

# Turkey in the 21st Century

Quest for a New Foreign Policy

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## Chapter 3

# Turkish–American Relations and Northern Iraq: Relief at Last?

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Turkey has long been suspicious about the real intentions of the West concerning an independent Kurdish state. A majority of the Turkish people believe that the West would prefer to see a “divided Turkey” and an “independent Kurdistan”.<sup>1</sup> For to this reason, the alleged “indifference” of the US on Turkey’s fight against the outlawed PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party) and its support for the northern Iraqi Kurds have been among the main reasons for strong anti-Americanism in Turkey (see Grigoriadis 2010, 51–66; Taşpınar 2005, 83–98; Bal 2005; Güney 2008, 482, 484).<sup>2</sup>

Washington has long been making efforts to analyse these facts and improve its relations with Turkey, which is one of its oldest allies in the Middle East. In this respect, one of the main targets of President Barack Obama’s visit to Turkey in 2009 was to erase the bitter memories of the past and decrease the level of anti-Americanism among the Turkish people. Under such circumstances, the surprising warming up of Turkey’s political approach to northern Iraq in the last couple of years triggered a wave of hope that seemed to relieve the relations between Ankara and Washington. The Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq, which was once considered to be one of the top threats against Turkey’s national unity, is now turning into an important partner with whom Ankara can cooperate in various areas. This relatively warmer relationship between Ankara and Irbil has also pleased Washington, since it favours a decrease in the tension in the Middle East while a new Iraq is being built. But how could Turkey and northern Iraq overcome their previous perceptions of “insecurity” towards each other and open a way for dialogue? And more importantly, how permanent is this new multidimensional relationship?

Especially by the second half of the last decade (2005–10), the systemic, regional and domestic changes have obliged Ankara to reconsider its foreign

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1 According to a survey conducted in April 2009 by Yılmaz Esmer of Bahçeşehir University, 86 per cent of the Turkish people believe that the US aims to divide Turkey. Similarly, 76 per cent think that the EU too pursues the same target (see Dundar 2009).

2 Turkey is among those countries which have the smallest sympathy for the US, as only 17 per cent of the Turkish people hold a favourable view of this country (see Pew Research Center 2010).

policy targets. As constructivists often put it, like identities, states' perceptions of threat and interest are open for change (see Wendt 1999; Nau 2002; Hopf 2002; Bozdağlıoğlu 2003). Consequently, Turkey's traditional perception of "insecurity", not only towards northern Iraq, but towards its other neighbours, such as Greece, Syria and Armenia, also changed to a relatively warm approach by the mid-2000s. For both external and internal reasons, the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party), which has been in power since November 2002, has been keen to replace Turkey's traditional "security-oriented" foreign policy approach with a more liberal understanding.

One of the main architects of this policy is Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who wants to enhance Turkey's regional and global role as a "soft power". With his new foreign policy vision, Davutoğlu aims to establish Turkey in the world "not as a bridge between the West and the Muslim World", but "as a centre". Keeping Turkey's historical ties with the region in mind, he wants to determine national interests according to the recent systemic, regional and domestic changes. Often regarded as a doctrine, Davutoğlism is mainly based on the principle of "zero problems with neighbours" and it targets a proactive and multidimensional foreign policy, in which economic interdependence is strongly supported for regional peace and stability (see Davutoğlu 2001; Davutoğlu 2010; Aras 2009a; Cohen 2010).

In this new foreign policy vision, relations with northern Iraq have been a vitally important issue that needs to be reconsidered. Due to the altered conditions of the new Iraq, which has urged Ankara to dramatically change its traditional "threat perception" about that area since 2005, the relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Irbil improved to a large extent. In parallel with the diplomatic and political developments, Turkey's economic relations with northern Iraq have also boomed. Despite the previous worries about the founding of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and possible side-effects of it on Turkey's Kurds, improving economic ties with Irbil helped Ankara to soften its political approach to the KRG and build more cooperative relations with it. For Ankara, it was especially important to eliminate the continuing PKK threat inside Turkey. Eliminating the basis for possible conflict between Ankara and Irbil has been positive for Turkish-US relations as well. Due to the fact that Washington would prefer to see Turkey, rather than Iran, as the most influential neighbour to Iraq, Ankara's and Washington's interests in the region began to converge.

However, there is an important issue which continues to threaten both the regional stability and the future of Turkish-American relations. Turkey's Kurdish question, which has not yet been solved, is still hanging over the regional stability like the sword of Damocles. The government's efforts to find a way to end the issue are being shadowed by various anti-democratic practices which cause questioning of the AKP's sincerity on the democratization in general. Although the PKK is an internal problem for Turkey, its cross-border ties, especially with northern Iraq, turn it into an issue that has the potential of ruining Turkey's relations not only with the Iraqi Kurds, but also with Washington and Baghdad. Apart from that, the

status of Mosul and Kirkuk and the future of the Turkomans in Iraq also create a risk for the wellbeing of the Turkish–northern Iraqi rapprochement.

Keeping all these in mind, this chapter will first look at the details of Turkish–American relations in the 1990s, during which time Turkey brought its national interests forward even if they seemed to clash with Washington’s priorities. Later on, it will discuss the impact of the post-9/11 era on Turkish–US relations and the competing security agendas of the two countries during the Iraq War. However, the special emphasis will be on the motives lying behind the Turkish–northern Iraqi rapprochement and the US attitude toward it. Explaining the main dynamics of the recent relations between Ankara, Washington, Baghdad and Irbil, the chapter aims to analyse the sustainability of the current changes, especially under the shadow of Turkey’s crippled democratization steps and the still-unsolved Kurdish question.

