was suffering, because of a huge downfall of oil prices.¹⁶ Accordingly, the federal government and the KRG negotiated an agreement, by which the Kurdish region would begin to supply the national pipeline network with its own oil. The KRG thought, that with this agreement the central government would pay the costs of the involved companies, which Baghdad was not willing to do. The Kurdish side would have to pay them through their own budget. Eventually, an understanding was reached as the federal government promised to reimburse the companies. In November 2010, after the Iraqi parliamentary elections, a new arrangement was agreed upon, as the KRG supported Prime Minister Nuri el-Maliki was to begin a second term. Finally, however, in April 2012, the KRG stopped suddenly all oil exports through the national pipeline network, arguing that Baghdad had not done the payments in due.¹⁷

Thus in sum, the KRG remains financially still dependent on the budget payments from Baghdad, thus on the southern oil fields. Given this confrontational issue, the KRG aims at increasing its own oil production until 2015 to one million barrels per day, which would mean financial independence from Baghdad, which could indeed pave the way for an independent state. The oil would then be exported through Turkey.

It remains to be seen, how this strained interaction between both actors will develop and how the regional states as Turkey and Iran, but also the United States, will react hereto.

¹⁶ Ibid. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

The Iraqi Issue and the Iranian Role

Aref al-Obeid,
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This analysis highlights the special relation between Iran and Iraq and the repercussions this relation has for Iraq and the region.

All the historical and geographical relations between Iraq and Iran are characterized by mistrust, lack of cooperation and conflict because of cultural and geographical factors, which over the years gained political and religious overtones. However, Iraq due to its strategic position played the role of protector of the eastern gate of the Arab world against the expansionist ambitions of the Persian Empire in the past.

The fall of the Baath regime in 2003 by the American forces led to the elimination of Iraq as a regional power from the chessboard of the Middle East and the emergence of the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a key force in the future developments of this country. Moreover, the new battle for greater influence in Iraq got regional and international dimensions mainly between Tehran and Washington. This was clear in the elections of March 2010 in which each side supported a different candidate for the presidency of the government.

Therefore no government can take the helm of the country without consulting the government in Tehran.

Although Iraq has large oil reserves, lack of security, political instability, poverty, oppression of human rights,¹ illiteracy, corruption, unemployment and lack of economic prosperity are the characteristics of the new Iraq after over 9 years of U.S. invasion. Today the daily violence that has grown has tired the Iraqi people and nobody wants a return to civil war than terrorists.

In the new order, Iraq is controlled by the Shiite Muslims of the country with an impact on Sunni who are marginalized. Yet the Shiite factions are not united and not compatible politically with each other. Furthermore, the Iranian regime supports strongly the non-Arab orientation of Iraq and efforts to increase the tension between Iraqi Shiites themselves. On the one hand,

¹ "Rise of executions in Iraq», (1/8/2010) - <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/ddcd87aa-b7c6-47da-8260-3a29228149f4>

Tehran supports the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council and the paramilitary group of the cleric Muqtada Sadr and on the other hand it tries to limit the influence of the cleric Ayatollah Sistani who is standing as a barrier against the Iranian infiltration. As a result the increased influence of Tehran is a concern for many Iraqi Shiites.

The president of Iraqi Alliance Iyad Allawi warned about the negative interference of Iran in Iraq's internal affairs also reaffirmed that the Iranian interference inside other Arab countries will drag the conflict into the area from which Tehran will be lost.² Allawi says that a return of the political and religious conflicts to Iraq's political field is an unusual phenomenon.

The Iranian efforts for a complete control of Iraq went a step further when it was proposed, through the Iranian vice-President Muhammad Reza Rahimi a complete union of the two countries to form a large force at an international level.

