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# THE AKP AND TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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**Cover Photo:** A Turkish soldier patrolling while members of the Free Syrian Army cheer at the Syrian-Turkish border line in Akcakale, Sanliurfa province, south-eastern Turkey, 15 June 2015. © STR/epa/Corbis.



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## Introduction

### Zeynep N. Kaya

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On 15 December 2015, the LSE Middle East Centre organised a workshop bringing together key experts on Turkish domestic and foreign policy. The workshop aimed at explaining the relationship between Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy in the Middle East in the midst of a period when both Turkey and the wider region are facing major challenges and undergoing significant transformations. This volume brings together a collection of papers presented at the workshop.

Explaining the links between states' domestic politics and their foreign policies is no easy task. In tackling this, authors of these papers adopt the principal idea that foreign policy decisions made by governments are shaped internally by the domestic political environment and internationally by the perceptions of threats and opportunities. They suggest that the amount of power vested in a government and the extent to which public opinion in society affects its decisions influence foreign policy-making in significant ways. This view overlooks neither the complexity of the domestic context in Turkey, nor the multiplicity of governmental and non-governmental actors and social, economic, political and historical factors that shape Turkish foreign policy. However, in order to narrow the scope and create a coherent analysis, the papers focus on the governmental level and on the Kurdish issue as domestic and regional factors.

At the domestic level, Turkey recently held two general elections, both in the same year. While losing its electoral majority in the June 2015 elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) regained it in November. Since mid-2015, the country has been going through one of the most turbulent periods of its history. During this time, the conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) resumed, the country experienced the biggest terrorist attacks on civilians since its establishment, and political polarisation further deepened. Moreover, politics became more securitised and the definition of terrorism expanded to include an increasingly wide range of activities. The government became particularly sensitive and reactive towards any criticism of its policies, which led to an increased number of prosecutions. These trends continue to affect the country in 2016.

At the regional level, the AKP government has been following a policy of greater and deeper engagement with the Middle East. The increased power and authority of the AKP for more than a decade increased its ability to generate foreign policies that largely disregard the historical Turkish position of 'minimal engagement with the Middle East'. The government's 'zero problems with neighbours' policy did not lead to expected outcomes. In this process, especially in recent years, the Turkish government framed its regional security-threat through a focus on the Kurdish issue. This perception in turn played a significant role in shaping the AKP's foreign policy in the region.

The first set of papers presented here elaborate on why the AKP has been able to consolidate its domestic power and authority and to generate a somewhat non-resisting public opinion towards its domestic and regional policies. In this context, the government has managed to develop strategies that do not pay lip service to or take into account opposing views and critical interest groups, internally and externally. Güneş Murat Tezcür explains the historical and contemporary trends in the Turkish political system that led to the AKP's rise. Menderes Çınar then traces the processes through which the AKP consolidated its power. Naz Masraff forecasts short and long-term future trends in Turkish domestic politics. Lastly, Evren Balta analyses Kurdish politics and conflict throughout the AKP rule.

The rest of the papers move on to the analysis of regional factors that constitute the core of Turkey's foreign policy in its immediate neighbourhood in order to explain the links between domestic and foreign policy of Turkey. Elizabeth Ferris analyses Turkey's refugee policy historically and today. Bill Park investigates developments within Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) perception of its relations with Turkey. Aydın Selcen elaborates on Turkey's policies towards the KRG. Güney Yıldız describes the reasons behind Turkey's reaction to Rojava, the *de facto* Kurdish autonomous region in Syria. Lastly, Cengiz Çandar concludes with an analysis that entangles the complex relationship between the AKP's domestic Kurdish policies and its Middle East policies.

This collected volume hopes to offer valuable insights for academics, experts and policy-makers interested in Turkish politics and foreign policy in the Middle East. The contributors' strong analytical and empirical approach and their deep awareness of the impact of domestic and regional factors shaping Turkey's Middle East policies have led to a systematic and rich analysis. On behalf of the LSE Middle East Centre, I would like to thank the Chair in Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, Esra Özyürek, for her help and support in running the workshop. I would also like to extend my thanks to Deniz Zeyrek, Gönül Tol and Serhat Erkmen, whose insightful presentations at the event in December greatly informed this collected volume. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the authors for their brilliant contributions and for their amazing cooperation throughout the process that led to this publication.

# Historical and Contemporary Trends in the Turkish Political Party System

## Güneş Murat Tezcür

*Güneş Murat Tezcür is the Jalal Talabani Chair of Kurdish Political Studies at the University of Central Florida.*

### Introduction

The period since the June 2011 parliamentary elections, which consolidated the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s political hegemony, witnessed a series of events unprecedented in the history of contemporary Turkey. On 28 December 2011, Turkish fighter jets bombed a group of Kurdish smugglers crossing the border from Iraqi Kurdistan, killing 34 villagers. This was the deadliest instance of civilians killed by state forces since the transition to multiparty democracy in 1950. None of the state officials responsible for the massacre were put on trial. In late May 2013, a localised protest against the demolition of a small park (the Gezi Park) in the centre of Istanbul transformed into nationwide mass demonstrations against the AKP government resulting in a disproportionate police reaction. Millions of people participated, mostly non-violently, and the Gezi protests became the largest anti-government demonstrations in the entire history of the Turkish Republic. In December 2013, anti-corruption investigations implicated prominent members of the government, revealing widespread levels of collusion between politicians and businessmen. These three episodes represented the end of the AKP's alliances with three groups that had been central to its rise. The impunity in the aftermath of the Roboski massacre of 2011 disillusioned large segments of Kurdish society that had been supportive of the AKP. Brutal treatment of Gezi protestors at the hands of the police undermined the AKP's liberal intelligentsia that had strongly supported the party during its power struggle with the military and high judiciary. The anti-corruption investigations of December 2013 transformed the Gülen movement from one of the key allies of the AKP into its nemesis.

Despite these challenges, the AKP made significant gains in the March 2014 local elections. The worst industrial disaster of Turkish history (that resulted in the death of 301 mine workers in Western Anatolia) took place in the immediate aftermath of these elections. Yet Recep Tayyip Erdoğan easily won the first competitive popular elections for the presidency a few months later. The Kobanî riots of October 2014 that claimed more than 50 lives, primarily in Kurdish cities, were ominous portents of the violence that would engulf Turkey in the second half of 2015. In the aftermath of these events and following a weakening of economic performance, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 elections. Shortly after, a suicide bomb attack targeting leftist activists visiting the border town of Suruç, just north of Kobanî, where Kurdish militants successfully fought back a large-scale Islamic State (IS) assault with the help of US airstrikes in fall 2014, killed 34 individuals. This IS-sponsored attack brought a definite end to the fragile ceasefire between the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgency that had been in effect since early 2013. Violence rapidly reached levels unprecedented since 1999, and the rekindling of armed conflict

resulted in the deaths of at least 600 individuals in five months. Meanwhile, in the face of major intelligence failures on part of the government, another IS sponsored suicide attack killed 102 individuals in a peace rally attended by leftist and Kurdish activists in a central square in Ankara on 10 October.

Given this background, the AKP's overwhelming performance in the November elections that enabled the party to recapture a parliamentary majority took many observers by surprise. The election results have revealed that many voters in Turkey do not hold the party and its leader Erdoğan accountable for these troubles. Ironically, as Erdoğan increasingly personifies political power and erodes the autonomy of economic and political institutions, he also appears as the only politician capable of ensuring stability and growth in the country. While his ascendancy represents the historical evolution of the Turkish right and its mission to integrate pious Muslims into the political system, it also has negative implications for democratic struggles.

### **A Rightist Advantage**

The initial impetus for democratisation in Turkey took place in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The Soviet threat made the Western alliance led by the US essential for Turkey's security. In this geopolitical context, the introduction of a parliamentary regime was facilitated by rivalries among the Turkish political elite whose ideological differences did not lessen their shared commitment to the Republican ideal of Westernisation. The Democrat Party (DP), formed by a group of politicians who had defected from the Republican People's Party (CHP) that founded the Republic, formed the first popularly elected government in 1950 and ruled the country until its overthrow by a military coup in 1960. The DP's brand of populism glorified the 'common man' and aimed to correct the 'excesses' of the CHP one-party rule (1922–1950), most importantly with various restrictions on public preaching and expressions of Sunni Islam.

The parties who claimed the mantle of the DP have won most of the elections in Turkey in the subsequent decades, with the exception of the 1970s. In fact, rightist parties of various sorts have ruled Turkey for most of the time since the introduction of electoral democracy. In contrast, leftist parties have never managed to capture the parliamentary majorities necessary for a single-party government. The DP's successor, Süleyman Demirel's Justice Party (AP), won the 1965 and 1969 elections. It was weakened but continued to form coalition governments as the senior partner in the 1970s. The 1980s saw the rise of Turgut Özal's Motherland Party (ANAP) that remained in power between 1983 and 1991. The period from 1991 to 2002 is known as the era of coalition governments. While no centre-right party managed to achieve electoral hegemony during this period, both the ANAP and AP's successor the Right Path Party (DYP) continued to be in government. The AKP's victory in the 2002 elections resulted in a return to single-party rule reminiscent of the DP, AP, and ANAP's years of glory. While the AKP was founded primarily by politicians who spent their formative years in Islamist political circles, it also positioned itself as the party continuing the legacy of the DP.

The conventional political sociology approach is to seek the causes of this rightist advantage in Turkish politics in historical configurations of state-society relations that pit an elite with a narrow social base and a modernist agenda against large masses resenting certain

aspects of this agenda. While this simplified binary distinction fails to shed light on complexities of democratisation in Turkey, its focus on one of the main cleavages of Turkey remains insightful. As long as rightist political forces unify around a single party and avoid fragmentation, they are not prone to electoral defeats. As the mainstream Turkish left is associated with this modernist agenda, it has had no electoral success in reaching large segments of society harbouring conservative values and remaining highly pious. The AKP appears as both the latest and most successful formation of this rightist dominance.

The electoral dominance of rightist political parties has contradictory implications for Turkish democracy that has historically been beset by first, categorical inequalities undermining equal access and representation in the political system and, second, powerful, extra-parliamentary forces constraining the rule of elected politicians. Regarding the former, the Turkish state has had ethnic, sectarian, and secularist biases hampering – to various degrees – the political representation of a large number of citizens. Regarding the latter, the political autonomy of the Turkish military has been a constant threat to the stability of parliamentarism and the integrity of human rights. A third and more recent challenge has been the rise of clandestine trust networks with undue influence over political affairs. An example of these networks is the Gülen movement, whose globalised civil society activism is overshadowed by schemes and conspiracies pursued by its members in key organs of the state bureaucracy, such as the judiciary and police.

### **From Victimhood to Triumphalism**

Like the centre-right parties of the preceding decades, such as Adnan Menderes' DP of the 1950s, Süleyman Demirel's AP of the 1960s, and Turgut Özal's ANAP of the 1980s, the AKP have pursued two objectives conducive to Turkish democratisation. However, unlike them, it has achieved remarkable success in its pursuits. First, the AKP has mostly revoked the secularist regulations that hindered the public participation of pious Muslims just a decade after the 1997 military intervention that sought to root out Islamist influence in politics. The AKP strategically made the sense of victimhood shared by pious Muslims central to its mission and gained their unwavering loyalty by enabling their greater representation in all echelons of state and society. Erdoğan's experience of brief imprisonment undoubtedly bestowed more authenticity on his party's claim to represent pious Muslims who had been the pariahs of the Republic. The AKP also tamed the power of the military, a force that presented an existential threat to political pluralism with its history of repeated interventions and extrajudicial practices. In its struggle with the military, the AKP had the significant support of the Gülen network, liberal intelligentsia, and Kurdish public opinion as well as key foreign actors such as the European Union (EU).

Turkish democracy's failings continue to persist in defying the optimistic view that the consolidation of AKP power would lead to an unequivocal and linear democratic progress. In fact, the sense of 'Sunni Muslim victimhood' that had been the internal driving force of the AKP's reformist impulses has now turned into a triumphalist stance that aggravates sectarian and ethnic biases of political power in Turkey. Furthermore, geopolitical developments since the 2008 economic crisis have had detrimental effects for democratic struggles in Turkey. Before 2008, EU membership was central to Turkish foreign policy and constrained the authoritarian tendencies of the government. As the EU gradually lost its relevance for Turkish elites and public, the AKP saw in the Arab uprisings of 2011 an

unprecedented opportunity to seek regional power. The expectation among AKP elites was that the uprisings would bring popular Islamist forces to power with similar ideologies to the AKP. This expectation turned into a bitter disillusionment, especially after the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the descent of the Syrian uprising into a vicious civil war.

### **A Sectarian Turn**

In this regional context where political affiliations tend to overlap with sectarian differences, the AKP has adopted an increasingly sectarian discourse. This is an important difference that sets the AKP apart from previous centre-right parties with less blatant pro-Sunni biases. Erdoğan explicitly highlighted the Alevi identity of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP leader, during the 2011 electoral campaign in an attempt to discredit him in the eyes of pious Sunni voters. Meanwhile, the AKP and the intelligentsia developed a sectarian framing of the Syrian civil war where a repressive minority Alawite regime (their historical and cultural differences with Alevis in Turkey were overlooked) were brutally massacring the majority Sunni population. As the intensity of violence increased, Islamist groups were co-opted by the AKP and gained unprecedented public visibility and access to resources. They became the enthusiastic supporters of the armed struggle against the Assad regime. In the absence of any serious government effort to prevent them, a large number of Turkish citizens joined the jihadist groups in Syria.

This policy had an unexpected and dire consequence: the rise of IS with its ideology of takfiri Salafi jihadism in 2013. Salafi-jihadist groups in Turkey found a fertile ground for recruitment in the absence of government surveillance. These groups were also the only Islamists that kept their distance from the AKP government and offered a puritanical version of Islam attractive to individuals disenchanted with the lack of a true Islamic government in Turkey. The rising appeal of this extreme form of Islamism at a time when an Islamist party was in power contradicts scholarly expectations that moderation naturally comes at the expense of radicalism.

In the summer of 2013, the Egyptian army overthrew Mohammad Morsi, an Islamist and the first person to be elected to the presidency in free and fair elections in Egypt. Adopting a discourse of victimhood, Erdoğan and his supporters framed the Gezi protests as a 'coup attempt' that coincided with events in Egypt. Erdoğan charged Gezi protestors with lacking basic respect for Islam and made unfounded allegations against them (such as drinking beer in a mosque or attacking a veiled woman) in order to mobilise his base.

