

Barzani's landmark visit to Ankara symbolises new historical passage between Kurds and Turkey



Three years is a long-time in any part of the world, but can be equal to a lifetime in the Middle East. Although, economic ties have been relatively strong between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region for many years, political ties became strained and contentious as Iraqi Kurds assumed a new "official" role in the new Iraq and with it considerable power and strategic standing.

The visit this week of Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani to Ankara, the first since the US invasion in 2003, bears significant ramifications for both Turkey and Kurds all over the region and not just in Iraq.

For a long while it seemed that Turkey would remain obstinate on old mentalities and was ever-reluctant to recognise the new reality across the border, even as other major powers flocked to open consulates, assume bi-lateral trade ties and build political cooperation.

While Kurdistan has been affectively autonomous since 1991 and not 2003, Turkey could live with that reality as to a great extent the region was under a firm eye, strategically confined and required support of Turkey.

However, its one thing acknowledging a reality behind closed doors and another openly accepting and recognising that reality. This is Turkey after all - a country that for many decades denied even the existence of the Kurds, let alone the es-

tablishment of a Kurdistan Region and who has fought deadly battles against the PKK Kurdish rebels since 1984.

Witnessing first-hand what initially appeared to be the materialisation of their greatest fear in 2003 would not have been easy to stomach. Especially as images of Peshmerga forces storming triumphantly into Mosul and Kirkuk in April 2003 under the Kurdistan flag, were flashed around the world.

Turkey has long feared greater Kurdish autonomy or even outright independence. This anxiety would have hardly been eased as Iraqi Kurds assumed key positions in Baghdad, negotiated historical terms in the constitution and became invaluable allies to a U.S. that had been stuck in a quagmire and short of genuine partners.

As Turkey has plunged deeper into its battle with the PKK in recent years, hawks in the Turkish military squarely pointed the finger at President Barzani for sympathising and even aiding the Kurdish rebels.

Kurdish military commanders openly threatened to invade the region many times and in 2008 decided to do just that. This was probably the lowest point in the post-2003 ties between the Kurds and Turkey. Some Turkish politicians and especially the ultra nationalist military elite were astonished at what they saw as Barzani overstepping his power and daring to "stand up"



Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and President of Iraq's Kurdistan region Massoud Barzani meet in Ankara June 3, 2010.

to them, after heated exchanges over the PKK and status of oil-rich Kirkuk. After all, how could any Kurdish "tribal" leader have the audacity to remain outspoken and firm against the mighty force of Turkey? A proud nation built on strong sense of nationalism and enormous ethnic pride.

For Turkey, it has simply been a case that whether you publicly accept a reality or not, that reality is still true. An internationally recognised Kurdistan Region exists and is enshrined in official legislature. The existence of a Kurdistan is no longer a taboo, even if it continues to be a common one in Turkey, but a reference to an internationally recognised political entity. The Kurdistan flag is no longer a symbol of "separatism" but a symbol of a federal region. The Kurdish language is not only spoken but is now one of the official languages of the Iraqi state. The Peshmerga forces do not belong to political groups but are an official

force of the Iraqi state. This list can continue and continue.

The overwhelming basis is that Turkey can ignore the new developments and this new reality to its own detriment. Closer to home, decades of conflict in the east has seen no gain but bloodshed for both Kurds and Turks.

Bound by age old principles and Kemalist foundations, Turkey seemed unwilling to waver from its historical stance. However, Kurds are a fundamental part of the Turkish state and key partners in the development and prosperity of Turkey. A Turkish drive for political reform and a new roadmap to resolve its age old dilemma is the best chance in many decades of a new true social basis that will allow Turkey to flourish economically and politically.

More importantly, Turkey has come to realise that Iraqi Kurds will not forgo strong ties with Ankara even at the expense of ties with Baghdad. The bustling trade between Turkey and Kurdistan

reached a remarkable \$9 billion in 2009. This will only increase further. Iraqi Kurds rely heavily upon Turkey for a number of strategic reasons and ironically the Turks are by far the best partners the Kurds can muster. Turkey is their door to Europe, to economic prosperity and the regions vision of becoming a de facto part of Europe.

A peaceful, stable and flourishing region is not only good for Iraqi Kurds but an essential buffer and access point to the Gulf for Turkey. Kurds, who share similar political and religious ideology, are just what Turkey needs against the ever changing picture in the Middle East and growing Shiite power both in Baghdad and Tehran. Ankara's hand in Erbil will ultimately ensure equilibrium against Tehran's hand in Baghdad.

Its time to realise that Kurds and Turks are natural allies and the best of strategic partners. Why create enemies of each other, when clearly both

in the present and the future, they must both work hand in hand for mutual prosperity and protection?

Kurdistan Region can be an affective arm for Turkey, and form a de facto confederation. Iraqi Kurdistan has immense potential, hunger and oil. The much touted Nabucco pipeline will be the glue between both sides of the borders.

Such a partnership, which only recently seemed far from an ideal match after growing friction, is slowly unfolding into a partnership that will not only take Turkey and Kurdistan forward, but will be a momentous and landmark gain for the greater Middle East region, starved of positive developments and stability.

For Kurds and Turks, it has become very evident that it's a case of our differences are small, but our similarities are huge.

Bashdar Pusho Ismaeel

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Children urge Iran to stop shelling



GLLOBE PHOTO/ Safin Hamed

A Kurdish child raises a banner that says "Stop Bombing" during a children's demonstration in front of the Iranian Consulate in Erbil.

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Exclusive Interview with Masrour Barzani

In an exclusive interview with the Kurdish "Gulan Magazine," Masrour Barzani says that "the assassination and the brutal murder" of the Kurdish student Sardasht Osman, was "politicized" from the very start. Masrour Barzani, a leading Kurdish politician and head of the Kurdistan Region Security Protection Agency also says that the Gulan (May) Revolution (which was started by the Peshmarga following the signing of the Algiers Agreement between the Shah of Iran and Iraq in 1975) was an important and historic period in the Kurdish struggle against the former Iraqi Baath government. Barzani also speaks about the KDP's current situation as it heads for changes later in the year.

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