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Erbil–Ankara Relations: Paradoxes, Challenges and Harmonization

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Abstract

The elaboration of Turkey's foreign policy position on Erbil-Ankara remains a serious challenge to Turkey's political establishment. Its recent re-orientation to accommodate new actors within its framework appears to be an important step in either managing or sweeping aside the uncertainties Turkey might face in this respect. Turkish Kurdish policy is particularly concerned with Iraqi Kurdistan as a security threat. Through a shift of focus on political, economic and energy security, Turkish foreign policy has been able to balance Kurdish domestic issues, to the extent that both actors' mutual political, economic and security objectives now appear to be interconnected. This has created interdependence as a means of overcoming challenges. The position of the Kurdistan region within Iraq highlights its importance for Turkey. These recent domestic political changes emphasise the political changes of the last decade, a period in which Islamism has become a visible challenge to historical foreign policy doctrines.

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The Nature of Turkish Foreign and Security Policy

*"Domestic policy and foreign policy must always be linked."*K. Ataturk¹

*"It is time for Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis to rebuild the Middle East... it is time for everyone to take brave steps."*A. Davutoğlu²

When analyzing Turkish foreign policy, it is necessary to consider the cultural principals from which it derives its values. Simultaneously belonging to the Muslim and Western world, Turkey can be perceived negatively in both. Politically, Turkey actively seeks to become a member of the West, yet culturally it remains within the Muslim world. Turkish foreign policy is shaped by deep-rooted factors and priorities: first, territorial integrity and power distribution; second, realpolitik with respect to security and state-centric matters; third, a preference for non-interference, particularly in the Middle East; and fourth, the impact of traumatic national historical experiences such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Sevres Treaty, and the war of independence, in addition to external factors such as the activities of super powers (e.g. the Gulf Wars) and the emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan.³ Contemporary challenges and crises faced by Turkey, however, are having a significant psychological influence on the country's future position in the region.

Pan-Turkishness, Euro-Asianism and New-Ottomanism have historically remained the main basis of Turkish foreign policy, and are related to core political, geographical and cultural challenges since the policy's outset. Potential geopolitical changes in Turkey's foreign policy can only be understood within such a context.⁴ For instance, it was only

¹ F.S Larabee and I.O.Lesser "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Age of Uncertainty". *RAND, Center for Middle East Public Policy* , 2003, p.165

² Kurdistan Regional Government, "Time to Rebuild the Middle East", <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=32240> (Accessed: 19 Dec 2013).

³ M.B. Altunisik "Turkey's Security Culture and Policy Toward Iraq". *Perception*. Spring 2007.

⁴ S. Tahmasseb, "Turkey's New Activist Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities for Iran". *Just Peace Diplomacy Journal* , no 3, January-March 2011: International Peace Studies Center (IPSC), USA P.7.

the collapse of the Ottoman Empire due to defeat by the Western powers, and the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and Treaty of Lausanne (1923) that saved Turkey from sliding into a war of independence. On the other hand, the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK), a Kurdish political and military organization that became prominent in 1984, has agitated for independence for Kurds not only in Turkey, but in the Middle East more broadly.

The historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire plays an important role in Turkish imagination, and contributes to the new self-confidence that has shaped the Islamist Turkish foreign policy doctrine of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Davutoglu strongly argued for a geopolitical positioning of Turkey in the territory of the Ottoman Empire (the Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus) as the central objective of Turkish foreign policy – this a matter of Turkish power⁵ with implications for Turkey’s future geopolitical role.⁶ When it comes to relations between Ankara and Erbil, there are four major factors that have had a significant impact on changes in foreign policy: domestic political developments; the influence of regional factors; a liberal socio-economic stance; and a realist-exclusivist view of Kurdish questions as a threat to the Turkish state’s security and integrity.⁷

The Context of Turkish–Iraqi Kurdish Relations

Iraqi Kurdish-Turkish relations are mostly synonymous with former-President Turgut Ozal’s historical initiative. As thousands of Kurds fled to Turkey, Ozal met secretly with Kurdish Iraqi leaders on March 8, 1991 (a gathering that became public on March 22). Additionally, the United Nations Security Council Resolution⁸ to protect Kurds in

⁵ S.E.Cornell. “Changes in Turkey: What drives Turkish Foreign Policy?” *Middle East Quarterly*. No 14. Winter 2012.18

⁶ M.F Tayfur and K. Goymen, “ Decision Making in Turkish Foreign Policy: The Caspian Oil Pipeline Issue”. *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.38, no.2 (Apr.2002). 101-122;107

⁷ T.Oguzlu “Turkey’s Northern Iraq Policy: Competing Perspectives.” *Insight Turkey*. Vol 10. No.3. 2008.5-22;10

⁸ M.M. Gunter, “ A De Facto Kurdish State in Northern Iraq”. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 14, No 2, 1993: 295-319;295

northern Iraq could not have been implemented or have succeeded without Turkish permission. In Ozal's words aptly summarizing his political approach in protecting the Kurds: "There is nothing to be afraid of talking" [...] "We must be friends with them. If we become enemies, others can use them against us",⁹ an approach that changed the policy toward the Kurds from one based on enmity to one based on friendship. In contrast, the presence of the PKK within Kurdish territory in northern Iraq transformed Kurdish-Turkish relations, with Turkey increasing its political pressure on the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to cooperate to defeat the PKK. As Massoud Barzani, leader of the KDP, confirmed, "There has been no change in our stance on this issue, the PKK's presence in our region is unacceptable."¹⁰ Although Turkey was becoming more anxious, in 1991 it allowed both the KDP and PUK to open official representative offices in Ankara to conduct diplomatic relations with the government. These developed into meaningful channels of communication with the international community, through embassies located in Ankara.

