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## **Turkey and the Kurds: From Predicament to Opportunity** **Ömer Taşpınar and Gönül Tol**

Ninety years after the foundation of the Turkish Republic, Ankara appears to be on the verge of a paradigmatic change in its approach to the Kurdish question. It is too early to tell whether the current negotiations between Ankara and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) will manage to accommodate Kurdish cultural and political demands. Yet, for perhaps the first time in its history, the Turkish Republic seems willing to incorporate Kurds into the political system rather than militarily confront them. For decades, Turkey sought to assimilate its sizable Kurdish minority, about 15 million people, or around 20 percent of its total population. From the mid-1920s until the end of the Cold War, Ankara denied the ethnic existence of Kurds and their cultural rights. It took a three-decade-long PKK-led insurgency – which started in 1984 and caused a death toll of 40,000 – for the republic to start accepting the “Kurdish reality”

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and introduce cultural reforms.<sup>1</sup> This perhaps explains why the PKK's jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan is a national hero in the eyes of significant segments of Kurdish society.

Of the approximately 30 million Kurds in the Middle East, about half live in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Kurds also constitute a significant minority in neighboring Iraq, Iran and Syria. The Palestinians are often referred to as the most famous case of a “nation without a state” in the Middle East. But the Kurds, who outnumber the Palestinians by a factor of five, are by far the largest ethnic community in the region seeking national self-determination. The future of Turkey - and the Middle East - is therefore intimately linked to the question of Kurdish nationalism.

Over the past ten years, Turkey has come a long way in granting some cultural rights to its Kurdish minority. For instance, the state owned Turkish Radio Television now has a TV channel

<sup>1</sup> For more background on Turkey's traditional Kurdish policy see Henri J. Barkey and Graham F. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict Series, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The Turkish census system does not register ethnic background. It is estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the citizens of Turkey are of Kurdish origin. This amounts to approximately 15 million. According to the CIA world factbook Iran, Iraq and Syria have respectively 8, 6 and 2 million citizens of Kurdish origin. See [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/wfbExt/region\\_mde.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/wfbExt/region_mde.html)

that broadcasts in Kurdish language. It is also now possible to learn Kurdish as an elective language in public schools. But these reforms came too late to satisfy heightened Kurdish expectations. Now, debate about Kurdish cultural rights in Turkey is no longer confined to *teaching* Kurdish as an optional course. Instead, the more contentious issue is *education* in the Kurdish language – i.e. the right to pursue elementary and secondary public education in Kurdish. Education in Kurdish is a polarizing issue because it may put an end to the traditional policy of forcefully assimilating Kurds into Turkish society and pave the road for multiculturalism in Turkey. The debate has also raised the possibility of some form of autonomy for the Kurds, an idea that runs deeply against the unitary nature of the Turkish republic.

The political questions about the fundamental nature of the republic are more likely to be addressed in the absence of violence. Compromise becomes extremely difficult against a backdrop of intermittent violence between Turkey and the PKK. This is why the most recent round of negotiations between the Turkish government and Abdullah Öcalan provides a critical window of opportunity. The challenge for Ankara is to look at the Kurdish question from a political perspective rather than a national security one and to put an end to the assimilation and repression-oriented policies towards the Kurds of the last 90 years. There is room for cautious optimism. In the last few years, Turkey has seemingly embarked on a path of winning over Kurdish hearts and minds rather than confronting them. This trend is particularly evident in Turkey's growing economic, political and diplomatic engagement with Iraqi Kurdistan. At home, in the framework of the ongoing Imralı Process (named after the island prison where Abdullah Öcalan is serving his life sentence), the goal of the Turkish government is to convince PKK fighters to lay down their arms and leave

Turkey.<sup>3</sup> In return, Ankara appears committed to opening more political space for Kurdish rights and freedoms, potentially paving the way for administrative decentralization and even some form of autonomy.

Negotiating with the Kurds is a high-risk and high-reward strategy for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Solving the Kurdish problem at home by finalizing a peace agreement with the PKK will strengthen Ankara's hand in foreign policy, particularly in its relations with Syria and Iraq. In northern Syria, for instance, the PKK-affiliated Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has been fighting Islamist radicals. Until recently, Turkey was reportedly supporting Jihadist groups against the PKK affiliate.<sup>4</sup> Such a short-sighted logic based on an "enemy of my enemy is my friend" approach would no longer prevail if Turkey could effectively co-opt the PKK in the framework of a peace agreement. Similarly, the PKK has traditionally enjoyed safe-havens in the Kandil region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkey now has multiple energy deals with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. Turkey's growing economy and energy needs dictate a stronger partnership with the oil-rich Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet, the PKK's presence in this region has the potential to poison the growing economic and political ties between Ankara and Erbil. Given Turkey's determination to lessen its energy dependence on Iran and Russia, the AKP has a vested interest in not allowing the PKK challenge to become a spoiler in northern Iraq.

