

2. The Kurds in Turkey: A Gloomy Future

Soner Cagaptay, Cem Yolbulan

Introduction

Today, Turkey faces its biggest challenge from the Kurds since before the government captured Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with U.S. assistance, in February 1999¹. At that time, Ankara had just managed to defeat a full-blown Kurdish insurgency supported by two neighbors, Iran and Syria. The following decade promised a period of calm for Turkey regarding its Kurdish issue, since Öcalan was in jail and the PKK had declared a ceasefire. Even when the PKK broke its ceasefire in June 2004, the United States provided intelligence assistance in 2007, allowing Ankara to once again gain the upper hand against the militant organization. The PKK declared another ceasefire in March 2013 after entering into secret peace talks with the Turkish government in December 2012, led by the Justice and

¹ “The Capture of a Kurdish Rebel. Editorial”, *New York Times*, 17 February 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/17/opinion/the-capture-of-a-kurdish-rebel.html>

Development Party (AKP)². For a while it appeared that Turkey's Kurdish problem was headed towards a peaceful resolution.

But the Syrian conflict cut the path to peace short, and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ambitions to style himself as an omnipotent executive style president have led Ankara to harden its stance on the PKK. Concurrently, the PKK has mobilized against Ankara, emboldened by the ability of its Syrian franchise – the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD) – to capture large swathes of Syrian territory, notably the self-declared autonomous region of Rojava. The PKK apparently hopes to recreate the “Rojava model” inside Turkey, trying to take control of cities in which to declare autonomy.

All this puts Turkey at a dangerous trajectory, including inflamed fighting with the PKK, terror attacks by the PKK's franchise Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), including two recent attacks in Ankara which have killed at least 65 people, a new PKK-led insurgency in the country's majority Kurdish southeast, and last but not least growing tensions with the PYD, most recent of which Turkish shelling of the PYD position in Syria In February 2016. Fueled by developments in Syria, the Kurdish problem in Turkey could even lead to crisis with Washington which relies on the PYD to push back against the so called Islamic State (IS).

Analysts now wonder whether Turkey can take steps to prevent the current escalation from developing into another major conflict between Ankara and the PKK. The answer rests on a thorough understanding of the historic Turkish-Kurdish relationship and the newly emerging dynamics between Turkish Kurds and other Kurdish groups in the Middle East, especially those in Syria.

² “Turkey Kurds: PKK chief Öcalan calls for ceasefire”, *BBC News*, 21 March 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21874427>

Kurds in Turkey: a unique group in a multi-ethnic Muslim nation

Although this fact escapes most outsiders, Turkey is a multi-ethnic if almost homogenously Muslim nation. The Kurds are one part of this centuries-old diversity, yet in some ways they stand out from other Muslim ethnic groups in Turkey. It is hard to say exactly how many Kurds live within Turkish borders because domestic censuses do not collect data on ethnicity. However, most surveys suggest that as many as 15 per cent of the country's citizens could be ethnically Kurdish³.

The presence of this rather substantial minority is not so surprising. The country's population also includes a large number of other non-Turkish Muslim ethnicities. Approximately one million Circassians⁴ migrated to Anatolia in the middle of the 19th century after the Russian Empire expelled them from the northern Caucasus. At that time the Muslim population of Anatolia stood at nine million⁵. Hence, it is likely that the Circassians constitute around 10 per cent of the Turkish population. Yet, despite their relative size, the Circassians and millions of other non-Turkish Ottoman Muslims, from Bosnians to Greek Muslims, have integrated into the Turkish population. Some Kurdish groups, most notably the Alevi Kurds⁶ (who

³ "The World Factbook- Turkey", CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>.

⁴ Ethnic group originally from the northern Caucasus region (modern-day Southern Russia). The Circassians were persecuted and expelled by the Russians from the Caucasus in the 1860s. Survivors fled to the Ottoman Empire. Today, they live primarily in Turkey, but also in Jordan, Israel, Syria, and parts of the Balkans.

⁵ S. Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, University of Nebraska, Potomac Books, 2014, p. 98.

⁶ Distinct community from central-north as well as coastal Anatolia and the Balkans whose interpretation of Islam, while showing similarities to both Sunni

have for the most part adopted a secular Turkish identity) and the millions of Kurds living in western Turkey, have integrated into the country's overall population. Nevertheless, some have not, leaving the Kurds in a unique position among other non-Turkish Muslim groups in Turkey.

A number of historical factors help explain the Kurds' unique alignment *vis-à-vis* the Turkish nation, mostly relating to the Ottoman past. Turkish nationalism became a potent force in the late Ottoman Empire as the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Empire was collapsing. The new ideology of Turkish nationalism rose to prominence as Ottomanism proved a failed one. Turkish nationalism became the dominating force in the new Turkish Republic and throughout the 20th century.