In contrast to Ozal who recognized Kurdish political demands within Iraq such as federalism, Turkish leaders opposed the idea.¹¹ As the US support for the Kurdistan region grew, Turkish PM Bulent Ecevit characterised this engagement as the first steps toward the creation of a Kurdish state.¹² Over the decades, Turkish foreign policy abandoned any political or official relations with Iraqi Kurdistan. Departing from a hard-line security perspective, the new foreign policy procedures are intended to help prevent Turkey from becoming a vulnerable state in a region undergoing significant political and security changes. This has required a redefinition of Turkish policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan away from that articulated by Davutoglu on his visit to Erbil, when he

⁹ *The Christian Science Monitor*, "Turks Talk to Iraqi Kurdish Rebels. Secret Dialogue is change that provokes further debate after years of ignoring Kurds at home," <http://www.csmonitor.com/1991/0315/okurd.html> [Accessed 25 Nov 2013]

¹⁰ Barzani: PKK'yı bölgeden çıkarma müddemiz devam edecek", <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/ShowNew.aspx?id=-242057> [Accessed 25 Nov. 2013]

¹¹ Gunter, "A De Facto Kurdish State in Northern Iraq," 309-310.

¹² *The Christian Science Monitor*, "Kurdish Groups Unite as Turkey Watches, Warily, Anticipating US action against Baghdad, Two Iraqi Kurdish Factions Will Meet Friday," <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1004/p07s01-wosc.html> [Accessed 25 Nov. 2013].

told the Kurds: "Let's rebuild the entire region, let people travel from Basra to Edirne without any security concerns."¹³ This represented a clear recognition of the Kurdistan region, yet also stressed the need to establish a mutually-beneficial security, economic and political interchange, linked to the nonviolent cohabitation of indigenous and spiritual associations.

In fact, the road to building such positive relations would not have been possible if the structure of the Turkish National Security Council (TNSC) had not changed, as it was dominated by military. The most significant change occurred in 2003, with the new TNSC directive that authorised the Turkish state to establish relations with all Iraqi political organizations.¹⁴ Domestic perceptions on Kurdish issues coupled with new political objectives are forcing Turkey to build mutual political and security relationships with regional actors – and in particular, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). At the same time, developments in the Middle East, and the need to challenge the Iranian position in Iraq, militate for a Turkish foreign policy towards the Kurdistan region.¹⁵

Geopolitics and Security Outlook

Military power is essential for a state's security. If a state is able to make use of such power in an appropriate manner this can enhance security (conversely, failure to do so can generate an insecure environment for the state).¹⁶ The impact of the US's invasion of Iraq – in both 1991 and 2003 – on Turkish strategic and security concerns was to

¹³ Kurdistan Regional Government, "Time to Rebuild Middle East, Davutoğlu says in Erbil," at: <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=32240>. [Accessed 20 Nov.2013].

¹⁴ London School of Economics, "Turkey and Iraq," at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/iraq.pdf> [Accessed 07 Oct. 2013], p. 43.

¹⁵ F. Joseph, "Competition for Influence in Iraq Heats Up, Iran, Turkey Vying For Inside Track in Dispute Involving Kurds." G2 Bulletin, 2012, at <http://www.wnd.com/2012/10/competition-for-influence-in-iraq-heats-up/> [Accessed 13 Oct. 2013].

¹⁶ H.S. Ateşoğlu. "Security of Turkey with Respect to the Middle East." *Perceptions*, summer 2011, Vol, XVI, No. 2: 99-110; 100-101.

create fear of a domino effect, and of a consolidation of Kurdish political power in Iraq broadening into Kurdish nationalism within the Middle East generally.¹⁷

While there have been shared domestic and external factors between Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, particularly state integrity and security, the new reality created by the removal of Saddam Hussein led Turkey to consider new political and security objectives,¹⁸ changes that can be observed in the “relaxed, mature and flexible” characteristics of Turkish foreign policy¹⁹. The security-oriented outlook of Turkish foreign policy has arguably had a destructive impact, with Turkey frequently seen as a threatening, rather than stability-seeking, power in the surrounding region. Therefore, a shift from the psychological siege mentality is required, despite the fact that Turkey is encircled by antagonists. A “liberal turn in Turkish foreign policy” would free Ankara from such an apprehensive mentality, thus ensuring Turkey is capable of meeting new challenges.²⁰

Historically, Turkey’s “Kurdophobia” was grounded in a “paranoid mind-set that saw the world as full of enemies,” an argument that tends in the same direction as that characterizing Turkish foreign policy.²¹ Its current direction, as part of which Ankara has expended great efforts in its relations with Erbil in response to new developments, involves not just using soft power through commercial links but acknowledging security

¹⁷ G.M. Tezcur and A. Grigorescu, “Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Balancing European and Regional Interests.” *International Studies Perspectives* (2013): 1–20; 7

¹⁸ Ateşoğlu, “Security of Turkey with Respect to the Middle East,” p. 99.

