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## DAVUTOĞLU'S VISIT TO KIRKUK AND THE IRAQI TURKMENS

The unexpected visit of Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to Kirkuk brought up the Iraqi Turkmens, an issue long forgotten within the context of the heated foreign policy agenda. Everyone, even those who are familiar with his sentimental speeches that are full of historical references and built around a theme of a common future embracing Xanthi, Urumqi, Crimea or Benghazi, agreed that his remarks in Kirkuk, on the Iraq Turkmen front, escalated matters. He said, "Today is one of the happiest days of my life. I am finally able to visit Kirkuk, which was always a dream. After 75 years I have come to Kirkuk as the first Turkish foreign minister. This is a historic day. And I am the first Turkish statesman to have visited Kirkuk in 36 years. But I promise you won't have to wait this long for us next time. We will meet more often... The Turkmens will always live, and they will live in Kirkuk. I am sure that Kirkuk cannot live without the Turkmens. And we will always try our best to contribute to the development of your region. In the fields of economy and culture, we will spare no effort to help Kirkuk. We are offering you a blank sheet of paper: Turkey is ready to do whatever is necessary to achieve peace."<sup>2</sup> His remarks during this controversial unannounced visit, which upset the Iraqi central government, implies that for the first time a Turkish statesperson has acknowledged the existence of the Iraqi Turkmens.

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.tepav.org.tr/tr/ekibimiz/s/1198/Huseyin+Rasit+Yilmaz>>

<sup>2</sup> "Davutoğlu ITC'de konuşma yaptı." <<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/planet/21131639.asp>>(in Turkish)

It is noteworthy that shortly before Davutoğlu's visit, the Iraqi parliament had passed a decision that acknowledged the Turkmen as the third core element of the country. According to the decision, which the parliament made great effort to pass,

*\*Legal regulations can be introduced in regions not defined as federal regions for Turkmen to exercise their rights in local administrations. To this end, a council of Turkmen affairs will be established and funds shall be allocated from the federal budget.*

*\* Lands seized from Turkmen will be returned. Turkmen will be represented in the armed forces, security forces and all ministries.*

*\*A quota will be defined for Turkmen in the police force, military, and air force academies. They will have the chance to study abroad with government money.*

*\*The problems of the city Tel Afar will be solved using government funds.*

*\* Measures will be introduced to prevent the introduction and implementation of decisions that change the demographics in the Turkmen-majority regions.*

*\* The existence and continuation of the Turkmen will be secured by law.*

*\* The Turkmen will have the right to use their own language in both public and private spheres. They will have right to education in their own language. A state TV channel broadcasting in Turkmen will be established.*

*\*Turkmen will be able to establish units under federal police departments in the cities and regions in which the Turkmen generally reside.<sup>3</sup>*

If this decision, which can be considered major progress is assessed together with Davutoğlu's ambitious promises and the reaction of Iraq central government to his visit to Kirkuk, it can be claimed that the focal point of Turkey's Iraq policy has shifted. In this sense, it is highly probable that Iraqi Turkmen will become a more prominent agenda item for Turkey.

The area in which the Turkmen population in Iraq is concentrated reaches from Tel Afar in the northwest to Mendeli in the southeast, forming a natural buffer zone between the Kurdish region and the Arab region. The Iraqi Turkmen population is said to be over 2 million by unofficial accounts. The demographics of the Iraqi Turkmen society show that the majority is wealthy and highly educated. Because the rural areas do not have prominence and paramilitary organizations do not take part in this demographic structure, the Turkmen faced severe problems especially after 2003, when local armed forces determined political gains. Massacres of the Turkmen during critical episodes in Iraq have always raised concerns about the survival of Turkish society in Iraq. Memories

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<sup>3</sup> "İrak'ta Türkmenler İçin Tarihi Karar." <<http://dunya.milliyet.com.tr/irak-ta-turkmenler-icin-tarihi-karar/dunya/dunyadetay/01.08.2012/1574627/default.htm?ref=OtherNews>> (in Turkish)

of the massacre in 1959, right after the declaration of Iraq's independence, when many Turkmen intellectuals died, and the Altunköprü Turkmen massacre in 1991 after the Gulf War are still fresh.

The Turkmen's major problems are Erbil and Mosul, which have high Turkmen populations that are under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government, exclusion from the system in the occasional change in political balances in Baghdad, and the changing of the demographic structure in major cities including Kirkuk via forced and planned migration waves.

Apart from these general problems, however, the political disintegration among Turkmen per se is striking. The Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITC), founded in 1995 with the ambition to unite all Turkmen political groups under a single roof, failed to fulfill its objective despite five leadership changes and Turkey's logistic assistance. Out of 10 Turkmen MPs elected in the latest election, 6 were from the ITC and 4 from different lists. Given the intense denominational polarization across Iraq, one third of the Turkmen's being Shiite is the major reason why the ITC was not able to unite all Turkmen. Also, some claim that the Turkey-oriented structure of the ITC, which has been controlled by nationalist cadres since its foundation, is problematic in terms of inclusiveness. All of the party leaders so far (Vedat Arslan, Sanan Ahmet Ağa, Faruk Abdurrahman Abdullah, Sadettin Ergeç and Erşat Salihi) have carried out their policies under the direction or guidance of Turkey. It has been raised in the Turkmen media that some MPs in the ITCs list had voted "no" in the vote of no confidence against prime minister Maliki. These can be cited to exemplify that the division of the Turkmen between the ITC and other groups that is also reflected within the ITC.

It is observed that many Turkmen opinion leaders who have acted in harmony with Turkey for years are currently uncomfortable with Turkey's Turkmen policy. At the heart of this lies the perception that the Turkmen do not get enough support from Turkey. Mostly voiced among these are Turkey's efforts to bring about a rapprochement between the Turkmen and the Iraqi Sunni bloc, and the belief that Turkey, which rallied the Kurdish region in economic terms, was not generous enough to the Turkmen. The area of influence of the ITC's leader cadre, most of whom studied in Turkish universities, do not include certain Turkmen groups with a more denominational than ethnic sense of belonging. Recently, some Turkmen living in the Kurdish region have been added to the group of exclusion. Also, groups formed around the Turkmen who were assigned to administrative posts by Barzani further reduced the area of influence of the ITC. Turkey's offering Iraqi Turkmen different policies via the ITC without sufficiently using regional channels of consultation hinders the ITC's capacity to position itself in line with the local dynamics. Under the current circumstances, half of the Turkmen population in Iraq relies on Turkey's coordination while a smaller group exists within the Shiite bloc and an even smaller does so under Barzani's area of influence.