

Towards a rapprochement between Ankara and Baghdad?

The geopolitical triangle Ankara - Baghdad - Erbil: Turkey prepares for fighting ISIL out of Mosul

The two-day visit of the Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim in Iraq in the first week of the new year is one of the most important developments in the Turkish dial - Iraq last year. For the moment it is only a signal, but indicates how Ankara is prepared to take a step forward towards the Iraqi government picking up another of impaired its strategic neighbourhood dossier. Significantly compared to the past, when Ankara held separately relations with Baghdad and Erbil, this time the visit was composed of two stages, the first in the capital Baghdad and the second in Erbil, the capital of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Regional Government)

Purposes and timing of the visit

Multiple and delicate the aims of the visit, and temporally to be read in parallel with the start of the second phase of the battle of Mosul, a city of one million inhabitants defended by several thousand fighters Işil, which has been under siege in the mid of last October. The first week of January 2017, the Iraqi forces have gained good port of Mosul East of First reopen the political cooperation between the two countries after months of crisis that followed the recall of their respective ambassadors in October. To restart cooperation Ankara had to give the signal of availability, that is, to be willing to refocus their Iraqi relations from the autonomous Kurdish province of Erbil in central Baghdad Shiite government, the latter supported politically and militarily from the awkward couple, Tehran and Washington. In a manner similar to what happened to the Syrian theatre, where the start of the siege of Aleppo Ankara is due to come to terms with a weak central government supported by Moscow, even the reversal of Turkish politics in Iraq goes in the direction of abandoning ambitions to control the north of the country against the will of the central state, pursuing instead a re-balancing policy with Baghdad, and therefore also with Tehran.

There are two files that are on the table for the moment to unlock the bilateral relationship and to make possible the rapprochement between Ankara and Baghdad: the commitment of the Iraqi government not to allow the PKK to operate in any part of the northern territories and the parallel commitment of Ankara to reduce its military interference in the north of the country, planning a withdrawal of its troops next to the city of Mosul. For the moment these are not real commitments, but the points of principle on which you are confronted representatives of the two countries.

It would therefore be incorrect to consider this important visit as equivalent of an agreement reached. The outcome of the battle of Mosul and how Turkish interests will be protected in this event macro (which has all the characteristics to be a real game-changer for Iraq and Turkey) to act as a catalyst and help you determine if you pass by the negotiation phase to a phase of real approximation three two countries.

A rapprochement whose strategic sense goes far beyond simple bilateral axis with the weak Iraqi Shiite government, but it widens its relations with the two countries now maintain, in a different way. Baghdad, namely the US and Iran. On the proto ashes was Işil and the future of its de facto capital Mosul, it is thus now plays a strategic game that Turkey believes it is essential for its very existence as a state and for the strategic balance between Turkey, Russia, the US and Iran .

On the future of the Iraqi state is thus interweaves the unprecedented diplomatic triangle Turkey - USA - Iran, which is coupled with the Turkey - Russia - Iran which is gradually taking shape in Syria. Turkey, pivot is the only these four countries actively involved in both scenarios that will

become an active pivot of rebuilding the Middle East again, if the balances that are emerging from Iraqi and Syrian conflicts will be consolidated.

Otherwise, Ankara will be the state most exposed to the failure of these two states and anarchy that can arise and expand north of the border threatens to overwhelm the state itself Turkish dragging it into a civil war without borders.

It is for these reasons that goes absolutely welcomed the reduction of tension between Turkey and Iraq - after a period of escalation that has raised fears that the two countries could enter the brink of conflict - it appears today constitute the horizon. This relaxation is also the result of the mediation work carried out by the US, in particular to find a compromise on the future Turkish military presence in northern Iraq in the predominantly Sunni areas.

The situation prior to the start of operations for the recapture of Mosul

The tension between Ankara and Baghdad had skyrocketed in October 2016, when the Iraqi armed forces and those of the KRG had begun, with the support of the CJTF Operation Inherent Resolve American-led, but also together with the various Sunni and Shiite Iraqi militias and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Added to these are the Popular Mobilization Forces, Shiite militias supported by Iran, which are entered in the siege having as a main objective to cut the bridges between the ISIL in Iraq and one in Syria, ensuring the Syrian border - and isolating Iraq from Mosul Raqqa.