In addition, Iran has a clear national expansionist project in Iraq, Tehran uses friendly Shiite factions and religious and racial discrimination as soft strategy to increase or extend its influence starting, firstly, from Iraq and then other Arab countries. Also, Iranians exploit Iraq to improve the

conditions of negotiations with the U.S. and EU about their nuclear program. The complete domination by the imposition of military, political, and economic influence and in the security field also the elimination of Iraq as a key factor in balance of the Middle East with the disappearance of national and religious identity and making it a weak and idle state consisting of the Iranian strategy in Iraq.

The problem of Iraq is more political than economic, military or security problem. For Iraq to emerge from the deadlock the country's policies must have determination of managing the national issues. Also the lead in their consciousness has to be the national interest but not the individual, partisan or doctrinal. Moreover, the culture of trust among political leaders to consolidate the democracy, as unprecedented experience for the history of the Arab countries in the Middle East, is necessary for a united country.

The effort of the American government of the former President G. D. Bush to create a democratic Iraq as a model for other states in the region mainly Arabic, did not succeed. The Western democracy based on individual freedom, also the political and social life in America is based on individual freedom. Individual freedom cannot be applied in the case of Iraq, because of several obstacles such as traditions

²<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/06/16/153455.html>

A. Alobeid, The Iraqi Issue and the Iranian Role

and customs. It should not be omitted that Iraq as a country has some specific features, such as minorities, various religious communities, sects and different oriental mentality.

Despite all the pitfalls encountered, Iraq, because of the huge oil reserves, remains a major economic power in the Middle East and a member of the Arab League. Furthermore, Iraq is the only Arab country that could limit the expansionist intentions of

neighboring non-Arab countries (Iran - Turkey).

Finally, all the country's citizens should be equal in front of the law. It should amend the constitution in order to ensure the rights of all sections of Iraqi society. However, the twinning between Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs of Iraq is essential. For the unity and future of Iraq religious discrimination is more dangerous than the actual American occupation, because occupation is temporary whilst discrimination lasts.

Comments

Iraq-Egypt Ties: Cairo Shows the Way

Nicholas Voulelis,
Journalist, Athens

In spite of their different historical background, modern Egypt has almost always served as a precursor of political developments in Iraq.

In the course of modern Iraq's history, Egypt has always held a special place. Despite the different historical backgrounds and ethno-religious particularities of each country, modern Egypt has almost always served as a "bright beacon" or even as a precursor of political developments in Iraq.

Significant changes in Egypt or decisions that affected the regional and international balance of forces in the 1950s and 1960 inspired or decisively affected developments in Iraq. Even the eventually failed effort by Baghdad to challenge for the leadership of the Arab world occurred when Egypt lost this emblematic role or when it failed to claim its previous position.

Today, after numerous wars and reversals, historical conditions have drastically changed. The "Arab Spring" is still under way, despite the harsh reaction that this political movement is encountering in certain places. Nevertheless, Egypt again – *mutatis mutandis* – shows the way out, as the supreme political showdown taking place there is

between a regime that wants to retain power and privileges, on the one hand, and on the other a mass movement, which, beyond its intensely religious character, is claiming the implementation of rules of freedom and democracy.

In the face of this open, public and peaceful, to a large degree, tug-of-war taking place in Egypt, Iraq has taken its first steps. After the withdrawal of most US troops from that country, almost immediately Iraq fell into the vortex of sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites, violence punctuated by the involvement of regional powers attempting to benefit from this conflict in order to achieve favorable correlations of powers for their own strategic goals and interests.

Thus, today's Iraq is again witnessing the intense revival of antagonism between a Shiite majority, which now dominates the Baghdad government and also enjoys the backing of predominately Shia Iran, and a Sunni minority, which is forcefully demanding a share of power. This rivalry comes amid the

presence of extremist and terrorist groups trying to exacerbate the conflict and to sow the seeds of chaos.

The emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate as the next president of Egypt will surely encourage Iraq's Sunnis, who hope that their co-religionists in Egypt will not abandon them. Such a development could deflect any trend by young Sunnis in Iraq to turn towards terrorist groups inspired by Al Qaeda who propagate the idea of a new extremist "Caliphate" in Iraq.