While the AKP has become more sectarian than the centre-right parties of the previous decades, it has also been more liberal regarding the role of ethnic identity in Turkish politics. Its Kurdish reforms have been inspired by a stance that emphasises common Muslim identity transcending linguistic differences, and are consistent with its highlighting of Sunni Muslim identity in public affairs. Furthermore, the AKP's direct challenge to the political power of the military contributed to its appeal among Kurdish citizens. In contrast, centre-parties since the DP primarily relied on Kurdish notables and patronage relations in order to mobilise the Kurdish vote. Nonetheless, the growing popular dynamism and appeal of Kurdish nationalism has made the AKP's strategy of cultural rights under the discourse of Islamic brotherhood inadequate and outdated. Kurdish self-rule

in Syria emboldened the military wing of the Kurdish nationalist movement that aimed to replicate the success in Turkey's Kurdish cities through armed struggle. After the June 2015 elections, Kurdish support for the AKP appeared dispensable. Police and military sweeps against PKK militants in highly congested urban areas resulted in widespread human rights violations and heavy civilian casualties and signified a return to the security-first policies of the early 1990s. Kurdish nationalism, which eluded both the ANAP and DYP, continues to be the biggest challenge to the AKP, as the party seems to lack strategies and policies for its management.

### **The Fragility of Authoritarianism in Turkey**

The AKP's evolution from a reformist rightist party into a majoritarian force benefiting from and aggravating Turkey's social cleavages in a time of escalating geopolitical tensions leaves Turkish democracy in a bleak state. In the wake of its power struggle with the Gülen movement, the AKP reached a rapprochement with the military. This realignment also ended the government's willingness to support prosecutions where security officers were accused of human rights violations in the 1990s and put on trial. Opposition parties lack strategies to challenge the AKP's electoral dominance given the political sociology of Turkish electorate. The CHP, the main opposition party under the leadership of Kılıçdaroğlu, received the support of a quarter of the voters, but remains feeble vis-à-vis the AKP. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), whose unexpectedly solid performance in the June 2015 elections generated a moment of euphoria, fails to overcome the idea of armed struggle bolstered by the Rojava experience and to engage in the non-violent coalition building that is essential for cross-ethnic mobilisation. The Gezi protests briefly presented an unprecedented challenge to Erdoğan's authoritarianism, but also deepened social divisions before dying down. The EU accession process that was the chief external impetus for democratisation during the initial AKP years now appears irrelevant to the Turkish political body. While the refugee crisis and the rise of IS contributes to Turkey's geopolitical importance, they also undermine the EU's willingness and ability to prevent rights violations.

Nevertheless, there is a silver lining. While President Erdoğan has established his personal dominance over Turkish politics and eroded the autonomy of its institutions present, his rule lacks a strong institutional basis. Turkey has a history of political pluralism that is 65 years longer than many contemporary democracies. The AKP lacks a strong party identity and is highly dependent on Erdoğan's direct interventions to preserve its coherence. A new constitutional order is unlikely to give rise to new institutions under complete control of the President, as the AKP still needs the cooperation of other parties. Consequently, the ephemerality of personalistic rule, the irreducibly pluralistic nature of Turkish politics, and the vulnerability of the Turkish economy may result in a more fragmented and competitive electoral arena, which may in turn herald a new era of democratic reform.

# The Power Strategies of the AKP in Turkey

## Menderes Çınar

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### Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been Turkey's predominant party from the first elections they contested in 2002. The AKP steadily increased its share of votes from 35 percent in 2002 to 47 percent in 2007 and 49 percent in 2011, enjoying very comfortable majorities and forming single-party governments. This trend faced a setback in the 7 June 2015 elections, when the AKP failed to gain enough seats to form a single party government, despite winning 40 percent of the votes and surpassing its closest rival by a 15 percent margin. Following this, the AKP's *de facto* leader, President Erdoğan, used his constitutional powers and political leverage over the party to prevent the formation of a coalition government and to return to the electorate in repeat elections, held on 1 November 2015. In these elections the AKP increased their votes by 9 percent and restored their predominant position.

This paper gives an account of the AKP's durability in power in two periods, up to the final defeat of Turkey's military-led secular establishment in 2010. During the first period, the AKP proved to be a durable political force by accomplishing defensive and redistributive objectives, both of which entailed some reformist policies to contain and dismantle the power of the secular establishment and to carve out spaces for Turkey's Islamic/conservative identity within the nation's political fabric. In the second period, the AKP were preoccupied with prolonging their power position and expanding the domains of their control by exploiting and deepening the divisions in Turkey's torn society and increasing the cost of opposition.

### Phase 1: Dismantling the Kemalist Establishment

During the first period, the AKP maintained a broad-based appeal by becoming a political patron protecting Islamic identity from a very real threat of secularist aggression and providing for the hitherto marginalised Islamic bourgeoisie and urban poor. These required some Europeanising, civilianising and neo-liberalising reforms designed to dismantle the Kemalist status quo which, by that time, did not really serve beyond the waning secular sectors of society. The dismantling of the Kemalist establishment also came to epitomise democratisation and masked the AKP's paternalist outlook and self-interested search for power.

The founders and the core constituency of the AKP were willing to embrace the neo-liberal paradigm which, as in the case of Latin American neo-populism, would give them opportunities to build up their own economic power base. A massive privatisation drive, a major social security reform and a series of tailored legal changes enabled the AKP to integrate the marginalised informal sectors and the conservative Anatolian bourgeoisie. The AKP

also addressed negative side effects of its neoliberal programme by mobilising the state apparatus as well as the friendly Islamic NGOs and foundations to distribute some in-kind benefits such as coal and food to the needy. The beneficiaries of this type of social help have no legal entitlement to the assistance they receive and this renders them susceptible to partisan pressures and political blackmailing.

The most critical element facilitating the AKP's paternalist outlook was a defensive mission, to which they were compelled by the secular opposition. The secular opposition took the futile dichotomy between Islam and secularism for granted and reproduced the militarist mentality of the 28 February process, which back in the latter part of the 1990s defined Islamic identity as an internal enemy and aimed at eradicating it so as to restore the political centre along Kemalist lines. This resulted in an opposition reduced to secularism, and a secularism reduced to the dismissal and intimidation of the AKP and its conservative constituency. Hence, the association of secularism with authoritarianism and the AKP's defensive mission.

The militarist nature of the secular opposition facilitated the development of a vicious cycle of power politics, in which the AKP could guarantee the support and loyalty of the conservative identity simply by empowering themselves vis-à-vis the Kemalist establishment to prevent a secularist aggression. This rendered the AKP less susceptible to the demands of the rank-and-file and the conservative constituency, and facilitated the development of an extremely hierarchical party organisation with an explicit paternalist attitude. In fact, Erdoğan could dismiss and postpone demands, and avoid making promises on the grounds of the exigencies of the struggle against the Kemalist establishment.

This cycle of power politics has also enabled the AKP to anoint themselves the champions of democracy and democratisation with a vaguely defined 'conservative democrat' identity and without putting forward a comprehensive democratisation agenda. This is because neither the extra-political power of the Kemalist establishment nor its categorisation of the AKP as illegitimate was in congruence with democratic politics. In a sense, by compelling the AKP to a power struggle for its own survival, the secular opposition has made it possible for the AKP to equate its self-interested search for power with democratisation.

## **Phase 2: Prolonging the AKP's Power**

During the second phase, after the AKP's victory against the Kemalist establishment, the future of Turkish democracy was left to the mercy of the AKP. This is because, traditionally, it was the Kemalist establishment that surrogated the liberal mechanisms for a limited government by checking and balancing the civilian politicians from an extra-political position to keep them within the parameters they set for legitimate political activity. Also, the secular opposition that relied on the establishment now had to go through a long process of change before becoming a viable contender to the AKP. Finally, the European Union (EU), by failing to produce a political will for Turkey's full membership back in 2004, lost its political leverage over the AKP and rendered itself redundant as far as Turkey's democratisation was concerned.

By prevailing over the Kemalist establishment, the AKP were no longer able to portray their self-interested search for power as democratisation. This rendered the AKP more open to political criticism for its various failures and shortcomings from within and outside.

Thereby their mass support has become more fragile. To overcome this fragility, the AKP wanted the people to entrust Turkey's democratisation to them, but not to evaluate their political performance in light of the norms of democracy. The AKP, in effect, elevated themselves above democratic politics/criticism, monopolised democracy and linked democratic stability to their own position of power, which they wanted to shore up. To prolong their position by gaining the popular mandate, the AKP have employed a three-tiered strategy.

First, they emphasised their past performance in 'democratising' and 'modernising' the country, and used such catchphrases as '2023 targets' and 'new Turkey' to capture the imagination of the people. In so doing, they emphasised economic development and infrastructure modernisation. Consequently, grand construction projects like a third bridge over the Bosphorus, motorway and railway tunnels under the Bosphorus, a third airport in Istanbul, massive 'urban transformation' constructions in Turkey's big cities; and hastily developed national automobile and plane projects came to signify the 'new Turkey'.

The Turkish centre-right tradition since the inception of competitive politics in 1950 has taken economic development and modernisation as Turkey's national project to downplay the Kemalist single-party regime's (1924–46) rather unpopular cultural modernisation project and to emphasise that, unlike the Kemalist elite, they are concerned with the well-being of people, or 'serving the nation'. The AKP's emphasis on economic well-being and improved infrastructure was in line with the centre-right tradition and certainly resonated with a sizeable part of Turkish society.

### Strategies for Power Consolidation

The AKP abused its willingness and capacity to serve the nation to categorise the rest of the political class as populist and anti-political, painting any opposition as redundant and obstructive as far as the well-being of people was concerned. 'Serving the nation' provided the AKP with grounds upon which to justify its search for executive supremacy as well. What we needed for achieving a great economic leap forward was the capacity to make fast decisions without facing judicial and other hurdles. This search for executive supremacy has hindered the development of a rule-based institutional infrastructure as well as the realisation of much needed economic reforms. Henceforth, the management of the economy has become increasingly arbitrary and clientalist distribution of state contracts and licences amounted to serious corruption.

The second aspect of the AKP's power strategy aimed at obscuring its democratic failures, disciplining the Islamic/conservative constituency, forestalling the possibility of political criticism from within and outside, and rendering political criticism a categorically hostile endeavour. Here the AKP took Turkey's torn society for granted and deployed all the mutually exclusive categories that came with it as instruments for its power strategy. This meant that the AKP developed a polarisation-based identity and a combative style, which instrumentalised Islam. Consequently, pro-Western secular sectors of society were vilified and downgraded with an aggressively moralistic and populist language that rejected representative politics and its civility. A re-narration of history as the struggle of democratic Muslim Turkish society against the authoritarian secular elite helped the AKP to claim to be intrinsically democratic, and associate democratisation with the restoration of an allegedly original and forcefully submerged (Muslim) identity of the country. Portrayed as the AKP's

‘civilisational outlook’, this somewhat Islamist restoration was to correct the errors of over a hundred years of Westernisation in Turkey. Consequently, the AKP’s second strategy amounted to dividing society into ‘nationals/natives’ and ‘non-nationals/non-natives’, and disqualifying the latter as a Eurocentric or Islamophobic group, open to collaboration with evil forces simply for the purpose of damaging the AKP’s power position. Such a political practice has not only deepened the divisions in Turkey’s torn society, but also showed that democratisation in the sense of constructing a pluralist society of equal individuals is not the norm of the AKP.

Thirdly, the AKP have embarked on a project of redesigning Turkey’s political institutions in accordance with its majoritarian understanding of democracy, which considers the popular mandate as a licence to rule in any way they deem fit. The net result of this strategy has been the concentration of power in the hands of the AKP and simultaneously an increase in the cost of opposition and criticism. On many occasions the AKP leaders made it clear that they find a popularly elected government sufficient for a regime to qualify as democratic in itself and that serving the ‘national interest’ was the norm for all branches of government, including the judiciary. Such an understanding of democracy enabled the AKP to defend the notorious 10 percent electoral threshold, search for executive supremacy at the expense of the division of powers, restrict freedoms, delegitimise the opposition, and still claim to be a democratic and democratising force.

In the course of the last few years, the AKP has significantly reduced the levels of horizontal accountability, especially by targeting judicial independence. Perhaps more importantly, the AKP has undermined the very vertical accountability on which it puts an exclusive emphasis on the claim of democratic legitimacy. This is because, by showing intolerance to public criticism, by harassing the critics, by restricting freedoms of expression, assembly and press, by imposing media blackouts, by channelling state funds to loyalist media outlets/businesses, and by subjecting non-loyalist media outlets and businesses to fiscal investigations, tax-fines and administrative fines, the AKP has blocked people’s access to alternative sources of opinion, information, and meaningful public debate. This meant that AKP wanted people to evaluate their government performance solely in the light of the information they do not block, which in effect damages the democratic quality of the decisions people make in the ballot-box.

In conclusion, it can safely be suggested that what the AKP achieved in the course of the last few years was to render the transfer of power difficult—if not impossible. That they have used their power to compel the electorate to correct the ‘mistake’ they made in June 2015 is the latest testament to their willingness to continue to monopolise democracy and stability in Turkey.

## Post-Election Trends in Turkish Politics and Economy

### Naz Masraff

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The Justice and Development Party (AKP) performed well beyond expectations and secured a landslide victory in the 1 November parliamentary elections. The election outcome will lead to a strong government, which will also deliver continuity in policy-making. In that sense, we are entering a more predictable phase of policy-making following the intense political uncertainty of last summer.

In the long term, however, the November elections will ultimately fail to bring political stability to Turkish politics. The election result boosted the AKP, which regards this win as an affirmation of its domestic and foreign policy. Politics will, as a result, continue to be turbulent, which will negatively impact on the economy as well as the country's investment climate.

On the political front there are three key risks, the main one being the centralisation of executive powers around one individual, namely President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As of 1 November, Turkey had already moved into a *de facto* presidential system, where Erdoğan was informally concentrating powers around him and his office. There is now a serious possibility that the AKP, with the help of 14 additional deputies, will change the constitution and formally introduce an executive presidency.

Discussions surrounding the presidential system and attempts to realise it over the next year or two are likely to be divisive, creating tensions between Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, between the AKP and the opposition parties, among the Turkish public as a whole, and even inside the AKP. There is a risk that the actual system itself, if and when it materialises, will hand over significant executive powers to one individual without the necessary checks and balances.