¹⁹ C. Dinç, “Turkey as a New Security Actor in the Middle East: Beyond the Slogans.” *Perceptions*, summer 2011, Volume XVI, Number 2: 61-80; 62.

²⁰ Today Zaman, “The Liberal Turn in Turkish Foreign Policy,” at: http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists/ihsan-dagi_167699-the-liberal-turn-in-turkish-foreign-policy.html. [Accessed 18 Dec. 2013].

²¹ *Hurriyet Daily News*, “A Bit Closer to the Axis of Evil?” at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=a-bit-closer-to-the-axis-of-evil-2010-08-24> [Accessed 18 Dec. 2013].

concerns.²² Along with the change of attitude whereby head of the Iraqi Kurdistan region President Barzani came to be appreciated, if not treasured, by Turkey, Barzani has maintained his support to the extent that Erdogan's initiative supported Kurdistan's objectives.²³

Barzani has also made efforts to fashion a positive political environment emphasises Iraqi Kurdistan's political stance toward Turkey as expressed in his statement, "we are ready to facilitate any peace negotiation between the PKK and Turkey."²⁴ Conversely, the shift in Turkey's foreign policy appears premised on not just seeing the Kurdish issue merely as a security question but as part of a more holistic approach. This was articulated by the Turkish foreign minister when he said, "We have a common vision, and this vision is about the way we look at the Middle East."²⁵ This has also involved structuring domestic reforms to fashion an important platform for the AKP in materializing its political ideology, in contrast to earlier governments where economic growth factors appeared intended to increase Turkish power, repositioning it as a "stabilizing and peace-promoting" actor in the region.²⁶ Therefore, moving Kurdish questions from security issues into a political outlook emphasises stability in the country.

Geopolitical impact of energy

²² G. Stansfield, "The Reformation of Iraq's Foreign Relations: new elites and enduring legacies." *International Affairs* 86: 6, 2010: 1395-1409; 1406.

²³ Kurdistan Region Government, "Time to Rebuild Middle East, Davutoğlu says in Erbil," <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=32240>].

²⁴ Youtube, "CNN interview with Masoud Barzani," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIQHT5KSng0> [Accessed 16 Oct. 2013].

²⁵ Kurdistan Region Government, "Time to Rebuild Middle East"

²⁶ Dinç, "Turkey as a New Security Actor in the Middle East," p. 62.

Since Iraq and Turkey became divided, Turkey has demanded its share of Iraqi oil, particularly in Kirkuk and the Mosul area as per the Ankara agreement of 1926.²⁷ When the Soviet Union collapsed and new states emerged in the Eurasia region, oil became part of Turkey's foreign policy decision-making and institutions, in the context of energy security and other strategic considerations. This resulted in a national policy proposal incorporating the Caspian oil pipeline within the framework of Turkish foreign and security policy.²⁸ Turkish energy security policy will have significant repercussions if converted into reality; possibly, it might reposition Turkey geopolitically. The emergence of Turkey as a significant transit country will arguably give it increased power on the international stage, and it could also mean that the country has more of a stake in geopolitical, regional changes, such as a future independent Kurdistan.²⁹

Turkey therefore finds itself needing to play a future role regarding the securing of oil to the EU and the international market. For example, the outcome of the Blue Stream gas pipeline that runs from Russia to Turkey³⁰ has shed light on potential future political games, as well as blackmail factors, with Turkey focused on two major tools regarding security policy that are central for any state: political and economic gain.³¹

²⁷ The Turkish Yearbook, "The Mosul Question and the Turkish Republic: Before and after the Frontier Treaty, 1926." The Turkish Yearbook, Vol. XXXV: p. 43, at: <http://dergiler.ankara.edu.tr/dergiler/44/676/8604.pdf> [Accessed 10 Oct. 2013].

²⁸ M. Fatih Tayfur and Korel Göymen, "Decision Making in Turkish Foreign Policy."

²⁹ Matthew J. Bryza, "Turkey's Dramatic Shift Toward Iraqi Kurdistan: Politics Before Peace Pipelines." *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 2012: 53-61.

³⁰ Ibrahim Mazlum, "Twenty-first Century Energy Security Debates: Opportunities and Constraints for Turkey," in N. A. Güney, *Contentions Issues of Security and the Future of Turkey* (137-150). Ashgate, p. 139.

³¹ "Energy Security of Turkey." Paper presented at International Conference on Human and Economic Resources, Fatih University, Izmir, 2006, p. 84. <http://eco.ieu.edu.tr/wp-content/proceedings/2006/0608.pdf> [Accessed 13 Oct. 2013].

Economic growth and increased domestic demands for energy make Turkey vulnerable³² in terms of securing its supply. Despite strong objections from the USA and Baghdad,³³ Turkish companies, individually or in partnership with international companies, have comprehensively invested politically and economically in Iraqi Kurdistan's oil sector. The role of energy as a significant factor in Turkey's comeback as a regional geopolitical power demonstrates its importance to the EU and world market.³⁴ Meanwhile, the Kurdistan region appears eager to play a parallel role by developing oil and gas policies in order to become a credible partner assisted by Turkey. As Turkey imports most of its gas from Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan, and is heavily dependent on them, new suppliers are also attractive if they manage to provide future reassurance.³⁵ The Kurdistan Region appears less important than other neighbouring states at this moment,³⁶ but it may become a valuable strategic partner for Turkey both to ensure deep and solid political relations and also future mutual security issues.