Neighboring Saudi Arabia, the decades-old bastion of "ultra-orthodox" Sunni in the Muslim world, is also dynamically intervening in this barely contained conflict between Iraq's dominant Shiites and "jilted" Sunnis. The Saudi kingdom does not want to "lose" Iraq in its ongoing competition with Iran, a clash on every level for the prize of more-or-less leading the entire Arab-Muslim world, and a clash that has recently become sharper and bloodier, as evidenced by the scope of the undeclared civil war in Syria.

The Saudi monarchy has advanced from merely wanting to be the spiritual leader of Sunnis throughout the world and is now attempting active interventions where the strategic interests of its ultra-conservative regime are at stake. After the assistance the Saudi regime offered to the Bahrain monarchy to suppress the popular

demands for freedom and democratic rights, it subsequently threw its weight, along with Qatar and the UAE, into the Syrian conflict, this time on the side of the mostly Sunni majority insurgents.

Saudi Arabia continues to exhibit a distinctly cautious stance vis-a-vis the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, himself a Shiite, and is shoring up, any way it can, the Sunni parties and factions in their campaign to prevent persecutions and their marginalization. However, the Saudi monarchy does not want the transformation of Iraq's internal conflict into an outright civil war.

The focus of attention, and support, on the part of the powerful Sunni monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf nevertheless remains Syria, whose regime is viewed as a proxy of Teheran, a fact that has made it a target for overthrow by the Sunni monarchs. Conversely, the idea of dealing with the Baghdad government via political means has won out, and may be the reason why it is being attacked, at the same time, by portions of the Shiite majority.

In any event, Baghdad, as far as it may be from Cairo, and regardless of how much it is concerned by the possibility of fighting spilling over from Syria onto its territory, understands that the reverberations from the Egyptian capital are a reminder of what's truly at stake today in the Arab world. 🇸🇦

A Puzzle with not-matching Pieces: Iraqi-Turkish Relations after 2003

Pantelis Touloumakos,
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The emphasis of this comment is given to the necessary reorientation of Turkish soft power foreign policy towards Iraq as a result of the political reality in Iraq after 2003.

The invasion of U.S. troops in Iraq, in 2003 – and the subsequent toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime – changed completely the geostrategic map of Middle East. As a consequence of the federalization of Iraq, a Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in the northern part of Iraq, was founded. This was undoubtedly a source of major concern for Turkey, because of the Kurdish issue. Since the 1960s, Ankara was in close cooperation with Baghdad, in order to deal with the Kurdish activities in this area. In light of these facts, Turkey was now forced, not only to accept the new role of the Iraqi Kurds, but also to establish diplomatic relations with them.

The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq was a necessity; however, it is interesting to note that such a change took place in the context of neo – Ottoman doctrine. According to this, Turkey possesses an important geostrategic

location, a powerful economy, as well as political stability and a long – standing historical experience; therefore, Ankara can become a strong regional power, expanding her influence in regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, including Iraq.

As a consequence, Turkey tried to strengthen its political and economic relations with Iraq, giving special emphasis in soft power issues. In 2009, Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, visited Baghdad with 9 members of his cabinet. During this visit, memorandums of understanding on 48 issues – including education, energy, trade and health – were concluded; besides, several economic issues were also discussed. Turkish NGOs' activities in Iraq prove that Ankara is interested in expanding its development policy in this country. It should also be noted that Turkish interest in strengthening relations with Iraq was also expressed in the


domain of transports: from October 2008, Turkish Airlines started flights to Baghdad – which had been stopped since 1991, because of the First Gulf War; besides, from February 2010, a railway connecting Gaziantep with Mosul started working.

There are some good reasons for this new Turkish approach towards Iraq. Being in close cooperation with Iraqi federal government as well as with KRG, allowed Turkey to put more pressure on PKK. In addition to this, the development of economic relations between KRG and Southeastern Turkey could help improve the Kurdish – speaking regions of Turkey. There are also diplomatic reasons to be mentioned. Turkey is seen by some analysts as a geostrategic player capable of counter – balancing the Iranian influence in Iraq. Taking into consideration the decision of US government to withdraw American troops from Iraqi soil, the need to fill the vacuum of influence in this region becomes more important. This also coincides with the neo – Ottoman policy of Turkey and the new role Ankara aspires for herself.