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<sup>3</sup> Abdullah Öcalan was captured in 1999, convicted of terrorism and initially sentenced to death. His sentence was subsequently commuted to a life imprisonment as part of reforms introduced to meet the criteria for European Union eventual membership. On the capture and trial of Öcalan see "BBC Special Report: The Öcalan File," Friday, 26 November, 1999,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/280453.stm>

<sup>4</sup> See Semih İdiz <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/turkey-considers-support-for-al-nusra.html> (August 13, 2013)

However, granting political and cultural rights to Kurds could be seen as concessions to the PKK and alienate Turkey's nationalist voters. As a conservative party with strong populist and nationalist tendencies, the AKP can ill afford to lose significant segments of the Turkish electorate while negotiating with the PKK. Balancing Kurdish demands and the concerns of its nationalist Turkish base will be an uphill struggle for the AKP. At the same time, the party needs to manage heightened Kurdish expectations for cultural and political rights, particularly as there is some fear that unfulfilled Kurdish hopes may lead to never before seen levels of violence.

The secularist-Kemalist opposition of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) stand ready to benefit from any failure in the peace process with the PKK. Finally, there are also serious questions as to whether Prime Minister Erdoğan is only engaged in a cosmetic process of dialogue with the PKK in order to advance his own political agenda. It is an open secret that Erdoğan plans to stand in the presidential elections in July 2014; the upcoming local elections in March 2014 will act as a litmus test for him, his platform and party. The results of these local elections are also likely to determine the nature of Erdoğan's relationship with President Abdullah Gül, who likely plans to remain active in Turkish politics either as President for a second term or as the new Prime Minister. Given all these dynamics, Erdoğan may have calculated that he needs peace and stability on the Kurdish front until the local elections. At a time when Erdoğan's international image has been severely damaged and his authoritarian tendencies exposed by the harsh crackdown on the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul during summer 2013, it remains unclear how much he is willing to compromise to meet the demands of the PKK.

There are also risks on the Kurdish front. Disunity among Kurds is a problem with deep historical roots. Ankara wants to pursue good relations with Erbil and KRG President Masoud Barzani.

Barzani is seen as a Kurdish interlocutor with regional influence as well as some leverage over Turkey's own Kurds. But the PKK and Barzani have been at odds before and there are serious questions about the monolithic nature of the PKK. Although Öcalan is powerful, his influence over the different fractions of the PKK (it has branches in Europe, Iraq, Syria and Iran) may not be absolute. The PKK is a large entity with several thousand armed militants, long-established networks in the Middle East and Europe and competing hardline factions. Yet the current process is built on the premise that Öcalan wields total power over the PKK. The disunity of Kurdish groups in the pursuit of a negotiated solution is therefore a potential problem.

Despite these challenges, there is little doubt that the current negotiations present an important opportunity for all parties involved. Factors such as AKP's powerful position in the Turkish parliament, the lack of a strong Turkish military to resist peace efforts, and Ankara's willingness to win over Erbil and the PKK for economic and political reasons create room for optimism. This paper will analyze the viability of a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey, the foreign policy dimension of the problem and how all these dynamics impact U.S.-Turkish relations.

### **The Imralı Process**

The current peace initiative, the aforementioned Imralı Process, is not the first Turkish government effort to negotiate with the PKK. In 2009, Ankara began secret negotiations with the PKK, culminating in what became known as the Oslo Process. During the talks, both the Turkish security forces and the PKK scaled back their offensive operations. However, the initiative ran aground in the run-up to the Turkish general elections in June 2011. This resulted in a re-escalation of violence that increased casualties to a level not seen in more than a decade. By late 2012 it became

obvious to both Ankara and the PKK that no clear winner would emerge from this new round of violence.

Late in December 2012, Erdoğan announced that Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) had been holding talks with Öcalan in an attempt to convince the PKK to lay down arms and withdraw from Turkish soil. Unlike previous peace attempts, which were very secretive, the public has been informed of this round of talks and is somewhat supportive. These negotiations also have the backing of the CHP, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), many civil society organizations and the mainstream Turkish media. In contrast to the previous peace attempts, Öcalan stands at the center of the negotiations with a seemingly softer approach.<sup>5</sup> In meetings with BDP members of parliament, the PKK cadres in Europe and Iraq have also expressed their support for the ongoing talks. Erdoğan also seems intent on pushing the negotiation process forward and has considerable political capital at his disposal as long as the process delivers peace and quiet in the Kurdish southeast.