### **National Interests Come Forward: Turkish–US Relations in the 1990s**

For Washington, it has always been important to see Turkey as a “factor of stability” in its region. During the Cold War, this was relatively easy, as Ankara made significant contributions to the long-term US plans regarding the “common” Soviet threat. In this period, the two allies’ interests converged to a large extent under the NATO umbrella. However, things have not been so clear for the last twenty years. By the end of the Cold War, Turkey thought that it would lose its strategic significance in Washington’s eyes due to the big systemic change. However in the post-Cold War period, rather than decreasing, Turkey’s significance has even increased, both on regional and global levels. In this new era, being the only remaining superpower, the US had to deal with various worldwide issues ranging from ethnic and religious conflicts to human rights violations and terrorism. In Hook and Spanier’s words, “although the Soviet dragon no longer existed, this time, the US was in a jungle, full of poisonous snakes” (see Hook and Spanier 2000, 293). This certainly required the US to receive the support of its old allies like Turkey, which, contrary to its fears, has become one of the most influential players in a vitally important region. As a strong “anchor” of the West, Turkey was expected to establish “stability” in this new and difficult period (see Kramer 2000, 225).

As a matter of fact, Ankara and Washington decided to enhance their partnership in the post-Cold War era to diversify and deepen bilateral relations. After mutual high-level visits in 1999, the partnership was called “strategic” and began to cover various areas such as energy, economy and security. However, Turkish–American relations have never been devoid of problems (see Athanassopoulou 2001, 144). Despite their overlapping interests in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, it was already evident that Turkey and the US would not always share the same point of view on every single subject (see Aykan 1996, 348). In this new era, Turkey’s national interests, which were pushed back in the past, have begun to come forward and affect the route of its relations with the US (see Fuller 2007). It

is a widely known fact that when there is an external threat, national interests can easily be subordinated to common alliance interests; however once the external threat disappears, national or regional interests might resume a central place (see Roper 1990/91, 76). This can easily be observed regarding post-Cold War Turkish-US relations.

In this new period, Ankara's suspicions concerning Washington's hidden agenda about the foundation of an independent Kurdish state and the status of northern Iraq were among the main issues that bedevilled the relations between Turkey and the US. From Ankara's perspective, the "problem of northern Iraq" was actually a by-product of the Gulf War in 1991 as the US forces' victory against Saddam Hussein caused establishment of a secure region for the Iraqi Kurds in the north of Iraq.<sup>3</sup> The "Poised Hammer Force", formed by the US, UK and French aircraft, operated from the military bases in Turkey and speeded up the founding of a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq in 1992. Although Turkey too played an important role in protecting the Iraqi Kurds from Saddam Hussein's oppression, the last thing it would want to see was an independent Kurdish political entity in Iraq. In Ankara's eyes, the "problem of northern Iraq" was a direct extension of the PKK problem inside Turkey. With this reason, Turkey did not develop a "northern Iraq" policy that was independent from its PKK policy.

As Turkey's fight against the PKK became severe, especially by the beginning of the 1990s, Ankara expected the US administrations to understand Turkey's cause and provide the necessary support to eliminate this organization. However, during this period, both countries' primary threat perceptions diverged to a large extent. In Washington's eyes, Saddam Hussein was the "number one threat" against US interests, while the PKK was only a "destabilizing factor" for the region and of secondary importance. In other words, although the PKK was declared by the US to be a "terrorist organization" and Turkey's fight against it was considered to be "self-defence", Washington saw the PKK as a "domestic problem of Turkey" that required a "political, non-military solution".<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Washington's claim that Turkey actually had a "Kurdish question rather than a PKK problem that cannot be solved solely by force" enhanced Turkey's suspicions towards the US. Despite this fact, Turkish reforms during the EU harmonization process concerning the rights of its Kurdish citizens and the strong US role in the capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in 1999 led to a better atmosphere between the two capitals regarding the chronic Kurdish question (see Weiner 1999; Berkan

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3 After a Kurdish refugee crisis in March 1991, "Operation Provide Comfort" under the US initiative created a "no-fly zone" in the north of Iraq aimed at protecting the Iraqi Kurds from the oppression of Saddam Hussein (see Malanczuk 1991, 114-32).

4 The PKK's "terrorist nature" has been emphasized by the annual report of the US Department of State, "Patterns of Global Terrorism", for over a decade. In the "Patterns of Global Terrorism Report for 1992", the PKK was described as a "Marxist Leninist terrorist group, composed of Turkish Kurds seeking to set up a Marxist state in south eastern Turkey" (see US Department of State 1993, 40).

1999). This atmosphere was strengthened much more on 11 September 2001, when the US became the subject of the most striking terrorist attacks in history.

The 9/11 attacks had a consolidating effect on the Turkish–US alliance. When NATO invoked the Article 5 – the collective defence clause – of the Washington Treaty and declared the attacks against the US as attacks against all its members, Turkey was among the first countries to join the coalition forces to fight against terrorism. It permitted all American and coalition countries' aircraft to use Turkish airspace and provided troops for ISAF (the International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan. However, even this did not help the two countries to harmonize their diverging threat perceptions. By 11 September 2001, radical Islamist terrorism had become the main threat for Washington against its national security. However, for Ankara, the main threat against Turkey's national security had long been the PKK which gains strength from ethnicity rather than religion. As seen, the PKK and Al Qaeda did not form a "common threat perception" that was as strong as the Soviets and the Communism (see Taşpınar 2010).

Apparently, the divergence of threat perceptions and interests of Turkey and the US became more evident in the post-9/11 period. Soon after the attacks, the US, as a global power, pursued a grand strategy to expand Washington's interests in the Middle East and enlarge the number of the countries that would cooperate with it. In this respect, Iraq, headed by an anti-American leader like Saddam Hussein, came before Washington as an important problem to sort out. However, being a regional power with various internal problems, Turkey's interests and priorities required a completely different agenda. In this period, Turkey strongly opposed the ousting of Saddam Hussein as this would destabilize Turkey's southern border and might lead to an independent Kurdish state. For this reason, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ankara's priority was to achieve success in its fight against the PKK, whereas for Washington, this was of minor significance compared to a "greater target" like the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad.

