Turkey's Kurdish Challenge

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Turkey has been wrestling with its Kurdish issue since the foundation of the republic in 1923. The early 'Turkification' policy of the Kemalist elite met strong resistance among the Kurdish minority and sparked several outbreaks of unrest, violently suppressed, in the Kurdish areas in the east and southeast. In 1984 the issue took on a new dimension when the newly founded Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) began conducting terrorist attacks against Turkish territory from safe havens in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. The struggle against the PKK has so far cost 40,000 lives and has hurt both Turkey's internal development and its relations with its Western allies, especially the United States.

In the last several years, discontent and pressures for greater political and cultural rights have visibly increased within the Kurdish community in Turkey. In the aftermath of the 12 June 2011 election, which saw an overwhelming victory for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) headed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Kurdish issue is likely to move to the top of the Turkish political agenda as the country seeks to draft a new constitution. The stakes are high. If the AKP government fails to adequately address Kurdish concerns in drafting the new constitution, Turkey could face increasing domestic instability and violence that could pose a serious challenge to its constitutional order and undercut its ability to act as a successful model for peaceful democratic change in the Middle East.

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Rapprochement

The Erdogan government has made important efforts to try to defuse the Kurdish issue. One of the most important components of this effort has been a shift in its policy towards the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. 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 increased demands for greater autonomy and independence on the part of Turkey's own Kurdish community. Turkish officials saw such demands as a direct threat to the unity and territorial integrity of the Turkish state.

For years, the Turkish military staunchly opposed formal contact with the KRG. The Turkish General Staff made little differentiation between the PKK and the regional government, an attitude shared by many high-ranking Kemalist officials. During his tenure in office, 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.

But Turkish policy began to shift in late 2008. In October, Murat Ozcelik, at the time Turkey's special envoy to Iraq, and Ahmet Davutoglu, then Erdogan'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 Ozcelik and Davutoglu 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 economic field.[1]

Several developments have changed the context in which the Kurdish issue is viewed by the key actors. The strengthening of civilian control over the military in Turkey in recent years has made it easier for Ankara to change its approach to the Kurdish issue. For much of the post-war period, the Turkish military acted as a state within a state, but in the last decade its political influence diminished due to important legislative changes. Another development has been a strengthening of US political and military support for Turkey's struggle against the PKK. President George W. Bush's deci-

sion in November 2007 to step up US military support, especially actionable intelligence, to help Turkey combat PKK terrorist attacks was a crucial turning point.[2] Politically, the decision removed an important irritant in US–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.

While it has been weakened, however, the PKK retains the capacity to launch deadly, small-scale cross-border attacks against Turkish targets. Such attacks have led to a growing recognition that the struggle against the PKK cannot be won by military means. More and more Turks, including many in the upper ranks of the military, have come to realise that the Kurdish issue is essentially a political problem and can only be effectively resolved by measures that address the political, economic and social roots of Kurdish grievances. The issue is part of the broader issue of internal democratisation and constitutional reform in Turkey.

The PKK retains the capacity to launch deadly attacks

There have also been signs of a shift in the attitude of Iraqi Kurds toward the PKK. In the last several years, KRG authorities have increasingly come to view PKK attacks against Turkey as an obstacle to rapprochement with Ankara. During a visit to Turkey in March 2009, Talabani called on the PKK to halt its armed struggle, stating that 'either they [the PKK] will lay down their arms or they will leave our territory'.[3] This was an indication that KRG officials were ready to take stronger action against the PKK, a long-standing Turkish demand and precondition for improved relations. Faced with 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, the Iraqi Kurds appear to have concluded that their best option is to try to mend fences with Turkey.

The rapprochement between Turkey and the KRG reflects a growing recognition that the two sides share many interests. Both are predominately Sunni, secular and pro-Western. Neither wants to see an Iraq dominated

by Shi'ites and closely allied with Iran. Economic interests reinforce the growing political ties. The economies of the two entities are closely linked and highly interdependent. Approximately 80% of the goods sold in the KRG are made in Turkey. Some 1,200 Turkish companies are currently operating in northern Iraq (mostly in construction, but also in oil exploration). They have generated over $2 billion in trade and investment and stand to be major beneficiaries of the KRG's plans for $100bn in new infrastructure projects. And the KRG's future (particularly economic) will depend heavily on its relationship with Turkey. Although the KRG is rich in oil, it needs to be able to extract and transport it to Western markets. Oil pipelines from northern Iraq already flow into Turkish ports on the Mediterranean. They provide the most efficient and cost-effective means to get Iraqi oil to Europe.