The second risk is that the ruling party will now use the 1 November elections as a strong public endorsement of ongoing policies and will use this to continue to fight domestic opponents. It is therefore likely that we will witness further attacks on critical media outlets, journalists, businesses, as well as on bureaucrats. The rule of law will continue to be obstructed and the general business environment will suffer.

Thirdly, Turkish society is more polarised than ever following the elections. Erdoğan's ongoing interference in domestic politics and foreign policy, as well as ongoing clashes in the southeast, will only reinforce this trend. While there is no imminent sign of political unrest, the environment is such that large scale protests could be triggered, particularly in relation to the Kurdish question. Deepening societal divisions will also lead to a significant brain drain, which would undermine the country's economic potential.

With Erdoğan continuing to dominate the cabinet and the party's parliamentary group, a formal split within the party is unlikely any time soon – particularly after such a decisive electoral win. That said, Davutoğlu will also feel emboldened by the elections and this will encourage him to take a more assertive stance against Erdoğan. As a result, a power struggle between the President and the Prime Minister is likely. But despite Davutoğlu's attempts, Erdoğan will have the upper hand in the relationship. This power struggle will have a negative, albeit limited, impact on policy coherence over the next year. In the longer-run, this may create fault lines within the AKP.

On the economic front, another AKP government will, to some extent, reassure investors as it signals continuity, but it will also reinforce incumbency problems, including strong rent-seeking behaviour. More importantly, the government will remain in electioneering mode, which will preclude attempts at economic and political reform. Given that Erdoğan's game plan is to introduce a *de iure* presidential system through constitutional change, a potential referendum may be on the horizon. The government's economic policy will, therefore, remain populist in nature, and reforms that address the structural problems of the Turkish economy will once again be stalled.

Economically populist policies are likely to dominate the government's agenda, particularly as the country enters a period of lower growth (at about 3 percent of GDP annually). We will therefore observe a not-so-tight monetary policy coupled with a looser fiscal policy and the easing of macro prudential measures. The government will pursue immediate measures to support GDP growth.

Monetary policy will also continue to be politicised. The executive will put pressure on the central bank (CB) to ease monetary policy given the value of the lira seems to have stabilised for now. Although this pressure may not be as explicit as we have witnessed in the run up to parliamentary elections, the result will be the same: a more dovish Turkish central bank compared to its emerging markets peers.

Under these political pressures, the CB will continue to prioritise growth over inflation. The appointment of the bank's governor in April will be an important moment. With former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan excluded from the cabinet, current governor Erdem Başçı is likely to be replaced when his term is over. With this alteration, the risk of politicisation will be even higher.

We also expect easing of the macro prudential policy framework introduced back in 2012 to constrain credit growth, particularly on the consumer side. Since loan growth rates have plummeted sharply to 8.4 percent at the end of March (FX adjusted, excluding loans to financial sector), way below the CB's target of 15 percent, the banking watchdog, the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency, is likely to ease the macro prudential framework. This revision will support private domestic consumption, which will continue to constitute about 70 percent of Turkey's total GDP growth, as opposed to the country's exports or investments. Other than the consumer driven sectors, this move will also help the banking sector's profits.

Fiscal policy will also become looser, but we are not overly concerned given the healthy state of the budget. The deficit in the first two months of 2016 performed much better than the previous year's. Gross debt to GDP has also been falling over the last decade and is expected to come down to about 32 percent by year-end. There is, therefore, a bit of room to spend.

In the unlikely case the AKP goes too far on the loose fiscal policy side, a red flag will be raised with credit rating agencies, as Turkey risks becoming a country with twin deficits. A 30 percent increase in the minimum wage as of 1 January, in line with the AKP's campaign promise, has been the first move on this front, way above the average expected inflation rate in 2016 at about 8 percent. This move is also likely to increase the proportion of employment that is unregistered.

On the reform side, with a strong ruling majority, reform prospects over the next few years are potentially better than they would have been under a coalition or a narrow AKP majority. In this respect, we expect the government to conduct some changes over the next year or two. This will likely include an income tax reform to widen the tax base. Additional incentives for investments and some changes in the energy sector, as well as specific measures to constrain the current account deficit are also possible. The government will also support the construction and consumer-driven sectors and push forward large infrastructure projects as part of its goal to achieve near-term growth and to create employment.

That said, significant reforms to address the structural problems of Turkish economy and help the country achieve higher levels of growth in the medium to longer-run are likely to remain stalled. The previous AKP government, which also enjoyed a comfortable majority, did not demonstrate much appetite for reform and we have no reason to believe that this will now change. Moreover, the prospects of a constitutional referendum will further discourage the government from adopting politically costly reforms that would hurt its own electorate. These key changes include productivity boosting reforms such as education and labour market reform, as well as more comprehensive tax and social security reforms.

The composition of the cabinet supports this populist policy outlook. Leadership within the economic administration is weaker due to the absence of Babacan. Despite him being replaced with former Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek, who is also perceived to be credible by the investor community, Şimşek does not enjoy the same gravitas and standing in the party as Babacan. His ability to stand up to Erdoğan in times of crisis and convince him to follow a difficult course of economic action will be much more limited. Moreover, Erdoğan once again dominates the cabinet with key figures in economic administration perceived to be very much loyal to him. These figures will likely pursue more populist economic policies, in line with Erdoğan and his advisors' priorities, further constraining Şimşek's room to manoeuvre.

## The Pendulum of Democracy: The AKP Government and Turkey's Kurdish Conflict

### Evren Balta

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In February 2015, representatives of the AKP government and Kurdish politicians came together in the Dolmabahçe Palace for a meeting that Prime Minister Davutoğlu described as the beginning of a new phase in the peace process. After the meeting behind closed doors, the Turkish government and Kurdish politicians announced to the public a ten-point peace plan drafted by Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>1</sup> However, just months after this historic meeting, in June 2015, clashes between Turkish forces and the PKK were renewed, causing the peace process to collapse. Hundreds of people, including civilians, have died as a result of these clashes since then. Curfews lasting several days and cutting off access to the outside world were declared in many provinces in Southeastern Turkey.<sup>2</sup> The Kurdish issue has once again become completely securitised and framed not as a problem of democracy and democratisation, but as one of terror and separatism. How can we explain this swing of the pendulum occurring over such a brief period of time, shifting between peace and war, negotiation and repression?

In between periods of negotiation and repression, Turkey held general elections on 7 June 2015. In these elections, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) received 13.1 percent of the vote. The HDP not only emerged as a legitimate, moderate interlocutor for the Kurdish peace process but its electoral success also prevented the AKP from forming a single party government. In fact, had the HDP not been able to overcome the ten percent threshold which in the Turkish election system keeps smaller parties out of government, the AKP on its own could have received enough seats in parliament so as not only to form a majority government, but also to change the constitution. Whereas in other contexts of internal conflict the emergence of moderate interlocutors is seen almost as a prerequisite for successful peace processes, the emergence of an autonomous and successful Kurdish political party, specifically the HDP, as a credible alternative to the AKP's rule became the major reason for the failure of the peace talks.

The typical right-wing populist discourse of the AKP considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'. Politics is then just an expression of the general will of 'the pure people' against the established privileges of 'the corrupt elites'. Throughout the AKP's rule, the shift between negotiation and repression vis-à-vis the Kurdish demands was a reflection of this right-

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Dombey, 'Turkish government and Kurds in bit to revitalise talks', *The Financial Times*, 28 February 2015. Available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5d305c18-bf67-11e4-99f8-00144feab7de.html#axzz3qocjf228> (accessed 24 October 2015).

<sup>2</sup> 'Fact Sheet on Declared Curfews', *TIHV (Human Rights Foundation of Turkey)*, 26 December 2015. Available at <http://en.tihv.org.tr/fact-sheet-on-declared-curfews-between-11-25-december-and-violations-of-right-to-life-against-civilians/> (accessed 30 December 2015).

wing populist understanding of politics. The AKP elites included Kurdish demands when these demands were not strongly represented by other institutional actors – be it a legal party such as the HDP or an armed organisation such as the PKK – and when those actors did not challenge the primacy of the AKP’s agency in ‘solving’ the Kurdish problem. Thus, whenever a strong challenger emerged, AKP elites immediately backtracked, grabbing back power and repressing the opposition until they felt confident that they had regained control over the ‘problem’.

### **The First Opening: A Strategy of Inclusion**

After the capture of Öcalan and the PKK’s declaration of a unilateral ceasefire in February 2000, the intensity of the conflict in the southeast decreased. The AKP won the 2002 elections with significant support from the Turkish voters, securing 65 percent of the seats in parliament. The founders of the AKP and the leaders of the new Turkish government saw themselves as ‘victims’ of the military-security establishment of the 1990s, just like Kurds. Right from the beginning, it was clear to the AKP elites that their consolidation of political power was directly related to the strength of the military elites and that curbing the political power of the military was directly related to the desecuritisation of the political sphere, most importantly the desecuritisation of the Kurdish issue.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, AKP elites have a different understanding of what constitutes the Turkish nation when compared to the Kemalist elites of the previous era. According to the former, Turkishness wrongfully underlined the element of ethnicity and aggravated differences between Kurds and Turks. Instead, emphasis on the religious identity of the Kurds was believed to have a unifying effect on the people that had been alienated from each other by ethnic and secular versions of the nation. By utilising this discourse of religious unity and giving voice to the Kurdish constituency, AKP elites believed that they would eventually convince the already conservative ‘pure Kurdish people’ to turn against the secular and nationalist ‘corrupt PKK elites’ and undermine the influence of the Kurdish political movement.

Desecuritising the Kurdish issue and giving voice to Kurdish demands was thus a win-win strategy for the AKP. It helped them curb the power of the military in politics and also extend their popular constituency to Southeast Turkey. As the perception of internal threat decreased, so did the perceived necessity for the military to regulate politics.<sup>4</sup> European Union (EU) integration was also strategically important, not only to limit the army’s authority, but also to desecuritisise the Kurdish issue in the framework of wide-scale democratisation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Evren Balta Paker and İ. Akça, ‘Beyond Military Tutelage: Analyzing Civil-Military Relations under the Justice and Development Party’, in Ebru Canan Sokullu (ed), *Debating Security in Turkey: Challenges and Changes in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 77–93.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Michaud-Emin, ‘The Restructuring of the Military High Command in the Seventh Harmonization Package and its Ramifications for Civil-Military Relations in Turkey’, *Turkish Studies* 8 (2007), pp. 25–42.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Resul Usul, ‘The Justice and Development Party and the European Union: From Euro-skepticism to Euro-Enthusiasm and Euro-Fatigue’, in Ümit Cizre (ed), *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 175–197; Erhan Doğan, ‘The Historical and Discursive Roots of the Justice and Development Party’s EU Stance’, *Turkish Studies* 6 (2005), pp. 421–437.

Both policies established the AKP as a major political force and an actor in the Kurdish regions, a fact reinforced by the 10 percent threshold which blocked Kurdish political parties from running independently. Throughout the 2000s, the AKP gradually expanded its power base by claiming around 50 percent of the Kurdish vote and increasingly viewed itself as the sole force capable of resolving the matter at hand, while being very unwilling to recognise the agency of Kurdish political forces.

By 2009, the Turkish government had made significant headway in terms of demilitarisation and was finally free to follow a new political strategy to solve the Kurdish problem. In 2009, the AKP announced its Kurdish opening. Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MİT) also initiated negotiations with the PKK, known as the Oslo Talks. The tide of peace and optimism soon met rampant nationalism, and the AKP immediately brought the opening to a screeching halt, afraid of losing nationalist votes in the subsequent elections. The Kurdish problem almost immediately became securitised once again.<sup>6</sup> A lawsuit was filed by the state against the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), and almost 10,000 Kurdish policy activists, including elected Kurdish politicians, were detained, thus creating a new regime of oppression via judiciary means.<sup>7</sup> These trials were considered as a new strategy of repression, where the AKP government resorted to 'rule by law', not by rule of law.

Before the elections of 12 June 2011, the problem was once again rebranded as one of terror, not democracy; of violence, not rights. Then Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that they would meet only with legal and legitimate Kurdish representatives and suggested that the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) was not a suitable interlocutor since it did not act 'independently and autonomously'. Capitalising on this tougher stance towards the Kurdish issue, the AKP significantly increased its votes to 49.9 percent in the 2011 elections. The discourse of this period and the subsequent electoral victory of the AKP government reverberated in that of the period right after the 7 June 2015 elections.

## The Second Opening: A Strategy of Incorporation

This tough stance and discourse towards the Kurdish issue would soon soften after the 2011 landslide election victory of the AKP. Significantly different from the previous period was the new regional dynamics. In fact, this was a period of demonstrations and protests, riots and civil wars throughout the countries of the region. The Turkish government soon found itself in competition with other regional powers in trying to influence the fate and future of the region, directly and indirectly intervening in the domestic policies of Middle Eastern states.

While the region became more conflict-ridden, the AKP government re-launched negotiations with the PKK at the beginning of 2013, with the aim of disarming Turkey's Kurdish regions. On 21 March 2013, Öcalan's letter to the public was read both in Turkish and

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<sup>6</sup> Soner Çağatay, 'Kurdish Opening' Closed Shut', *Foreign Policy* 28 (2009). Available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/28/kurdish\\_opening\\_closed\\_shut?page=0,1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/28/kurdish_opening_closed_shut?page=0,1) (accessed 24 October 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Aliza Marcus, 'Troubles in Turkey's Backyard', *Foreign Policy* 29 (2010). Available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/09/troubles\\_in\\_turkey\\_s\\_backyard?obref=obinsite](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/09/troubles_in_turkey_s_backyard?obref=obinsite) (accessed 27 October 2015).

Kurdish during the historical Nowruz celebrations in Diyarbakır. The letter called for a ceasefire that included the disarmament and withdrawal from Turkish soil and an end to armed struggle. On 25 April 2013, the PKK announced that it would withdraw all of its forces from Turkey.