The broad outlines of the agreement between Öcalan and the MIT include ceasefire declaration by the PKK, the release of Turkish hostages held by the PKK and a withdrawal into Northern Iraq after laying down their arms. In return, the Turkish government is expected to craft legislation to overhaul the definition of terrorism, which would pave the way for the release of hundreds of imprisoned Kurdish activists. As part of settlement talks, the PKK declared a ceasefire in March 2013 and in May began its withdrawal from Turkey toward its camps in northern Iraq. Although no major casualties have been reported since, the political situation remains tense because of

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<sup>5</sup> For a scholarly assessment of Erdoğan's earlier efforts on Kurdish issue, see Çiçek, Demir, "Elimination or Integration of Pro-Kurdish Politics: Limits of the AKP's Democratic Initiative" *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2011), pp. 15-26.

unfulfilled mutual expectations. Progress has been limited but the ceasefire is holding.<sup>6</sup>

Regional dynamics have also made concluding a peace more complicated. The Arab uprisings have fed Kurdish national ambitions in the region. Kurdish nationalists now think that the Kurdish political movement in Iraq, Turkey and Syria is on the verge of a historic breakthrough. Capitalizing on the regional chaos and deteriorating relations between Ankara and the Assad regime in Syria, the PYD took de facto control of parts of northern Syria. It possesses a well-trained militia and a clear political agenda for the future of Syrian Kurds in the form of territorial autonomy at a minimum. This is potentially a development that strengthens maximalist demands among some PKK hardliners in Turkey. Even if the PKK agrees to withdraw from Turkish soil, it may continue to operate in northern Syria. So a deal struck between Ankara and the PKK must address the PYD/PKK presence in Syria, adding further complication to an already arduous process.<sup>7</sup> Despite all these challenges, a sense of optimism prevails in Turkey. Optimists hope the eventual fall of the Assad regime will curtail the PYD's room for maneuver, leaving the organization facing a hostile Damascus and a Turkey-dependent KRG. The prospect of a difficult political terrain in a post-Assad region, the logic goes, might force radical factions within the Kurdish nationalist movement to participate in the ongoing talks between the PKK and Ankara. Those on the cautious side, on the other hand, warn against a descent into an even greater spiral of violence if the talks fail, much like the intensified violence following the failure of the Oslo Process in 2011.<sup>8</sup> No matter

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<sup>6</sup> Albayrak, Aldin, "Terrorist PKK Halts Withdrawal from Turkey, Maintains Cease-Fire," *Today's Zaman*, September 9, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-325823-terrorist-pkk-halts-withdrawal-from-turkey-maintains-cease-fire.html>

<sup>7</sup> Marcus, Aliza "Kurds in the new Middle East" *The National Interest*, August 22, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/kurds-the-new-middle-east-7377>

<sup>8</sup> Akyol, Mustafa, "Turkey Considers New 'Peace Process' With PKK," *Al-Monitor*, January 2013, <http://www.al->

where one stands with regard to the initiative, there seems to be general consensus that the eventual success or failure of the initiative will have major domestic and regional implications.

Domestically, a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue would remove one of the most important stumbling blocks to democratic consolidation in Turkey. It would also boost Prime Minister Erdoğan's image in the run-up to the 2014 presidential elections, sealing his place in history as the leader who ended the country's thirty years of conflict with the PKK. Given the increased level of Kurdish expectations, such a positive outcome will depend on Turkey's chances of becoming a more multicultural and decentralized country with Kurdish rights under legal protection. A critical step in that direction would be ensuring reform of the 1980 military-implemented constitution.

However, the AKP is short of the parliamentary majority required to legislate constitutional amendments and therefore needs to collaborate with opposition parties. Shortly after the 2011 general elections, a Constitutional Reform Commission with equal representation from the AKP, CHP, MHP, and the pro-Kurdish BDP (three parliamentarians from each) was established in September 2011 to draft a new constitution.<sup>9</sup> Since the commission required unanimity for approving changes, achieving full consensus on critical issues like Turkey's ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity proved impossible. Not surprisingly, on the issue of national identity, the MHP and the BDP are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Issues like the AKP's insistence on a presidential system have only exacerbated political dynamics and diminished chances of consensus.

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monitor.com/pulse/iw/contents/articles/originals/2013/01/pkk-peace-turkey.html

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the constitutional reform process in general and as it relates to the Kurdish question see [www.turkeyconstitutionalwatch.org](http://www.turkeyconstitutionalwatch.org).