The AKP'S Kurdish opening

Since assuming power in November 2002, the Erdogan government has introduced a number of reforms designed to improve relations with the Kurdish community in Turkey. In August 2002, Kurdish-language broadcasting was introduced on a limited basis. As part of the same reform programme, classes conducted in Kurdish were also approved on a limited basis. These reforms initially helped the AKP improve its political support among the Kurds, who make up about 20% of the Turkish population.

However, the reforms were introduced piecemeal and have been hindered by bureaucratic obstacles. It took two years, for example, to make the regulatory changes needed to allow Kurdish broadcasting by Turkish state-run stations. Private television stations had to wait another two years to get their paperwork approved, and then programming was limited to 45 minutes per day. Teaching in Kurdish has faced similar obstacles. Such delays diminished the political impact of the reforms and bred a certain cynicism among many Kurds about the sincerity of the AKP's efforts.

Social discontent has, as a result, visibly increased in the Kurdish areas of Turkey since 2005. During Erdogan's August 2005 visit to Diyarbakir, the most important Kurdish city in Turkey, he was welcomed with open arms because of his more open and tolerant approach to Kurdish rights and identity. In a visit in October 2008, by contrast, he faced a massive boycott. Public

transportation was shut down and 90% of the city's shops were closed to protest his visit. The boycott underscored the growing frustration among the Kurds with the slow pace of reform in the last several years.

Growing Kurdish discontent was reflected in the Turkish municipal elections at the end of March 2009. In the July 2007 national elections, the AKP won most of the cities in the predominantly Kurdish southeast. However, in March 2009 the party lost badly in the southeast to the Democratic Society Party (DTP), the main pro-Kurdish party, which campaigned on a platform of Kurdish cultural identity. The DTP captured mayoral seats in nine provincial capitals and took control of 19 municipalities in eastern Turkey.[4] The AKP tried to woo Kurdish voters by emphasising its ability to supply goods and services, but this strategy failed. The message was loud and clear: Kurdish identity was more important to Turkey's Kurds than any other issue.

The AKP's poor showing in Kurdish areas served as an important wake-up call and underscored the need to address Kurdish concerns and grievances more seriously. The result was the government's 'Kurdish Opening'. Launched in summer 2009, the initiative was the first serious attempt since Turgut Ozal was prime minister in the mid-1980s to address the Kurdish issue. But its implementation was badly mismanaged. The return of 34 PKK fighters in October as part of an unofficial amnesty backfired when the DTP and PKK turned it into a sort of victory parade. This enraged many Turks, who regard the insurgents as terrorists, and forced the government to put the Kurdish Opening on the back burner.

Changing perspectives, new impetus

At the same time, there have been important changes within the Kurdish community in Turkey. The vast majority of Kurds want peace. Support for the armed struggle is declining among Turkey's Kurds, who have come to understand that war has not solved anything in 26 years and that change must come through effective use of democratic means. This view is voiced more and more frequently within Kurdish civil society, which has become more active in the last few years.

The majority of Kurds have also given up the idea of secession (either carving an independent Kurdistan out of Turkey or joining the KRG). Not

only does an independent Kurdistan have no support internationally or within the region, but Kurds are also increasingly geographically dispersed. They live not just in the impoverished areas of eastern and southeastern Turkey but also in large cities such as Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir and Mersin. An estimated 2–5 million live in Istanbul, making it the largest Kurdish city.

The Kurdish struggle is increasingly being played out in the political rather than the military domain. The Kurdish emphasis is on bilingualism in education, greater cultural rights, a general amnesty for PKK rebels, restoring Kurdish place names in eastern and southeastern Turkey, and 'democratic autonomy' in areas where Kurds have a majority. These goals are openly championed by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the largest Kurdish party, successor to the banned DTP, and generally considered to be the political wing of the PKK.

