

Turkey's Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas – Syria, Iraq and at Home; How They Are Related, and Where They Might Lead

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Abstract

With the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government of northern Iraq to quasi-statehood, the growing political and economic relationship between it and Turkey, the turmoil in Syria that has led to the establishment of self-governing Kurdish zones in the country, and Turkey's continuing attempts to resolve its own Kurdish problem, Ankara is now grappling with a 'Kurdish issue' that is more transborder, complex, overlapping and interlinked than ever before. This paper traces the relationship between these various and fast-moving dimensions of Turkey's Kurdish dilemmas, and speculates about the range of possible outcomes. It also seeks to locate Turkey's Kurdish policies and problems within the context of wider regional and global dynamics.

Keyword: Kurds, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, KRG, PKK

Türkiye'nin Çok Yönlü Kürt Çıkmazları – Suriye, Irak ve Anavatanda; Nasıl Birbirleriyle Bağlantılıdır ve Ne Yöne Gidebilir

Özet

Kuzey Irak'ın Bölgesel Kürt Yönetimi'nin yarı-devlet olma yoluna girmesiyle, Türkiye ile arasında artan siyasi ve ekonomik ilişkilerle, ülkede özerk Kürt alanlar oluşmasına yol açan Suriye'deki karışıklıkla ve Türkiye'nin kendi Kürt sorununu çözmek için devam eden girişimleriyle, Ankara şimdi hiç olmadığı kadar daha sınırlar-arası, karmaşık, örtüşen ve birbirine bağlı bir "Kürt Sorunu" ile boğuşmaktadır. Bu çalışma Türkiye'nin Kürt çıkmazının çeşitli ve hızla gelişen boyutları arasındaki ilişkileri izlemektedir ve olası sonuçların kapsa-

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mı hakkında tahminlerde bulunmaktadır. Aynı zamanda Türkiye'nin Kürt politikalarını ve sorunlarını daha geniş bölgesel ve küresel dinamikler içinde saptamaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kürtler, Türkiye, Suriye, Irak, IKBY, PKK

المشاكل الكردية ذات الأبعاد المتعددة بالنسبة الى تركيا – كيفية ارتباطها ببعضها في سوريا والعراق والوطن الأم، والى أية اتجاهات قد تسير نحوها
بيل بارك

الملخص :

بعد ان اوضحت الادارة الكردية الإقليمية في شمال العراق تتجه نحو كونها شبه دولة مستقلة، ونتيجة العلاقات السياسية والاقتصادية المتزايدة بين هذه النظام وتركيا، والاضطرابات التي تشهدها سوريا والتي فتحت المجال لتكوين مساحات كردية المستقلة في البلاد، والمبادرات المستمرة التي تبذلها تركيا من اجل حل مشكلتها الكردية الداخلية. فان انقرة تتصارع الآن مع "مشكلة كردية"، لم يسبق لها مثيل من قبل من حيث التعقيد وتداخل الحدود وارتباط احداها بالأخرى وتغطية إحداها للأخرى. وتحاول هذه الدراسة تتبع العلاقات المختلفة بين ابعاد المشكلة الكردية المتفاقمة بسرعة في تركيا، والتنبؤ بالنتائج المحتملة لهذه المشكلة. كما تحاول هذه الدراسة، في نفس الوقت، تشخيص السياسات الكردية لتركيا ومشاكلها ضمن ديناميكيات اقليمية ودولية وابعاد اكثر اتساعا وعمقا.

كلمات مفتاحية : الأكراد، تركيا، سوريا، العراق، KRG، PKK

Introduction; Turkey's multiple and overlapping dilemmas

As Ankara embarks on the 'Imrali process' in its latest endeavour to find some kind of resolution to its domestic problem of Kurdish unrest and alienation, it is more evident today even than has been the case in the past that Turkey's Kurdish question is a trans-state one that is by no means confined to, or soluble within, Turkey's own national borders.¹ Although the latest 'Kurdish opening' is surely primarily motivated by Turkey's purely domestic political needs, the emergence of a more or less self-governing Kurdish enclave in Syria has added to Ankara's sense of urgency. This assessment is strengthened by the apparent pre-eminence amongst Syrian Kurds of the PYD (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*, or Democratic Union Party), which is generally presumed in Turkey to be an offshoot of the PKK (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, or Kurdistan Workers Party). The developing unrest in Syria that followed the Assad regime's crack-down in Spring 2011 was soon accompanied by a withdrawal of government forces from Syria's Kurdish areas in the country's north and northeast.² In what might yet prove to be an echo of the consequences of Saddam Hussein's withdrawal of government forces from northern Iraq in October 1991, this provided the opportunity for the PYD to effect a takeover and to introduce autonomous governing structures.