After the Constitutional Reform Commission failed to produce results, the AKP government decided to pursue its own legislative proposals for democratic reforms, partly in order to address Kurdish demands discussed in the context of the Imralı Process. In September 2013, Erdoğan announced the much awaited "democratization package". The key points of the package stated that Kurdish-language education could be provided in private schools, but not in public schools.<sup>10</sup> (In order for Kurdish-language public schools to open, the provision in the Turkish constitution stating that Turkish is the sole official language in Turkey needs to be changed.) The package would also make it legal for Kurdish and other minority languages to be used in electoral campaigns, for the old names of Kurdish villages in Turkey's southeast to be reinstated and for the legal use of letters such as Q, W, and X, that are used in Kurdish but not in Turkish. Additionally, the morning oath recited by Turkish schoolchildren at the beginning of every school day, which reads "I am a Turk, I am correct, I am hard-working," would be removed.<sup>11</sup>

This "democratization package" failed to meet high Kurdish expectations. Kurdish language education and amendments to the anti-terror law were crucial areas where Kurds had high hopes. The package disappointed most Kurds on both fronts because it did not address public education in Kurdish and did not change laws defining what constitutes terrorist activities. The package also failed to fulfill expectations by not taking concrete steps toward lowering the ten percent threshold needed for a party to be seated in parliament.<sup>12</sup> This issue is critical for the Kurdish

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<sup>10</sup> Schleifer, Yigal, "Ankara's New Democratization Package Gets Mixed Reviews" *Eurasianet*, October 1, 2013 - <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67567>

<sup>11</sup> Aybayrak, Ayla, "Turkey's Long-Awaited "Democracy Package": The Rundown" *Wall Street Journal Europe*, September 30, 2013,

<http://blogs.wsj.com/emerging europe/2013/09/30/turkeys-long-awaited-democracy-package-the-rundown/>

<sup>12</sup> In Turkish national elections, for a political party to qualify for seats in the parliament, it must receive a minimum of 10% of the overall national votes.

question because it stands as an obstacle to the BDP's political representation; in the last elections BDP candidates were obligated to run as independents rather than with their party ticket to gain seats in the Turkish National Assembly. The AKP government failed to satisfy aspirations by declaring that Parliament will merely begin debating the issue. Right now, it is still not clear whether the AKP supports lowering this threshold to five percent.<sup>13</sup> Under such circumstances, disappointment becomes inevitable.<sup>14</sup>

More positively, the government has clearly indicated that it is willing to pursue further legislative efforts towards democratization and that the current proposals should be considered the beginning, not the end, of a long reform process. Given the relative failure in meeting Kurdish demands at home, one can argue that Ankara has a long way to go to successfully co-opt the rising tide of Kurdish aspirations. These difficult political dynamics at home make the foreign policy dimension of Turkey's Kurdish strategy all the more interesting and have a direct impact on Turkish foreign policy with respect to relations with KRG, the Syrian crisis and implications for Turkish-U.S. relations.

### **Turkey's Rapprochement with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)**

In the aftermath of the 1990–91 Gulf War, Ankara shunned direct contact with the KRG, fearing it would strengthen the KRG's drive for

independence and lead to similar demands for greater autonomy and independence on the part of Turkey's own Kurdish community. The Turkish military staunchly opposed formal contact with the KRG and the Turkish General Staff made little differentiation between the PKK and the KRG, an attitude shared by many high ranking officials.<sup>15</sup>

But Turkish policy began to shift in late 2008. In October of that year, Murat Özcelik, at the time Turkey's special envoy to Iraq, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, then Erdoğan's main foreign-policy adviser, met with Barzani in Baghdad. This was the first high-level contact between Turkish officials and Barzani in four years. The visit by Özcelik and Davutoğlu initiated a series of formal contacts with the KRG that has resulted in a significant improvement in relations between Ankara and Erbil, particularly in the energy field. In addition to a growing energy partnership – which remains most critical because of Turkish dependence on Russia and Iran – there is now a multidimensional relationship between Turkey and the KRG at the diplomatic, economic and cultural level. Turkey opened a consulate in Erbil in 2011 and Turkish trade with the region is booming. Barzani's visit in late 2013 to Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeastern province of Diyarbakir is a reflection of the transformation of bilateral ties between Turkey and the KRG. Cultivating closer energy ties with the KRG has become one of the most important components of Turkey's attempts to address the Kurdish problem at home.

In May 2012, Turkey and the KRG cut a deal to build one gas and two oil pipelines directly from Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq to Turkey

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<sup>13</sup>Asalioğlu, Ibrahim, "Government's proposed election systems favor AK Party," *Today's Zaman*, October 13, 2013, [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?sessionId=0E40D80EE4202E478335FDBFE06046D7?newslid=328844](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?sessionId=0E40D80EE4202E478335FDBFE06046D7?newslid=328844)

<sup>14</sup> For more on Turkish fears and Kurdish expectations, see "Crying 'Wolf': Why Turkish Fears Need Not Block Kurdish Reform," *International Crisis Group*, October 7, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/227-crying-wolf-why-turkish-fears-need-not-block-kurdish-reform.aspx>