Integrative market consideration: the new foreign policy

Economic and commercial integration, along with strategies for long term cooperation to reduce instability and enhance security in a Middle East undergoing significant changes, are critical factors that might significantly restructure Turkish diplomacy in the

³² International Relations and Security Network, "Turkey: Oil Pipeline Security Questions Persist," at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots783=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=52142> [Accessed 13 Oct. 2013].

³³ Natural Gas Europe, "Turkey's Cross-Border Energy Policy's Tone Shifted," at <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/turkey-cross-border-energy-policys-tone-shifted> [Accessed 13 Oct. 2013].

³⁴ T. Babali, « Regional Energy Equations and Turkish Foreign Policy: The Middle East and the CIS." *Insighy Turkey*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2010: 147-168; 150.

³⁵ Ibrahim Mazlum, "Twenty-First Century Energy Security Debates," p. 140.

³⁶ Natural Gas Europe, "Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey Proceed Slowly on Energy Cooperation," at <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/kurdistan-turkey-energy-cooperation> [Accessed 13 Oct. 2013].

region.³⁷ Prime Minister Davutoğlu's statement illustrates the importance of the Turkish point of view in this respect when stating: "what makes your borders safe is not the number of your tanks, [but] the volume of mutual trade and investment with your neighbours."³⁸ In fact, major Turkish business associations, such as TUSIAD, MUSIAD, TOBB, and TIM, which have backed the prioritization of economic interaction over traditional security concerns³⁹ of foreign policy during the last decade, have increased their influence on the AKP and reinvigorated a more realistic multidirectional and multi-dimensional foreign policy of which commercial economic relations are a central feature.

To illustrate, Davutoglu made an official visit to Erbil on October 30, 2009 in the capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs, and was the first high ranking Turkish government official to do so, accompanied by Trade Minister Zafer Caglayan and nearly 70 other officials and businessmen. He addressed the change in foreign policy and the new policy of Turkey toward Iraqi Kurdistan. For the Kurds, this was a momentous event: it indicated the normalization of relations and also marked the activation of the AKP Iraqi project, launched in 2007, which provided Turkey with a significant political and economic position within the Kurdistan region and wider Iraq.⁴⁰ Since then, relations with Iraqi Kurdistan have only become more official, as Erbil and Ankara now share political positions. In particular, Erdoğan's 2011 official visit to Erbil and the opening of the Erbil International Airport, along with the continuing of ministerial meetings, demonstrates the special nature of the relationship. In fact, the integration of commercial links within foreign policy is also demonstrated by the export of new creative products known as Anatolian Tigers, through which the AKP executes a policy similar to that of President Özal's reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and which have now become a mainstay of the AKP's political strategy.^{41, 42} Turkey remains a vital

³⁷ U. Ulgu, "Turkish Foreign Policy in 2009: A Year of Pro-activity." *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 12, No.1, 2010: 1-12 ; 1.

³⁸ Dinç, "Turkey as a New Security Actor in the Middle East: Beyond the Slogans," p. 63.

³⁹ Günes Murat Tezcür and Alexandru Grigorescu, "Activism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Balancing European and Regional Interests." *International Studies Perspectives* (2013): 1–20; 13.

⁴⁰ Ulutaş, "Turkish Foreign Policy in 2009: A Year of Pro-activity," p. 4.

⁴¹ G. Özcan, "The Changing Role of Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy Making." UNISCI Discussion Papers, No. 23, May 2010: 23-45; 26.

and primary trade partner of Erbil; in 2010, nearly 730 Turkish companies were operating in Iraqi Kurdistan, and by early 2012 this had increased to 1,023.⁴³

The bilateral economic and trade links between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey increase each year. By inviting President M. Barzani to Turkey as head of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, Turkish diplomacy has adopted an unorthodox stance, while the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRI), N. Barzani, has highlighted that it is essential to cultivate political and diplomatic relations between Kurdistan and Ankara to a variety of subjects which both parties find mutually beneficial;⁴⁴ this point of view is referred to as "maximum-mutual-interest," which in turn needs to be transformed into interests that become "interdependent and integrated" to accomplish the objectives of new Turkish foreign policy to extend harmony and wealth.⁴⁵ Consumer demand both in Iraqi Kurdistan and wider Iraq for Turkish products, suppliers and services has increased, impacting on Turkish economic growth and pointing towards an integration of the Kurdistan region and the Iraqi market into the Turkish domestic economy.⁴⁶ It is also important to address the positive role Turkish media and business establishments have played in fashioning a positive environment between Erbil and Ankara as an important factor demonstrating the influence of these establishments in Turkish foreign policy.⁴⁷

⁴² Henry J. Barkey, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the Middle East." *Ceri Strategy Papers No. 10*, 2011: 1-13; 4.

⁴³ N. Tocci, "Turkey's Kurdish Gamble, The International Spectator:" *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 48:3, 2013: 67-77; 69.

⁴⁴ World Time, "An Interview with Nechirvan Barzani: Will There Be an Independent Kurdistan?" <http://world.time.com/2012/12/21/an-interview-with-nechirvan-barzani-will-there-be-an-independent-kurdistan/> [Accessed 10 Oct. 2013].