The Ottoman Empire broke apart across ethno-religious *millet*⁷ lines in the Balkans. While Balkan Christian nationalisms wanted to expel all Turks and other Muslims from the peninsula, the nascent Turkish nationalists aimed to trans-

and Shiite Islam, is unorthodox enough to be considered neither. Different from the nearly eponymous and esoteric community of Arab Alawites, the Alevi, who practice an open and syncretic version of Islam constitute 10-15 per cent of the Turkey's population, as well as smaller communities in Greece and Bulgaria. The Alevi, whose liturgical language is Turkish and whose faith has been influenced by Shamanism and Christianity, have long been an important component of Turkey's secular block.

⁷ In its classical period in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Ottoman Empire organized its population into religious compartments called Millets, granting them religious freedoms as well as the ability to run social institutions, such as courts and schools in return for political loyalty. Originally, there were four millets: Muslim, Orthodox, Jewish and Armenian (including also other Eastern Churches). In the later centuries, however, many other religious communities, including Catholics and Protestants, were recognized as Millets. The Empire merged the ethnic identities of its peoples into religious ones to make their millet identity more dominant which resulted in religion becoming the key marker of national identity in post-Ottoman societies, such as Greece, Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

form the Ottoman Muslim community into a viable modern force by considering all Ottoman Muslims as members of the prospective Turkish national community, regardless of their ethnic origins. This effort strengthened following the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, in which the Ottomans lost 69 per cent of its population in Europe and 83 per cent of its territory on the European continent⁸. Ottoman Muslims in the Balkans had nowhere to go but to Turkey and the embrace of Turkish nationalism.

In order to achieve a homogenous national identity, Turkish nationalism substituted the patriotism of “Ottoman Muslimness” with that of “Turkishness”, thereby establishing a new standard of citizenship where Bosnians, Greeks and Bulgarians, Albanians, Kurds and other Ottoman Muslims, needed to identify themselves as Turkish to be seen as true participating citizens in the new country. This nationalism had little to do with the ethnic classification of “Turkish,” since a viable Turkish nation could only emerge from the chaos of the imploding Ottoman Empire through the support of the millions of Ottoman Muslims who did not have any ethnic Turkish heritage. This explains why after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk liberated Turkey in 1922, Kemalism, the apogee of Turkish nationalism and secularism, would also, and rather ironically, consider shared Muslim identity rather than ethnic commonality as the foundation of Turkishness in its policies⁹.

Surprisingly this late Ottoman-Kemalist stance presented few challenges for the Balkan Muslims, such as Bulgarian Pomak Muslims¹⁰, as well as other immigrant non-Turkish

⁸ S. Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History, 2006, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Bulgarian-speaking Slavic Muslim population who faced extermination or expulsion with the establishment of a Bulgarian state in the 19th century. While

Muslims, such as the Circassians. These groups had previously been members of the Ottoman Muslim *millet*. Whereas Kemalism viewed the former Muslim *millet* to be the same as the contemporary Turkish nation, this allowed the Circassians, Pomaks, and other Balkan and Caucasus Muslims to make a rather voluntary transition into the Turkish nation.

This was not the case for the Kurds who did not share with the Turks, or for that purpose with Bosnians and Circassians, a profound and ancient memory of having been part of the former Muslim *millet* of the Ottoman Empire.

While the vast Ottoman lands extended from Central Europe to the Red Sea, the territories that could be considered Ottoman par excellence are, in fact, more limited in nature. The sultans established their authority and installed classical 15th-16th century Ottoman institutions, such as the *millet* system, only in a core group of territories that they captured in the earlier centuries of the empire at a time when the Ottoman territories stretched from the Danube River in the west to the Black Sea in the north, the Mediterranean in the south, and the Euphrates in the east.

The empire's further expansions during the 16th century brought additional challenges to the gargantuan task of running a vast, mostly land-based state. The Ottomans often managed these newly acquired lands through pre-Ottoman rulers and institutions in a pseudo-vassal system, demanding loyalty and taxes from their inhabitants but leaving out the pervasive institutions that developed the strong Ottoman identity within the inner lands of the Empire. The relatively weak cultural influence is visible in the now profoundly separate areas once controlled by the Empire, including lands beyond the Euphrates and Danube, North Africa, and Arabia.

many Pomaks fled to Turkey where they live to this date, large Pomak communities remain in southern Bulgaria.

Enter the Kurds, whose traditional homeland lies east of the Euphrates and beyond the core Ottoman territories. This group was not exposed to Ottomanizing influences in the premodern era to the same extent of the Empire's non-Turkish Muslims of the Balkans. Kurdish areas were largely autonomous from Istanbul, and local leaders (*beys*) ruled over these lands that the Ottomans called Kurdistan¹¹. To put it succinctly, in the classical Ottoman era a Kurd in what is now southeastern Turkey most likely did not see himself as "Ottoman" in the way that a Slavic Bosnian Muslim in Sarajevo did.

As the Ottoman Empire centralized during the 19th century in an attempt to shift into a modern state, Istanbul attempted to bring its peripheral territories, including Kurdistan and Arabia, under direct rule. Yet these efforts to Ottomanize Kurdish and Arab communities quickly ended along with the collapse of the Empire. When the Turkish Republic formed in Anatolia, Kurds' Ottoman identity lacked the deep roots of Bosnians or other Balkan Muslims now incorporated into the new state. In Atatürk's republic, the Kurds stood in a unique position *vis-à-vis* Turkish nationalism: the distance of Ottoman rulers left them with enough of their own ethnic identity to prevent their assimilation into the new, proud Turkish ethnicity.