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<sup>15</sup> During his tenure in office, former Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a staunch Kemalist, refused to officially receive his Iraqi counterpart, Jalal Talabani, one of the key leaders of the Kurds in Iraq. Turkish officials referred disparagingly to KRG President Massoud Barzani as a 'tribal chieftain', suggesting that he was not an acceptable partner for a dialogue with high-ranking Turkish officials. See Gonul Tol, F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey's Kurdish Challenge", *Survival*, August-September 2011, vol. 53, pp. 143-152

without the approval of Baghdad, taking the rapprochement started between the two in 2008 one step further. These Kurdish pipelines will for the first time provide the Kurds direct access to world markets, bypassing the Baghdad-controlled Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline. Ankara and Erbil signed an additional multi-billion energy deal in late 2013 and crude oil from Iraqi Kurdistan began filling the pipeline in late December. However, the active process of exporting this oil is still awaiting Baghdad's consent.<sup>16</sup>

Recently, Turkey established a state-backed firm to explore oil and gas in northern Iraq, and Genel Energy, an Anglo-Turkish exploration and production company, was awarded the right to ship oil directly from the area. Since then, the company has been exporting crude oil by truck from the KRG's Taq Taq fields to Turkey's port in Ceyhan. The amount of oil exported from Taq Taq will now grow significantly with the pipelines as will energy cooperation between the KRG and Turkey. About a dozen Turkish companies have applied to Turkey's energy watchdog to obtain licenses to import gas from and construct oil pipelines in the KRG, and the KRG recently granted six Turkish companies permission to explore for oil. In late 2013, a Turkish company was issued a license to import natural gas directly from the KRG. The Turkish state company BOTAŞ has also started construction of a gas pipeline from the KRG to Turkey's southeastern city of Mardin.<sup>17</sup>

All these dynamics clearly suggest that the KRG's economic future will depend heavily on its relationship with Turkey. Although the KRG is rich in oil and natural gas, it needs to be able to extract and transport it to Western markets. Oil pipelines from northern Iraq to Turkish ports on the Mediterranean provide the most efficient and cost-effective means to get Iraqi

oil to Europe. Factors such as: a potentially nuclear-armed Iran with regional ambitions, the growing power of a Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad, and the waning influence of the United States as it draws down its military forces, only add to the Iraqi Kurdish conviction that their best option is to mend fences with Turkey.

In short, the energy deals foreshadow a major shift in Turkey's KRG policy. Gone are the days when the Kurds of northern Iraq were seen as part of the problem; they are now viewed as part of the solution. There are now clear signs that Turkey would like to empower Kurds in northern Iraq since Ankara greatly benefits from the region's energy source. Barzani's most recent visit to Diyarbakir, is a testament to the growth Turkey has seen in its relations with Iraq's Kurds. In his first official visit to Diyarbakir, Barzani wore traditional Kurdish clothes, gave a speech in Kurdish and met with Turkish Erdoğan who pronounced the word "Kurdistan" in public for the first time.<sup>18</sup> The two have also privately discussed issues such as the peace process between Turkey and the PKK. The visit underlined the new push in the AKP's policy to further deepen relations with the KRG.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to economic benefits, there are clear geopolitical implications in Turkey's rapprochement with the KRG. Through this energy partnership, Turkey has not only secured a low-cost supplier but has also created unprecedented level of cooperation against the PKK through economic interdependence. Not surprisingly, in the last several years, KRG authorities have increasingly come to view PKK attacks against Turkey as an obstacle to rapprochement with Ankara.

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<sup>16</sup> See Reuters "Kurdish oil flow to Turkey begins, exports await Iraqi consent," January 2, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/02/turkey-iraq-idUSL6NOKCOM220140102>

<sup>17</sup> Tol, Gonul, "Has energy-hungry Turkey finally solved 'the Kurdish problem'?" *cnn.com*, November 1, 2013

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<sup>18</sup> Hussein, Ahmed, "Turkish Prime Minister uses word Kurdistan for the first time in history," *Iraqi News*, November 16, 2013, <http://www.iraqinews.com/baghdad-politics/erdogan-salutes-kurds-in-kurdistan-region/#ixzz2piCVfJ7a>

<sup>19</sup> Tol, Gonul, "Turkey's KRG Energy Partnership," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2013,

[http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/29/turkey\\_s\\_krg\\_energy\\_partnership](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/29/turkey_s_krg_energy_partnership)

However, this burgeoning relationship with the KRG is challenged by the civil war in Syria and the emergence of Kurdish-controlled territories along Turkey's border.