⁴⁵ Babali, "Regional Energy Equations and Turkish Foreign Policy: The Middle East and the CIS," p. 149.

⁴⁶ S. Erkmen, "Seçim Öncesi Irak'ta Siyasal Durum Ve Seçime İlişkin Beklentiler." *ORSAM*, No. 14, Feb. 2010: 1-37; 17.

⁴⁷ M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending the Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 42.

While there are different estimates and data sources of varied validity, it is thought that the percentage of foreign investment in the Kurdistan region and the value of trade in goods by Turkish companies aggregates to more than \$12 billion. Several leading Turkish banks operating within Iraqi Kurdistan, such as the state-run Ziraat Bank and Aazpennek, along with direct flights provided by Turkish Airline between Erbil, Suleymaniyeh, Istanbul and other Turkish tourist destinations, are among the issues that have had a central impact on the integration of commercial links. Similarly, a great number of Turkish companies operating in the Kurdistan region employ mainly Turkish expertise/employers (14000 employers).⁴⁸

There are several key principles that promote the success of such a Turkish foreign policy goal: "first, regional security and freedom for all; second, inclusive, high level political dialogue and negotiations; third, economic interdependence as a way to peace; fourth, multilateral inclusiveness."⁴⁹ Thus intensifying the opportunity for closer Erbil-Ankara relations clearly represents an imperative, premeditated manoeuvre, encouraging and endorsing the setting up of a new alliance in the region, while nevertheless realizing that such a step is not without obstacles.⁵⁰

Political Appreciation

Erbil-Ankara relations have developed to such an extent that the Kurdistan Region has become a leading regional partner for Turkey. Such relations, an outcome of a shift in Turkish politics, have strengthened Iraqi Kurdistan's aspirations after independence. Energy and economic opportunities, sectarian violence in Iraq, in parallel with the new Kurdish dynamic and its expected influence on Turkish Kurdish issues have transformed Erbil-Ankara relations to a partnership where Ankara's goal appears primarily focused

⁴⁸ K. Toktamis, "This Part of the Globe is Not Flat: The Paradox of the Turkish Relationship with Northern Iraq and the Dilemma of Kurdish Politics across Borders." PGDT , Volume 8, Issue 2, 2009: 480-493; 489.

⁴⁹ Babali, "Regional Energy Equations and Turkish Foreign Policy: The Middle East and the CIS," pp.148-149.

⁵⁰ London School of Economics, "Turkey and Iraq," at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/iraq.pdf> [Accessed 07 Oct. 2013], pp. 42-44.

on preventing domestic ethnic conflict.⁵¹ The border shared by Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan is nearly 400km long, and a positive geostrategic position has shortly provided security. In this case, achieving and maintaining peace is a central concern: it creates stability, and a positive neighbourly-relations could maximize cooperation, as a central objective of current Turkish foreign policy.⁵² While Turkish diplomacy has accommodated Iraqi Kurdistan, due to dramatic regional changes it has found it necessary to move away from the inflexible Turkish foreign policy strategy practised in the past, which had been unreasonably harsh and less cooperative in nature toward Iraqi Kurds.⁵³

Traditional Turkish foreign policy produced unsympathetic diplomacy, especially in 2003-2004 when Ankara threatened to use military intervention and coercive power. From the point of view of the KRG, such action is detrimental to prosperity and peace. Therefore, to open a negotiation window, the PM of the KRG, N. Barzani reached out in the belief that "diplomacy and dialogue must be given a chance."⁵⁴ Turkey's unsustainable red-line policy imposed by the military and other internal factors have influenced the balance of power in favour of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁵⁵ On the other hand, ratification of Iraqi constitution recognizing the Kurdistan Region clearly influenced Ankara to change its policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan. The view of Kurds expressed by General Helmi Özkök, Chief of the Turkish General Staff (CGS), as "no longer chieftains of their tribes but statesmen" gives the impression of a positive acknowledgement that carry out support of an innovation in the way of Erbil-Ankara relation. Additionally, in

⁵¹ Tocci, "Turkey's Kurdish Gamble, The International Spectator," p. 67.

⁵² Ulutas, "Turkish Foreign policy in 2009: A Year of Pro-activity," p. 2.

⁵³ Altunisik, "Turkey's Security Cultural and Policy towards Iraq," p. 83.

⁵⁴ *Washington Post*, "Nechirvan Barzani. Kurdistan's Hope for Talks," at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/04/AR2007110401225.html> [Accessed 11 Oct. 2013].

⁵⁵ *Hurriyet Daily News*, "Turkish Gov't, Military Divided over Kurds, Says Key Iraq Expert," at <http://www.hurriyetcailynews.com/turkish-govt-military-divided-over-kurds-says-key-iraq-expert.aspx?pageID=438&n=turkish-govt-military-divided-over-kurds-says-key-iraq-expert-2006-05-11> [Accessed 13 Dec. 2013].

February 2006 special Turkish envoy Oğuz Çelikkol conveyed the Turkish government's communique to M. Barzani in an effort to overcome political tensions between both sides.

Prior to 2008, Turkish relations with the Iraqi Kurdistan Region were tense and harsh, but KRG PM N. Barzani's planned visit in 2007 eased tensions with positive future outcomes,⁵⁶ while Gül underscored that the military domination of Turkey's foreign policy with regard to the Kurdistan Region was over.⁵⁷ While Turkey's good relations with Erbil speak positively on its influence on Iraqi politics, the impact and influence of Iraqi Kurdistan on Turkey's domestic Kurdish issues might become very viable and working for the benefit of both parties.