### **The Iraq War and the Competing Security Agendas of Turkey and the US**

The diverging priorities of Ankara and Washington turned the occupation of Iraq in 2003 into an important "litmus test" for the future of Turkish–American relations. Deteriorating relations reached their peak level by the so-called "1 March Motion Crisis". After six months of military, political and financial negotiations between Washington and Ankara, the opening of a northern front from Turkey against Iraq did not receive the necessary approval of the Turkish Parliament on 1 March 2003 (see Bila 2003; Yetkin 2004). The refusal of access for US troops to Iraq via Turkish territories shocked the US and even forced the Pentagon to change its war plans (see Park 2003, 11–23). Members of the Bush administration claimed that this had especially lengthened their route to victory and complicated the post-war situation (see *New York Times* 2005).

Actually, the tough bargaining process between the AKP and Washington right before the parliamentary voting gave the American side an impression that Turks would be helpful on the US plans to open a northern front (see Taşkın and Çalışkan 2003; Balbay 2009).<sup>5</sup> However, the AKP government was not very clear about the issue as the Turkish people strongly opposed the occupation of Iraq (see Hale 2007), worrying that this might both lead to an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq and have a negative impact on the plight of the Iraqi Turkomans.<sup>6</sup> Possible economic losses and other detrimental effects on regional stability, such as a refugee crisis similar to the one in 1991, were also influential on the hesitant behaviour of the AKP government (see Migdalowitz 2003). Consequently, the government's bill to allow US troops to use Turkish land did not receive the necessary approval of the parliament. Although Turkey allowed US forces to use Turkish airspace, Turkish–American relations could not overcome the negative impacts of the “1 March Crisis” for a long time (see Rubin 2005, 69–80; Parris 2005, 49–58; Çağaptay 2004, 43–52).

Fearing that Turkey might be excluded from the post-war plans in the new Iraq, the AKP government tried to minimize the damage. For example, on 21 March 2003, it pushed the parliament to pass another bill, which legalized the deployment of Turkish troops in northern Iraq. Despite the parliamentary approval of this bill, the deployment could not be carried out at all, due to the strong objection of both the Iraqi Kurds and Washington. The Turkish public believed that the US was determined to take revenge on Turkey because of the 1 March Crisis. That is why US soldiers' ill-treatment of Turkish special operation troops in Sulaymaniyah, northern Iraq, on 4 July 2003 – widely known as the “sacking incident” – caused a further boost in anti-Americanism in Turkey (see Kandemir 2005). According to the former Chief of Staff General Hilmi Özkök, the incident signified the most serious crisis of confidence between the two NATO allies (see Çağaptay 2003). Turks had begun to perceive their NATO ally, the US, more as a “national security threat” rather than a “strategic partner” (see Taşpınar 2005, 83–98). In the eyes of the Turkish public, it was the US which was directly responsible for the PKK finding a “safe haven” in northern Iraq (see Ertem 2006, 57–98).<sup>7</sup> Therefore,

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5 It was claimed that on 15 February 2003, a Turkish delegation headed by former Turkish Foreign Minister Yaşar Yakış negotiated a massive aid package with the Bush administration, which included a grant of US\$ 6 billion and a loan of US\$ 20 billion. According to the media, US President Bush called this tough bargaining “horse trading” and this had a very damaging effect on Turkish public opinion (see Taşkın and Çalışkan 2003; Balbay 2009).

6 According to a Pew Research Center survey, 83 per cent of the Turkish people were against a war with Iraq and the opening of a base for the US troops in Turkey (see *Cumhuriyet* 2002).

7 According to Philip H. Gordon and Ömer Taşpınar, the secular-Kemalist part of the population thought that the US always used the Kurdish question as a means to hurt Turkey, thus supporting the Kurdish separatism. Apart from that, they also believed that the AKP too was being supported by the US to present Turkey to the Muslim world as a new “moderate Islamic model” (see Gordon and Taşpınar 2008, 3).

Ankara wanted the US to take more concrete steps to help Turkey to weaken the PKK's outside presence (see Çongar 2006). Among these steps were allowing the Turkish military to make cross-border operations, dissolution of the PKK camps on the Qandil Mountains and extradition of the PKK leaders there.

However, as Iraq after Saddam Hussein became a “quagmire” for the American forces, Washington found stabilization of Iraq a target that was once again more important than struggling with the PKK. In the eyes of some Turkish nationalists, Washington was consciously turning a blind eye to the PKK to be able to use it against Ankara to achieve various other targets (see Güzel 2007, 95, 114). “Keeping Turkey out of northern Iraq” was the foremost among these targets.<sup>8</sup> This region was a relatively stable part of Iraq, and Washington did not want to ruin this by upsetting the Iraqi Kurds with a Turkish intervention. Thus, Ankara's efforts to obtain more influence over the new Iraq, such as providing the stability force with Turkish troops, did not produce any outcome because of the strong Kurdish opposition and Washington's preference to control Turkey's influence in the region (see *Hürriyet* 2003; *Radikal* 2003). Under these circumstances, up until 2006 Ankara could not witness a concrete US step to support the Turkish cause against the PKK threat.

However, escalating feelings of distrust towards Washington pushed the Bush administration in August 2006 to establish a “special envoy” mechanism to underline its support for Turkey's fight against the PKK.<sup>9</sup> Despite that mechanism, the PKK militants continued to leak into Turkey from the mountainous Iraqi border and committed new attacks against the Turkish military and security forces. The raid on the Dağlica military post at the Turkish–Iraqi border on 21 October 2007 was one of these attacks that killed 12 and wounded 16 Turkish soldiers. The sincerity of Washington and the future of the alliance were once more being questioned by the Turkish public. In order to appease the nation and chase down the PKK militants, the Turkish parliament approved a new bill allowing Turkish troops to launch a military incursion into northern Iraq.

Seeing that Turkey could make a new cross-border operation, the Bush administration felt the necessity of making a better contribution to Turkey's fight against the PKK (see CNN.com 2007). By November 2007, the two countries have begun to share “real-time intelligence” for military purposes and Washington did not oppose the Turkish ground incursion into northern Iraq on 21 February 2008 (see *Today's Zaman* 2007, *Washington Post* 2007, NTVMSNBC 2008a).

