

Kurds Can Go Their Own Way

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's approach to resolving the Kurdish issue should be rooted in European models and liberal politics, not the Syria war or failed Ottoman-era policies.

In the early twentieth century, as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing, what took the Young Turk leaders by surprise was not that the Armenians pursued independence but that the Albanians did. The Young Turks could understand, even if they did not accept, that Christian Armenians would want to break away from the Muslim-ruled empire. But why should Albanians, most of whom were Muslims like the Turks, want to part ways?

At the height of their nationalist fervor during the first decade of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Albanians had simple political demands, including the recognition of their alphabet and education in Albanian. After coming to power in 1908, the Young Turks refused to grant even those requests. Subsequently, the Albanians led three rebellions, which the Young Turks crushed. Istanbul won, but was debilitated. When the Balkan Wars broke out in 1912-13 and pulled Turkey into a regional maelstrom, the weakened Ottoman state crumbled and the disgruntled Albanians used the opportunity to break away from Ottoman control.

Today, Turkey faces a similar complication, in the form of Kurdish nationalism. Like the Albanians, who posed a united front, the Kurds have finally come together against Ankara. And just like the Young Turks, who could not wrap their heads around Albanian nationalist demands, Turkey's Ottoman-nostalgic president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is failing to grasp what it is that the Kurds want. Perhaps most ominously, Turkey once more faces a political riptide, this time in the Middle East, brought about by the rise of Islamic State (also called ISIS) and the meltdown of Iraq and Syria. Unless the Erdogan administration addresses Kurdish demands, it could meet a fate similar to the Ottomans after they were confronted with Albanian agitation.

SPLIT VOTE

For a long time, Turkey's Kurdish community, 10 million to 12 million strong, was politically divided and subsequently failed to act as a national movement. Conservative Kurds, constituting around two-fifths of the

Kurdish community, typically voted for Erdogan's Islamist-influenced Justice and Development Party (AKP), closely identifying with the party that has ruled Turkey since 2002. Leftist Kurds, also representing two-fifths of the Kurdish population, voted for the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and its predecessor, known as the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The HDP and the BDP come from a long line of Kurdish nationalist parties known to be deferential toward the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an armed group that Ankara has fought for decades. The pro-PKK alignment cast the nationalist Kurds in opposition to Ankara.

Meanwhile, liberal-minded Alevi Kurds, around one-fifth of the Kurdish community, traditionally voted for secularist parties, particularly the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). In this, they joined with Turkish-speaking Alevis, prioritizing their confessional identity over their ethnic one.

These political divisions within the Kurdish community came to an end over the summer. During the June 7 parliamentary elections, the Kurdish factions voted as a block for HDP, which had previously struggled to pass the electoral threshold, and against Turkey's powerful president.

What brought the Kurds together was Erdogan's wait-and-see policy on Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish enclave controlled by a PKK-aligned Syrian Kurdish group, which came under ISIS attack in September 2014. His failure to stop the bloodshed appalled his conservative Kurdish base, as did his perceived attempts to use ISIS attacks on the Kurdish town as a bargaining chip to force the PKK, its Syrian counterpart, and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to accept his terms in peace talks. One Turkish Kurd, who voted for the AKP in previous elections, told me: "How can anyone who watches Kurdish girls forced into sexual slavery be a good Muslim?"

And so, on June 7, conservative Kurds left Erdogan's party in droves; nearly one million switched from the AKP to the HDP. The AKP lost 18 legislative seats to the HDP in the country's southeast alone, making HDP the dominant party in Turkey's Kurdish provinces. Even more astounding, conservative and leftist Kurds alike are now united under the HDP's banner, a historical first in Turkey.

Alevi Kurds, too, threw their lot behind the HDP in the summer election. In the run-up to the vote, the HDP fielded a number of liberal candidates, including Alevi politicians, to broaden its base and surpass Turkey's ten percent electoral threshold. This strategy worked, helping the HDP win 13 percent of the Turkish vote. In Tunceli, Turkey's only Kurdish Alevi majority province, the HDP harnessed 61 percent support. In 2011, 57.5 percent of Tunceli's voters supported the CHP, whereas only 22 percent supported the BDP, the HDP's predecessor.

