

The Kurds in Turkey: A Gloomy Future

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Articles & Testimony

As Turkey vies for influence in Syria and Iraq and stability across its borders with those countries, it will need to make peace with its own Kurdish community.

The following is an excerpt from a chapter in the new study [Kurdistan: An Invisible Nation](#) (http://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/KURDISTAN_TORELLI/KURDISTAN_TORELLI.pdf), published by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). To read the full chapter, download the PDF.

Today, Turkey faces its biggest challenge from the Kurds since before the government captured Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with U.S. assistance, in February 1999. 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 Ocalan 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 Development Party. 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 Erdogan'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 swaths 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 on a dangerous trajectory, including inflamed fighting with the PKK, terror attacks by the PKK's franchise the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, 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. 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.

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... ❖

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