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8 Some US officials in northern Iraq were even claimed to be in close cooperation with the PKK commanders in the region (see Dündar 2003).

9 In August 2006, the Bush administration appointed one of its top retired generals, Joseph Ralston, as the “US Special Envoy for Countering the PKK”. A press statement by the US Department of State on 28 August 2006 said that “General Ralston will have responsibility for coordinating US engagement with the Government of Turkey and the Government of Iraq to eliminate the terrorist threat of the PKK and other terrorist groups operating in northern Iraq and across the Turkey-Iraq border” (see Kurd Net 2006).



However, just as with previous ones, this massive ground operation could not end the PKK militants' leakage from northern Iraq to Turkish territories either. As a result of this fact, on 3 October 2008, the PKK militants attacked another military post called Aktütün, at the southeast border of Turkey, and killed 17 more soldiers. Despite rising anti-Americanism in Turkey, both countries continued their efforts to control the damage to mutual relations and soon found other means to secure the future of their alliance. In November 2009, a "triple mechanism" was founded between Turkey, the US and Iraq especially to improve the cooperation for Turkey's fight against the PKK. Since then, the three countries regularly come together and discuss possible ways of cutting the logistical and financial sources of the PKK. In his statement on 28 September 2010, the Turkish Minister of Interior Affairs Beşir Atalay underlined that, through this mechanism, Turkey expects the US, Iraq and northern Iraq to help Turkey to end the PKK terrorism that finds shelter in the Iraqi territories (see CNNTurk.com 2010a).

As seen, Turkey has become aware that without the support of the northern Iraqi administration, taking the PKK activities under control is almost impossible. This certain requirement has coincided with Turkey's new foreign policy vision, which is "less security-oriented" and "much more liberal", and which aims to remove the problems with its neighbours and develop cooperation areas such as the economy. The new systemic, regional and domestic circumstances required Turkey to reconsider its previous threat and interest perceptions.

### Northern Iraq and Turkey's Changing Security Perceptions

Turkey's quest for a new policy towards the Iraqi Kurds was in full operation by the 2005–10 period. Despite the continuing PKK attacks, the Head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, or MİT), Emre Taner, initiated covert official negotiations with the Iraqi Kurdish leaders by the beginning of the mid-2000s. One of the most significant negotiations was held in Irbil on 20 October 2005, where Taner met with northern Iraqi leader Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (see *Radikal* 2005).<sup>10</sup> This meeting was an early signal of the new Turkish foreign policy towards Irbil and aimed to prepare the society for an open dialogue with the Iraqi Kurds in the near future. After continuing mutual visits for about three years, conditions for an overt relationship with northern Iraq were ready.

On 24 April 2008, the Turkish National Security Council (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*, or MGK) approved a proposal that allowed the government to establish contacts with all of the Iraqi groups, including the Kurds. This was a result of a tough negotiation period between the Turkish government and the military. Being pleased with this decision, Iraqi Kurds underlined the importance they

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<sup>10</sup> As a result of the efforts to normalize relations with the Iraqi Kurds, in October 2005 Turkey permitted Barzani to use the İncirlik base to fly to the US (see *Radikal* 2005).

attached to increasing the level of cooperation with Turkey. Regarding the issue, the Ankara representative of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Bahros Galali, stated that “northern Iraq was not an enemy, but a friend of Ankara” (see NTVMSNBC 2008b). Actually, this was a sign that the ice between Turkey and northern Iraq was melting. Ankara had begun to present the Iraqi Kurds as the “relatives”, not the “external enemies”, of Turkey (see Oktav 2010, 59).<sup>11</sup> It was time for Ankara to stop thinking that negotiating with northern Iraqi Kurds separately would damage the territorial integrity of Iraq and lead to the recognition of the de facto Kurdish state in the north of this country. On the contrary, Ankara had begun to establish a northern Iraq policy that has various dimensions other than Turkey’s Kurdish problem.

Despite the ongoing PKK attacks, Turkey was making a dramatic change in its approach toward the Iraqi Kurds. In the following years, mutual contacts reached a point of redefining the official relationship between Ankara and Irbil. In this respect, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s visit to northern Iraq on 30 October 2009 to meet the President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani, was a groundbreaking event. With this visit, Turkey for the first time accepted an Iraqi Kurdish leader as an equal counterpart.<sup>12</sup> In previous Turkish political discourse, Barzani had often been described as a “tribal leader”. This explanation was purposely chosen to underline the perceived hierarchy between the Turkish and the Iraqi Kurdish politicians, while it also hinted “humiliation”.

President of the central Iraqi government, Jalal Talabani was another northern Iraqi Kurdish figure who faced such treatment in the past. In his visit to Ankara on 7 March 2008, there was no official welcoming ceremony for Talabani, as this might have caused a reaction among the Turkish public that was already very sensitive about the continuing PKK attacks. However, Turkish President Abdullah Gül’s visit to Baghdad on 23 March 2009, mainly to receive support for Turkey’s fight against the PKK, passed in a relatively warmer atmosphere. In his meeting with Talabani, President Gül underlined the significance of Iraq’s territorial integrity and stability, while Talabani openly warned the PKK, saying that “either it has to leave arms or leave the Iraqi territories” (see *Radikal* 2009). Mutual contacts reached their peak level with the visit of Turkish Premier and AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Irbil on 30 March 2011. In this visit, Erdoğan especially underlined that Turkey has ended

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11 During the period 2000–05, Turkey preferred to underline its kinship with the Iraqi Turkomans and tried to protect the interests of this group as a kin-state. However, this caused claims that by focusing on the Turkomans so much, Ankara was actually ‘otherizing’ its own Kurds and their Kurdish relatives in Iraq. It seems that Ankara took this criticism into consideration as Premier Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has begun to call the Iraqi Kurds “brothers”, which signals a much closer relationship than with other relatives (see SkyTurk.net 2011).