Other reasons also complicated the Kurds' voluntary embrace of Turkish nationalism. Various non-Muslim ethnicities lived in Turkey by the time Atatürk turned it into a nation-state in the interwar period. But again the Kurds were different than all other non-Turkish groups in this new Kemalist Turkey: they were the most sizable non-Turkish group in Turkey, comprising more than 10 per cent of the country's population in 1920s.

¹¹ S. Cagaptay, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Not just historic identity-related issues but also the present reality hindered the Kurds' voluntary embrace of Turkishness, relative to other non-Turkish Muslims. Various non-Turkish Muslims had been scattered all over Turkey after chaotically arriving in the country as expellees from Russia and Europe. But by the time Atatürk turned the country into a nation-state, the Kurds, who are autochthonous in Anatolia like the Turks, lived clustered and isolated from other Muslims and also from Turks in a contiguous territory in eastern and southeastern Turkey. The Kurds formed the majority of the population in a number of provinces. Non-Turkish immigrant Muslims lived mixed with the Turks west of the Euphrates and married them, and this process also created a physical amalgam: the Turkish nation. The Kurds could not join this amalgam right away because they lived by themselves in rugged, eastern Turkey, which was isolated from the rest of the country: it was not until the late 1930s that railway lines penetrated this area, and then only a few, and not until the 1950s that highways came to the region, again only a few.

Atatürk's secularization and centralization efforts also alienated the deeply religious Kurds who also relished a memory of being semi-autonomous under the Ottomans. Notably, the single most important uprising against Atatürk's reforms – the Sheikh Said uprising of 1925 – took place in a Kurdish area led by a religious leader¹².

Relative poverty has also hindered Kurdish integration into the milieu of the Turkish republic. Much of Turkey was poor until the 1980s, when then prime minister and later president Turgut Özal opened the country to the global economy and paved the way for a more prosperous Turkey. While much of Turkey had faced financial difficulties, eastern Turkey has

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

always been poorer than the rest of the country. The region never fully recovered from the collapse of its infrastructure multiple times during and following World War I. Armenian, Ottoman, and Russian armies all burned cities in the area and crippled the local economy in a matter of years.

The region's remoteness (it is distant from navigable seas and the rest of the country) and rugged nature (the average altitude in eastern Turkey is 6,500 feet) did not allow it to develop in the 1980s when the rest of the country took off. Accordingly, poverty has lasted in this region to this date. Turks too live in eastern Turkey, where they form the majority of the population in the country's equally rugged, remote and cold northeast, an area that saw even ore destruction during and after WWI than did southeastern Turkey. While these Turks in the Northeast are as poor as the Kurds in the southeast, their resentment has naturally not become an ethnic one. The Kurds' relative deprivation compared to the rest of the country, though, has led to ethnicity-based resentment among them, following the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the late 20th century. Such resentment, among other reasons, has in return boosted Kurdish nationalism with strong leftist antecedents.

Contemporary Kurdish nationalism and the PKK

Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey is a laboratory for observation of the dominant leftist brand of Kurdish nationalism. This town is the home of the Kurdish political movement represented by the People's Democratic Party (HDP) – now the third largest party in the Turkish parliament. The town as a whole strongly supports this political movement: the HDP received more than 70 per cent of votes in Diyarbakir in the most recent Turkish elections in November 2015. Diyarbakir serves as an incubator of Kurdish nationalism in

Turkey, and can operate as a platform for observing how Turkish Kurds are increasingly imagining themselves as a separate nation from the Turkish Republic. The ancient city that forms Diyarbakir's core is a typical Fertile Crescent citadel, with three and a half miles of medieval walls surrounding mosques, synagogues, Assyrian, Chaldean, and Armenian churches, stone houses, and arched walkways. In the heart of the old town is the city's central Grand Mosque – Ulu Cami. This is a symbolic building that speaks volumes about southeastern Turkey's historically weak connections to Istanbul. The mosque lacks a central dome but is adorned by an *evantine*, demonstrating that its architectural influences stem more from the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus than the Byzantine-influenced Blue Mosque in Istanbul, the blueprint for Ottoman mosque architecture from the Euphrates to the Danube. The Ulu Cami reminds visitors that Diyarbakir is far removed from Ottoman influence, both geographically and ideologically.

Fittingly, Sur – the old town and city center of Diyarbakir – has been an epicenter of the most recent clashes between the PKK and the Turkish government forces. The PKK's newly-formed youth wing, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), has led the charge in shifting this battle into urban areas by digging ditches and building barricades in the city streets. According to official records, more than 500 civilians have died in the Southeast since the violence erupted in July 2015¹³. Notably, this number includes the chairman of the Diyarbakir Bar Association and Kurdish rights activist Tahir Elçi, who was assassinated in Sur district of Diyarbakir.