However, the Turkish government's reluctance to enable support for the Kurdish town Kobanî, which was under attack from the Islamic State (IS), created a large-scale protest cycle among the Kurds of Turkey, especially in the southeast, leaving 42 people dead.<sup>8</sup> The government issued a curfew in six Kurdish-populated cities of Turkey in order to control the growing intensity of the protests.<sup>9</sup>

With these protests, it became clear that the Kurdish political movement had transnational links transgressing the borders of the Turkish state. Furthermore, it also became clear that the Kurdish political movement had turned into the major political alternative of the Salafi movements in the Middle East. With major powers such as the US and Russia allying themselves with the Kurds against the growing Salafi influence in the region, it reshaped Middle Eastern politics in a way that AKP policy-makers had never imagined. Initially, the AKP viewed negotiations as a way to stop the growing influence of the Kurdish political movement and hoped to unite Turkey's Kurds around the Muslim Brotherhood, but the Kobanî protests proved to AKP elites that neither policy would be feasible and that it would be difficult to curb the PKK's influence in the region as much as in Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

### **'The End': Renewed Fighting**

As expected, in the 2015 general elections the AKP once more took first place, bringing in 40.9 percent of the votes. But this percentage – which under normal circumstances would have been celebrated as a triumph – became the party's first 'defeat', because it was unable to form a single government. This 'first defeat' of the AKP has largely been perceived as a success of the HDP.<sup>11</sup>

Maybe one of the most important reasons behind the HDP's success is the fact that many Kurds who had previously voted for the AKP retracted their support. As stated earlier, for almost a decade, the AKP and the pro-Kurdish parties had shared the Kurdish vote almost equally; however, in this instance, the balance radically tipped towards the HDP.<sup>12</sup> In the Kurdish provinces, the HDP ranked first virtually everywhere. As one of the main aims of the solution processes had been to marginalise pro-Kurdish politics, the AKP soon understood that it had created the opposite result and empowered autonomous Kurdish political actors.

<sup>8</sup> '6-7 Ekim'in Acı Bilançosu', *Radikal*, 12 November 2014. Available at [http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/6\\_7\\_ekimin\\_aci\\_bilancosu\\_42\\_olu-1229423](http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/6_7_ekimin_aci_bilancosu_42_olu-1229423) (accessed 15 January 2015).

<sup>9</sup> 'Curfew in 6 Southeastern Cities', *Bianet English*, 7 October 2014. Available at <http://bianet.org/english/world/158990-curfew-in-6-southeastern-cities> (accessed 20 January 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Evren Balta, 'The Syrian War and Turkey's Kurdish Conflict', in Karen Young (ed), *Mapping GCC Foreign Policy: Resources, Recipients and Regional Effects*, LSE Middle East Centre (2015).

<sup>11</sup> The HDP was established in 2012 as an umbrella party for various groups with feminist, green, and socialist agendas. Among them, the largest was certainly the pro-Kurdish party BDP.

<sup>12</sup> Cuma Çiçek, '1 Kasım 2015 Seçimleri: Politik Kürt Bölgesinde Ak Parti', *Birikim Dergisi*, Available at <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel-yazilar/7310/1-kasim-2015-secimleri-politik-kurt-bolgesinde-ak-parti#.VIR8M2QrLaY> (accessed 23 November 2015).

This was a major blow to their populist policy of incorporating Kurds into the party itself.<sup>13</sup>

In Kurdish regions, the HDP's campaign rested on three pillars: autonomy to Kurdish culture; solidarity among Kurds – which also included regional solidarity, and regional peace. The HDP also successfully incorporated conservative, religious Muslim Kurds in the region and attracted rightist and conservative tribes. Right before the June 2015 elections, the party established social reconciliation and dialogue commissions – also known as 'persuasion commissions'. The strategy of negotiating with tribes was frequently used by the state as a strategy of incorporation of Kurds. Through their direct collaboration and the influence of these tribes, Turkish governments were historically able to rule this contentious periphery.<sup>14</sup> This time however, the HDP reached out to these conservative tribes and received the support of local *mullahs* and influential conservative Kurds. As a result, many formally pro-AKP tribes changed allegiances right before the elections. This shift was alarming, challenging not only the AKP as a party in the region, but also the traditional basis of the state rule in the region.<sup>15</sup>

After the 7 June elections, even before coalition talks began, the government announced that the solution process was over. Similarly to the time surrounding the 2011 elections, the AKP government again declared there no longer existed a 'Kurdish question' in Turkey and that 'all possible rights had already been granted'. As the solution process came to an end, the entire country was swept up in renewed conflict. A curfew was imposed in hundreds of predominantly Kurdish districts, the PKK attacked and killed Turkish soldiers and police officers, and Turkish nationalist groups attacked many HDP buildings in revenge.<sup>16</sup> Two suicide bombings in Suruç and Ankara killed 104 people and wounded many more.

As the initiatives to form a coalition government failed, new elections were called upon. On 1 November 2015, voters responded to the increasing violence, conflict and chaos, much as they did in 2011. Capitalising on this tougher stance towards the Kurdish issue, the AKP managed to gain enough seats in parliament to form a single-party government.

Right after that win, AKP elites began to use the same rhetoric towards the peace process. This rhetoric was based upon the same premise as previously: a conflictual position against the PYD, a continued fight against the PKK, and a non-acceptance of the HDP as a legitimate negotiating partner in the Kurdish problem. What remains of the peace process is the government granting rights to ordinary Kurds. One government spokesman even stated that finally the 'AKP is now alone with the Kurds'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Evren Balta, 'How Turkish Elections Changed the Foreign Policy of Turkey', *openDemocracy*, 27 July 2015. Available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/evren-balta/how-turkish-elections-changed-foreign-policy-of-turkey> (accessed 24 October 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish militias in the Ottoman tribal zone* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Fehim Taştekin, 'Kurds Abandon AKP', *Al Monitor*, 20 May 2015. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/05/turkey-pious-kurds-abandon-akp-in-droves-hdp.html#> (accessed November 12, 2015)

<sup>16</sup> Ömer Tekdemir and Oğuzhan Göksel, 'A Turbulent Turkey in a Region of Turmoil', *openDemocracy*, 17 September 2015. Available at [https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/omer-tekdemir-o-percentC4\\_percent9Fuzhan-g\\_percentC3\\_percentB6ksel/turbulent-turkey-in-region-in-turmoil](https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/omer-tekdemir-o-percentC4_percent9Fuzhan-g_percentC3_percentB6ksel/turbulent-turkey-in-region-in-turmoil) (accessed October 24, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> 'Başarı Yan Yana Durmanın Mükafatı', *Al Jazeera Turkish*, 2 November 2015. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/basari-yan-yana-durmanin-mukafati> (accessed 24 October 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The AKP's populist ideology has inherent limits, as it does not allow for the establishment of strong independent institutional actors or political interlocutors. It is also hostile to a checks-and-balances system, whether derived from society or state institutions. Similarly, its political stance concerning the Kurdish issue can be described as 'we are the power and the opposition', which constitutes the political utopia of right-wing populist movements. Thus, it is based on the elimination of the Kurdish movement and on singling itself out as the only legitimate political actor. The strong belief in monistic and majoritarian absolute power does not have space for dialogue, debate, criticism or difference, as any kind of democratic politics would require. When Kurdish political actors acted, both domestically and regionally, with influence and strength, curbing the power of the AKP, the party resorted to repression. This choice has shaped and will continue to shape not only the quality of Turkish democracy but also the sense of national belonging and the future of national community in Turkey.

# Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Challenges and Impact on Turkey's Regional Policies

## Elizabeth Ferris

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### Introduction

When Syrian refugees<sup>1</sup> began arriving on Turkey's border in 2011, the government welcomed them warmly, set up new camps and expected their stay to be temporary. For then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, welcoming refugees was consistent both with his foreign policy of advocating an end to the Assad regime and with the wishes of the Sunni Muslim constituency of his Justice and Development Party (AKP). Now entering its fifth year, the conflict has become even more complicated. The number of refugees has soared to well over 2 million,<sup>2</sup> far outstripping the capacity of the camps, and no one expects their return any time soon. Turkey faces major challenges – and opportunities – during this phase of its refugee policies.

Before turning to the central question, it is important to keep three points in mind. While a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Turkey has maintained 'geographical restriction' which means that the Convention does not apply to Syrian refugees – nor, for that matter, to any non-European refugees. Rather, non-European refugees may stay on the condition that they are resettled to third countries. Secondly, Turkey has changed from being a country of emigration to one of immigration (and now to one of transit) and has taken steps to reform its laws and policies in recognition of this change. But Turkey has little experience of integrating refugees or migrants – its prior experience with refugees was almost exclusively with those of Turkish descent. An under-appreciated fact is that even in the midst of the Syrian refugee influx, Turkey was receiving unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees from other countries. Thirdly, in 1991, 500,000 Iraqi Kurds sought to escape the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime by fleeing into Turkey. The Turkish government refused to admit them and instead prevailed upon the international community to create and police a safe zone inside Northern Iraq: Operation Provide Comfort. This safe zone functioned fairly well and the displaced Iraqi Kurds were able to return to their communities within months. This experience has undoubtedly had an influence on current discussions about safe zones in Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> While the term 'refugee' has a specific legal meaning, this paper uses the term in its more generic sense – to refer to all of those fleeing the Syrian conflict, whether legally recognised as refugees or not.

<sup>2</sup> 'Syria Regional Refugee Response', *Interagency Information Sharing Portal, UNHCR*. Available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224> (accessed 25 February 2016).

## Welcoming the Refugees, Foreign and Domestic Policies Aligned (2011–2013)

The first Syrian refugees arrived on Turkey's borders on 29 April 2011.<sup>3</sup> The Erdoğan government proclaimed an open door policy for Syrians, promised them assistance in terms of shelter and services in well-constructed camps near the border, and rebuffed offers of assistance from international agencies. In October 2011, the government extended 'temporary protection' to Syrian refugees – an official status unlike the 'guest' designation used by most other countries in the region.<sup>4</sup> It was consistent with Erdoğan's opposition to the Assad regime and his calculation that its demise would occur quickly (not an unreasonable assumption at the time given the rapidity of regime change in the Arab spring.) This was paralleled on the military side with Turkish support for the Free Syrian Army. Turkey's generous policies towards the refugees were also consistent with the country's emergence as an up-and-coming leader in the humanitarian world. In the decade 2003-13, Turkey had become the world's sixth largest governmental humanitarian donor.<sup>5</sup> This growing humanitarian role was also consistent with the AKP's emphasis on *ummah* – the community of all Muslims.

In 2012, as the number of refugees increased, the government announced a 'red line' in terms of the number it could admit; if the figure were to exceed 100,000, Erdoğan said, it would be time to move to establish a 'buffer zone'. This idea of a safe zone inside Syria, repeated often in subsequent years, seems also to have been rooted in the Turkish government's desire to prevent Kurds from gaining control over further territory in Syria along the Turkish border.<sup>6</sup>

In 2013, there were signs that welcoming policies were strained. In February of that year, an explosion at a border crossing occurred and in May another explosion in Reyhanlı killed more than 50 people. As the camps reached capacity and increasing numbers of Syrians began living with family or friends, often dispersed throughout the towns, economic pressures mounted – particularly in the border areas. Rent increased and there were reports of cultural changes such as polygamy and early marriages taking place. The impact of the refugees was tremendous – for example, Reyhanlı, with a population of 63,000 hosted 100,000 refugees.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Osman Bahadır Dincer, Vittoria Federici, Elizabeth Ferris, Sema Karaca, Kemal Kirişçi, and Elif Özmenek Çarmıklı, 'Turkey and Syrian Refugees: The Limits of Hospitality', *Brookings Institution*, November 2013. Available at [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2013/11/18-syria-turkey-refugees/turkey-and-syrian-refugees\\_the-limits-of-hospitality-\(2014\).pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2013/11/18-syria-turkey-refugees/turkey-and-syrian-refugees_the-limits-of-hospitality-(2014).pdf) (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Note that temporary protection only acquired a truly legal basis with the adoption of the Temporary Protection Circular in October 2014.

<sup>5</sup> 'Turkey Country Profile', *Global Humanitarian Assistance*. Available at <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/countryprofile/turkey> (accessed 25 February 2016). Also see Andrea Binder, 'The Shape and Sustainability of Turkey's Booming Humanitarian Assistance', *International Development Policy* 5/2, 2014. Available at <https://poldev.revues.org/1741> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Kemal Kirisci and Elizabeth Ferris, 'Not Likely to go Home: Syrian Refugees and the Challenges to Turkey – and the International Community', *Brookings Institution: Turkey Project Policy Paper* 7, September 2015. Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/09/syrian-refugee-international-challenges-ferris-kirisci> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Ahment Icluygu, 'Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead', *Transatlantic Council on*

Turkey also began to operate what were to become massive cross border assistance programmes inside Syria through a 'zero point delivery' system, where the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) delivers aid inside Syria with the support of the Turkish Red Crescent and the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH). This assistance undoubtedly kept many thousands of Syrian alive, but given its opaque nature, also gave rise to speculations that Turkey's true intention with this programme was more than purely humanitarian.

Turkey's open door policy towards the refugees was never truly as open as depicted. While the temporary protection policy indicated that Syrians entering via official border crossings (and many entered through non-official ones) and with passports (which many did not have), could apply for work permits, in practice this was such a cumbersome process that it rarely occurred. Refugees were allowed into the country, but (except in the camps) received no financial assistance from the government or international agencies and were not allowed to work. As personal savings ran out, they turned to the informal economy for jobs and income – with all of the exploitation that this brings.

Commendably, in the midst of this mass influx of refugees, Turkey adopted its first comprehensive law on migration in April 2013 which came into effect a year later. This change, part of the pre-EU accession process, was a positive one. As Ahmet İğduygu noted, 'this law introduces some landmark reforms that provide Turkey with a modern, efficient and fair management system in line with core international and European standards'.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 2013, the Turkish welcome was beginning to wear thin. Turkey was reporting the ever-increasing financial costs of caring for the refugees (citing a figure of USD 2 billion in late 2013, which jumped to USD 8.5 billion in November 2015 though there is little clarity about what is included in that figure). Whereas initially Turkey seemed to take pride in being able to care for the refugees without international support, by 2015 complaints about the lack of international aid were loud and bitter. Over the course of the last two years, the realisation grew that Assad was not going to be quickly overthrown and the refugees were not going to return home soon.

At the same time, the dynamics of the conflict became more complex and Turkey's role in supporting opposition forces became yet more opaque.