12 In his meeting with Davutoğlu, Barzani underlined Irbil’s support for Turkey’s democratic reform process which, he believed, would finally end the clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK (see *Hürriyet* 2009).

the policy of denying the presence of the Kurds, while Barzani gave full support to Erdoğan in his government's recent reform process (see SkyTurk.net 2011). The warm atmosphere between the two leaders had even caused comments on a possible integration between Turkey and northern Iraq in the near future (see Çandar 2011). As seen, the type of the relationship between Turkey and northern Iraq has begun to change radically in the last couple of years. What are the main motivations behind this change and how permanent can it be? And where does the US stand in the recent rapprochement between Turkey and northern Iraq? In order to understand all these, it is necessary to examine the details of each side's position.

### **Reasons for Rapprochement from Turkey's Perspective**

Keeping the previous state policies in mind, Turkey's rapprochement with the northern Iraqi Kurds is almost like a "180-degree change". According to Turkish diplomats, this is harmonization of the policies according to the current realities of the day (see *Radikal* 2005). The reason for this is a combination of various developments both in Turkey and in the Middle East. The new geopolitics of the region after the Iraq war and the US plans to withdraw from Iraq are the two most important systemic and regional developments in this period. In addition, shifting civilian–military relations in Turkey, the gradually changing Turkish traditional approach to the Kurdish question and the AKP's new foreign policy vision that aims to turn Turkey into a more influential power have also been influential domestic factors on Ankara's new policy toward northern Iraq.

Regarding all these elements, one can easily claim that Turkey's changing approach toward northern Iraq has systemic, regional and domestic reasons. At the systemic and regional level, the post-9/11 conditions and the US occupation of Iraq are the most influential factors. Ending Saddam Hussein's rule and bringing a de facto US presence to the region, the occupation deeply changed the future planning of the surrounding countries, such as Turkey, Iran and Syria. The US occupation brought these three countries together as they all had deep concerns about the division of Iraq and the possible emergence of an independent Kurdish state after the ousting of Saddam Hussein. However, fears about an independent Kurdish state have soon lost their place to a common search for stability in the region. In the January 2005 elections in Iraq, the Sunni Arabs won only 6 per cent of the parliamentary seats while the Kurds won 27 per cent. With this result, Ankara specifically understood that the Kurds would have a strong say in the new Iraq (see Oktav 2010, 57). This result has been very influential on Turkey's reconsideration of its northern Iraq policy and its targeting of a better relationship with Irbil.<sup>13</sup> As an influential factor on Turkey's rapprochement with northern

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13 Until 2007, when Ankara and Washington began to share real-time intelligence against the PKK, Turkey's relations with northern Iraq had been tense for various reasons, such as the status of Kirkuk, cross-border operations against the PKK presence in northern

Iraq by the mid-2000s, Turkish diplomats also underlined the significance of the recognition of the Iraqi constitution in October 2005, which pushed Turkey to set better conditions with its southern neighbour (see *Radikal* 2005).

A policy change about northern Iraq was again of vital importance, as the AKP's new Turkish foreign policy approach targeted to turn Turkey into a globally effective "soft power", which pursues a multidimensional and proactive foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> For a country which works for stability and peace in its region, it would not be appropriate for Turkey to have a problem with one of its neighbours. Seeing that it can easily be excluded from the future US plans in the Middle East, Ankara found more reasons to sort out its problems with an Irbil that is relatively the most reliable and stable partner of Washington in the new Iraq. Continuing a tense relationship with northern Iraq and carrying an "internal" problem like the PKK beyond its borders would threaten Turkey's relations not only with Irbil and Baghdad, but also with Washington.

At the domestic level, Turkey, headed by the AKP government, has realized that to eliminate the PKK it would be appropriate not to ignore but to recognize the northern Iraqi Kurdish administration. Ankara has understood that to end the PKK's Kurdish separatism, not only military but also political, economic and diplomatic means must be put into practice. Working on a democratization programme to improve the rights of its Kurdish citizens, the AKP government realized the vital importance of building better relations with northern Iraq. As Henri Barkey of the Carnegie Endowment reminds us, when Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds are bad, so are its relations with its own Kurds (see *Hürriyet Daily News* 2010).

For this reason, Turkey's relations with its own Kurds are actually directly related to its relations with the Iraqi Kurds. By trying to enlist the support of the KRG, Turkey aims to show both its Kurdish citizens and the West that the PKK was not a representative of the Kurds, but a "terrorist organization" (see Aytac and Uslu 2008). However, because of the psychological barriers erected by the Turkish public, which is already traumatized by the PKK's armed attacks in the last 25 years, the AKP's job is not at all easy. For years, the Turkish state's continuing fight against the PKK kept the Turkish army at the top of the Turkish political decision-making structure, and the army in general was against an rapprochement with northern Iraq.

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Iraq and the handing over of the PKK militants on Qandil Mountains, etc. However, by 2007, strengthening US commitment to support Turkey's fight against the PKK decreased the harsh tone of the Iraqi Kurdish leaders against Ankara (see Oktav 2010, 57).

14 According to Bülent Aras, Turkey's new foreign policy reflects a sharp break from its past behaviour, which was "traditionally subordinate to the international systemic order and shaped under the constraints of domestic politics". Aras believes that, in this new period, Turkey has gained a new approach, which is self-confident, multidimensional and dynamic (see Aras 2009b).

However, the recent change of balance between civilians and the military helped the AKP to practise its new foreign policy vision and thus the requirements of its policy change toward northern Iraq (see Çongar 2007).<sup>15</sup> With the diminishing military tone in Turkish politics since 2007, Turkey's official discourse toward northern Iraq has clearly been softened. Turkish officials still refrain from using the word "Kurdistan" in their statements, as the Turkish public is not yet ready to accept the current autonomous conditions in northern Iraq.<sup>16</sup> However, strengthening economic relations, which create a "complex interdependency" between Turkey and northern Iraq, will certainly help the AKP to pass the "psychological threshold" in Turkish public opinion to carry the relations up to a higher level.