But this is only the one side of the story. Iraq is still far from being a country with solid social and political structures. Moreover, KRG is seeking to annex Kirkuk – a potential to

which Turkey is strongly opposed. In such a case, Kurds might try to establish an independent state, which will also have possible serious consequences in Turkey’s large Kurdish – speaking population.

Other difficulties do arise too. Following the 2010 Iraqi elections – and during the negotiations for the formation of the new government – Ankara and Washington sided with the Iraqiyya bloc, headed by Ilyad Allawi, the Shiite former Prime Minister; Ankara developed also strong ties with Vice – President, Tariq al – Hashemi. This caused serious problems in Turkish – Iraqi relations; in April 2012, Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al – Maliki, described Turkey as a “hostile state”, with a sectarian agenda. To make things worse, Tariq al – Hashemi, facing charges for having had terrorist death squads under his command, took refuge to Turkey. In spite of an Interpol warrant for Hashemi, Turkey seems reluctant to extradite him.

The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy has helped Ankara to deal with many possible problems in Turkish – Iraqi relations; but there are also many other pieces which form the Iraqi puzzle. It remains to be seen how all these factors will interact – and the Turkish attitude towards them.

Facilitating Dialogue between Iraq and the Saudis

Evangelos Venetis,
ELIAMEP Middle East Research Project

Given the growing Sunnite-Shiite dipole in the region the relations between Baghdad and Riyadh are crucial for regional stability. Both countries need to overcome their mutual distrust and to establish a diplomatic rapprochement in order to make gains in various fronts.

It is a conventional wisdom that the emergence of the Shiite government in Baghdad as the result of the 2003 deposal of Saddam Hussein has made Riyadh feel uneasy about their neighbor. Besides since 1923 bilateral relations have always been strained, except the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The strained relations between the two neighbors are mainly ideological, i.e. the Saudis sponsor the Sunni Wahhabi version of Islam in the Muslim world at the expense of the Shiites whilst the Baghdad Shiite government views the Saudis as the spearhead of an extreme version of Sunni Islam and a main source of trouble and oppression for the Shiites in the region in recent past. This ideological intra-Muslim difference is pivotal for understanding geostrategic developments in the region and has become an obstacle for the improvement of bilateral ties. Could they improve and, if so, in what context?

No doubt the mutual distrust is deep-rooted and interwoven with ongoing political developments in both countries. Baghdad accuses Riyadh of supporting terrorism inside Iraq in order to destabilize the country whilst Riyadh is interested in protecting the rights of the declining Sunni minority in Iraq. On its part, Riyadh views the Shiite-led Baghdad government with suspicion, especially with regard to Iraq's flourishing ties with neighboring Iran almost in every case. Riyadh is concerned about Iraq's role in the Bahrain crisis and the impact of the Iraqi Shiite rule amongst the Shiites in east Saudi Arabia. In this context Riyadh welcomed and accommodated the fugitive Iraqi Sunni Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi who is wanted in Iraq for various crimes. Expectedly this move raised tensions and is expected to worsen bilateral relations further. Thus the future seems to be bleak.

Yet there is something that both countries agree, and this is regional

stability. Albeit their mutual distrust, they must realize that they must find a *modus vivendi* which will presuppose mutual respect. Riyadh is unwilling to accept that after Tehran there is a second Shiite-led government in the Mesopotamia and Baghdad feels also threatened by the Wahabbi form of Islam that Riyadh advocates. Yet, if their relations continue to deteriorate, both will suffer. Riyadh must contribute to the stability of Iraq and Baghdad must work hard for balancing regional disputes between the Shiites and the Sunnis.