### **Rising Awareness that the Refugees are not Going Home (2013–2015)**

The military gains and brutality of the Islamic State (IS) in mid-2014 both intensified and changed the nature of refugee flows. For the first time since 2011, large numbers of Iraqis arrived, initially fleeing the IS occupation of Mosul in mid-2014. By June 2015, there were some 240,000–250,000 Iraqi refugees.<sup>9</sup> Additionally around 190,000 Kurds crossed into Turkey, fleeing the fighting between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and IS in and around Kobani in October 2014, with renewed clashes in 2015 leading to further displacement. While almost all of the initial influxes of refugees had been Syrian and Sunni

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*Migration and Migration Policy Institute*, April 2015, p. 11. Available at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/syrian-refugees-turkey-long-road-ahead> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Kirisci and Ferris, 'Not Likely to Go Home', p. 4.

Muslims, now Yazidis and Christians from Iraq as well as Kurds from Northern Syria have made the refugee scene more diverse. At the same time, Turkey was receiving large numbers of asylum-seekers from other countries, including Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>10</sup>

Domestically there was growing concern about the economic, social and sectarian impact of the refugees. Alawites were reportedly concerned about the Sunni influx in Hatay while Turks welcomed ethnic Turkmen.<sup>11</sup> As İçduygu writes:

A recent poll found that 70 percent of the host population in the localities of South-eastern Turkey with a high percentage of Syrian refugees believed that Syrians constituted a security threat while more than three-fifths of Turkey's overall population thought they committed crimes and were detrimental to public order and peace wherever they were settled.<sup>12</sup>

Both domestically and internationally the Kurdish factor was key in government policy towards Syrian refugees. Kurds were alarmed at what they saw as the reluctance of the government to support them against IS attacks on Kobanî in June 2015 while the government was concerned with the prospects of large-scale influx of Kurdish refugees into Turkey. The gains by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the June 2015 election was seen by some as a manifestation of Kurdish discontent with foreign policy. Meanwhile the political polarisation resulting from Erdoğan's policies, reports of human rights abuses, the challenge of a multi-country Kurdish insurgency, attacks by IS on areas close to Turkey's border and violence between pro-and anti-AKP factions<sup>13</sup> created a volatile situation. The November 2015 elections in which Erdoğan's AKP party won a majority of the votes is actually fairly positive for refugees, since the AKP, with its strong base among religious conservatives, has been more supportive of a welcoming refugee policy than other political parties as secular Turks, Alevis and Kurds feared the potential of large numbers of Sunni Arab refugees changing the demographics of local society and politics.<sup>14</sup>

While Erdoğan's opposition to the Assad regime is well-known, there have been persistent reports of Turkish support for IS.<sup>15</sup> If true, this creates quite a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Turkey continues to have a rhetoric of supporting refugees from IS while, at the same time, it provides some degree of support to the militant group, allowing foreign fighters, arms and money to pass through Turkey. This paradoxical hypocritical policy is reinforced by a July 2015 agreement to allow US forces to use Turkish airbases for attacks on IS.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 'Turkey Country Operations Profile 2015', *UNHCR*. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>11</sup> İçduygu, 'Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead', p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>13</sup> Sonar Cagaptay, 'Turkey is in Serious Trouble', *The Atlantic*, 5 October 2015. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/turkey-isis-russia-pkk/408988/> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Kirisci and Ferris, 'Not likely to go home'.

<sup>15</sup> David Graeber, 'Turkey could cut off Islamic State's supply lines. So why doesn't it?' *The Guardian*, 18 November 2015. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/18/turkey-cut-islamic-state-supply-lines-Erdoğan-isis> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Cagaptay, 'Turkey is in Serious Trouble'.

In terms of its policies towards the now over 2 million refugees, Turkey took a number of positive steps in the 2014-15 period, including engaging international actors it had once scorned and allowing INGOs to register and begin aid programmes for refugees. The Ministry of Education moved to close the informal Syrian schools which had emerged and to bring the refugees into the country's educational system – although two-thirds of Syrian children remain out of school. The refugee registration system was improved and in spring 2015, before the elections, legislation was introduced that would allow Syrians the possibility of entering the labour market – although the policies have yet to be approved. These changes seem to reflect a recognition that the refugees were not going to return and that steps were needed to ensure their integration into Turkish society. For example, 35,000 Syrian refugees have now given birth in Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the Turkish government continues to support the idea of establishing a safe zone inside Syria, albeit without much uptake by major powers. The idea may have had more to do with the Turkish government wanting to prevent Kurds from gaining control of further territory in Syria along the Turkish border and with domestic politics than with their concern for refugees. It may also have been motivated by accusations that the PYD was pursuing ethnic cleansing against Arabs and Turkmen in the region.<sup>18</sup>

## Europe and the Future

In August 2015, the Syrian refugee crisis took on a new dimension with the massive migration of tens of thousands – and then hundreds of thousands – of refugees moving through Turkey to Germany and other northern European countries. These were mixed migration movements with migrants and asylum-seekers from many other nationalities taking advantage of the more open European borders to press their claims.

As European governments and the European Union (EU) struggled to respond to the refugee flow, Turkey found itself in a strong bargaining position. The European Union needed Turkey and Erdoğan was ready to seize the opportunity. The 15 October 2015 EU summit on migration focused not on how to relocate refugees within the EU, but on Turkey. Nearly four-fifths of the 615,000 people arriving in Europe by sea had come via Turkey (a figure that at the time of this writing is edging toward 900,000.) German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had opposed Turkey's EU membership bid in 2005 and blocked new accession talks in 2013 because of human rights concerns, flew to Ankara to talk with the Turkish authorities. She was now open to discussions on ending visa requirements for Turks seeking to travel to Europe and the EU was ready to increase aid to support refugees in Turkey – both of which were long-standing Turkish demands. Turkey was now in a strong position and agreement was quickly reached that a substantial aid package would be put together (although discussions continue on the specific amounts. In spite of Western

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<sup>17</sup> Oytun Orham and Sabiha Senyucel Gundogar, 'Effects of the Syrian Refugees on Turkey', *Orsam*, January 2015. Available at [http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/201518\\_rapor195ing.pdf](http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/201518_rapor195ing.pdf) (accessed 25 February 2016). Note that this figure seems to have increased to 60,000. Ömür Budak, 'Global migrant crisis requires global effort', *The Boston Globe*, 14 November 2015. Available at <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/11/14/global-migrant-crisis-requires-global-effort/S4DVxSUM4NNJ9vWLhKVrpJ/story.html?event=event25> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Kirisci and Ferris, 'Not Likely to go Home', p. 5.

concerns about violence in Turkey and the crackdown on human rights, Erdoğan is now in strong position vis-à-vis Europe.<sup>19</sup>

There seems to be an assumption that Turkey can – and should – control or stop the flow of refugees through its territory to Europe. If Turkey uses the additional resources to improve the living conditions of Syrian refugees within its borders and allows them access to employment, this might lead some Syrians to decide to remain in Turkey. But if the expectation is that the Turkish government will physically deter Syrians from moving on to Greece, then this raises a serious human rights issue. European governments are anxious to have a country to which they can return Syrians, especially those whose claim for asylum have been rejected, without having to send them directly back to Syria. But as Amnesty International has pointed out, Turkey isn't a 'safe country' for everyone and in fact, historically one in four Turkish asylum-seekers has been granted asylum in Europe.<sup>20</sup>

On World Refugee Day 2015, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres referred to Turkey as a great example for other countries in the world. However, the picture has become more complicated since then with growing despair among refugees and growing anti-Syrian sentiment.<sup>21</sup> Turkey is in a strong position to take advantage of European desperation to stem the flow of refugees. But the decisions that Turkey and EU member states take in the coming months will have long-term consequences for refugees, for Turkey–EU relations and indeed for the European Union itself.

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<sup>19</sup> Naina Bajekal, 'Why the EU is Offering Turkey Billions to Deal with Refugees', *Time*, 19 October 2015. Available at <http://time.com/4076484/turkey-eu-billions-dollars-refugee-slow/> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>20</sup> 'Merkel Must Ensure Rights of Refugee Rights Not Cut Out of an EU-Turkey Deal', *Amnesty International*, 17 October 2015. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/turkey-merkel-must-ensure-rights-of-refugees-not-cut-out-of-eu-turkey-deal/> (accessed 25 February 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Omar Ghabra, 'Why Syrian Refugees in Turkey Are Leaving for Europe', *The Nation*, 28 September 2015. Available at <http://www.thenation.com/article/why-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-are-leaving-for-europe/> (accessed 25 February 2016).

## KRG–Turkey Relations from the KRG's Perspective

### Bill Park

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The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was Turkish foreign minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu's first foreign visit following the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) electoral victory on 1 November 2015. In his address at Erbil's Middle East Research Institute (MERI) on 4 November, he commended the role played by the KRG's Peshmerga in the struggle against the Islamic State (IS), insisted that 'Turkey is steadfast in its support for Iraq and the KRG in the fight against terrorism', and reminded his hosts that Turkey's 'military and humanitarian assistance...has started from the very beginning of the crisis'. He also referred to Ankara's determination to further develop the successful economic relationship with Erbil.<sup>1</sup>

Sinirlioğlu's reference to economic cooperation between Erbil and Ankara was a recognition of the importance of oil exports from the KRG's oil fields via a newly built pipeline to Ceyhan on the Turkish coast. The pipeline became active in May 2014, in the face of opposition from both Baghdad and Washington,<sup>2</sup> and towards the end of 2015 oil was flowing at the rate of over 500,000 barrels per day, one seventh of the Iraqi total. The earnings from these sales has enabled Erbil to avert the real possibility of a complete financial crash as a consequence of its continuing budgetary and oil trade disagreements with Baghdad and of large-scale corruption and nepotism. Indeed, in 2014 oil earnings from exports via the Ceyhan pipeline were used as collateral to secure a USD 3 billion loan, much of it from Turkish sources. Unsurprisingly in November 2015 the KRG's minister for natural resources, Ashti Hawrami, noted how 'incredibly supportive' Turkey had been and described the Erbil–Ankara relationship as 'strategic' – which was far from the first time a KRG official had used the term.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Hawrami had himself used the term at an address to a MERI forum back in November 2014, and argued that 'Turkey needs Kurdistan, perhaps at least as much as we need Turkey'. On that occasion, though, he conceded that there were doubters who regarded

<sup>1</sup> 'Speech by H.E. Mr. Feridun Sinirlioğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey at the MERI Forum', *Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 4 November 2015. Available at [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-by-h\\_e\\_-mr\\_-feridun-sinirlio\\_percentC4\\_percent9Flu\\_-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey\\_-at-the-meri-\\_middle-east-research-institute\\_-forum\\_-4-november-2015\\_-erbil.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-by-h_e_-mr_-feridun-sinirlio_percentC4_percent9Flu_-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey_-at-the-meri-_middle-east-research-institute_-forum_-4-november-2015_-erbil.en.mfa) (accessed 22 November 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For more details see Bill Park, 'Turkey-Kurdistan Regional Government relations after the US withdrawal from Iraq: putting the Kurds on the map?', *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army war College*, 2014, pp. 22–33. Available at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1190> (accessed 18 February 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Dmitry Zhdannikov, 'Exclusive: How Kurdistan bypassed Baghdad and sold oil on global markets', *Reuters*, 17 November 2015. Available at <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0T61HH20151117> (accessed 22 November 2015).

Turkey's commitment to the KRG as 'only skin deep'.<sup>4</sup> These doubts relate to non-energy Turkey–KRG relations, and one such doubter is Masrour Barzani, son of the KRG president Massoud Barzani and chief of the KRG's intelligence services. In an interview he gave in July 2015 he observed that in August 2014 'when the Kurds came under attack from [IS] the expectation was that Turkey would play a much bigger role by actively engaging and providing the support that the Kurds needed'. In a reference to Turkey's contribution to the international coalition against IS he expressed the view that 'they should be doing a lot more than they are doing now'.<sup>5</sup> This echoed comments made by president Barzani's influential chief of staff Fuad Hussein soon after the IS threat to the KRG, when he said of Turkey that, notwithstanding the political and economic relationship that had been built up between Erbil and Ankara, 'our security was under threat, but still we did not receive any support from Turkey' – in contrast to the assistance provided by the US, other western states and indeed Iran.<sup>6</sup> Masrour Barzani also criticised Ankara's approach to Kurdish control of the Syrian-Kurdish border, asserting that 'the Turks should be more concerned about having IS on the borders of Turkey. Indeed, Turkish reaction to this should be one of relief that Kurds, as friends of the Turks, are controlling the border rather than IS, which is the enemy of the entire world'.<sup>7</sup>

Kurds, whether in Iraq, Syria or Turkey itself, are not alone in their disappointment with Ankara's relationship with IS, or in their tendency to doubt the sincerity of Ankara's recently intensified rhetoric against IS. For Kurds this matters because they have found themselves in the forefront of the anti-IS struggle. Turkey has long been suspected of at best turning a blind eye to IS and other jihadi group's movement of goods and people across its border with Syria, and these suspicions are far from quelled.<sup>8</sup> Its actions against IS in Syria have been very limited, and in Iraq more or less non-existent, in contrast to many of its NATO allies and neighbours. Although Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has insisted Ankara has no objections to arming Iraq's Peshmerga,<sup>9</sup> and there has been some limited

<sup>4</sup> 'Baghdad-KRG Relations, between Interdependence and Independence: Part 3: Intervention of Ashty Hawrami (Minister NR, KRG)', *Middle East Research Institute*, 20 November 2014. Available at <http://www.meri-k.org/multimedia/meri-forum-2014-s8-baghdad-krp-relations-part-3/> (accessed 22 November 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Amberin Zaman, 'Masrour Barzani: Kurdish Independence Would Help Defeat IS', *Al Monitor*, 2 July 2015. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-iraq-syria-kurdish-independence-help-war-against-isis.html> (accessed 22 November 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Hevidar Ahmed, 'Senior Kurdistan Official: IS Was at Erbil's Gates, Turkey Did Not Help', *Rudaw*, 16 September 2014. Available at <http://rudaw.net/english/interview/16092014> (accessed 22 November 2014). Dorian Jones, 'Islamic state tests Turkey-Iraqi Kurd ties', *Voice of America News*, 12 September 2014. Available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/islamic-state-tests-turkey-iraqi-kurd-tie/2447851.html> (accessed 22 November 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Zaman, 'Masrour Barzani: Kurdish Independence Would Help Defeat IS'.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent report along these lines, see Nafeez Ahmed, 'NATO is harbouring the Islamic state', *Insurge Intelligence*, 19 November 2015. Available at <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/europe-is-harbouring-the-islamic-state-s-backers-d24db3a24a40#.4674kgigiu> (accessed 23 November 2015). For a useful compilation of allegations, suspicions and evidence, see David. L Phillips 'Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey Links', *Huffington Post*, 9 November 2014. Available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke\\_b\\_6128950.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html) (accessed 7 February 2015).