### Dealing with Syria's Kurds

Confronting a high-stakes crisis on its southern border, Turkey has pursued a cautious approach toward Syria's uprising. Ankara initially asked President Bashar al-Assad to carry out reforms. However, frustrated with the growing bloodshed, it finally joined the anti-Assad camp in the fall of 2011.<sup>20</sup> Beyond its efforts to shelter refugees and increase international diplomatic pressure on the Syrian regime, Turkey took a proactive role in hosting and providing an organizational hub for the Syrian opposition. In retaliation, Assad granted several concessions to the Kurds and to the PKK in particular. He allowed Saleh Muslim, the head of the PYD who lived for years in Iraq's Kandil Mountains, to return to Syria and permitted the PYD to operate freely in the northern part of the country.

In an attempt to address the challenges posed by the Syrian conflict, Turkey sought to use its leverage over Barzani and the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) to marginalize the PYD within the Syrian opposition and among Syrian Kurds. As part of that strategy, Turkey promoted the Kurdish National Council (KNC), the Syrian Kurdish group sponsored by Barzani, by encouraging it to join the Syrian opposition. Turkey has also turned a blind eye to weapons transfers from its territory to Jabhat al-Nusra, a radical Islamist militant group, hoping to boost the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime and keep the PYD in check.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tol, Gonul, "Ankara Is Trying to Have It Both Ways," *New York Times*, November 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/11/15/why-turkey-turned-away-from-syria/turkey-is-trying-to-have-it-both-ways>

<sup>21</sup> Balci, Bayram, "Turkey's Flirtation with Syrian Jihadism," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 7, 2013, <http://m.ceip.org/beirut/syriaincrisis/?fa=53532&lang=en>

The Syrian civil war, however, has proven that Barzani has little influence over Syrian Kurds. In time, a number of factors have led Turkey to reverse its support for anti-Kurdish radical Islamist groups. These factors include pressure from the United States, the realization that the PYD is too strong to be marginalized, and attempts to co-opt the PYD leader by inviting him to Turkey for talks during the summer of 2013.<sup>22</sup> The shifts and fine-tuning in Turkey's Syria policy reflect Turkey's struggle to deal with a conflict that complicates its efforts to make peace with its Kurds. In an effort to end the troubles posed by an unstable Syria on its doorstep, Turkey has been seeking a swift regime change in Syria. But the sectarian nature of the conflict and the fighting among different segments of the opposition point to the inconvenient truth: Assad's departure will not end the bloodshed, and it will take years before there is a stable, peaceful Syria. Without tackling its own Kurdish problem, Turkey will continue to render itself vulnerable to the vicissitudes of its neighbors' Kurdish politics.

### Effects on Turkey-U.S. Relations

The Kurdish question – and the PKK challenge more specifically – has traditionally been one of the main drivers of anti-Americanism in Turkey. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, this trend has intensified as several opinion polls have consistently revealed that large segments of Turkish society see the United States as a national security threat. In 2008, this ratio was as high as 70 percent and as late as in 2013, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, about 50 percent of Turks have described the U.S. as an enemy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See "PYD leader arrives in Turkey for two-day talks" *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2013

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/55/country/224/response/Enemy/>. See also "Why Turks feel threatened by the United States" in *World Public Opinion*, September 5, 2007

The arrest by U.S. forces of Turkish Special Forces commandos in July 2003 during a raid in Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq further deteriorated security relations between the two NATO allies.<sup>24</sup> Turkey's reliance on U.S. troops to confront the PKK in the Kandil Mountains only heightened the tension. Turkish officials repeatedly relayed to Washington their frustration with the lack of U.S. support in its fight against the PKK.

In late 2007, when the U.S. decided to step up its intelligence and military cooperation with Turkey against the PKK forces in Iraqi Kurdistan, relations began to improve. President George W. Bush's decision in November 2007 to provide U.S. military support, especially actionable intelligence, to help Turkey combat PKK terrorist attacks was a crucial turning point in the relationship. Politically, the decision removed an important irritant in U.S.-Turkish relations and made clear that the United States was committed to backing Turkey's struggle against the PKK, a long-standing Turkish desire. Militarily, it has enabled the Turks to carry out surgical strikes to disrupt PKK lines of communication and hinder its operations.