With the Syrian crisis getting worse, both sides need to address this issue and preserve regional security. Although their interests are conflicting, they must contribute to peace in the short term in order to resolve other international and domestic issues. In this context they need to start discussing at a diplomatic level. The lesser degree of bilateral diplomatic ties is reflected by the fact that the first post-war (2003) Iraqi Ambassador to Riyadh was appointed only in 2009 and the Saudi Ambassador in Baghdad is based in Amman and serves both posts in Jordan and Baghdad. This situation needs to alter and both countries must have full diplomatic missions, taking in mind that the

greater their differences are the more their diplomatic contact.

Once a systematic discussion framework is achieved, then Riyadh must be more diplomatically active in regard to Baghdad and encourage Iraq to participate more actively in Arab forums, such as the Arab league. If the diplomatic interaction works out, then Iraq should also be invited to the Gulf Cooperation Council as an attendee. Although this sounds unrealistic now, it could be achieved in the foreseeable future, once basic trust is achieved.

On its part Baghdad must participate constructively to an intra-Muslim Sunni-Shiite dialogue. Such a development is much needed now, especially with regard to the status of Sunnis in Iraq and the Shiites in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Iraq has also a key role to play in bringing Tehran and Baghdad closer and bridging unbridgeable gaps.

Given the ongoing Syrian crisis, the region cannot stand another major regional dispute. Currently no side shows any interest to engage constructively in a dialogue and if they fail to establish an essential diplomatic rapprochement, Baghdad and Riyadh are destined to face each other in every front and this is in the interest of no regional country. 🇸🇦

Focus on *Iraqi-Greek Ties*

With Iraq at a crossroad in terms of its domestic political scene, the Middle East faces a challenge resulting from the role of the newborn Iraqi democracy and the geopolitical repercussions it may have in the context of the Shiite-Sunni rivalry and the case of Kurdistan. A major country in the energy sector worldwide Iraq is an important partner for Athens at a time of extreme economic hardship for Greece.

In this regard, H.E. Mr. Burhan Jaf, the Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq in Greece, sheds light on important aspects of Iraqi-Greek ties as well as the role of Iraq in the Middle East.

Q: *What do you think of the existing status of Iraqi-Greek economic relations?*

A: Iraqi- Greek relations are fairly strong. Yet, there is mutual interest in the further deepening of this relation in all fields of interest. In particular, we are determined to expand our economic cooperation and to pursue a series of delegations exchange at all levels of hierarchy. As far as the sector of education is concerned we aim to support programs of study for Iraqi students in Greece as well as programs of exchange of students between the two countries. In cultural level there is a lot of interaction going on at the moment. The recent Greek excavations in Erbil region as well as the operation of many Greek companies in Kurdistan region and other parts of Iraq are revealing of the nature of the ties between the

two countries. However, we need to do more on the tourist sector whereby I find there are opportunities that can be properly explored. Similarly, we are hoping to open regular direct flights between our countries.

Q: *Many Greek businessmen are interested in investing in Iraq, and especially the Kurdistan region. Has there been any substantial progress for Greek investments in your country?*

A: We can definitely identify a good progress made in the domain of Greek investments in Iraq. Through well-established organizations such as the Greek- Iraqi Business and Industrial Association and the recent creation of the Greek-Kurdish Center for Reconstruction& Investments in Erbil along with individual initiatives, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has attracted

lately a big number of companies, mainly those engaged with construction projects but pharmaceutical ones too. Yet, we are looking to increase such opportunities aiming at the further strengthening of our bilateral relations. For their side, Greek companies should not hesitate to invest in Iraq, as this would add further to the success of our mutual goal of an institutionalized cooperation.

Q: *You have been influential in promoting bilateral cultural relations.*

A: I feel very strongly about promoting cultural bilateral relations, but we are still very much at the drawing board, and dependent on individual initiatives. In a first instance we have looked at strengthening and acknowledging the diversity in our own community in hope to create a spirit of participation.