<sup>9</sup> 'Davutoğlu: Turkey supports US arming Peshmerga, not PKK', *Rudaw*, 10 November 2015. Available at <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/10112015> (accessed 23 November 2015).

Turkish training of Peshmerga forces and supplies of non-lethal equipment, Ankara has taken the backseat in the training and arming of the KRG's forces. Thus the Kurdistan Training Coordination Center (KTCC) that was set up at the beginning of 2015 and which forms part of the Operation Inherent Resolve multinational coalition, currently features Italian, British, Dutch, German, Norwegian and Finnish as well as US trainers.<sup>10</sup> Some of those countries, as well as others such as Australia and the Czech Republic, have also been at the forefront of western arming of the Peshmerga.<sup>11</sup>

The KRG leadership has also been compromised by the reignition of Ankara's war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and its hostility to Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD). The summer 2015 resumption of Turkish bombing raids against PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, which has resulted in the deaths of a number of Iraq Kurdish civilians and prompted widespread Kurdish outrage, led president Barzani to issue a statement saying, 'we condemn this bombardment that led to the martyrdom of people from the Kurdistan Region and call on Turkey not to bombard civilians again'. As Turkey's former consul general to the KRG, Aydın Selcen expressed it, 'an anti-PKK campaign will never enjoy popular support among the KRG public'.<sup>12</sup> Although Turkey subsequently aligned itself more explicitly with the anti-IS coalition, not least by allowing US bombers and armed drones to attack IS targets from Turkey's Incirlik airbase,<sup>13</sup> but also by rounding up suspected IS sympathisers in Turkey, the onslaught against the PKK in south eastern Turkey and inside KRG territory has been far more ferocious, and has involved numerous bombing raids, brutal curfews, and detentions of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) officials.

Ankara's hostility towards the PYD has not softened neither, despite US reliance on and support for the PYD's efforts against IS in Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had earlier offered an insight into Ankara's thinking with his comment that 'for us, the PKK is the same as ISIL. It is wrong to consider them as different from each other'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Maj. Antonio Bernardo, 'Multiple coalition countries training Iraqi forces', *CJTF-OIR Public Affairs, United States Central Command*. Available at <http://www.centcom.mil/en/news/articles/multiple-coalition-countries-training-iraqi-forces> (accessed 23 November 2015).

<sup>11</sup> 'Arming Iraq's Kurds: fighting IS, inviting conflict', *International Crisis Group: Middle East Report 158*, 12 May 2015. Available at [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle percent20East percent20North percent20Africa/Iraq percent20Syria percent20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf) (accessed 8 April 2016). For some dissenting view to this report's conclusion that the KDP has disproportionately benefitted from these equipment programmes at the expense of the PUK, see 'Have the Kurdish militias battling IS lost their way?', *Radio Free Europe*, 15 May 2015. Available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kurdish-militias-icg-report/27018967.html> (accessed 23 November 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Amberin Zaman, 'The Iraqi Kurds' waning love affair with Turkey', 1 September 2015, *Al Monitor*. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/turkey-iraq-kurdistan-krp-pkk-love-affair-over.html> (accessed 22 November 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Aaron Stein, 'The Incirlik expansion and the US-Turkish strategy to fight ISIS', *Atlantic Council*, 8 October 2015. Available at [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-incirlik-expansion-and-the-us-turkish-strategy-to-fight-isis?utm\\_content=bufferd61d6&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer#.Vhdk1P-Enzs.twitter](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-incirlik-expansion-and-the-us-turkish-strategy-to-fight-isis?utm_content=bufferd61d6&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer#.Vhdk1P-Enzs.twitter) (accessed 26 October 2015).

<sup>14</sup> 'PKK, ISIL are the same, says Erdoğan', *Today's Zaman*, 4 October 2014. Available at [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_pkk-isil-are-the-same-says-Erdogan\\_360766.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_pkk-isil-are-the-same-says-Erdogan_360766.html) (accessed 5 March 2015).

He also asserted that the PKK and the PYD are one and the same organisation, and on that basis opposed Washington's air drops to the PYD, fearing the arms might fall into the PKK's hands. Washington was obliged to air drop military supplies to the PYD defenders of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanî, which was besieged by IS forces, while the Turkish military looked on and Erdoğan loudly criticised Washington's action.<sup>15</sup> Turkey sought to prevent Turkish Kurds from crossing the border to join in the defence of Kobanî (and has been reluctant to allow the bodies of Turkish Kurds killed fighting IS in Syria to be repatriated) although it did eventually agree to allow, under US pressure,<sup>16</sup> a small Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga force to transit Turkish territory and help lift the IS siege – a move apparently fiercely resisted by the Turkish military.<sup>17</sup> Kobanî eventually fell to the PYD in early 2015. When in June 2015 Syrian Kurdish forces captured – with US help – the border town of Tal Abyad, Erdoğan chose to express his concern about the possible 'creation of a structure that threatens our borders',<sup>18</sup> a concern he had not expressed during the over a year that the town had been under IS control.

Of course, Barzani has also long been irritated by the PKK's presence in northern Iraq,<sup>19</sup> and to some extent his support for Turkey's peace process with the PKK has stemmed from his desire to rid his territory of PKK fighters and of the attention they attracted, from Turkey and Iran. Indeed in November 2013 Barzani and Erdoğan even shared a platform in Turkey's overwhelmingly Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, where Barzani expressed his support for Turkey's Kurdish peace process and acclaimed the brotherhood between Turks and Kurds.<sup>20</sup> Yet today the Turkish government does not appear at all ready to resume peace talks with the PKK. Barzani also wants to present himself as the true symbol of Kurdish nationalism, and this consideration, combined with pressure from Ankara, has meant that his approach to the PYD in particular has overlapped with that of Turkey. Barzani's unease with the possible emergence of the PKK/PYD intensified in light of the widespread sympathy for the PYD's spirited defence of Kobanî and against IS in Syria generally, and the role played by PKK and PYD fighters in Sinjar and Makhmur in Iraqi Kurdistan in the wake of their desertion by Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga in the face of an IS attack. More recently it again surfaced in the run-up to the liberation of Sinjar, which was

<sup>15</sup> 'Erdoğan: I don't understand why Kobanî is so strategic for the US', *Today's Zaman*, 22 October 2015. Available at [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_Erdoğan-i-dont-understand-why-Kobanî-is-so-strategic-for-us\\_362331.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_Erdoğan-i-dont-understand-why-Kobanî-is-so-strategic-for-us_362331.html) (accessed 6 March 2015).

<sup>16</sup> According to PYD head Salih Muslim, among others. Author interview, 23 March 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Semih Idiz, 'Turkish military angered by Ankara's Peshmerga move', *Al Monitor*, 31 October 2014. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-Peshmerga-move-pkk-Kobanî-syria.html> (accessed 23 November 2015).

<sup>18</sup> 'Turkish President says troubled by Kurdish advance in Syrian Kurdistan', *Ekuord Daily*, 14 June 2015. Available at <http://ekurd.net/turkish-president-says-troubled-by-kurdish-advance-in-syrian-kurdistan-2015-06-14> (accessed 16 June 2015).

<sup>19</sup> 'Syria's Kurds: A struggle within a struggle', *International Crisis Group Middle East Report* 136, 22 January 2013. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria-lebanon/syria/136-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.aspx> (accessed 8 April 2016).

<sup>20</sup> 'Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani urges support for peace process in Diyarbakır rally with Turkish PM', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 16 November 2013. Available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iraqi-kurdish-leader-barzani-urges-support-for-peace-process-in-diyarbakir-rally-with-turkish-pm.aspx?PageID=238&NID=58028&NewsCatID=338> (accessed 20 June 2015).

delayed by differences over the role the PKK/PYD might play.<sup>21</sup> The PYD had resisted Barzani's attempts to subordinate it to the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of Syrian Kurdish groups that was formed in 2011 under Barzani's sponsorship,<sup>22</sup> although in 2014 it did enter a power-sharing arrangement with Barzani-sponsored Kurdish groups.<sup>23</sup> Erbil initially offered no assistance to PYD forces, and even sought to obstruct them from using KRG territory. Indeed, the KRG, like Turkey, closed its border with Syria even as the PYD was battling jihadi elements.<sup>24</sup>

Iraqi Kurds are surely as capable as Turkish and Syrian Kurds in comparing Ankara's response to threats to – and its military training of – Syria's Turkmen, with its indifference towards the fate of the inhabitants of Kobani. In response to reported Russian bombing of Turkmen villages, Ankara not only summoned the Russian ambassador but also raised the issue to the UN.<sup>25</sup> Within a couple of days Turkey shot down a Russian air force jet, ostensibly because it intruded Turkish air space. This was immediately followed by an intensification of Russian bombardment of Syrian Turkmen fighters right up against the Turkish border. Kurds might recall the way in which Turkey once sought to similarly manipulate the Turkmen issue in the Kurdish-controlled area of Iraq as a means of weakening Kurdish claims.<sup>26</sup>

KRG leaders, both of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) but even more so of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), have always appreciated their land-locked vulnerability to the policies of their neighbours, and the dangers of putting all their eggs in one basket. However, when Turkey emerged as the KRG's chief economic partner, and to some extent alternative to Baghdad, Erbil had little choice or hesitation in embracing the relationship.

<sup>21</sup> Mahmut Bozarslan, 'Kurdish infighting complicates Sinjar offensive', *Al Monitor*, 12 November 2015. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/turkey-iraq-krq-sinjar-pkk-yazidis-town-kurds-cannot-share.html> (accessed 25 November 2015). Denise Natali, 'Lessons from the liberation of Sinjar', *War on the Rocks*, 25 November 2015. Available at <http://warontherocks.com/2015/11/lessons-from-the-liberation-of-sinjar/> (accessed 25 November 2015).

<sup>22</sup> 'The Kurdish National Council in Syria', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 15 February 2012. Available at [www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502](http://www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502) (accessed 25 January 2013).

<sup>23</sup> 'Syrian Kurds sign power-sharing deal to draw more support', *Ekuord Daily*, 23 October 2014. Available at <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/syriakurd1576.htm> (accessed 24 June 2015). 'TEV-DEM council member speaks about Duhok agreement', *Ekuord Daily*, 26 October 2014. Available at <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/syriakurd1599.htm> (accessed 24 June 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Fehim Tastekin, 'KRG trench divides Syrian, Iraqi Kurds', *Al Monitor*, 21 April 2014. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/contents/authors/fehim-tastekin.html?b=65> (accessed 24 June 2015). Wladimir van Wildenburg, 'Border arrests reveal disunity, conflict among Syrian Kurds', *Al Monitor*, 21 May 2013. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/pyd-arrests-syrian-kurds.html> (accessed 5 June 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Serkan Demirtas, 'Turkey urges UN to act to protect Turkmens in Syria', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 23 November 2015. Available at <http://www.hurriyetcdailynews.com/turkey-urges-un-to-act-to-protect-turkmens-in-syria.aspx?pageID=238&nID=91539&NewsCatID=352> (accessed 23 November 2015).

<sup>26</sup> See Bill Park, 'Turkey's policy towards northern Iraq: problems and perspectives', *Adelphi Papers 374*, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 2005, pp. 36–38. For Turkey's current relationship with Syria's Turkmen, see Sam Heller and S.G. Grimaldi, 'A cause for all Turks: Turkey and Syria's Turkmen rebels', *War on the Rocks*, 21 January 2016. Available at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/01/a-cause-for-all-turks-turkey-and-syrias-turkmen-rebels/> (accessed 23 January 2016).

Although Turkey always made clear its support for Iraq's territorial integrity and its continued commitment to Baghdad – as again evidenced by foreign minister Sinirlioğlu's phrasing in November 2015 – Ankara also appeared to be positioning itself against the prospect of a meltdown of the Iraqi state. In any case, Erbil and Ankara developed a mutually beneficial energy relationship which has survived the recent shocks. Furthermore, the widespread corruption that characterises the KRG is especially rife in the energy industry, reportedly benefits KDP more than PUK figures – thus adding to tension between them over access to power and arms<sup>27</sup> – and is widely believed to involve the presidents of both the KRG and Turkey and their families. To some extent, the Erbil–Ankara relationship is personalised, and is a relationship between Ankara and the KDP specifically rather than the wider KRG leadership. The PUK has always been closer than to KDP to Tehran and Baghdad, and more skeptical about Turkey – perhaps in part because it has been relatively excluded from the spoils.<sup>28</sup>

However, Barzani and others in the KRG leadership remain keen to preserve the advantageous relationship with Ankara and to maintain the KRG's and their own economic well-being; they need Turkey. There can be little doubt that Turkey's failure to come to the KRG's aid, its ambiguous stance towards IS, and the ferocity of its opposition to both the PKK and the PYD, has surely been a chastening experience for Erbil. In addition to worsening relationships between its Turkish ally and its fellow Kurds, Erbil may in the future also have to contend with greater Iranian influence in Iraq and even within the KRG, and with a powerful Shi'a militia presence. It already looks likely that, when and if IS is ever degraded, and possibly even before that, the KRG's territorial claims and its determination to maximise its autonomy will have to be defended against Shi'a challenges, perhaps backed by Tehran. These tensions have recently manifested themselves in Peshmerga–Shi'a militia fire fights around Tuz Kharmato<sup>29</sup> and tensions in Kirkuk.<sup>30</sup> Erbil has surely now concluded that Ankara might limit the risks it is prepared to take on the KRG's behalf, and that for Ankara the relationship is important, but possibly compartmentalised rather than 'strategic'. Regional circumstances and its reservations concerning Ankara have enabled Erbil to cultivate a wider network of allies, including in the West. Erbil might also ponder the mercurial manner in which Turkey – or President Erdoğan – shifted from being the KRG's sworn enemy to its seemingly most ardent suitor. Assad has been subjected to a similar experience. Turkey can seem both unpredictable and ill-advised in its behaviour, and Erbil has surely taken note.

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<sup>27</sup> Kawa Hassan, 'Kurdistan's politicised society confronts a Sultanistic system', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 18 August 2015. Available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/08/17/kurdistan-s-politicized-society-confronts-sultanistic-system/ieta> (accessed 23 November 2015).