¹³ G. Metin, "Turkey breaks new ground in southeast reconstruction", *Al-Monitor*, 21 January 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/turkey-dilemma-how-to-end-clashes-pkk.html>

The centrifugal forces that have kept Diyarbakir's Kurds away from the heart of the Turkish nation have been compounded in the late 20th century by fighting between the Turkish government and the PKK. This Kurdish left-wing group has been waging a war against the Turkish state since 1984, when it was founded by their currently imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan. A nationalist organization fighting for greater rights and autonomy for the Kurds, the PKK is considered a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and NATO¹⁴.

Although Turkey has been able to keep the PKK under check since the organization launched a campaign against Ankara through military force, the incessant fighting has left an indelible scar in the public consciousness along with an estimated 35 thousand lives lost in southeastern Turkey. Instability and the region's other challenges have prevented it from participating in Turkey's opening to the global economy in the 1980s and subsequent economic miracle. Today, in the overwhelmingly Kurdish provinces of southeast Anatolia have an average disposable income of 5,418 Turkish lira, in comparison to Istanbul's average of 14,873 Turkish lira¹⁵.

The violence between the PKK and the government further alienated Kurds from the rest of the country. In the 1980s, Turkey responded to the PKK's Kurdish nationalist message by reinforcing its bans of the Kurdish language in courts, municipal government, and even in the media. This move has proven counterproductive. Coupled with the PKK's strategy of violence to intimidate the rural Kurdish population in order to build a logistics and recruitment base, this ban on the Kurdish

¹⁴ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

¹⁵ S. Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, Potomac Books, 2014, p. 105.

identity helped the PKK build a popular base among the Kurds in the 1980s and the 1990s¹⁶.

In recognition of its failure to stifle Kurdish nationalism, Turkey switched tactics and adopted progressive policies regarding the Kurdish issue in the first years after AKP came to power in 2002. The government removed restrictions on public Kurdish language use and began a publicly funded 24-hour Kurdish language television channel¹⁷. Moreover, Ankara now facilitates Kurdish language departments in universities, and allowed Kurdish to be taught as an elective course in middle and high schools in June 2012¹⁸. These reforms became a part of the “2009 Kurdish Opening” and so-called “Solution process”, where then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initiated negotiations with the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in an apparently sincere attempt to foster peace.

The period between 2012 and 2014 can be regarded as the height of a peaceful era in Turkey’s Kurdish conflict. The PKK announced that it would withdraw all its forces from Turkey, and the government promised to move forward with legal and constitutional changes. But the spillover from the Syrian Civil War halted any further steps toward peace. The situation quickly deteriorated, and since July 2015, full-scale warfare between Turkey and the PKK has been as violent as the conflict has ever been. Moreover, the renewed violence nullified the progress of the past decade; any future negotiations will have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

¹⁶ A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and The Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York University Press, 2007.

¹⁷ “Turkey’s Kurdish TV channel opens to mixed reviews”, *Reuters*, 2 January 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL2352569>

¹⁸ “Kurdish can be taught in Turkey’s schools, Erdoğan says”, *BBC News*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18410596>

Politics in southeastern Turkey: the HDP Factor

Turkey's politics are often characterized by a four-way race between the AKP, the HDP, the secular Republican Peoples Party (CHP) that operates as the main opposition party, and the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP). In contrast, politics in southeastern Turkey are a two-way rivalry between the HDP and the AKP; the two receiving a combined 95 per cent of the vote in the seven southeastern provinces during the most recent November 2015 elections. While the ruling AKP appeals to more conservative, pious Kurds in the region, the HDP's liberal, left-wing platform manages to draw in both ethno-nationalist Kurds and some support from Turks in Western provinces.

Overall, the HDP made a historical move by deciding to enter the June 2015 and November 2015 elections as a party – previously they only fielded independent candidates – and managed to cross the 10 per cent electoral threshold for the first time to enter the parliament¹⁹. In the June elections, the party received more than 13 per cent of the vote, gaining 80 out of 550 seats in the Turkish legislature, and in the November 2015 elections, their popularity slipped somewhat and the party garnered 10.7 per cent of the vote, winning 59 seats in the country's legislature. The HDP's decrease in popularity after its historic victory can be attributed to the renewal of PKK violence after the June elections, which distanced middle-class Kurds and liberal Turks concerned over violence and conservative Kurds who disapproved of the PKK's leftist message from the HDP. In June, the HDP had increased their vote share in every Kurdish-majority province in the region

¹⁹ T. Arango, "Kurds Have Bigger Prize in Mind After Political Gains in Turkey", *New York Times*, 10 June 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/world/europe/kurds-have-bigger-prize-in-mind-after-political-gains-in-turkey.html>

compared to 2011. Nevertheless, the HDP's entry into the parliament in both elections, passing the country's rather high ten per cent electoral threshold, can be considered a success. Historically, pro-Kurdish parties have received about 5 to 6 per cent of total votes, meaning that the Kurdish political movement could only be represented by independent members of the parliament, giving them a much smaller block of deputies (20-30) compared to the HDP's current delegation in the parliament.