Despite the difficulty of the siege and the extensive use ISIL in suicide operations account the besieging forces, the fate of Mosul, the main northern Iraq Sunni city under control by the Islamic State in 2014, appears now marked. It is in this context that the Turkish government - which for more than a year has set up a few dozen kilometres from Mosul army base Bashiqa, with about a thousand men - had announced in late October that it intended to participate in the battle for reconquest of the city. The government in Baghdad has definitely vetoed any direct military engagement Turkish in the battle for Mosul, claiming that the Turkish military presence in Iraq is a violation of international law and Ankara and ordered the army to withdraw from northern Iraq, otherwise the relations between the two countries could have been damaging to the possibility of an armed conflict. President Turkish Erdogan, for his part, reiterated that Ankara's army positioned in Iraq does not take orders from Baghdad's Shiite government, giving confirmation to speculation that Turkey pursues its own agenda within the sectarian conflict in Iraq.

Despite the bellicose rhetoric, during the first months of military operations around Mosul the Turkish army remained in a wait and see position, continuing training activities is the Kurdistan Regional Government forces of the Sunni anti ISIL Turkish wire militias, particularly those referring to the former governor of Mosul before taking part ISIL (10 June 2014), Atheel al-Nujaifi. After the fall of Mosul al-Nujaifi took shelter in Erbil, and, with the support of the KRG and the determining and direct support by Turkey, has prepared a Sunni militia called al-Hashd al-Watani (national mobilization) that strong of about 10,000 men, it should have been the main force for the Sunni recapture of Mosul. Ankara has in fact tried to combine the forces of the KRG with a Sunni militia and other minorities that it was able to regain control of the city without producing cause ethnic cleansing and the destruction of the town.

Turkey fears that the fall of Mosul Kurds or Shiites ports at the hands of an ethnic cleansing of Sunnis in the city and the destruction of Iraq's most important Sunni center, which would lead to strengthening of ethnic Kurdish and Shiite components (that are already 2 / 3 of Iraq's population). Ankara believes that it is its role and its interest to protect Iraqi Sunnis after the fall imminent and inevitable of the Islamic State, and foster the creation of a Sunni autonomous state which, together with the KRG, would be attracted into the Turkish Economic and would as a counterweight to the pro-Iranian Shiite party and the country. The coup failed in July in Turkey which has weakened the country and the armed forces and the subsequent start of the military operations of the Iraqi

government with US support and the other allies (France and Britain in particular) have put Ankara offside for the race to Mosul.

The past months since the start of the Battle of Mosul last October showed, however, that Turkey, despite the muscular rhetoric of President Erdogan and a return of irredentist themes in the media and in political language, is now replicating to find ways to exercise an influence in Iraq after the fall of Mosul, rather than aim for a direct military intervention that could have disastrous consequences.

For its part, also the Iraqi central government needs the cooperation of Ankara for groped to put together the pieces of the country, also because of the outreach Baghdad is heavily restricted to the north of Baghdad and Turkey has built in recent years strong connections both with the Arab part - Sunni Iraqis who with the Kurds. These two components representing the Ankara strategic depth in Iraq. As Sunni view component, the Turkish aim is now to bring out from Mosul ISIL post a Sunni political entity supported by Ankara and connected to the KRG to talk with Baghdad on the future of the country. Turkish interference in Iraq rationality is mainly to be read in an effort to support the emergence of a Sunni alliance in the north of the country at least in the governorates of Ninewa (Mosul), Erbil Dohuk and bonding with the thread of political Islamism and Arab Sunni Kurds, contrasting them with the support of the Sunni Turkey, the South Shiite supported by Iran. The strategic vision of Ankara is probably very sceptical about the possibility of keeping the country together in the long run and is concerned that, by a crushing of the neighbouring country, emerges an independent Kurdish state. In fact, the alternative to an Iraq divided along religious lines is that of an Iraq divided along ethnic lines, in which the Arab nationalist component end up marginalizing and assimilate the Sunni component, leaving the Kurds out of the single project. In taking forward this policy Ankara is a consensus both among the Kurds other minorities, who want to take the opportunity to reverse the Arabization campaigns that Saddam Hussein has carried out in the seventies and eighties, when he pushed the urbanization numerous tribes Sunni Arab who lived south of the city, dispersing minority Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrian Yazide.