This will go hand in hand with transformation of Turkish foreign policy from a security-oriented perspective to a more liberal approach. In this new era, Turkey aimed to rise in its region by being a "problem-solving", rather than a "problem-creating" country. Davutoğlu's new multidimensional foreign policy vision, which puts forward a "zero problems with neighbours" approach, also required such a rapprochement with northern Iraq. Davutoğlu often talks about "a common fate, a common history and a common future" for the Middle East (see *Yeni Şafak* 2009; *Haberajans* 2009). He believes that regional peace and stability can easily be enlarged through economic interdependence (see *Milliyet* 2010a).

Due to its relatively stable position, northern Iraq is an important market, in which Turkish businessmen aim at being some of the biggest actors (see *Radikal* 2010a). Starting from the mid-2000s, the trade volume between Turkey and the KRG has reached up to US\$ 5 billion, which is twice as big as Turkey's trade volume with Greece (see *Kerkuk.net* 2010). This once again shows that the international capital has no "red lines", barriers or borders. In this respect, Turkey's recent recognition of the changing conditions in northern Iraq and its efforts to harmonize its policies with them, both economically and diplomatically, is not surprising. Whether or not Turkey was ready to face it, the obvious "Kurdistan" reality in northern Iraq finally required Ankara to reconsider its foreign policy towards its southern neighbour. Thinking about the regional leadership rivalry between Turkey and Iran, Tehran's relatively faster steps to improve its relations with the northern Iraqi Kurds also pushed Turkey to leave its traditionally cautious policies toward this region.<sup>17</sup> As

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15 Even in 2007, the Turkish military was talking about intervening in northern Iraq "both to neutralize the PKK and to prevent an independent Kurdish state there". On 4 June 2007, the Turkish Chief of General Staff Yaşar Büyükanit stated that it was not clear whether the Turkish military should deal only with the PKK or with the Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani as well, if it entered northern Iraq (see Çongar 2007).

16 On 23 March 2009, the Turkish daily *Radikal* claimed that on the way to Baghdad, where he met Kurdish-rooted Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, Turkish President Abdullah Gül used the word "Kurdistan" while he was talking about the regional government there. This caused a huge discussion in Turkey. Gül neither denied nor approved this claim (see *Radikal* 2009).

17 By 2009, at least 12 different countries had consulates in Irbil, and Iran was among the first ones to take this step, opening a consulate in Irbil in November 2007 and appointing

a result, Turkey finally gave up perceiving northern Iraq only a matter of security and added various other dimensions to its relations with this region. In 2010, Erdoğan and Barzani openly stated their decisiveness to achieve full economic integration (see *Zaman* 2010).

### Reasons for Rapprochement from the KRG's Perspective

The KRG too has its own reasons for a better relationship with Turkey. First of all, the Iraqi Kurds see Turkey as a bridge which opens a more comfortable and secure path for them. Moreover, Turkey is the best option that could act as an anchor to the West for them (see Çağaptay 2003). Being the world's sixteenth largest economy, Turkey is the only neighbour of Iraq which has the necessary conditions for free trade. It is also a well-known fact that Turkey aims to activate various new projects and become an energy hub in its region (see Çandar 2009, 15). In parallel with that, the KRG plans to transport oil to Europe via new pipelines through Turkey. The Kerkuk–Yumurtalik oil pipeline has already been working since June 2009 and the KRG is pleased with Turkey's support for the transportation of the Iraqi oil (see Oktav 2010, 65). Despite the continuing oil dispute between Irbil and Baghdad, the KRG has also begun providing various foreign companies, including Turkish ones, with licences to dig for oil in northern Iraq (see Münir 2009).

Because of its relatively secure and stable atmosphere, northern Iraq also comes forward as a region that is more suitable to make business. The AKP government and the KRG have recently signed various protocols to improve their economic ties. About 1,200 Turkish companies are actively working in northern Iraq and 900 of them are from the construction sector (see *Cumhuriyet* 2007). Many call Irbil a huge “working site”. Developing relations with Turkey will certainly contribute to northern Iraq's search for better security and stability. Especially after the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq in August 2010, Turkey is the only neighbouring country that Irbil can really rely on. Trusting Iran and Syria is more risky for Irbil, because of these countries' ethnic and sectarian ties in Iraq and their problematic relationship with Washington (see Çağaptay 2008).

Keeping in mind the current social and political divisions of Iraq, there is no alternative for Irbil that is better than Turkey. Already having a tense relationship with the Shiite and Sunni Arabs of Iraq, the KRG seems to be in need of Turkey's support. Remembering that even the US can leave them alone, as happened in the past, this need becomes much severe for the Iraqi Kurds. Iraqi Kurdish leaders have long left their provocative political discourse against Turkey on the issues like independence or the PKK presence in northern Iraq (see *Milliyet* 2007; *Radikal* 2009). Although Barzani openly declared in the past that their dream was independence, Irbil recently prefers to talk about “democracy for Iraq” and

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a Kurdish-Iranian diplomat as the consul (see Çekirge 2007). Turkey has had a consulate in Irbil since March 2010.

“autonomy for the KRG” (see Oktav 2010, 66). In addition to that, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, who once mentioned that “they would not surrender even a cat of them to Turkey”, is now warning the PKK that it cannot continue to stay in northern Iraq if it does not surrender its arms (see *Radikal* 2009).