Interplay between Turkish Kurdish politics and regional Kurdish politics

HDP's overall success in the previous June 2015 and limited success in the November 2015 elections has been attributed to several internal and external factors. It can be argued that HDP rode the wave of rising Kurdish nationalism thanks to the recent regional developments. PKK's Syrian offshoot PYD made territorial gains in northern Syria to establish self-rule, and demonstrated a valiant 112-day resistance in Kobane to take the strategic border town back from ISIS. Ankara's refusal to provide necessary support to the Kurdish forces during the initial attack in September 2014 left Kurds disgruntled with AKP and Erdoğan. As the Kurdish regions in northern Iraq and northern Syria received international recognition and support in their successful fighting against IS and their nascent political autonomy, Turkey's Kurds began to develop broader expectations for their own areas. The HDP, led by their young and charismatic co-chairman Selahattin Demirtaş, capitalized on this regional Kurdish moment to consolidate the Kurdish vote²⁰.

²⁰ H. Barkey, "Turkey's Turmoil: Why Erdoğan and the Kurds are Both to Blame", *The National Interest*, 25 September 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/turkeys-turmoil-why-erdogan-the-kurds-are-both-blame-13932>

A pro-Kurdish party dominating southeastern Turkey caused further split between the AKP and the HDP, and nationalist Kurds in general. Viewing itself as the champions of civil rights for the Kurds, the AKP government felt betrayed by them, and chose to resort to old-school military tactics to defeat the new Kurdish insurgency²¹.

Another reason for Turkey's turn to hardline politics on the Kurds is that Erdoğan wants to change the country's constitution to make himself an omnipotent executive style president²². As of the most recent election, the Turkish leader's party hovers at barely at 50 per cent support among the electorate. Erdoğan needs to build further support, and to this end, he will pursue a platform, casting himself as a strong-man president, to peel off right-wing votes from the MHP. For this reason, the Turkish leader will maintain a tough line on the PKK, and continue fighting to boost his image as a strong man.

In this regard, Erdoğan's hard line policies are supported by the Turkish security forces, which include the military. Although technically folded under the AKP's civilian rule since the Ergenekon trials of 2008-2013 – a series of cases regarding an alleged clandestine organization consisting of high ranking military officials staging a coup against the AKP government –, the military's compliance is not guaranteed, seen for instance in its objections to the government's Syria policy²³. However, regarding the PKK, the military is aligned with Erdoğan, as is the rest of the country's security bureaucracy. Military and

²¹ E. Peker, "Turkish Fight Against Kurdish Insurgency Spreads", *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-fight-against-kurdish-insurgency-spreads-1456035892>

²² S. Cagaptay, "Erdoğan's Next Act", *Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/erdogans-next-act-1446668849?alg=γ>

²³ "Timeline: Turkey's Ergenekon Trial", *Al Jazeera*, 5 August 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/08/20138512358195978.html>

security forces are in particular concerned about the PKK's "underground state" infrastructure, which includes arms caches, "courts", and "tax offices" that developed in southeastern Turkey during the "Solution Process" between 2013 and 2015²⁴. Accordingly, when the PKK broke ceasefire with Ankara in July 2015, not only Erdoğan, but nearly the entire security establishment were happy to move militarily against the group²⁵.

The PKK for its own part, too, has eagerly embraced violence, undermining the rise of the HDP and Selahattin Demirtaş. The PKK, whose *raison d'être* is violence managed once again to make violence the language of the Kurdish movement, coming out as winners in the process, along with President Erdoğan.

However, the government and the military's actions against the Kurdish insurgency thus far have been mostly counterproductive. Weeks-long curfews, heavy bombardments and urban warfare in HDP strongholds appear to be pushing Turkey's Kurdish population away from the state.

Erdoğan and the Syria complicate the picture

Increasing polarization and violence in the southeast between the Kurds and the government is a challenge, especially at a moment when Turkey is debating writing its first civilian-made constitution and with rising concerns over President Erdoğan's authoritarian style of government. The question is what sort of

²⁴ D. Natali, "Turkey's Protracted PKK Problem", *Al-Monitor*, 1 September 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/turkey-protracted-pkk-problem-kurds.html>

²⁵ "The truce between Turkey and Kurdish militants is over", *The Economist*, 26 July 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21659870-truce-between-turkey-and-kurdish-militants-over-turkey-and-kurds>

political rights to grant to the Kurds. The HDP pushes for an extensive set of group rights, including recognition of the Kurds as a national community and recognition of Kurdish as an official language in the country's constitution and most importantly, broad autonomy for the Kurdish provinces. The AKP has little to gain politically from writing such promises into Turkey's next charter, especially since the party is hoping to reconsolidate the Turkish nationalist vote further than it already did in the November elections thanks to their increasingly hawkish stance against the PKK. Moreover, the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seem more interested in changing Turkey's parliamentary system to an executive presidential system with Erdoğan at the helm, than to solve the Kurdish issue once and for all. President Erdoğan, known to be an astute politician, is well aware that a liberal and compromising stance on the Kurdish issue would not win him enough Kurdish nationalist votes to offset the many Turkish nationalist votes he would lose. Many Turkish nationalists oppose any political reconfiguration of Turkey, into a bi-national state of Turks and Kurds, a federal structure of self-autonomous regions, and this is the constituency that Erdoğan most hopes to court for upcoming referendum to change Turkey's constitution and make Erdoğan an omnipotent executive-style president.