The improvement in Turkey-KRG relations over the past few years has also a crucial American dimension. Concerned about its security and tension in relations with Iran, Turkey, Syria and Baghdad, it is no secret that the KRG leadership wanted to see permanent American military bases on its territory. During the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, the question of Iraq loomed large in foreign policy debates between Republican candidate John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama. While Obama made it clear that he wanted U.S. troops to leave Iraq as soon as possible, McCain took the opposite position and argued that he could easily see the U.S. stay in Iraq

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<http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/bmiddleeastnafricaga/393.php>

<sup>24</sup> Howard, Michael and Goldenberg, Suzanne, "US arrest of soldiers infuriates Turkey," *The Guardian*, July 7, 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/08/turkey.mic> haelhoward

with permanent military bases in a similar arrangement made with Japan after World War II.<sup>25</sup> Obama's electoral victory and the U.S. decision to leave Iraq left the Kurds in a very difficult position. It became clear that, for their own security and long-term prosperity, they would have to temper their maximalist territorial ambitions and find ways to pragmatically cooperate with Turkey. It is in this context that the KRG also began to cooperate more effectively with Ankara against the PKK. These developments – and particularly the U.S. decision to leave Iraq – strengthened Turkey's hand against Erbil and enabled Ankara to negotiate with Iraqi Kurds from a position of strength. In short, the U.S. elections of 2008 proved to be a turning point for Turkey-KRG relations.

Obama's election and his desire to further improve relations with Turkey led to an increasingly positive climate in Turkish-American relations. Yet, it did not take too long for new problems to emerge. Ankara's willingness to engage rather than isolate Iran coupled with Turkey's deteriorating relations with Israel created serious tension in Turkish-American relations during 2010. But in the eyes of the Turkish leadership, it is the Syrian uprising and U.S. reluctance to get militarily involved that created the most significant rift. On September 5, 2012, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan told CNN's Christiane Amanpour that the United States was "lacking... initiative" in dealing with the crisis in Syria. "There are certain things being expected from the United States. Obama has not yet catered to those expectations," he said.<sup>26</sup>

Reports that Turkey was tacitly permitting weapons transfers from its territory to Jabhat al-

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<sup>25</sup> "McCain in NH: Would Be "Fine" To Keep Troops in Iraq for "A Hundred Years," *Mother Jones*, January 3, 2008,

<http://www.motherjones.com/mojournal/2008/01/mccain-nh-would-be-fine-keep-troops-iraq-hundred-years>

<sup>26</sup> Amanpour, Christiane, "Exclusive Interview With Recep Tayyip Erdogan," *CNN*, September 7, 2012,

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1209/07/ampr.01.html>

Nusra in have driven a deeper wedge between the two allies. Fearful of another Iraqi scenario in which the dismantling of state institutions leads to instability and chaos, the U.S. administration has promoted a controlled transition to maintain the Syrian state apparatus and has proposed Geneva II talks to implement plans for a transitional government. Turkey, on the other hand, has been less than enthusiastic about Geneva II, fearing that the process would somewhat bring undeserved international legitimacy to pro-Assad political groups in Syria.

Turkey's growing energy connections with the KRG is another factor that fuels tension between Ankara and Washington. The United States fears that Turkish policies will push Baghdad's Shi'a government closer toward Tehran and threaten Iraqi unity. In comparison to the situation in 2009, Ankara and Washington seem to have traded places. Now, while Turkey is busy carving up a lucrative space of economic and political influence with Iraqi Kurds, it is Washington that needs to remind Ankara of the importance of Iraq's territorial integrity. As late as 2008, it was Ankara that used to insist on talking to Baghdad instead of Erbil in order to marginalize the north. To Baghdad's dismay, Ankara and Erbil are now busy deepening their relationship. It is hard for Americans to complain since they were the ones who used to encourage Turkey to engage more with Erbil. Turks, by contrast, were once hypersensitive about Iraq's territorial integrity and the need to respect the central authority of Baghdad.<sup>27</sup>

The divergence between Turkey and the United States in Iraq is exacerbated by their clashing views of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In Turkey's eyes, Maliki is a sectarian autocrat who is responsible for the ongoing disintegration of Iraq and the slow descent of the country into a new civil war. In private,

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<sup>27</sup> Barkey, Henri J., *Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan*, Special Report: 237, USIP, Washington DC, May 2010.

Turkish officials cannot stop blaming Washington for supporting Maliki and turning Iraq into Iran's backyard. Washington sees the situation differently. The White House believes that, with the right policies, Maliki can be co-opted. For his part, Maliki is convinced that Iraqi Sunni radicals want to eliminate him and that those same radical groups are now fighting against Assad in Syria. Once Damascus is conquered, he believes, Baghdad will be next on their list, as it is considered the real prize. Under such circumstances, Maliki sees partnership with Iran as his only alternative. This is why Washington believes Maliki's relations with Iran can be changed if countries like Turkey embraced him, rather than pushing him further into the Persian orbit.

If Iraq is the most important problem in Turkish-American relations Syria remains the most urgent one. On Syria too, Ankara and Washington seem to have traded places, particularly concerning the question of what a coercive regime in a dictatorship may look like. Ten years ago, when the Bush administration asked for Turkey's help in getting rid of Saddam Hussein, Turks had a basic question: what will replace him? With quintessential idealism the American answer was "democracy." Ankara was not impressed. There was also a genuine fear in Turkey that the situation could get worse in Iraq after Saddam. Such considerations played a major role in Turkey's reluctance to help the United States in 2003 and in many ways Turkey was proven right about the chaos of post-Saddam Iraq.<sup>28</sup> It is ironic that now Turkey is making the same case to Washington about the need for coercive regime change in Syria in the name of democracy while Obama and his administration is clearly concerned about what will come after Assad.