<sup>28</sup> 'A PUK leader warns against Turkish 'trap'', *E Kurd Daily*, 4 January 2013. Available at <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/1/state6768.htm> (accessed 25 November 2015). Denise Natali, 'Is Iraqi Kurdistan splitting apart – again?' *Al Monitor*, 25 September 2015. Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/iraq-kurdistan-region-splitting-apart.html> (accessed 25 November 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Joel Wing, 'Interview with US Naval Academy Prof Wayne Hsieh on Tuz Kharmato', *Musings On Iraq*, 23 November 2015. Available at <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.co.uk/> (accessed 24 November 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Martin Chulov, 'Kurds and Shias face off over Kirkuk in vacuum left by Iraqi army', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2016. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/22/kurds-and-Shias-face-off-over-kirkuk-in-vacuum-left-by-iraqi-army> (accessed 18 February 2016).

## Turkey's Relations with Iraq and the KRG

### Aydın Selcen

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Although we can't speak of a federal region before 2003, even as early as 1992, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had taken over the border between Turkey and Iraq and so the issue was well known to Turkey. Initial contact was made by the Special Forces and the army – and naturally by the intelligence service. Foreign Ministry officials were flown in and out by Turkish army helicopters to meet with KDP and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leadership.

As Habur fell under the fairly efficient control of the KDP, regional trade began. The Oil For Food programme helped strengthen that flow. The foundation of the post-2003 decade can be noted much earlier, just without the institutions that later surrounded it. Even today's outlawed from Turkey Gülen Movement had got themselves established at that time.

In the mid-nineties, the Turkish army increased its presence inside Iraqi Kurdistan to 60,000 men. This was intended to prevent the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from gaining foothold either in the mountainous areas or the cities.

At the time when Prime Minister Erdoğan paid a visit to Baghdad and announced the decision of the government to open a consulate in Erbil, Turkey had already opened consulates in Basra and Mosul – in addition of course to the Embassy in Baghdad. Turkish officials even cajoled large Istanbul-based businesses – such as construction and energy companies – to consider coming to Kurdistan.

That was the uncharted draft of future diplomacy – later on to be affectionately rebaptised as the 'mutual economic dependence' model. In many cases, construction contracts and the export of manufactured or non-manufactured products would be statistically termed 'investment'.

Politically speaking, something new was unfolding. Turkey, considered the sworn enemy of the Kurds in many quarters, made a quick comeback owing to its geographic proximity to – and economic complementarity with – the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Turkish Airlines started flying to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, three regular and three 'Islamic' banks opened branches, a Trade Attaché was assigned to the Consulate, Turkey began distributing long-term multiple entry visas free of charge, and real investment began to take place.

In the following months Trade, Finance, National Education, Foreign, Development ministers all visited Erbil, and MPs attended KDP and PUK party congresses, while governors from various provinces led business delegations to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Then there was the first ever visit of a Turkish prime minister to Erbil. Erbil's streets were for once decorated with Turkish flags, and the finance delivered half his public speech in Kurdish.

But difficulties arose. While officials in Ankara were allowed to use the term 'KRG', the word 'Kurdistan' remained problematic. The now warm relations between Ankara and Erbil did not acquire an institutional outlook. Ankara shied away from recognising the federal region's legal status. When once prodded towards that direction, then finance minister Davutoğlu questioned the value of such recognition.

Ankara also played to the faultline, attempting to divide the KDP north from the PUK/Gorran south. In time, the KDP acquired more than a *primus inter pares* status, not only causing frustration among other political parties but causing people to question Ankara's intentions.

When trucks loaded with oil began crossing borders from the KRG to Turkey, opportunities were unlocked in Ankara. In hindsight we can suggest that the oil business became for like-minded communities in Erbil and in Ankara the most valuable lobbying asset for a rapprochement. However the apogee of that development was the building of Iraqi Kurdistan's pipeline to Turkey – as well as the Turkish Energy Company's partnership with Exxon. This oil was sourced not only in oil fields in Kurdistan 'proper', but also in so-called 'disputed' territories. Yesterday's red line became the throbbing heart of cooperation and integration.

In June 2014, the Islamic State (IS) attacked Mosul and the Iraqi army left Kirkuk. In one day, the Kurds took over the remaining fields of Kirkuk, and a one-hundred-year old dream was realised. Although Ankara didn't step in support of the Kurds, the IS attack on Mosul turned out to be godsent for the KRG.

Events took a different turn, however, when IS attacked Erbil. Initially it seriously strained Turkey–KRG relations as the former was seen as being late rushing to the rescue of the latter, and the quality of that rescue was not initially up to the latter's expectations. In time, Turkey's response improved, with wounded Peshmergas being transported to Turkey, ammunition and light weaponry beginning to be brought down through the Habur border gate, and some financial support finding its way to Erbil. The flow of oil continued uninterrupted.

In November 2014, Prime Minister Davutoğlu was pictured visiting a military camp near Erbil where a Turkish Army unit trained the Peshmerga, showing the restoration of better relations.

At present, Turkey maintains an armoured battalion at Bamerne, elements of that tank battalion at Amadiya and Suri, and a commando battalion at Kanimasi, together with 130 special forces based in Erbil, Selahaddin, Zakho, Duhok, Batufa, Sulaymaniyah and Amadiya as liaison teams. With the latest reinforcement in Bashiqa, the number of uniformed Turkish personnel consists of around 3,000 members.

The priority of the Turkish Armed Forces has been to prevent the PKK armed elements from crossing into Turkey from their bases in the mountainous triangular area in the north-eastern corner of Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus the army did not quite play along with the KRG, and why the news of Turkish army officers training Peshmerga is more political news than military.

Elsewhere Peshmerga received training from the Turkish army in Duhok, Erbil and Diyala too. In Bashiqa, 20km north of Mosul, around 80 Turkish Special Forces personnel have trained mostly Sunni Arabs but also some Turkmen and Peshmerga units for over a year.

At present, a 400-strong commando detachment supported by 25 M-60 A3 tanks brought the number of Turkish military personnel at that camp up to about 600. Not sufficient for offensive action perhaps, yet proof enough that Turkey unilaterally acted to turn the temporary training camp in Bashiqa into a permanent military base.

Looking at the so-called 'peace process' in Turkey, relations between the KDP and the PKK have always been strained. At the same time, ever since the internecine civil war among the KDP and PUK called '*brakuji*', there has been a strong will on the KDP side to avoid fighting against its own brethren. Indeed, during the liberation of Shengal, KDP Peshmerga avoided clashing with HPG forces even though they were far superior in numbers.

To conclude, Turkey's recurrent rhetoric of constantly underlining the ultimate importance of Iraq's territorial integrity and national unity appears increasingly detached from its actions on the ground. Recent action taken to reinforce the Bashiqa military base stands as a testimony to that. Ankara seems to be more and more willing to forsake the usual proforma niceties – such as going through Baghdad in order to deal with Erbil.

Today, the KRG is going through what is probably the worst financial crisis of its short history. Among its other friends, the KRG is most needful of Turkey's help in order to navigate these dire straits, and Ankara does whatever it can.

Around half of the 30–40 million of the Kurdish population are Turkish citizens. Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region are like Siamese twins, bound not by the hip but by their geographic location, ethnic affinities and economic complementarity.

## Turkey's Rojava Policy?

### Güney Yıldız

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What is Turkey's Rojava policy? The short answer, in my opinion, is that it doesn't have one – in the sense that in order to have a policy towards a political entity, you have to first accept its existence. Refusing to deal with Rojava administrations which control a significant amount of Syria's border with Turkey is not a policy. Rojava ('West' in Kurdish and used to denote Western Kurdistan) in Turkey's eyes shouldn't exist. This paper gives a brief account of the attitudes of regional and global forces towards the Syrian Kurds, of how Rojava came into being, how it has interacted with Turkey, and how it has influenced Turkey's Kurdish politics. It concludes by discussing a few options Turkey now has in the region.

Turkey, objectively, is in a very advantageous position with regards to influence in Rojava. However, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has been so sensitive to threats from that region that it has failed to perceive the opportunities lying alongside them.

In contrast to Turkey, the United States has a healthy relationship with Rojava. US military officials compete with each other in praising the People's Protection Units (YPG), the predominantly Kurdish armed forces of the region. They also cooperate at a high level with the group against the Islamic State (IS). Russia also has a relatively positive Rojava policy, with Russian officials being the first to extend support for the Kurds as part of the Geneva meetings, and with Putin even praising the YPG in his UN speech. Assad has a very clever Rojava policy, encouraging Kurds not to be part of a foreign-supported anti-Assad alliance. Iran also has a Rojava policy, a policy it implements mostly via its relations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the main force in Rojava, facilitating the group's war with Turkey in order to curb its ambitions in Syria. Even the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is a far smaller actor, has a more sensible Rojava policy than Turkey. The KDP attempts to negotiate with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the main political force and PKK ally in Rojava. On several occasions the KDP demanded concrete concessions from Rojava administrations in exchange for political, financial and military support from the KDP. Demands such as the one asking for control of the oil-rich Jizira area in north-eastern Syria may have been too much, but it was at least an attempt at negotiation.

What is it that the Turkish government demands from Rojava? Right from the start of the militarisation of the Syrian uprising, Turkey's demands have been for the PYD to join the Free Syrian Army and its political organisations, which offered no more political rights to Kurds than the Assad government did. So the Turkish position has been that the Rojava administration should cease to exist.

Contrastingly, the Turkish government sees a partner in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraqi Kurdistan. It also increasingly regards the KDP as its best instrument against PKK-linked Kurds in Syria. Officially, the only possible solution in the mind of the Turkish government in regards to Turkey's Syrian Kurdish problem is to have the Iraqi Kurdish KDP's sister organisations gain more power in Syria – as well as in Turkey – in order to balance the power of the PKK.

Turkey's ambiguous attitude towards Rojava is also the main reason for its ambiguous relationship with Islamist groups in Syria, as Turkish officials see the rising Islamist groups in northern Syria as powers to balance the Kurds.

Kurds made up of 10 percent of the Syrian population before the civil war, but they only became a significant political force after the beginning of the uprising in 2011.

There had been Kurdish opposition parties in Syria since 1957, when the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) was founded. That was six years before the Syrian Ba'ath coup. But KDPS failed to present powerful opposition to the Ba'ath regime. It is affiliated to Iraqi KDP – and as these opposition parties allied, so did the regimes, with the Syrian regime providing troops in Iraq's fight against the Kurds while repressing its own Kurds.

The PKK, on the other hand, has been one of the strongest Kurdish political groups in Syria since the early 1980s. The besieged town of Kobanî on the Turkish border was the first place Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, took shelter when he fled Turkey in anticipation of the military coup of 1979.

However, the PKK didn't organise Kurds against the Assad regime, since its primary target was Turkey. During the following decades, thousands of Syrian Kurds joined the PKK to fight against the Turkish army. Many of those Syrian Kurds rose to become top military and political leaders within the PKK. Two consecutive heads of the PKK's armed wing were Syrian Kurds and the commander who accompanied the PYD co-leader, Asya Abdullah, when she met President Hollande was a former PKK commander.

The year 1998 saw the first serious attempt by the PKK to organise Kurds against the Syrian regime – that same year Abdullah Öcalan was forced out of Syria, suggesting to his comrades that they should form an organisation backed by the PKK against Hafez al Assad. An organisation was quickly set up by people under his influence and that of the PKK, including Salih Muslim, the co-leader of the main Syrian Kurdish party. Syrian intelligence was skilful in infiltrating the organisation, killing some leading members and eventually destroying it.

A second attempt was made in 2003, this time under the name of the PYD and in the Qandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, in the area under the control of the PKK. At this time, still eight years ahead of the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian regime's attempts were less successful at degrading the organisation. In March 2004, a major Kurdish uprising took place in Qamishli following a probable government-organised provocation at a football match.

These were the years when Turkish and Syrian governments became closer and started cooperating against Kurds. The PYD-led Kurdish opposition continued underground mobilisation in Syria.

This status quo began to change dramatically after March 2011, with the arrival of the so-called Arab Spring to Syria. The PYD was more efficient in organising itself than most other Syrian movements, let alone other Kurdish parties like KDPS, the Kurdish Union Party (Yekiti) and the Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi). Other Kurdish parties were too late to start organising themselves when the PYD took control of most Kurdish areas and established self-governing bodies in the form of non-contiguous cantons in Efrin, Kobanî and Jizira across northern Syria.

Because the Kurdish areas in Syria were at a distance from the centres of regime power, they were spared the brunt of regime attacks as the army withdrew to concentrate on other regions. Even now, Kurdish-held areas are separated from the regime-held areas by a large strip of land controlled by IS and others. The Syrian regime has correctly calculated that a Kurdish presence on the Turkish border would complicate Turkey's efforts against forces loyal to President Assad.

The Turkish government initially assumed that it did need to accept Rojava because the Syrian civil war would end within a couple of months with the toppling of Assad. In his place, friendly forces would keep Kurds under control. But this did not turn out to be the case.

Turkey was alarmed by Kurdish attempts to gain foothold in Syria. In 2012, then Prime Minister Erdoğan stated that Turkey would not allow a terrorist entity on its borders, which was not a reference to Al Nusra Front or other similar organisations, but to the Kurds. Erdoğan described the establishment of a Kurdish entity as Turkey's red line. The PKK's then executive leader Murat Karayılan threatened to spread the war across Turkey if there was a Turkish intervention in Syria. The conflict between Turkey and the PKK reached its peak in 2012, with the PKK taking more risks in military terms for the sake of Rojava than they took for developments in Turkey. Turkey's red line and policy of denial towards Rojava hasn't changed since then.

Fortunately, the intense fighting in 2012 was enough to persuade people on both sides that there would be no military solution to the Kurdish question given the capabilities of both sides. So Turkey and the PKK entered into another round of peace talks, allowing the PKK to concentrate its efforts in Syria, forming and joining the armed units of the Kurdish forces in Syria.

Peace talks in Turkey ensured a *de facto* mutual ceasefire within Turkish borders. But for the PKK, the fighting never ceased. PKK-linked Kurds in Syria first had to face attacks from Free Syrian Army groups, then from al Nusra Front, and later IS. During this period, Kurds frequently accused Turkey of supporting Islamist groups against the Kurds.