Nevertheless, the Turkish government would do well to reexamine its role in the current escalation with the PKK, if not for political reasons then for the long-term stability of the country as a whole. Turkey's Kurdish problem will not simply disappear if left to smolder on its own. And due to shifting regional dynamics following the Arab Spring, Turkey is now more pressed than ever to develop a more permanent response to its Kurdish issue. The Syrian Civil War, instability in Iraq and the rise of the so-called Islamic State caused Turkey's

doorstep to spiral into chaos. While the Turkish government has at least in part contributed to this mess with its miscalculations in foreign policy, such a policy to go out alone against Assad and his sponsor, Russia, it now finds itself directly affected by the negative developments in its neighborhood. In fact, five of the six deadliest terror attacks in Turkish history have taken place in the last three years and they are all connected to the fallout from the Syrian Civil War. Together, these attacks have killed at least 240 people and injured at least 800 others. Furthermore, the October 2015 attack in Ankara, the July 2015 attack in Suruç, and the June 2015 attack in Diyarbakir all intentionally targeted pro-Kurdish groups, demonstrating the broader, regional aspect of Turkey's Kurdish problem, as well as showing how dangerously and easily the war between IS and PYD in Syria can be imported into Turkey²⁶.

Addressing Turkish Kurdish *Weltschmerz*

Until recently Ankara could have simply told the Turkish Kurds that “they have it really good”, given the country's economic boom and political liberalization. Not so long ago, Turkish leaders could have made a convincing case simply by saying, “given the levels of oppression and marginalization of the Kurds in the adjacent autocratic states, the Turkish Kurds should appreciate what they have”.

This can no longer be said. For one thing, the Iraqi Kurds now “have it really good” as well, and many Turkish Kurds

²⁶ On the Ankara attack, see T. Lister, “Ankara terrorist attack: What does it mean for Turkey?” CNN, 11 October 2015,

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/10/world/turkey-ankara-bomb-why-it-matters/>

On the attack in Suruç, see “Suruc Massacre: At Least 30 Killed in Turkey Border Blast,” *BBC News*, 20 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33593615>

envy the autonomy enjoyed by their ethnic kin in Erbil and Sulaimaniyyah in northern Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds are all but independent, and Turkey's politically active Kurdish community suffers some status anxiety over this fact. There is also economic envy. Until the past decade Diyarbakir and other Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey appeared more prosperous than Sulaimaniyyah and Erbil. Today, the opposite could be true.

There is also the fact that Turkish Kurds are now exposed to the Iraqi Kurds and see what the latter have. Ankara's recent rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds has made the Turkish-Iraqi border a line that exists only on paper, allowing many Turkish Kurds cross into northern Iraq daily to trade, receive education, and in some cases intermarry. These travelers witness firsthand the growth of a Kurdish state and pride in a region not so far from their own. The Iraqi Kurds' rise has created *Weltschmerz*, relative pain, among Turkish Kurds, who envy what the Iraqi Kurds have, and they want even more.

Events in Syria compound Ankara's problem by increasing the Turkish Kurds' relativity-based social pain. As the Assad regime weakened in light of the ongoing civil war, Kurdish parties and groups have started to take control over territories in northern Syria, creating an autonomous Kurdish region called Rojava consisting of three cantons; Jazira, Kobani and Afrin. Syrian Kurds have established institutions and a democratic system there and have received some international recognition as a viable political and military partner, especially in the fight against the IS. It seems that it will only be a matter of time until Kurds in Syria have enough leverage to demand constitutional recognition in a post-Assad Syria. In fact, on 17 March 2016,

the PYD declared a “federal democratic system” in Syria²⁷. If they cannot achieve full-fledged and internationally-recognized autonomy, the Syrian Kurds will at least have political power and recognition – hence, more *Weltschmerz* for the Turkish Kurds.

With the Iranian Kurds enjoying their own Kurdistan province, even though Iran is far from being a democracy, Turkish Kurds in the near future will go from being the “luckiest Kurds” in the Middle East to nearly the most politically underprivileged Kurds in the region. This is where Turkey’s new constitution comes in. If Ankara grasps this opportunity to create a truly liberal charter that broadens everyone’s rights, including those of the Kurds, perceptions of injustice relative to Turkey’s neighbors will carry less weight.

Can Turkey overcome its fear of an independent Kurdistan?

Another fear Turkey needs to overcome is that of an independent state of Kurdistan. This is especially important, just as Turkish Kurds are longing for greater autonomy in reaction to recent regional developments have presented Turkey with a rare opportunity, its own Kurdish moment.

Whereas Turkey’s ties with the Iraqi Kurds have improved in recent years, Ankara’s relations with the Syrian Kurds have remained rather bitter. This is because; unlike in the KRG where Iraqi Kurdish groups hold more sway than the PKK, the PKK is very popular among the Syrian Kurds. Bashar al-Assad’s father allowed the PKK to grow inside Syria to use the

²⁷ “Syria civil war: Kurds declare federal region in north”, *AlJazeera*, 17 March 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-civil-war-kurds-declare-federal-system-north-160317111902534.html>

group as a proxy against Turkey, and this bond between the two has remained.