The PKK's Dağlica action of October 2008 soured Erbil-Ankara relations,⁵⁸ prompting Turkey to demand of the USA, as the authority in Iraq at the time, to encourage Iraqi Kurdistan to take action against the PKK. To break down this tension, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice released a "diplomatic full court press" on both Erbil and Ankara while urging Turkey not to invade northern Iraq.⁵⁹ Therefore, any change in the nature of the Erbil-Ankara association with the US might serve both sides. Still, when it comes to Erbil-Ankara relations and also Washington, where each actor follows its own interests, the complexity of the Middle East region and the uncoordinated and individual behaviour of the aforementioned actors can produce unexpected and undesirable outcomes.⁶⁰ President M. Barzani's five-day visit to Ankara in 2010 no doubt managed to renew relations between Erbil and Ankara, bringing about a 180-degree change of Turkish foreign policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan, with Ankara sweeping away its extremely

⁵⁶ Dinç, "Turkey as a New Security Actor in the Middle East: Beyond the Slogans," p. 71.

⁵⁷ Özcan, "The Changing Role of Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy Making," pp. 38-39.

⁵⁸ Star TV Interview, "Ambassador David Satterfield, Coordinator for Iraq," http://turkey.usembassy.gov/statement_033108s.html [Accessed 13 Dec. 2013].

⁵⁹ Star News Online, "US in 'Diplomatic Full Court Press' to Stop Turkish Incursion into Iraq," at: <http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20071022/NEWS/71022012> [Accessed 13 Nov. 2007].

⁶⁰ Bill Park, "Turkey, the USA and the KRG: Moving Parts and Geopolitical Realities." *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14. No. 3. 2012: 109-125; 113.

heated discourse on Iraqi Kurds.⁶¹ One of the most significant changes in its Kurdish stance was the invitation of President M. Barzani to Diyarbakir by Turkish PM Erdogan to initiate a further strengthening in relations between the Kurdistan region and Turkey.⁶²

Erbil–Ankara Future Prospects

While the warming of relations between Turkey and the KRG dates back to 2008, the current push for a strategic alliance signals a new era in bilateral relations in which cooperation is not only desirable but also necessary given the unfolding events in the region.⁶³ An important question regarding the future dynamics of Erbil-Ankara relations is whether Ankara has changed its approach to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The sectarian division of the Middle East and the influence of Iran, especially in Iraq, has led to a polarization of the region on the basis of religious groupings: Iraq has emerged as a battleground between Sunnis and Shi'a, as well as between Iran and Syria on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states on the other. Turkey is being left behind. Who is going to be the valuable ally for Turkey in Iraq? These changes in the Middle East have forced Turkey to reconsider its policy and embrace an emergent power in the region to protect its interests; first to play as positive and influential a role as possible and second as part of the future development of the region.⁶⁴ The Kurdistan region is keen to build close relations with Turkey, but the domestic political environment of the

⁶¹ Today Zaman, "An Analysis of Massoud Barzani's Visit to Turkey," at: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-215263-an-analysis-of-massoud-barzanis-visit-to-turkey>. [Accessed 15 Oct. 2013].

⁶² *Hurriyet Daily News*, "Barzani's Diyarbakir Visit and a Renaissance for all Kurds," at: <http://www.hurriyetsdailynews.com/barzanis-diyarbakir-visit-and-a-renaissance-for-all-kurds.aspx?pageID=449&nID=58121&NewsCatID=466> [Accessed 25 Dec. 2013].

⁶³ Eurasianet.Org, "Turkey: Relations with Baghdad Hit a (Kurdish) Oil Slick," <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65672> [Accessed 31 Mar. 2014].

⁶⁴ London School of Economy, "Turkey and Iraq," at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/iraq.pdf> [Accessed 7 Oct. 2013], p. 41.

Kurdistan region is significant in this case. The PUK is far more extensively engaged with Iran, whereas the KDP is more allied with Turkey and looks to Turkey as a model. The signals indicate the emergence of a Shi'a-Sunni polarity in the region, which will dominate the original balance of power in this close geography. This makes Iraqi Kurdistan a critical actor in the current conflict, which is also fundamental for its future location in the Middle East.⁶⁵ This disagreement might become a serious political challenge for Kurdistan to maintain a balanced foreign policy; however, Ankara's engagement with President M. Barzani is fundamental and indicates that he shapes the Kurdistan Region's foreign relations.⁶⁶ What questions would be asked if the balance of power in the Middle East undergoes significant changes?

PM N. Barzani's visit to Wan and his argument, together with at the time Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu, for "*psikolojik duvarlar yıkılıyor*" [tearing the psychological wall down] also brings up the historical epoch of Şeyh Ahmet Barzani, who fled to Turkey and settled in Wan in the 19th century, and emphasises the historical relations between the two sides. During the visit, Erbil-Ankara signed a protocol on strengthening trans-border economic cooperation to open five new border gates.⁶⁷ This is a step forward towards the strategy to open a flight route between Erbil and Diyarbakir; the Diyarbakir Trade Office emphasises the importance of the project, which might bring the region closer, and which from the security perspective, enhances Turkey's position. As for the AKP, it is very interested in economic development in its Kurdish area. Furthermore, in doing so, the AKP achieves the political objective of reducing Kurdish conflict.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ E. Sugarman and J. Walker, "Iraqi Kurdistan & Turkey: America's Middle East Silver Lining." Center for National Policy, Nov. 2013: 10.