Greek initiatives to keep their history, their own traditions and cultural heritage alive strengthening thus the Greek cultural identity constitutes a source of inspiration for Iraq. Greece has refined the art on how to celebrate ones' past history, and how to pass this on to the future generations. The importance attached to history rediscovering one's roots and artifacts is ongoing in Iraq. We are thus very happy to have Greek archeologists helping the

effort to learn more about the joint history in the North of Iraq, namely Kurdistan Region. We also hope to share the rich past of Mesopotamia and its meeting points with the rich Greek history through lectures and presentations.

Through the exchange of artists in all artistic expressions, folklore Kurdish- Greek dance groups and other activities such as Iraqi- Greek exhibitions initiated by a number of Greek universities in Iraq we also hope to introduce more Iraqi artists to the Greek public and assist individual initiatives in this year's program. Last Spring we were able to present a successful cultural meeting on Iraq for the first time.

In the near future, we target at hosting a number of more and diverse initiatives.

Q: *How could bilateral relations evolve satisfactorily in the foreseeable future? In what field?*

A: Our target is to strengthen and expand the already established bilateral relations in all spheres of mutual interest. On the cultural level, we share common interests to bring together artists from both countries and expose their works in mutually organized cultural festivals in order to share different techniques that can vary from one country to another. Conferences and seminars also intend to enable both sides to learn from each other's experience

and thus increase and expand knowledge of each other. On the political level, we aim at the exchange of delegations and the enrichment of diplomatic relations. Finally, on economic level, we target to increase the number of trade and other economic bilateral agreements.

Q: *Are you satisfied by Iraq's progress to reconstruct its energy sector?*

A: Iraq experiences a very long shortage of electricity despite many efforts by the government. Our energy sector needs to be reconstructed up to the challenges ahead. The government has given this sector a priority and thus allocated a vast amount of investment. I'm confident that the current government will eventually address this vital issue this year. I hope the Greek energy companies will take part in any upcoming solution and cooperate in this significant sector of our country.

Q: *With regard to the Syrian Crisis what is Baghdad's position?*

A: One of our foreign policy's fundamental principles is the 'non-interference' in the domestic affairs of other countries, let alone the internal affairs of our neighbouring countries. Iraq supports a stable democratic Syria and condemns all violations of the human rights. Iraq

wants to function in a viable security and stability region.

Q: *What would Iraq do in case the Syrian crisis leads to the destabilization of Syria?*

A: Iraq is very much concern about the current crisis in Syria. Iraq is in line with the Arab league resolutions and against any military intervention in Syria. Nonetheless, the future of Assad's regime is ambiguous. Iraq has last month expressed its willingness to cooperate in bringing the Syrian opposition and the current Assad government into direct negotiations. But the crisis is now heading towards uncertainty. Iraq wishes for the present Syrian crisis to be solved without violence and bloodshed. Iraq will respect the wishes of the Syrian people to build their political future on peace through non-violent means.

Q: *After the US military withdrawal from Iraq and the ongoing bomb attacks in various cities, do you think that Baghdad can be self-sufficient in terms of internal security?*

A: The current situation in Iraq indicates the need for a careful consideration and thorough reading of the recent incidents. The withdrawal of Al- Iraqiya list and the recent verdicts on Tariq Al-Hashemi only make clear the need for the Iraqis to work together for the sake

of a harmonious coexistence in a stable constitutional Iraq. This is in turn dependent on a ‘non-interference’ policy that the neighbouring countries ought to pursue as regards to our domestic affairs whereas prerequisite for a strong unity among all the Iraqis is the cooperation among all the groups involved. The recent call for a Reconciliation National Conference in order to sign a national agreement could work only positively towards this aim.

