Chapter 10

Shift in Turkey’s Narrative toward Iraqi Kurds

The change in Turkey’s diplomatic maneuvers in Iraq came following President Abdullah Gul’s meeting with US president George W. Bush in the White House in early 2008. Pundits noted that during their meeting in the White House, Bush must have given Turkey’s Gul carte blanche to pursue his country’s security and commercial interests in Iraq, conditional on not destabilizing the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-administered region in the north. Some US analysts argued that allowing Turkey to establish strong political and economic roots in Iraq would serve both Turkish and US strategic interests in the Middle East.1 Turkey’s growing influence in Iraq was to contain not only the Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK) and KRG’s growing political stature, but also Iran’s influence in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

Until early 2009, Ankara had portrayed Barzani “as a cocky tribal upstart,” who was emboldened by the US support and was plotting against Turkey.2 Turkey’s hawkish generals often threatened the Kurds with war if they ever contemplated independence or grabbed Kirkuk or harmed their Turkman proxies. Barzani vowed to fight back against any attempt by Turkey to invade Iraqi Kurdistan.

A little over a year after Talabani’s March 7, 2008, visit to mend fences with Ankara, President Abdullah Gul traveled to Baghdad on March 23, 2009, “the first such visit in more than three decades.”3 On his way to Baghdad, Gul told reporters on board his plane that

Iraq needs to quash the terrorist organization [PKK] and only then will it get 100 percent cooperation from its neighbors. The Kurds should understand
the importance of winning and losing Turkey. The northern Iraqi admin-
istration should take the necessary steps regarding the PKK. This visit is a
very important gesture showing our support for Iraq. Everyone should do
his best in the fight against terrorists. Continuing PKK presence in north-
ern Iraqi territory, this region would eventually turn into a no-man’s land.4

When asked why he avoided referring to northern Iraq as Kurdistan,
he said, “It is whatever the Iraqi constitution says it is [Kurdistan].”5
President Gul’s remark was a positive signal to Iraqi Kurds that better
days were still ahead.6 During their meeting in Baghdad, both presidents
Gul and Talabani pledged to fight the PKK and expel them from Qandil
Mountain. At a joint news conference and after signing a trade agreement,
Gul stressed that his country supports Iraq’s stability at all levels and that
Iraq had passed through very difficult times.7 On his part, Talabani said
that the PKK should either lay down their arms or leave Iraq.

In addition to meetings with Iraq’s president, Jalal Talabani, and prime
minister, Nouri al-Maliki, Gul also received the KRG prime minister,
Nechirvan Barzani, in Baghdad on March 24, 2009, during which they
discussed security, political, economic, and cultural issues.8 It was the first
time a Turkish leader met formally with a KRG official, whom they had
accused of sheltering the PKK. Following a meeting discussing pending
issues between Arbil and Baghdad, al-Maliki and Barzani met with Gul
and bade him farewell at the Baghdad airport.9

Paul de Bender wrote in the Gulf Times that a senior Turkish official
had noted that “[t]he visit was a public gesture. We now expect cooperation
to speed up between Turkey and northern Iraqi authorities. But results
won’t happen overnight.”10 Although Turkish officials had avoided mak-
ing any reference to the KRG by name, Gul’s meeting with Prime Minister
Barzani was an acknowledgment of the region’s official existence, which
had enjoyed autonomy since 1991.

The religiously rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) of
President Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was more concil-
iatory toward Turkey’s Kurds than any other Turkish political parties since
it came to power in 2002. The AKP agreed to establish a Kurdish tele-
vision station and consider the idea of translating Qur’an into Kurdish in an
apparent attempt to draw the Kurds away from their nationalist ambition.
The Turkish journalist, Mehmet Ali Birand, with firsthand knowledge of
the Kurdish question, said Gul’s trip and its “results are proof that Turkey
is seeking stability in the region” and “is not just lip service.”11 Gul said
that it was timely to address the region’s problems through peaceful means,
committing Turkey to a more flexible approach to the Kurdish question,
recognizing the KRG and pressing Iraqi Kurds to take a more active role