### The US Perception of the Turkish–Northern Iraqi Rapprochement

Washington, which calls Turkey “its most important ally in the Middle East” and northern Iraq “its most reliable partner in Iraq” (see *Washington Post* 2006), is pleased with the developing relations between Ankara and Irbil. It is even being identified as the factor which inspired the two sides to create such a rapprochement (see *Radikal* 2005). This is especially because of its quest for regional stability in the post-Saddam Hussein era. Although the US army has left Iraq in 2010, it is still important for Washington to guarantee the future of the new order that it wants to settle in Iraq. Regarding that, the security and stability of northern Iraq, which gave the biggest support to Washington during the occupation, is one of the main concerns of the US. In fact, the “Status of Forces Agreement” (SOFA), which was signed on 23 December 2008 to determine the conditions for the US withdrawal from Iraq, was strongly supported by the northern Iraqi Kurds as it was a kind of a guarantee for them against the Iraqi Arabs concerning the future administration of Iraq after the US withdrawal.

Iran is another factor that pushes the US to support the creation of better cooperation areas between Ankara and Irbil. Knowing that Iran too is targeting to be a strong player in the region, Washington prefers to see in the new Iraq a more active Turkey that is on good terms with the Iraqi Kurds. Keeping in mind its problems with Iran, such as nuclear armament, Washington favours leaving northern Iraq under Turkey’s protection in the post-US Iraq and preventing Tehran from advancing its influence in the region (see Çandar 2010a; Aydıntaşbaş 2010).<sup>18</sup> The rivalry between Shiite Iran and the Sunni Arab world finds an important ground in the deep sectarian divisions of Iraq. In this rivalry, Turkey took a position that was much closer to the Sunni Arab world. In this respect, aiming to prevent the dissolution of Iraq, Turkey pushed hard to have a say in the establishment of the central Iraqi government.

Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu visited Irbil and Baghdad in November 2010 to persuade various ethnic and sectarian groups to solve their problems in order to overcome the government crisis which lasted for almost eight months (see CNNTurk.com 2010c and *Radikal* 2010b). During the Iraqi search for a new

18 According to the secret diplomatic reports revealed by Wikileaks, Iran has spent 100–200 million US dollars to increase its control on the Iraqi political groups so as to prevent a pro-US Iraq (see Çandar 2010a). However, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani believes that Turkey has become influential in Iraq much more than Iran primarily because of its current rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds (see Aydıntaşbaş 2010).

government, Turkey seemed to side with Ayad Allawi's Sunni faction, rather than Nouri al-Maliki's Shiite one (see Çandar 2010b). The approval of Maliki's re-election as the Iraqi Prime Minister has strengthened the comments that Iraq's future will be based mainly on the Shiite Arab–Kurdish front, which were the two most oppressed groups during the rule of Saddam Hussein. Iraqi Kurds, especially Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, criticized Turkey's siding with Allawi. Claiming that Turkey pursued a wrong policy by supporting the Allawi front, Talabani underlined that he was still a friend of Turkey, although it made a wrong choice during the Iraqi government crisis (see *Milliyet* 2010b).<sup>19</sup>

The US knows that if Turkey had a tense relationship with northern Iraq, a Turkish military intervention in northern Iraq would always be on the agenda and this would play a destabilizing role both in Iraq and in the region. In order to eliminate such a risk, the US favours a rapprochement between Ankara and Irbil, which will isolate the PKK, help Ankara to finally eliminate it and improve the stability of Iraq (see Yetkin 2009). According to the US, a tense relationship between Ankara and Irbil will also jeopardize Washington's future plans regarding the transportation of northern Iraqi oil to the West. Washington too believes that the most appropriate gate for Irbil to reach out to the world is the one through Turkey. In this way, the US will have a stronger control on Iraq's oil trade.

### Major Obstacles facing the Turkish–Northern Iraqi Rapprochement

The biggest obstacle in front of the Turkish–Iraqi Kurdish rapprochement is Turkey's still unsolved Kurdish question. As long as this problem continues to exist, the relations between Turkey, Iraq and northern Iraq will not relax totally. This fragile situation will also carry the potential for ruining the relations between Ankara and Washington and thus the Obama administration's future plans in the region (see Barkey 2010). For now, the relations with northern Iraq could not totally rescue itself from the heavy impact of Turkey's PKK problem. Ankara knows that it is difficult to build long-lasting relations with Irbil if it continues to shelter the PKK militants on the Qandil Mountains.

In parallel with this, the Iraqi Kurdish leaders' expectations from Turkey are high as they bind their support for both sides to the solution of the issue through peaceful means. Claiming that violence was not a means to achieve political ends anymore, the KRG leader Barzani said that it was time for dialogue (see *Yeni Şafak* 2008) and Iraqi President Talabani thinks that the PKK must totally give up its armed struggle and join the process of politics (see Aydıntaşbaş 2010). However

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19 Being able to preserve warmer relations with Irbil may help Turkey to have much more impact on the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. After Saddam Hussein, Kurds have already become very influential in the Iraqi administration. Because of this, by improving its relations with the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey will actually “kill two birds with one stone” and become stronger both in Irbil and Baghdad.



these statements alone are not enough to preserve the sensitive relationship between Ankara and Irbil. Turkey and Iraqi Kurdish leaders already have bitter memories about each other and this makes it difficult for the leaders to persuade their public to accept a brand-new definition of the relationship. Unless the change in official threat perceptions is strongly approved by the nations, it is difficult to expect total security and stability in the region. For years, northern Iraq has been considered by Ankara as one of the biggest threats against Turkey's national unity and security. Similarly Turkey has been perceived by the Iraqi Kurds as the most serious threat before their independence. For this reason the job of both sides' governments is not easy as extra attention is needed to refrain from provocative statements.