Somewhere between 10 and 20 per cent of the Syrian population is Kurdish, creating a strong case for a greater Kurdish zone of control and eventual autonomy together with fraternal allies in Iraq, particularly given that the largest concentrations of Kurds in Syria live in the north along the Turkish border areas stretching eastward toward northwestern Iraq. There is also linguistic commonality among the Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi Kurds in that Kurdish stretch. These Kurds speak the Kurmanji variety of Kurdish, as opposed to most Iranian and northeastern Iraqi Kurds, who speak the Sorani variety of Kurdish, which is as different from Kurmanji as perhaps Portuguese is from Spanish. The strong historic relationship between Syrian and Turkish Kurds meant that the PYD's increased control of Kurdish areas in northern Syria triggered a fear in Ankara that PYD victories could signal the birth of a PKK-led state on its doorstep²⁸.

However, cross-border dynamic of the Syrian Civil War and imminent security threats from multiple actors against Turkey present an important case for why Ankara needs to conquer its deeply-rooted fear of an independent Kurdistan. Turkey might actually be better served by supporting strong buffer states such as Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan instead of attempts to maintain the far less defined ground realities today. If Ankara were to make peace with Syrian Kurds, it would benefit from having a friendly force that guards over 450 miles of Syria's 540-mile long Turkish border against IS and other threats.

Furthermore, as has been the case with Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkish infrastructure companies have been among the prime

²⁸ H. Barkey, "Erdoğan's Foreign Policy is in Ruins", *Foreign Policy*, 4 February 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/04/erdogans-foreign-policy-is-in-ruins/>

beneficiaries of the region's investment boom, winning major contracts for road and airport construction. Turkey is the necessary outlet for Kurdistan's energy resources and a necessary trade partner for any landlocked entity emerging in the post-Syrian aftermath. Turkey's advantage of a strong and vibrant free-market economy would also prove mutually beneficial to an autonomous Syrian Kurdish region in post-Assad Syria, as it has with Iraqi Kurdistan.

In this regard, Syrian Kurds could learn from the remarkable shift in relations between Turkey and the Iraqi KRG. In recent years, Ankara's policy with the Iraqi Kurds has evolved from open hostility in 2003 at the beginning of the Iraq War to open friendship today. When Iraqi Kurds showed good will on the PKK issue; allowing Turkey to carry out cross-border military operations, Ankara reciprocated, building good ties with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Today, Turkey has a diplomatic mission in Erbil. Turkish Airlines, the country's national flag carrier, flies directly from Erbil to both Istanbul and Antalya, facilitating Iraqi Kurdish tourism in the Turkish Riviera. And trade between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds has boomed to such an extent that, were Iraqi Kurdistan an independent country, Turkey would be its largest trading partner²⁹.

Even if Turkey manages to put down a Kurdish insurgency at home, it would have a difficult time against Turkish Kurds backed by the Syrian Kurds. To be sure, Turkey is a powerful state and could eventually defeat a multi-country front, but only at an immense cost – suspension of democratic liberties, massive bloodshed, huge material damage, and Ankara's

²⁹ S. Cagaptay, Ch.B. Fidan and E.C. Sacikara, *Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth*. The Washington Institute, 16 March 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-krg-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth>

diversion away from the IS threat – with grave implications for Washington’s alliance with Ankara.

Solutions

To preempt a widespread Kurdish upheaval, Turkey would be better served to address the Kurds’ grievances, although following the regional examples in Syria, Iraq, and Iran is not necessarily the best way to go about it. In those countries, an overwhelming majority of Kurds live within the boundaries of their traditional homelands, or Kurdistan. In Turkey, half of the Kurds have migrated out of their homeland in the country’s southeast, and Istanbul is the most populous Kurdish city in the world.

There is no doubt that Turkey cannot grow closer to Iraqi and Syrian Kurds without making permanent peace with its own Kurdish community. Given Turkish political dynamics, territorial Kurdish autonomy looks unlikely. One reason is that a majority of the Turkish population would object to this step. More important, a potential autonomous Kurdish region inside the country would have to exclude nearly half the country’s Kurds, who live in western Turkey, having moved there over the years for jobs and other opportunities. Geographically, the distribution of Kurds in Turkey is very different from that in Iraq, Syria, and Iran, where population concentrations in Kurds’ territorial homeland make territorially based autonomy a realistic outcome.

The solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey is, therefore, not narrow political autonomy but broader liberties for all citizens. Turkey needs to provide its citizens with the broadest individual freedoms imaginable if it is to satisfy its Kurdish citizens regarding their rights, including Kurds in western Turkey. A prescription for individual rights is also most

appropriate given Turkey's historical experience, whereby the forms of repression endured by Kurds resulted from distinct historical circumstances. Moreover, the Kurdish population is not only diffused geographically in Turkey but is also quickly integrating. One of every six Kurds is married to a Turk³⁰. Accordingly, addressing Kurdish demands in Turkey means granting comprehensive cultural rights to all of the country's citizens, Kurd or not, irrespective of location. Reforms would include access to education and public services not only in Kurdish but in other minority languages as well.