The consolidation of the Kurdish vote has changed Kurdish politics in Turkey. For the first time, an overwhelming majority of the country's Kurds are voting for one party, with their political differences trumped by ethnic unity. And that means that Turkey can no longer afford to ignore Kurdish demands for comprehensive rights and political inclusion. With 13 percent of the vote, the HDP tied for the third-largest bloc in the Turkish legislature. This has made it a potential kingmaker in the hung Turkish parliament, in which no party has been able to muster the majority to form a government. According to the polls, the HDP is likely to retain its strength in the forthcoming snap elections scheduled for November 1.

BEHIND THE TIMES

Erdogan seems blind to the changes in his country. He comes from an Islamist tradition that sees the Kurds through the lens of religion: they are part of the Turkish nation since they are united with the Turks through shared religious bonds. Accordingly, he is unwilling to grant them special considerations.

What is more, by launching a military offensive against the PKK on July 24 in retaliation for PKK attacks, he has signaled that he would rather bulldoze his way into Turkey's Kurdish majority regions than work with those regions' inhabitants. Previously, when the Kurds were divided and Ankara fought only the PKK, such a strategy might have worked. Now, that appears unlikely.

To be sure, the PKK has not caught up with the times either. The armed group remains an exclusive club for hard-line Marxists ready to die; the United States, Turkey, and NATO still consider the PKK a terrorist group. Even so, conflict between Ankara and the PKK, and the subsequent spilling of Kurdish blood, will only consolidate Turkish Kurds of all stripes under the HDP, and many others could, unfortunately, gravitate toward the PKK's claim that the only way to defend Kurdish rights is through armed resistance.

According to the polls, the AKP is currently hovering just below a parliamentary majority. So, for his part, Erdogan is surely hoping that a military campaign will enhance the AKP's Turkish nationalist credentials, boosting its popularity at the snap elections to be held in November. The AKP could, perhaps, emerge stronger in November, winning a legislative majority again. But even that will not tamp down on rising Kurdish nationalism.

The regional maelstrom has taken things out of Erdogan's hands. The Kurds in Iraq run their affairs inside the nominally independent Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil, and since the beginning of the civil war, Syrian Kurds have carved out de facto autonomous areas, collectively known as Western Kurdistan, controlled by the PKK's Syrian sister organization, the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD). Unless Turkey provides real answers to Turkish Kurds' demands, such as access to education and public services in Kurdish, and also treats them as a serious political partner, they may follow the path of the Ottoman Albanians a hundred years ago -- or at least they will try.

Turkey might be able to put down a Kurdish insurgency at home, but it would have a difficult time against Turkish Kurds backed by the Syrian Kurds. (The Iraqi Kurdish leadership in Erbil is on friendly terms with Erdogan, and the KRG does not support the PKK, although a full-blown Turkish-PKK war would rally the Iraqi Kurdish street against both Ankara and Erbil.) 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 diversion away from the ISIS threat -- with grave implications for Washington's alliance with Ankara.

To preempt a widespread Kurdish upheaval, Turkey needs 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.

The Kurdish population is not only diffused geographically in Turkey but is also quickly integrating. One of every six Kurds is married to a Turk. 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.

These reforms should come with administrative, but not political, autonomy. Turkey is a large country in need of decentralization. The Kurds want self-government in the southeast. But an overwhelming majority of Turks oppose outright federalization. In this regard, Turkey can look to Spain's administrative reforms that began in the 1980s. In Spain's asymmetrical political system, areas such as the Basque region have stronger administrative autonomy than others. Yet all areas remain under central government control. By providing the Basques with local political power, Spain has ultimately pulled the carpet out from under 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. Indeed, Turkey's inspiration for moving forward should come from European models and liberal politics, not from the Syrian war or Ottoman fixes.

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