⁶⁶ Ömer Taşpinar and Gönül Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds: From Predicament to Opportunity." Us – Europe Analysis Series No. 54, January 22, 2014: 3.

⁶⁷ Star Gazette, "Davutoğlu: Psikolojik Duvarları Yıkacağız," <http://haber.stargazete.com/guncel/davutoglu-psikolojik-duvarlari-yikacagiz/haber-856261> [Accessed 31 Mar. 2014].

⁶⁸ Bas News, "Direct Flight between Erbil-Diyarbakir Soon," <http://www.basnews.com/en/News/Details/Direct-flight-between-Erbil-Diyarbakir-soon/13624> [Accessed 26 Mar. 2014].

Turkey is eager to see a stable, secure, democratic, and prosperous Iraq at peace with its own people and its neighbours; negative political and security developments in Iraq will have a clear impact on Turkey. The ideological approach to Iraqi society of Baghdad's Shi'a-dominated government, along with Iranian influence, hinders other actors' positive contributions to maintain Iraq's peace and solve the political crisis.⁶⁹ The Kurds' relations with Turkey contributes to the balance of power with Baghdad, and therefore many efforts are heavily invested in fostering and maintaining positive political and economic relations with Ankara – but also requiring Baghdad to accommodate Kurdish demands. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu, attending the Suleymaniyeh Forum on March 4, 2014 held by the American University in Suleymaniyeh, introduced his speech in the Kurdish language. Davutoğlu himself said that this was intended to tear down the psychological fear that has characterised Kurdish-Turkish relations.⁷⁰

Similarly, the AKP invited M. Barzani to attend its congress on September 30, 2013, where his speech gave the impression of a new stance towards the Kurdistan Region leadership in general.⁷¹ This also indicates that Erdogan is much clearer in his considered strategy. Among Kurds it is clear that the AKP and Erdogan's leadership has gone far beyond expectations in respects of accommodating Kurdish demands and developing positive, sustainable relations with the KRG. This is demonstrated in Barzani's speech with his emphasis on preserving mutual interests while also bringing positive economic integration benefits that have reached 12 billion dollars (80% of

⁶⁹ Al Jazeera Center for Studies, "Turkey & Iran: Islamic Brotherhood or Regional Rivalry?" <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/05/20135139554264452.htm> [Accessed 28 Mar. 2014].

⁷⁰ Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Minister Davutoğlu Participates in the Sulaymaniyah Forum." at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/foreign-minister-davutoglu-participates-in-the-sulaymaniyah-forum.en.mfa> [Accessed 26 May 2014].

⁷¹ *Today Zaman*, "AKP and Iraqi Kurds: the participation of Massoud Barzani in the AKP general congress," at http://www.todayszaman.com/news-294091-akp-and-iraqi-kurds-the-participation-of-massoud-barzani-in-the-akp-general-congress-by-aziz-barzani*.html [Accessed 31 Mar. 2014].

which are in the Kurdistan region), as well as overcoming a 30-year old conflict and preventing more bloodshed.⁷²

However, neither Turkey nor the KRG would have moderated their approach toward the other had there been no indication of common and mutual objectives on which both sides could cooperate. This has required assistance, and that has only happened with the support by the USA for both the Kurdistan Region and Barzani; Washington's presence has helped both parties to come closer to each other. For both Barzani and the Kurdistan Region, it was also important to be positively viewed. Barzani began his initiative from several fronts, in order to engage peacefully with the PKK to start a shared approach to finding a solution for their conflict. There was also the release of eight Turkish soldiers by Barzani, the BDP, and on the order of Ocalan as part of the continuation of the peace process.⁷³ Barzani has on several occasions positively supported Erdogan's initiatives.⁷⁴ In this regard the KRG appears to be a valuable and important mediator in the PKK-Ankara conflict, as it provides an avenue for both parties to ease any tensions in the peace process. This is important for Turkey, as well as for the KRG to widen its influence on the Kurdish community in Turkey and to weaken the PKK's position. There is also the positive factor of playing a part in solving one of the most persistent conflicts (of more than three decades' duration) in Turkey.⁷⁵

The Erbil-Ankara political stand on regional change with regards to the Syrian and Kurdish uprising underscores the close security cooperation on terrorism and development, mainly related to Turkish fears of the Democratic Union Party Syria (PYD), a sister political organization of the PKK domination in the Kurdish area. To reduce uncertainties, the Kurdistan leadership attempted to bring all Syrian Kurdish

⁷² Kurdistan Regional Presidency, "President Barzani's Address at Conference of Turkey's Ruling Party in Ankara," <http://www.krp.org/english/articledisplay.aspx?id=8992LusP9R0> (Accessed 28 Mar. 2014).

⁷³ *The Wall Street Journal*, "Kurdish Militants Free Turks," at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324077704578357982969164810> [Accessed 25 Mar. 2014].

⁷⁴ Kurdistan Region Government, "Time to Rebuild Middle East, Davutoğlu Says in Erbil."

