While Kurdish bureaucrats managed their home-front affairs and established fundamentals for a de facto state, the Kurdish Diaspora helped the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) representatives explain their people’s grievances and aspirations to the international community through seminars and conferences and personal contacts with foreign diplomats, politicians, entrepreneurs, and investors.

In an effort to gain recognition, legitimacy, and international support for their nascent autonomous region, Kurdish politicians did not miss an opportunity to explain the injustices done to their people by successive Arab governments in Baghdad. They underlined the dire need for the international community’s protection in order to prevent the recurrence of past atrocities committed against their people. KRG representatives made concerted efforts to link up with state officials in the United States, Europe, Middle East, and Asia in order to explain the progress they had made on the security front and in nation-building and their region’s untapped human and natural resources potential for development. While KRG representatives and the Kurdish Diaspora campaigned to remove the old image of the Kurds, created by the neighboring states and colonial powers in the early 1900s as a bunch of thieves and highway robbers, Kurdish politicians on the home front enshrined their national ambitions in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), and later in the new Iraqi constitution.

Although the majority of the Kurdish population wanted to seek their long-standing dream of independence, their political leaders sought coexistence within Iraq’s boundaries, fearing retaliation from the United States and the neighboring states. Talabani’s remark “let them dream” was indicative that he and other Kurdish political leaders had received stern warnings
Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building

from Turkey and the United States not to pursue the route of independence. Despite the fact that Kurdish politicians had repeatedly stated that they would not seek independence as long as the new Iraq became a democratic and federal state that would provide the Kurds with maximum autonomy to run their own affairs, the neighboring states remained suspicious of their intentions.

The Kurds had to prove by deeds to Iraqi Arabs and to their neighbors that they truly sought peace, coexistence, and Iraq’s unity. The 2005 and 2010 nationwide elections accorded the Kurds an excellent opportunity to prove that they were peacemakers and not warmongers by establishing an equal distance from Sunni and Shiite Arabs in their disputes and acting as arbitrators between them for maintaining Iraq’s unity and territorial integrity. The role played by the KRG in the protracted sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Arabs turned the Kurds into peacemakers and their region into a haven for those, especially Christian families, who escaped the brunt of the civil war in the center and south. The Kurdistan Region also turned into a gateway for foreign investors and contractors to enter the center and south of Iraq and a resting place for those who wanted to escape the summer heat of Baghdad. The Kurdish peshmarga played a monumental role in maintaining the security of the region and isolating it from the devastating civil war in the center and south.

While carefully navigating home-front turbulent waters, the KRG pursued a measured and systematic engagement with the outside world in order to win political recognition, legitimacy, and to earn foreign investors and diplomatic trust. To achieve these goals, the KRG engaged in an aggressive diplomatic and business campaign to entice foreign investors and entrepreneurs to develop the region’s rich natural and human resources. In addition to its moderate climatic condition, the region is endowed with rich farmland, abundance of water, and large oil and gas resources.

The KRG’s ability to enforce law and order, by effectively deploying its peshmarga, created a safe and secure environment in the region for incoming refugees, tourists, and members of the diplomatic corps in Baghdad, including the US military fighting the insurgency and terrorist groups in the center and south. During 2003–2012, the three Kurdish provinces witnessed only a few minor incidents of violence. The relative stability of the region and the warmth of its people encouraged visiting foreign diplomats and US military personnel to return to Arbil even after their official assignments as consultants and investors.

The initial visits to the region by members of foreign diplomatic missions to Iraq turned into regular visits, during which they exchanged views with KRG officials concerning the security and political situation in the region and Iraq. The relative safety of the region, lax tax and investment