Kurds are increasingly dispersed

PKK strategy has also shifted. The PKK was founded as a Marxist–Leninist party with a Maoist tinge. It originally focused on the class dimension of the Kurdish conflict, insisting that it was not a Kurdish nationalist movement but an internationalist revolutionary organisation. Beginning in 1999, the PKK changed its rhetoric and began to emphasise the cultural-identity dimension of the Kurdish issue.

Over the last year or so, the day-to-day commander of the PKK in the absence of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Murat Karayilan, has softened his rhetoric. He no longer calls for a separate Kurdish state but increasingly emphasises that the PKK wants a degree of autonomy in Turkey inspired by, but falling short of, the type of federal system that exists in the KRG.[5] Whether this is simply a tactical shift or a more fundamental change in the PKK's approach is unclear. But discontent among the Kurds in Turkey has intensified. Large numbers of Kurds heeded the BDP's call to boycott the constitutional referendum on 12 September 2010 to protest the AKP's Kurdish policy. In the southeastern province of Hakkari only 7% of the electorate went to the polls. The BDP's successful organisation of the boycott underscored the party's increasing regional clout and influence among the Kurdish population. In the aftermath of the referendum

the Erdogan government moved to open a dialogue with the BDP. This was an important policy shift: prior to the referendum, the AKP had paid little attention to the BDP, which it considered a marginal political force.

In addition, unofficial back-channel contacts have been maintained with Ocalan, who continues to influence PKK policy from his prison cell.[6] The goal of this intensive diplomatic campaign has been to convince the PKK to extend its unilateral ceasefire, halt its operations within Turkey, and turn the ceasefire into a permanent truce, which the Erdogan government hopes will provide an environment that would enable it to initiate further reforms aimed at addressing the Kurdish issue.

Future prospects

Achieving an accord on the Kurdish issue will take time and require patience and compromise on all sides. But the genie is out of the bottle. Now that the 12 June parliamentary elections are over, pressures for change are likely to mount quickly, especially if the rest of the Middle East remains in turmoil. Indeed, the growing unrest and calls for greater democracy elsewhere in the Middle East, especially Syria, could have an impact in Turkey and embolden the Kurds to press their demands more firmly.

Erdogan emerged from the 12 June elections in a strong position. The AKP won 49.9% of the vote, giving it 326 seats in the 550-seat parliament. This was almost twice as many votes as the runner-up Republican People's Party (CHP), which garnered 25.9% of the vote and 135 seats in parliament. The ultra-rightist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) won 53 seats on 13.9% of the vote, just barely enough to pass the 10% threshold necessary to maintain its representation in parliament.

The biggest surprise was the strong showing of the BDP, which won 5.9% of the vote. These votes, augmented by the strong showing of the independent Kurdish candidates supported by the BDP, gave the party 36 seats in parliament. This ensures that the Kurds will have an important say in the drafting of a new constitution.[7]

Drafting a new civilian constitution is the most urgent task on the post-election political agenda. The current constitution was promulgated under the tutelage of the military after the 1980 coup. It is based on a Kemalist

notion of ethnic identity which leaves no room for ethic and religious differences. The Kurds reject the ethno-centric definition of Turkish citizenship and want a more inclusive understanding that recognises Kurdish identity.

Three changes at the constitutional level are needed to pave the way for a settlement of the Kurdish issue: first, recognition and safeguarding of education in Kurdish as a mother tongue; second, amendment of the definition of citizenship based on the 'Turkish' ethnic identity and its replacement with a constitutional citizenship that stands at an equal distance to all ethnic identities; and third, the empowerment of local administration.

However, achieving a settlement of the Kurdish issue will not be easy. Turkish elites and the public maintain a deep-seated mistrust and suspicion of non-Turkic ethnic nationalism and minority rights. Historically, these forces have been manipulated by outside powers and used to weaken or dismember the Turkish state. Thus they remain suspect in the eyes of many Turks. Although Turkish society is more open to ethnic, cultural and regional heterogeneity than it was in the 1990s, many Turks continue to fear that according minorities greater political rights would weaken the Turkish state and precipitate greater social unrest.