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<sup>28</sup> "Turkey upsets US military plans," BBC News, March 1, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2810133.stm>. See also Cengiz Candar, "Regime Change in Iraq: Repercussions for Turkey," *Wilson Center*, June/July 2002, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/regime-change-iraq-repercussions-for-turkey>

Yet, there are some recent positive signs that Turkey wants to engage Baghdad. After the Iraqi foreign minister's visit to Turkey in October, Davutoğlu went to Baghdad to discuss a fresh start to relations. During his visit, Davutoğlu held talks with Shi'a leaders and visited holy sites in an effort to undo Turkey's image as a Sunni power pursuing a sectarian agenda, particularly in Syria.<sup>29</sup> Such high-level diplomatic traffic is an apparent effort to turn a new page in bilateral relations. Iran and Turkey are still on opposite sides of the equation in Syria, and Turkey was extremely disappointed with the way the Obama administration handled the Assad's regime use of chemical weapons, by launching a diplomatic process that legitimizes Assad as a genuine counterpart with the help of Russia. Yet, Ankara also realizes it has little leverage over Washington and instead has significantly toned down its opposition to Geneva II.

## Conclusion

The Arab Spring has led to a sense of Kurdish awakening in the region. Turkey came to realize that, at its core, the Arab Spring is a movement for democratic self-determination. Such sweeping change in the region was bound to have a major impact on Kurdish demands for self-determination. The emergence of an independent greater Kurdistan is the dream of millions of nationalist Kurds. It is very likely that in a post-Assad Syria a semi-autonomous Kurdish regional government will be formed in the north of the country. With the presence of the Kurdish regional government in Iraq, a newly formed Kurdish region in Syria, and Iran's own Kurdish region, Turkey will soon see nothing but Kurdish entities at its southern borders.

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<sup>29</sup> "Turkish FM Davutoğlu in Iraq to push fresh start," *Agence France Presse*, November 10, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-fm-davutoglu-in-iraq-to-push-fresh-start.aspx?pageID=238&nID=57664&NewsCatID=338>

Faced with these regional dynamics and pressing demands for reform at home, the Turkish government increasingly felt the need to reform its traditional policy of confrontation with the Kurds. At a time when the region is in turmoil, accommodating Kurdish culture and political aspirations emerges as the most viable policy. Such a policy may be a bridge too far for a country that constantly feared dismemberment due to its vivid memories of Ottoman disintegration. Turkey has already given up the traditional policy of strict assimilation of Kurds. But it has yet to adopt genuine multiculturalism. Given mounting Kurdish expectations nothing less than serious steps towards democratization, multiculturalism and decentralization will help to stem Kurdish extreme nationalist demands and bring violence to an end.

Ankara is well aware that a settlement with Kurds at home and in the region would also have major regional implications. Turkey's Middle East policy has been held hostage to the Kurdish problem for the past decades. A resolution would remove a major stumbling block to Turkey's aspirations to be the regional power. After 30 years of conflict that cost more than 40,000 lives, a Turkish-Kurdish peace finally appears within reach. Given the level of distrust towards the U.S. in Turkish public opinion, Washington should adopt a policy of "silent support" in a "do no harm" spirit. With respect to Turkey's growing economic and political relations with the KRG, Washington rather than fear Kurdish secessionism, in a manner that once Turkey used to, it should play a more active and constructive role to bring Baghdad on board the economic deals that Turkey and KRG have negotiated. Surely, if economic considerations helped to improve relations between Turkey and the KRG could it not also have a similar effect on Iraqi-Turkish and Erbil-Baghdad relations.

Turks know the power of nationalism. The Ottoman Empire crumbled when it was unable to withstand nationalist minorities determined

to establish their own nation-states. Ethnic demands for self-determination became the nightmare of the crumbling imperial Ottoman center. It is therefore not surprising that today many Turks are alarmed about prospects of Kurdish nationalism and the possible emergence of a greater Kurdistan. Given such dynamics, Turkey has two options. The first option is to panic and adopt a confrontational attitude with all the diplomatic, economic and even military instruments of power. The second option is to adopt a co-optation strategy both at home and in the region by engaging different Kurdish groups at the political, economic, and diplomatic levels. Wisely, Turkey seems to have opted for the latter and can turn its Kurdish question from a predicament to a major opportunity for democratization, prosperity and regional stability.

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