Chapter 5

Evolving Ties with the United States and Europe

Surrounded by deadly enemies in the Middle East, Kurdish politicians carefully navigated the US, European, and Middle Eastern political arena, demonstrating statesmanship, diplomatic skills, and reliability as peacemakers between Sunni and Shiite Arabs in order to maintain Iraq’s unity. The Kurds were quick to acquire the necessary political and diplomatic skills to administer their autonomous region, consisting of Arbil, Sulaimaniya, and Duhok. The nascent Kurdish administration galvanized the Kurdish Diaspora who helped them establish bridges with Western states.

The young charismatic KRG prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from Jefferson College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for his distinguished public service. In his acceptance speech on May 17, 2008, Barzani stated,

We Kurds are committed to a democratic and federal Iraq—an Iraq at peace with itself and with its neighbors. Since 2003, we have built the Kurdistan Region as a model for democracy and tolerance. Our region is a gateway for economic development to all of Iraq. For the first time in nearly a century the people of the Kurdistan Region have genuine hope and a real chance for a peaceful and prosperous future.

While talking to reporters, Barzani added that early US troop withdrawal from Iraq would be disastrous for Kurdistan and appealed to the United States for support, by saying, “Whatever is good for the United States is good for us.”

Barzani met with US president George W. Bush and his national security advisor, Stephen Hadley on May 24, 2008. He expressed his
condolences to the families of those who had died during the war and thanked President Bush for US sacrifices to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein’s repressive government. He apprised Bush of the political and security progress made in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Barzani also met with Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

The *Turkish Daily News* wrote on May 27, 2008, “The number two official of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq was received by top level U.S. officials, including President George W. Bush, in Washington last week, in the latest indication of an increasingly close relationship between the United States and its closest ally in war-torn Iraq.” The paper alleged that the talks by Kurdish officials in Washington were concealed from media flashlight partly to avoid provoking Turkey’s sensitivity. Bulent Aliriza, director of the Turkey Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, noted, “The United States has clearly upgraded its ties with Iraqi Kurds.”

Qubad Talabani, KRG representative in Washington, told reporters, “The reception the prime minister received across the U.S. government and the U.S. business community, and the messages of support we heard from our friends in Washington, show a sincere appreciation for the leadership of the Kurdistan Region.” Barzani’s visit climaxed with the creation of an American-Kurdish Caucus, led by US Congressmen Lincoln Davis of Tennessee (Democrat) and Joe Wilson of South Carolina (Republican) and by a trade mission to visit Kurdistan.

**US Policy Adjustment in 2007 and Iraqi Kurds**

In the face of the evolving situation in Iraq, the United States readjusted its alliances with Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni Arab political factions in an effort to show that it was keeping equal distance from Iraq’s three major communities. To this end, US officials put increasing pressure on the Kurds to make greater concessions to Sunni and Shiite Arabs and to Turkey on disputed Kurdish areas, peshmarga fighters, oil law, and federalism.

While Washington initially opposed Turkey’s hot pursuit of Partiye Karkaran Kurdistan (PKK) rebels across borders into Iraqi Kurdistan, fearing that might destabilize the only stable part of Iraq, the United States started providing Turkey with real-time intelligence in December 2007 on PKK targets on Qandil Mountain in order to keep Turkey off its back. Three Turkish air raids into Iraqi Kurdistan during December 16–26, 2007,