A number of specific issues are likely to prove contentious and could complicate or derail the AKP's effort to settle the Kurdish issue. The first, and most controversial, is the question of who will be the interlocutor on the Kurdish side. A solution to the Kurdish problem will be difficult to achieve without involving the PKK. But engaging the PKK in dialogue directly would be an impossible sell to the Turkish public because of the PKK's reliance on violence. In theory the BDP could act as an intermediary between the PKK and the government. But the BDP is largely controlled by the PKK, and is not seen by the Turkish public as an independent, trustworthy actor.

The question of a full or partial amnesty for PKK members is also likely to be highly contentious. Turkish and Kurdish views on the issue differ widely. Many Kurds see the PKK as fighting for Kurdish cultural and political rights and believe that PKK members should be granted amnesty and political representation as part of any accord. Most Turks, however, consider the PKK a terrorist organisation and hold it responsible for the deaths

of thousands of innocent Turkish citizens. They oppose any formal political role or amnesty for the PKK.

A third potential stumbling block is the issue of autonomy. In December 2010, the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), a local Kurdish group in eastern Turkey, circulated a draft of a model of 'democratic autonomy', or self-government, for Kurdish regions. The Erdogan government strongly opposes the idea of autonomy, which it sees as threatening the territorial integrity of the Turkish state, and has warned against actions that violate the principles of 'one flag, one nation, one country and one state'. The government also strongly opposes bilingual education.

Finally, the turmoil in the Middle East, especially in Syria, could seriously complicate Turkish efforts to resolve the Kurdish issue. Turkish officials worry that pressures for greater internal democracy in Syria could lead to growing unrest among Syria's Kurdish minority. Faced with rising discontent among it own Kurdish population, the last thing Turkey wants is unrest among the Kurds in Syria which could spill over into Turkey, exacerbating Ankara's own Kurdish problem.

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The victory of the AKP in the 12 June elections fell short of the 330 seats needed to change the constitution through a referendum, and far short of the 367 seats needed to change it in parliament. Thus, in the aftermath of the election, the AKP will have to work with other parties, above all the BDP, to draft a new constitution that acknowledges Turkey's ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural diversity but preserves the unity of the Turkish state. Given the highly polarising election campaign, this will pose a difficult challenge, and will require restraint and compromise on all sides. Erdogan has demonstrated that he is a superb political tactician. In the post-election period, however, he must prove that he is also a wise statesman capable of putting the national interests of his country above tactical party interests. How well he succeeds will have a profound impact on Turkey's domestic evolution in the years to come as well as its ability to act as a catalyst for democratic change within the Middle East more broadly.

Notes

1 Sinan Salaheddin, 'Turkish Officials Meet Iraqi Kurds in Baghdad', *Boston Globe*, 15 October 2008. See also Gareth Jenkins, 'Turkey Bites the Bullet', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 5, no. 196, 14 October 2008.

2 For a detailed discussion, see F. Stephen Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership: U.S.–Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change.* MG-899-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), pp. 19–20.

3 Emrullah Uslu, 'Gul's Visit to Baghdad: A Sign of Rapprochement with the Kurds', *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 56, 24 March 2009.

4 Mustafa Akyol, 'Kurdish Nationalism on the Rise, Ballot Suggests', *Hurriyet Daily News and Economic Review*, 31 May 2009.

5 Steven Lee Myers, 'A Kurdish Rebel Softens His Tone', *New York Times*, 1 January 2011.

6 These contacts were initiated in 1992–93 by then-President Turgut Ozal and have continued ever since. For a detailed discussion, see Cengiz Candor, *Dagdan Inis – PKK Nasil Silah Birakir? Kurt Sorunu'nun Siddetten Arindirilmasi* (Istanbul: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, June 2011). See also 'Who Wants the PKK to Continue the Armed Struggle?', *Today's Zaman*, 28 June 2011.

7 For a detailed analysis, see Gonul Tol, 'New Hope for Turkey's Kurds', *Foreign Policy*, 15 June 2011.