Obviously there is a lacking of cultural democracy in our society, but lawful practices, based on a commitment to democratic principles, pursued by our politicians can prevent continuous political crisis that hinders stability in our country. Our constitution is not perfect and certainly more amendments could be further implemented. Yet, it is an important achievement towards democracy. No politician, head of political party or group who won the last elections can control the security of this country alone. What is missing in this equation is the state. Iraqi sovereignty doesn’t only dictate the withdrawal of foreign forces from its soil but it is equally rooted in the fulfillment of the national will which stems from the empowerment of its people. Given that all political parties today are willing to abide by the constitution then, I consider a

peaceful and civil solution imperative so that we can see violence to fade away. After the national conference in Baghdad, it seems the Iraqi federal security forces are stronger to take on the control of the internal security and safety of our citizenship.

Q: *In recent years Iraq has entered democratic process. How do you view the so-called Arab Spring?*

A: The Arab Spring is reflective of the people’s will for rights, equality and a democratic system of governance in the broader region of the Middle East and North Africa. It is a positive development and indication of the alterations that have started to take place in the regional setting. We have witnessed regime changes, free elections in various Arab countries and therefore I do believe more changes can be anticipated.

Q: *What is your view regarding democratic movements in the Persian Gulf Arab states?*

A: The 2011 uprising in Bahrain following the Arab protests in Tunisia and elsewhere aimed at greater political freedom and equality mainly for the country’s Shia population that constitutes the majority. Yet the February 14 uprising, in view of regional interference, failed. All these teach

us the same lesson of the need for democratic reforms and abidance to the basic principle of ‘non-interference’ according to the UN Charter as the only way to regional progress and stability.

Q: *Do you think that a collaboration between Iraq and the Arab League is viable given the strained relations between Baghdad and Riyadh?*

A: The Arab League is not an abstract player distinctive from Iraq, but an organization consisting of 22 Arab states whose aim is exactly to strengthen relations among its state-members through political, cultural and economic cooperation and even more coordinate their policies, and promote their common interests. Bearing in mind that Iraq together with Saudi Arabia are founding members of this organization, I do

not see why such cooperation could not be viable. So far, there are no problems between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The only issue at stake at least for Riyadh is the fear of a potential emergence of an Islamic state based on Shi’ism identical to that of Tehran. That could not and will not happen in our federal and constitutional Iraq.

Q: *Iraq-Iran relations could be termed generally as harmonious.*

A: Kurdistan and Iran are bound up with historical, cultural and strong economic relations. Therefore, even if that visit would indeed occur, it would only strengthen their bilateral relations. Iranian goods can be found widely in the Kurdish markets whereas KRG’s relations with Iran could only lead to stronger Iraqi-Iranian relations.

Monitoring the Middle East

Afghanistan

Afghan governor slain in Jowjan (29, June, 2012)

Militants slew the northern Jowjan Province's governor along with his wife and daughter. The assailants managed to flee and police have arrested one of the governor's bodyguards. So far no group has claimed responsibility for the incident.

Bahrain

Anti-regime slogans in the streets of Bahrain (30 June, 2012)

A large number of Bahraini Shiite demonstrators keep protesting in the capital Manama and other cities against the al-Khalifa government. Protesters called on the ruling family to relinquish power and enable a democratically-elected government emerge.

Comment: The Bahrain Crisis is ongoing regardless of the fact that western media remain silent.

Cyprus

Nicosia welcomes the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi (29 June, 2012)

During his daylong stay in Cyprus Salehi visited Larnaca and met with the Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias and conveyed Iranian President Mahmud Ahamdinejad's verbal invitation to the Cypriot President to participate in the Non-Alligned Movement Summit in Tehran in August.

Egypt

Mursi sworn in as Egypt's first democratically-elected President (30 June, 2012)

Muhammad Mursi has officially been sworn in as Egypt's first democratically elected president more than a year after former President Hosni Mubarak was toppled.

Comment: Mursi has a long way to go before overcoming the red lines of the military.

Greece

Pirates seize Greek-owned tanker off Oman (11 May, 2012)

Pirates have hijacked a Greek-owned oil tanker carrying 135.000 tones of crude oil while in the Arabian Sea. This was the first successful attack on an oil tanker off the Horn of Africa in more than a year.