⁷⁵ Sugarman and Walker, "Iraqi Kurdistan & Turkey: America's Middle East Silver Lining," p. 4.

political organizations, including the PYD, together to sign an agreement known as the Erbil-Agreement, but this has not been adopted in practice by the PYD.⁷⁶ Therefore, it does not appear to be a simple task for either Turkey or Barzani/KDP, and in fact seems to be part of the peace process between the PKK and Turkey. However, while a great challenge, the Turks have not lost their optimism.⁷⁷

The recent negotiations under way between the Turkish government and Abdullah Öcalan/PKK/BDP have created an important opportunity for shaping whether and how the future political perspectives could be generated to put an end to Kurdish-Turkish conflicts, and give Turkey a new start in the 21st century to achieve its political, economic, and security objectives. Three important factors give cause for optimism in terms of securing a future peace: first, the AKP's position in the Turkish parliament; second, a weak military role in Turkey's foreign policy decision-making; and third, Ankara's willingness to win over Erbil and the PKK.⁷⁸ The impact of the March 30, 2014 local election on Erbil-Ankara and Turkish-Kurdish relations, from Erbil's point of view, appears to be important, particularly given the message conveyed by M. Barzani to Erdogan that congratulated him and the AKP's victory, while also encouraging the BDP and Ahmet Turk, an influential Kurdish political figure within Turkish politics, to maintain the peace process.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The importance of taking cognizance of the situation in the Middle East for Turkey's foreign policy is obvious, in accordance with its geopolitical location and strategies; this is what will make it possible to achieve its goal of becoming a transit territory for

⁷⁶ *Today's Zaman*, "Turkey to Urge Barzani to Step up Cooperation against PKK in Syria," at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-288203-turkey-to-urge-barzani-to-step-up-cooperation-against-pkk-in-syria.html> [last visited: 27 Mar. 2014].

⁷⁷ Taşpinar and Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds: From Predicament to Opportunity," p. 2.

⁷⁸ Taşpinar and Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds: From Predicament to Opportunity," p. 3.

⁷⁹ Kurdistan Region Presidency, "President Barzani Congratulates Turkey's Kurdish BDP and PM Erdogan's Parties on Election Successes," at <http://www.krp.org/english/articledisplay.aspx?id=ssLhbQPMHVE=> [Accessed 01 Apr. 2014].

securing energy to the world market. This is demonstrated by the fact that, at this moment, Erbil-Ankara share several political objectives regarding the future of the political process in Iraq and wider region. By acknowledging that Turkey has taken most impressive steps in fostering short term strategic relations, softening toward Kurdish demands at this moment appears significant for Turkey's wish for domestic stability. In return, by providing technical assistance to Iraqi Kurdistan to construct an autonomous pipeline to transport oil independently of Iraqi observation and intervention, strategically Turkey has become a serious actor that might at any time be able to influence the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. On the other hand, politically and strategically the independent pipeline puts the Kurdistan region in a great position in current regional changes. It can be hypothesised that Turkey's dealings with the Kurdistan Region might be a strategy to avoid the impact of regional changes, especially the Kurdish question. Under such visualization the future of Erbil-Ankara relations is not straightforward.

Economically, Turkey remains Kurdistan's main trade partner, and a large share of the Kurdistan Region imports originate from Turkey. From the Kurds' perspective, such close and integrated interaction has been a major factor in the development of political/strategic relations. In fact, a great political goal is to allow the Iraqi Kurdistan to transport its oil to international markets (mainly the EU) without international structure challenges. The dimensions of interdependence between Kurdistan and Ankara appear quite visible. Also, Kurdistan-Ankara cooperation on the subject entails mutual benefits that have propelled both actors into regional geopolitical positions. Ankara has attempted to harmonize its energy politics with the Kurdistan Region. Despite Baghdad's opposition, Ankara has chosen to accommodate the Kurds rather than excluding them. The double Iraqi policy remains a challenge for Turkish foreign policy at this time, but it also appears to be a cultural change. The AKP leadership's vision has turned Turkey into an international actor, supported by new activism as part of a profound political structural modification, becoming export-driven and overcoming the status quo power principle to become seriously involved in the Middle East. Turkey's domestic considerations, democratization and economic growth have provided the country with strength and self-confidence in respect to foreign powers, compared with previous governments. Nevertheless, domestic stability is in Turkey's geostrategic interest; in fact such position could seizure into gain within foreign policy practice. For such motives, the essence of the new, pro-active Turkish foreign policy vision involves, first, efforts to reconstruct a valuable agent to ensure its security, economic growth and interdependence, and, second, integration within the Middle East to reduce current and

future threats that might influence Turkish domestic concerns, and its future position in the region.

Ultimately, Ankara continues to have reservations about issues of ethnic nationalism with respect to the dangers of secessionism, but its observation policy has not impeded Kurdish objectives. For that reason, the development of Ankara's commercial diplomatic links with the Kurdistan Region has not done away with its security fears, primarily the protection of Iraqi territorial integrity. These apprehensions may interfere in Ankara-Erbil relations, and influence the credibility of Turkish threats to intervene across other regional borders in response to internal security challenges, such as the PKK and an independent Kurdish state. In fact, the status quo of Turkey's politics in regard to the territorial integrity of Iraq and Kirkuk has only changed slightly from its previous policy.

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