It was a plausible prediction at that time that the Islamist onslaught against PKK-linked Kurds in Syria would weaken the Kurds and provide better conditions for Turkey in its negotiations with the PKK. This was not however the case. Attacks by al Nusra and later by IS made the Kurds more powerful and provided them with legitimacy in the eyes of western governments.

This legitimisation started in Sinjar. When hundreds of thousands of Yazidis came under attack by IS, the PKK and their Syrian allies the YPG played a significant role in fighting them back. This was probably the first open contact between the PKK and the US military. The process of Kurdish aligning with the West peaked when the US first airdropped weapons in Kobani. The YPG went on to take more areas from the Islamic State than any other force in Iraq or Syria.

Moreover, the Turkish government's failure to embrace the Kurds in Syria and to adopt a harsh rhetoric against the Rojava Kurds resulted in the ruling AKP losing Kurdish votes, and caused riots like those of 6-8 October 2014. These had the effect of breaking the trust built on the side of the Turkish government towards the PKK.

Despite these setbacks, some inside the AKP, along with Turkish intelligence and the PKK leader Öcalan, attempted to continue the peace process, with the Dolmabahçe Accord, where senior government officials and pro-Kurdish left wing HDP MPs read a public statement by Öcalan, and the joint operation between the Turkish army and the YPG to move the tomb of Ottoman leader Suleiman Shah in northern Syria.

However, the pro-peace figures on both sides ultimately failed to bring about a solution, and the rise of violence in Turkey's Kurdish areas severely curbed Turkey's ambitions in the Middle East.

The AKP failed to take advantage of the opportunity they had between 2013 and early 2015, during the PKK talks, to adopt a positive policy towards Rojava. Turkey geared its Syrian policy towards preventing Kurdish or PKK gains. While western governments invested in Turkey to further their causes in Syria, Turkey invested most of its efforts in making the Kurds lose. Its top priority was first to prevent a Kurdish entity, then to remove the Assad regime and finally to oppose IS. Turkey's inability to accept Rojava came to determine its whole Syria policy and made it fail to align with the western position.

Turkey is still aiming at giving KDP linked Kurds control over some parts of Syria to balance those linked with the PKK. This project failed several times, most recently when the KDP-linked Syrian Kurds failed to gather support for Kurdish rights at the opposition conference in Riyadh.

The KDP and Barzani himself are also facing significant political problems in their own right – there should be concerns that the KDP may not necessarily be a good partner in the fight against the PKK or IS.

Some suggest that because Turkey had been very hostile towards Iraqi Kurds in the past but then managed to change its policies, the same thing could happen with Syrian Kurds. However, Turkey established better relations with Iraqi Kurds long before they established their semi-state precisely because of the PKK, because rivalry between Iraqi Kurds and the PKK gave the Iraqi Kurds some common ground with Turkey. These dynamics indicate the unlikelihood of a rapprochement happening in the Syrian case.

Over the last couple of years, the developments in Syrian Kurdish areas were linked to the developments in Ankara more than the developments in Damascus, Washington, Tehran, Moscow or Raqqa. The question is now whether this will continue – or whether Kurds will find themselves in a new world where their policies are not necessarily centred around Ankara. In order for Ankara to remain relevant, not only does it need to have an implementable policy in Rojava, and towards other individual Kurdish political forces, but the Turkish government needs to have a broader Kurdish policy that goes beyond dealings with individual actors.

## Untangling the AKP's Kurdish Opening and its Middle East Policies

### Cengiz Çandar

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The Kurdish policy of Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has become as controversial as its Middle East policies. Both policies are intertwined, so the task of untangling them and providing a meaningful analysis is challenging.

The controversy surrounding the AKP's Kurdish and Middle East policies centres around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's current president and the first to be elected by popular vote, following a long premiership that lasted over a decade.

When compared to his predecessors, Erdoğan did far more to address Kurdish grievances than any other Turkish leader. He not only acknowledged the Kurdish question in 2005 but, in a speech in Turkey's Kurdish stronghold city of Diyarbakır, he was the first prime minister to ever mention that the 'state did commit wrongdoings' and to apologise on its behalf to Kurdish citizens. He took a big risk by launching secret negotiations in the early 2000s, which led to the announcement at the end of 2012 of a 'peace process' that was to be started with the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, who had been serving a life sentence. This was a big leap, as Öcalan had previously been demonised in the official rhetoric as a 'terrorist', a 'murderer of children' and 'public enemy number one'. Suddenly, Öcalan was transformed into a 'partner' in the resolution of Turkey's decades-long and seemingly intractable Kurdish question. He was transformed from being a part of the problem to being a part of the solution, and moreover, a key character in the solution.

It was Erdoğan who hosted the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq's president Masoud Barzani in party congresses along with other foreign dignitaries and allowed him to speak in Kurdish when addressing the delegates of the AKP in a live-televised event. Barzani was also greeted in Diyarbakır with Kurdish flags besides Turkish ones. The Kurdish leader was able to address the Kurds in the heart of Turkey's overwhelmingly Kurdish southeast in his native language in an open-air meeting. These moves were unprecedented, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could be considered the most audacious Turkish leader in relation to the Kurdish issue.

Yet, for many Kurds, particularly those of Turkey and Syria, he remains the villain who suppressed them – a suppression that is sometimes compared with the brutal overthrow of the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka by the central government just at a time when hopes were highest for a political settlement. Such diametrically opposed and irreconcilable opinions of Erdoğan remain to this day.

The truth necessitates a closer scrutiny of the AKP's Kurdish policy within the framework of its Middle East policy, especially regarding its domestic political imperatives and ideological underpinnings. The AKP's foreign policy has to be assessed in its two very different phases, which are also relevant in terms of its domestic policy.

The first phase runs between 2002 and 2011, and the second from 2011 to the present day. The year 2002 saw the AKP winning the elections with a safe majority, marking the end of Turkey's experience of coalition governments, a period that was considered a 'lost decade' as far as concerned the Kurdish issue. The AKP won 34 per cent of the votes but found itself in a very hostile environment, surrounded by the old Kemalist elite who were extremely opposed to any semblance of Islamism in the political realm, as well as an uneasy military with a tradition of interference in politics waiting in the wings.

The first AKP government was formed by Abdullah Gül in November 2002, as the political ban on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prevented him from becoming a member of parliament. Following the lifting of the ban, Erdoğan became prime minister in March 2003, when he set out on a vigorous course of democratic reforms, aiming for the European Union (EU) membership.

Carrying the banner of integration into the EU was unusual for an allegedly Islamist party; nonetheless, its market-friendly economic policies and reformist attitude gave it the necessary political legitimisation and support from Turkey's western allies, even though they also insulated it from the secularist establishment of the Turkish state. Simultaneously, the US invasion of Iraq created friction and resentment towards the Turkish military, as the latter was concerned about regime change there, fearing it would allow Kurds to gain further political legitimacy, which in the military's eyes would ultimately affect Turkey. Friction with Washington weakened the military's stance, and this in turn benefited the AKP's domestic and foreign policy.

Turkey was eventually able to start accession negotiations at the EU's December 2004 Summit in Brussels. This coincided with Erdoğan's apology for the 'state's wrongdoings' in Diyarbakır, which could be seen as the natural outcome of the AKP's bold initiatives for democratic reform and its attempts to comply with EU criteria.

It is also surprising to note that secret contact with Kurdish insurgents was underway since 2006, and accelerated in 2007, culminating in the publicly declared 'Kurdish opening' of the government. The AKP's moves to tackle the Kurdish question needed the assistance of the KRG (Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government) authorities ruling the northern territories of Iraq, and these contacts were mostly and covertly conducted by Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MİT).

Relations with Iraqi Kurds led to diplomatic representation of Turkey in Erbil and further development of economic and political ties with the KRG government, particularly with its president Massoud Barzani and its prime minister Nechirvan Barzani.

These warmer relations with the KRG provided the only missing link in Turkey's Middle East policy, described by the motto 'zero problems with neighbours' – a characterisation coined by the architect of the AKP's foreign policy and current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

The 'zero problems with neighbours' ideal was meant to be 'pro-status quo', in contrast to Iran's perceived 'revisionism'. As a matter of fact, it helped Turkey's re-entry into the region through the application of 'soft power' via commerce, diplomacy, and politics. 'The Kurdish opening' announced in August 2009 fit well into this idea. However, by the end of 2009, the term was changed to 'Democratic Opening', and shortly afterwards was changed

once again to the 'National Unity and Brotherhood Project', a term emptied of all meaning. Notwithstanding these frequent changes, the process itself generated hope for further reforms with regards to the Kurdish issue and created an atmosphere of an enduring cease-fire. Not only did it bring a cherished normalcy to the lives of Kurdish citizens of Turkey but it also provided the AKP with a stable environment under which it could pursue its reformist economic policies.

This first phase of AKP rule ended in 2011, with the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Since 2011, a very different AKP foreign policy and Kurdish policy slowly began to emerge. The Arab Spring signified the end of the status quo in the MENA region, rendering the 'zero problems with the neighbours' policy irrelevant. When the Muslim Brotherhood moved to power in some countries, the AKP saw this as a historical opportunity to project Turkey as a pivotal regional power. With its Islamist identity, Turkey's ruling party felt on the same page with these new rulers of primarily Sunni Arab states.

When protests reached Syria, the AKP took the initiative to form the Syrian opposition with the Muslim Brotherhood as its backbone. Thus, by actively advocating regime change in a neighbouring country, it departed from republican Turkey's traditional foreign policy.

This prudent foreign policy that had marked decades of republican Turkey was increasingly underpinned by pro-Sunni Islamism. The AKP steered the state towards forming an axis with Qatar and providing support to Salafi-jihadi opposition groups in Syria fighting against an Alawite regime that historically enjoyed the backing of Iran, of Hezbollah – its Shi'a arm in Lebanon, of the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government, and of Russia.

The ambitious seeking of a regime change in Syria marks a 'revisionist' Turkey under Erdoğan and the AKP. The pro-sectarian, Sunni-oriented Syrian policy of an AKP-led Turkey found its Sunni proxies within the wide spectrum of the Syrian opposition – and included among these were Salafi-jihadi groups. Within a larger framework, the posture of Erdoğan and the AKP converged with the Islamic State, which claimed to have erased the Sykes-Picot boundaries of Iraq and Syria drawn by western, 'crusader' powers. The so-called Islamic State presented itself as a useful instrument for Ankara in its anti-Kurdish drive, especially with the emergence of Kurdish self-rule all along Turkey's border with Syria. Unlike the Kurdish entity in Iraq, the one in Syria was under the control of a PKK-affiliate. A continuous Kurdish zone stretching from the eastern intersection of Turkey's borders with Iraqi Kurdistan all the way west, towards the Mediterranean and adjacent to Turkey, became, in the eyes of the Turkish state, an existential challenge.

The 'Rojava Revolution' – so-called by PKK supporters since July 2012 – made clear to Ankara the increasing magnitude of its own Kurdish insurgency. 'Rojava' provided a strategic depth to Turkey's Kurdish struggle against Ankara, and, by presenting the Kurds as the only consistent fighting force against the Islamic State, elevated them to the status of natural and trusted allies of Western countries. 'Rojava' and the increased role of the PKK and its affiliates have become major concerns for Erdoğan.

Despite the fact that Erdoğan did more to address Kurdish grievances than any of his predecessors, the suspicion lingered that his efforts were instrumental in nature, designed more than anything else to serve his political ambitions. Actually dealing with core Kurdish demands had never been Erdoğan's priority – that was not part of his political make-up.

When the usefulness of the peace process had passed, as the elections cycle that started in March 2014 came to its end in November 2015, peace negotiations, as instrumental as they had been for Erdoğan, were terminated by him.

Even with new dynamics in the region, the peace process would now be very difficult to resume. Russia's strategic military move in Syria that began in September 2015 could be seen as a game changer. With such a new dynamic to the Syrian equation, the PKK and its affiliates had the opportunity to ride on a formidable Moscow–Tehran axis, feeling emboldened and acting with much more resilience vis-à-vis Erdoğan's policies. Furthermore, the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey on 24 November 2015 deteriorated Turkish-Russian relations, and the worsening relations between Kurds and the Turkish state would be further exacerbated by stronger Russian support. Despite Erdoğan's tactical flexibility, all these aspects posed significant challenges for him.

Moreover, ever since the collapse of the peace process in summer 2015, the new generation of Kurdish militants entrenched in the cities and towns of Turkey's Kurdish southeastern region posed a qualitatively different challenge to the Turkish state than the PKK did in the rural areas of that same region 20 years ago.

Erdoğan and his AKP are ill-equipped to overcome the much more complex challenges of present times. The Kurdish challenge promises to reveal more about the shortcomings of Erdoğan's Kurdish and regional policies, and even to confirm its ultimate defeat.

The resolution of the Kurdish conflict, or a peace process under Erdoğan and the AKP government, is as remote as ever. Unless a radical shift takes place, there is little hope for the resolution of the Kurdish question in the near future.

## Abbreviations

<b>AFAD</b>	Disaster and Emergency Authority	<i>Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı</i>
<b>AKP</b>	Justice and Development Party	<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>
<b>ANAP</b>	Motherland Party	<i>Anavatan Partisi</i>
<b>AP</b>	Justice Party	<i>Adalet Partisi</i>
<b>BDP</b>	Peace and Democracy Party	<i>Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi</i>
<b>CHP</b>	Republican People's Party	<i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i>
<b>DP</b>	Democrat Party	<i>Demokrat Parti</i>
<b>DYP</b>	True Path Party	<i>Doğru Yol Partisi</i>
<b>EU</b>	European Union	
<b>HDP</b>	Peoples' Democratic Party	<i>Halkın Demokrasi Partisi</i>
<b>KRG</b>	Kurdistan Regional Government	
<b>IHH</b>	Humanitarian Relief Foundation	<i>İnsani Yardım Vakfı</i>
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State	
<b>KCK</b>	Group of Communities in Kurdistan	<i>Koma Civakên Kurdistan</i>
<b>KDP</b>	Kurdistan Democratic Party	
<b>KDPS</b>	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria	
<b>KNC</b>	Kurdish National Council	
<b>KTCC</b>	Kurdistan Training Coordination Center	
<b>MERI</b>	Middle East Research Institute	
<b>MİT</b>	National Intelligence Organisation	<i>Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı</i>
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers' Party	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan</i>
<b>PUK</b>	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	
<b>PYD</b>	Democratic Union Party	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i>
<b>YPG</b>	People's Protection Units	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>

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