Iran

EU ban on Iran oil will be enforced on July 1 (30 June, 2012)

EU governments formally approved an embargo on Iranian oil to start on 1 July, dismissing calls from Greece for possible exemptions to help ease its economic crisis.

China defies US and EU oil embargoes on Iran (30 June, 2012)

Beijing has reiterated its strong opposition to the oil-embargoes against Iran, describing its oil imports from Tehran as “legitimate and justified.”

Iraq

Iraqi President threatens to quit (18 June, 2012)

Iraq’s President Jalal Talabani has threatened to step down if Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki does not receive a vote of confidence.

Iraqi Prime Minister calls for early elections (27, June, 2012)

The Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki has called for early elections after efforts to end the political crisis through negotiations failed. Maliki’s decision came after his political rival, Iyad Alawi, refused to engage in dialogue to solve the political stand-off and embarked on a campaign to unseat him.

Comment: Iraq is discerning into political chaos again. Fireworks expected soon.

Lebanon

Lebanon confiscates smuggle arms on Italian ship (8 May, 2012)

The Lebanese army has confiscates a large quantity of ammunitions aboard an Italian ship in the northern Lebanese port city of Tripoli. The ship was sailing from Germany via Alexandria. The arms were destined to equip rebels in Syria.

Comment: This incident reflects the non-regional western powers intervention in Syria.

Palestine - Israel

PLO urges UN action on illegal Israeli settlements (30 June, 2012)

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council on the issue of the illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. The development comes days after (June 6) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered for the construction of 300 units in the illegal settlement of Beit El in the occupied West Bank.

Comment: As long as Israeli settlements keep expanding, there will be no peace intermedium in Palestine.

Qatar

Qatar-US bilateral trade above \$ 1.25 b. in 1 Q 2012 (18 June, 2012)

According to Robert W. Dunn, a senior commercial officer at the US Embassy in Doha, the US exports to Qatar totaled \$ 965.5 million while imports amounted to \$ 287.3 million. He cited exports Qatar in energy, aviation, automobile, healthcare and infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia

World leaders mourn Prince Naif (18 June, 2012)

World leaders and envoys have expressed their condolences over the death of the Saudi Prince Naif.

Saudi Arabia reopens an old pipe line to counter Iran Hormouz threat (29 June, 2012)

Riyadh has reopened an old Iraq-built pipeline to bypass Persian Gulf shipping lanes, giving Riyadh scope to export more of its crude through the Red Sea terminals, in case Tehran attempts to block the Straits of Hormouz.

Somalia

Somali President escapes Al-Shabab ambush (29 May, 2012)

Al-Shabab fighters have ambushed an armored convoy transporting Somali President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmad on the outskirts of the capital Mogadishu. The President escaped safely under the protection of the African Union troops and Somali government soldiers.

Syria

Assad: Only National Model Settles Syria Crisis (29 June, 2012)

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad reiterated that the only way to resolve Syria's crisis is through a 'national model': "What took place in Libya is not the model to settle the Syria Crisis."

Comment: Assad is alarmed by the rise of the Islamists in Syria, especially after Mursi's election in Egypt.

Turkey

A Turkish F-4 jet was shot down by Syrian forces (22 June, 2012)

Syria shot down a Turkish warplane over the Mediterranean, stating that the warplane flew inside Syria's airspace, an allegation that Ankara declined.

United Arab Emirates

Obama backs UAE on islands (28 June, 2012)

During a meeting in the White House, US President Barack Obama stated to the UAE's Crown Prince General Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan that the US strongly supports the UAE's initiative to resolve the issue through direct negotiations, the International Court of Justice, or another appropriate international forum.

Yemen

Yemen requests for US drones attacks against militants (27 June, 2012)

Due to the fear of infiltration of extremists and terrorists into Yemen from Somalia, Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Kurbi stated that Sanaa had asked Washington to use drones in order to attack fleeing al-Qaeda militants.

Comment: The security situation in the Eastern Horn of Africa is deteriorating and expanding in the Arabian Peninsula.