Turkey's recent democratization steps also create a teetering platform for Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish rapprochement. In August 2009, the AKP government introduced a new political approach, widely known in public as the "Kurdish opening" in order to solve Turkey's number one problem, the PKK, and thus to remove the armed aspect of the Kurdish question (see Çandar 2009, 13–19). As a result, 34 PKK militants settled in northern Iraq returned to Turkey in October 2009, receiving a warm welcoming from their supporters. However, rising reactions among the Turkish public pushed the AKP to step back from its Kurdish opening. Facing heavy reactions from the opposition parties, the Kurdish opening was first renamed as the "Democratic opening", then as the "Project for National Unity and Brotherhood". Being unable to explain the details of its own initiative, the AKP government was even accused of putting into practice a US plan that allegedly aims to divide Turkey (see *Radikal* 2010c). As a result, the arrests of more than 100 Kurdish politicians since December 2009 show that the government is not very clear at all about how to improve its relations with Turkey's Kurds. Similar to the previous elections, the AKP paid extra attention not to upset the nationalist voters during the 12 June 2011 general election period and preferred a relatively harsher tone regarding the Kurdish issue.<sup>20</sup> The new Erdoğan government's attitude towards the declaration of a Kurdish autonomy and the re-escalating PKK attacks in Summer 2011 shows that military rather than civilian means will once again come forward.

Turkey's new relations with northern Iraq may also be damaged by such an outcome as there are already various other problems between Ankara and Irbil, such as Mosul, Kirkuk and the status of the Turkomans. Northern Iraqi politicians view Kirkuk as an integral part of their heritage and future (see International Crisis Group 2008, 16–21). For that reason, Iraqi Turkomans are already uncomfortable with Ankara's current rapprochement with Irbil<sup>21</sup> as Kirkuk's historical meaning for Turkey cannot be denied either. Although the status of the Turkomans in

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20 During the 2007 general election campaign, the PKK and northern Iraq were the two dominant issues, which pushed most of the political parties to pursue a hawkish nationalism to appeal to the generally nationalist Turkish voters. The AKP also became a part of this tendency to maintain its votes (see Karakaya Polat 2008, 5).

21 After the visit by Emre Taner, the Head of Turkish National Intelligence Organization, to Irbil in October 2005 to meet Barzani, the leader of the Iraqi Turkoman

northern Iraq has been on Turkey's agenda for the last couple of years, both Turkey and the KRG keep silent on these sensitive issues for now. However, this does not mean that these issues may not cause problems in the near future. Washington too is aware of this risky situation. In July 2010, the Chief Commander of the US Forces in Iraq, Raymond Odierno, said that they could not solve the problems in the disputed areas of Iraq, which was why Kirkuk was one of the issues to deal with after the US withdrawal (see CNNTurk.com 2010b). To determine the final status of Kirkuk, the KRG continues to insist for a referendum (see NTVMSNBC 2007). Article 140 of the new Iraqi constitution, which foresees the making of a referendum on the disputed regions of Iraq, strengthens Iraqi Kurds' hands in this cause and worries Turkey about the future status of the Turkomans.

## Conclusion

According to Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey has made a big mistake in ignoring its historical and cultural ties with the Middle East which would allow it to build better relations within its neighbourhood. In this respect, he has attached greater significance to winning over the Iraqi Kurds as well. With the strong support of President Gül and Premier Erdoğan, Davutoğlu, who often underlines the need for a multidimensional and proactive foreign policy, preferred to bring forward the areas of cooperation rather than conflict with northern Iraq. In the end, the new systemic, regional and domestic conditions coincided with Davutoğlu's vision and it became an impetus for Ankara to build more cooperative relations not only with Irbil, but also with Baghdad and Washington.

By Washington's decision to withdraw its forces from Iraq, the US and Turkish interests in the region have begun to converge, as both countries are against a stronger Iran in the region. Preferring to see Ankara rather than Tehran as the most influential neighbour to the new Iraq, Washington supports the Turkish-northern Iraqi rapprochement, which had begun by the second half of the decade under discussion. For Washington the rapprochement between Ankara and Irbil is also necessary in order to leave the Iraqi Kurds in a stable and secure atmosphere. Having quite a tense relationship with the Iraqi Arabs, northern Iraqi Kurds already felt uncomfortable with the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq by August 2010 (see Cihan Haber Ajansı 2009). Continuing ethnic tension between the Kurds and the Arabs worried Washington as well, and for this reason the US military had to declare that it would leave northern Iraq after leaving all other parts of the country (see CNNTurk.com 2010b). Washington is aware that the current autonomous position of Irbil can easily discomfort neighbouring countries such as Syria and Iran and the Iraqi Arabs. That is why it pays extra attention to guaranteeing the future stability of northern Iraq.

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Front (ITC), Sadettin Ergeç came to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to express Turkomans' discomfort about Turkish–northern Iraqi rapprochement (see *Radikal* 2005).

To be able to pursue a better fight against its number one national security threat, the PKK, Turkey has to take the support of northern Iraq, where thousands of PKK militants find shelter. Launching most of its attacks through northern Iraq, the PKK continues to discomfort the Turkish state and create a certain feeling of insecurity in Turkish society. This causes the Turkish nation to question its relationship with Washington once again as, in the eyes of the Turkish people, it is still the US which is heavily responsible for the continuing PKK presence in northern Iraq. The majority of the Turkish people believe that Washington supports the PKK as it wants an independent Kurdish state. Although Obama's presidency has lowered the level of anti-Americanism, a recent survey shows that approval ratings for Obama in Turkey, too, have fallen sharply, from 50 per cent in 2009 to 28 per cent in 2010 (see *The Economist* 2010b, 6–10). Turkish people want to see concrete developments, especially on issues like the PKK, which is still perceived as the most serious threat against Turkey's national unity. This certainly has a negative impact on Turkey's recent rapprochement with northern Iraq.

Due to their complex relationship, ranging from economic to political and diplomatic to cultural cooperation, both Irbil and Ankara have to think twice before taking any step that can jeopardize their relations. There is especially one very important issue that both sides, including Baghdad and Washington, should keep in mind. Under the current circumstances, the biggest challenge to the improvement of Ankara's relations with northern Iraq is Turkey's still unsolved Kurdish question. It has a great potential to damage Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's "zero problems with the neighbours" policy. If the ruling AKP government cannot manage to strengthen democratic rights, meet the demands of its Kurdish citizens and eliminate the PKK, Turkey's chronic Kurdish question will continue to hold the potential to change the current track of the Turkish-US, Turkish-Iraqi and Turkish-northern Iraqi relations.

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