A framework based on strengthening individual rights would almost certainly be embraced by Kurds and Turks alike. In the short term, the government could take a number of specific and feasible steps. First, removing the legal uncertainties that surround the use of indigenous names for villages and landmarks would be a welcomed symbolic gesture to Kurdish and other linguistic minorities. Many buildings, towns, and streets with Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, Kurdish, or Greek names were reassigned "Turkish" names during the 20th century. A reversal of this forced renaming would serve as an acknowledgement of Turkey's linguistic and ethnic diversity.

A change in judicial culture, even if gradual, should be another goal. Turkish criminal law entails a good deal of vague wording, gaining much of its significance from how technical and legal terms are interpreted by the judges reviewing a case. Even if criminal statutes may seem perfectly reasonable if interpreted prudently, some Turkish judges have gained a unfortunate reputation for illiberal interpretations of the law. This factor has been behind many of the harsh rulings against pro-Kurdish political activists and journalists in Turkey. For example, the police arrested thousands of Kurdish nationalists

³⁰ "Milliyet. 55 milyon kişi 'etnik olarak' Türk", *KONDA*, 22 March 2007, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/03/22/guncel/angun.html>

in 2011 that were linked to the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), a pro-PKK political umbrella organization. Authorities alleged that the KCK members were working for the benefit of the PKK. But while some involved in the case could be connected to the outlawed and violent PKK. Many others, however, represent the legal, civilian Kurdish political movement, although they refuse to explicitly denounce the PKK³¹.

Turkey also needs to appease the Kurds by making peace with what happened in the past. The history of the Turkey-PKK conflict is full of extrajudicial killings or crimes committed by unknown perpetrators. This includes the December 2011 targeting of a convoy of Kurdish smugglers by the Turkish military in Uludere that resulted in the death of thirty-four people and the October 2015 bombing in Ankara, which targeted mostly pro-Kurdish groups³². Acknowledging the mistakes from the past and bringing perpetrators to justice would help alleviate Kurds' grievances.

These reforms should also come with administrative, but not political, autonomy. Turkey is a large country in need of decentralization. Many nationalist Kurds want self-government in the southeast. But an overwhelming majority of Turks oppose outright federalization. In this regard, Turkey might look Spain's administrative reforms beginning in 1980s as a model. In Spain's asymmetrical political system, areas such as the Basque region have stronger administrative autonomy than others, even though all areas remain under central government

³¹ Amnesty International, "Turkey: KCK Arrests Deepen Freedom of Expression Concerns", Amnesty International, 10 November 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/015/2011/en/>

³² F. Tastekin, "Turkey's Kurds want explanation, apology for Roboski massacre", *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/turkish-kurds-remain-estranged.html>

control. By providing the Basques with local political power, Spain ultimately negotiated a non-federalized government that deflated the violent wing of the Basque movement.

Turkey could follow a similar path of decentralization, allowing for stronger administrative autonomy in Kurdish provinces and other outlying areas while maintaining constitutional unity. By granting broad individual freedoms and greater administrative autonomy to Kurds, Ankara can win the Kurds while also satisfying the country's greater populace. Many Turks are uncomfortable with the country's current military-written constitution, which reads like a "don't do" list rather than an outline of Turkey's national principles. Not just the Kurds but Turks of all stripes would welcome a fresh constitution that lists their freedoms and those alone. This is the best way to help Turkey consolidate as a liberal democracy.

Can Turkey capture its "Kurdish moment"?

It will be hard for Turkey to maintain leverage over the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds when Turkish Kurds are locked in a violent struggle against Ankara. As it vies for influence in Syria and Iraq and stability across its borders with those countries, Ankara has to make peace with its Kurdish community. Kurdish nationalists and some others believe that this is the Kurds' moment in history. The Kurds may indeed turn the Middle East's post-World War I alignment on its head, but they cannot do this without Turkey. This is in fact Turkey's Kurdish and Middle East moment – if Ankara gets its hand right at home.

But all this depends on Erdoğan's political agenda. If the Turkish leader continues to fight the PKK to maintain his strong man image in the hopes of transitioning Turkey into a presidential system of government with himself at the helm, Ankara can miss the proverbial Kurdish train, not only in Syria,

but also inside the country. The risk for Turkey is that will reflexively respond to developments in Syria, where the PYD is supported by Russia and the United States alike and may prompt rash Turkish action. Respectively, the PKK can launch an all-out war, expanding the violence to cities in western Turkey. This would put Turkey at the risk of a long and sustained PKK-led insurgency in the southeast, a U.S. – and Russian backed and PKK – aligned Rojava entity in Syria across the border, and terror and mayhem in the country's big cities. Turkey could survive these shocks, but only at a huge humanitarian and material cost as well as damage to its human rights record, and even alliance with the United States. It is Turkey's Kurdish moment to capture: if Ankara plays it right, it can become long-term friends with the Kurds. And if Erdoğan decides on war with both the PKK and the PYD, then Turkey could, unfortunately, be in for a rough ride.