The neo-Ottoman rhetoric of Erdogan and the danger of shifting boundaries

In this context such a delicate and explosive, not a few were astonished to hear the President Erdogan Turkish support during a public event the Turkish right to have a military role in the offensive on Mosul, basing such a historical right on the Turkish territorial claims 1920. In mid-October 2016, the Iraqi offensive preparedness Mosul by the Iraqi government, the Turkish president argued that "Turkey will be present on the ground and at the negotiating table", plotting a daring historical parallels for which the importance Mosul to Turkey dates back to 1920, when the last Ottoman parliament approved, after the first World war, a document drawn up by Mustafa Kemal and named Misak-i Milli, "national Oath", which would contain the definition of the minimum natural boundaries Turkey and the Turkish conditions for the end of the war. These boundaries include both Aleppo Mosul within Turkish borders. The vicissitudes of history turned out differently, however, and requests the Turkish nationalists were not accepted by the British, who refused to hold the plebiscite proposed for northern Iraq and - in 1926 - they came to an agreement to which Turkey renounced the village of Mosul in exchange for a share of oil revenues for the next 25 years.

The Turkish military presence in Iraq

The irredentist flavour of Erdogan's statements had actually an external meaning, in particular towards the Americans, the main supporters Iraqi offensive on Mosul, but also an internal political significance, in relation to parliamentary and electorate of the Nationalist Party, of whose votes the AKP will need in parliament to push through constitutional reform in a presidential way.

This intervention was obviously not well received in Baghdad, although Iraq now has lived for years with a Turkish military presence in Iraq, which continues for decades, as well as frequent were the air operations and raids across the border into account the PKK bases. But a Turkish direct intervention in the battle for Mosul would represent something different, because you put in the controversy between the two states on the basis of Bashiqua, the area 20 kilometres from Mosul, where for more than a year is a Turkish military base He conducts training activities of the PKK Kurdish militias and other Sunni Arab militias anti ISIL. Ankara argues that the military presence is legal and follows an agreement and an invitation from the same Kurdish Regional Government. Baghdad, of course, denies that the KRG has the power to make bilateral agreements with sovereign States in defense matters and calls for several months the withdrawal of Turkish forces also because the Turkish base is located outside the KRG territory.

Relations between the KRG and Turkey.

Since 2008 Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government have increasingly stepped up their collaboration, largely to the detriment of the sovereignty of Baghdad. Ankara has become the main commercial and energy partner for Kurdistan and Barzani KRG has supported and endorsed in exchange for the Turkish military presence in northern Iraq territory. No coincidence that the Turkish government claims that one of legitimacy for its military presence in Iraq comes from an invitation to the Armed Forces tir The situation has gradually deteriorated with the emergence ISIL Sunni, the other powerful regional actor North Iraq and Syria with which Ankara has had to contend. After the fall of Mosul in 2014, Turkey has found a new neighbouring with whom he had to do and it's early on a collision course with the Kurdish Iraqis. Ankara has preferred to maintain equidistance between KRG and ISIL, not running in the KRG military rescue even when the Islamic State troops have arrived to threaten Erbil. Iraqi Kurds have therefore further tightened its cooperation with the US and with other countries of the anti-ISIL coalition, while Iran also has found it useful to enter into a strategic game Northern Iraq supporting the KRG in making the advance ISIL .

Analysis, assessments and forecasts

The timing and how it will be carried on the release of Mosul and the expulsion ISIL, are therefore particularly relevant to Ankara. A test used for verifying the gradual improvement of bilateral relations between Turkey and Iraq will be represented by the forthcoming visit to Turkey of the Chief of Defence - and Defense Minister ad interim - Iraqi Osman al-Ghanimi, that the Turkish government invited Ankara after visiting Yildirim in Baghdad.

The battle for Mosul, the largest Iraqi battlefield after the conquest of the country since 2003, is not only a matter related to the territorial re-conquest of Nineveh province by the central government, but it is now embedded in a series of regional strategic scenarios and International, many of which directly involve Turkey and its main regional competitor. This makes Mosul a center of gravity of competing agendas because it may depend the future of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the sustainability of the rebuilding of an Iraqi state, but also the balance of power between Iran, Turkey and USA.