The Syrian Kurdish takeover was preceded and partly accompanied by a spike in PKK violence inside Turkey, in which it was estimated that more than seven hundred people were killed in the fourteen months up to August 2012 – the highest level of PKK-related violence for thirteen years.³ Turkey feared that it might find itself faced with a two-front campaign by PKK fighters from across both the Iraqi and Syrian borders. This fear is perhaps understandable given that as many as one third of the PKK membership may be of Syrian Kurdish origin,⁴ and also in the light of Ankara's conviction that

1 This is the theme running through *The Kurdish question and Turkey: an example of a trans-state ethnic conflict*, Kemal Kirisci and Gareth M. Winrow, (London and Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass, 1997).

2 Scott Bobb, "Syrian conflict gives Kurds new freedom", *Voice of America News*, 20 August 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/content/syrian-conflict-gives-kurds-partial-control-of-north/1491341.html>, accessed 5 June 2013.

3 *Turkey: the PKK and a Kurdish settlement*, Europe Report no. 219, International Crisis Group, 11 September 2012, p.1, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/219-turkey-the-pkk-and-a-kurdish-settlement>, accessed 28 May 2013.

4 Nihat Ali Ozcan and H.Erdem Gurkaynak, "Who are these armed people on the mountains?", February 2012 <http://www.tepev.org.tr>, accessed 17 May 2012.

Damascus resuscitated its support for Turkey's Kurds in retaliation for Ankara's support for the Syrian opposition.⁵ Indeed, Turkey's sponsorship and hosting of the Syrian National Council (SNC), and the close links it has with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), both of which were headquartered in Turkey until November 2012, in effect made Turkey a party in the fight over Syria's future. Ankara's preference has been that Syria's Kurds commit to the SNC's struggle against the Assad regime. However, most of the diverse and squabbling elements that make up the increasingly Islamic and Arab nationalist Syrian opposition lack sympathy with Kurdish aspirations. In any case Syria's Kurds are almost as divided as the SNC,⁶ but most appear to distrust the opposition to Assad as much or more than they distrust Assad, and they have generally kept their distance from it. Notwithstanding clashes between the PYD and pro-government forces in late 2012 and subsequently, and the PYD's demands for Syrian Kurdish autonomy, Ankara suspects the PYD is in an alliance of sorts with the regime. Clashes between PYD and anti-government forces that broke out in late 2012 and early 2013 might give some credence to the Turkish view,⁷ although many Kurds - and not a few Turks - believe Turkish-backed Arab forces provoked the exchanges.⁸ Iran too has a track record of aiding the PKK as a lever against Turkey, and Ankara's differences with Tehran over both the Syrian crisis and Iraq's evolution may also have prompted Iran to offer sustenance to the PKK.⁹ Turkey's role in the simmering sectarian tensions in the region further complicates its Kurdish dilemmas. In short, the region's volatility, and Turkey's response to it, has highlighted its own vulnerability to PKK violence. Hence Ankara's need to initiate a peace process at home.

5 Serkan Demirtas, "Syria supporting PKK, says intelligence report", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 23 March 2012.

6 For analyses of Syria's Kurdish politics, see Denise Natali, "Syria's Kurdish Quagmire", 3 May 2012, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/5/syriakurd486.htm, accessed 3 May 2012; *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, International Crisis Group (ICG), Middle East Report No.136, 22 January 2013; *Who Is the Syrian Kurdish Opposition?: The Development of Kurdish Parties, 1956-2011*, KurdWatch, Report 8, December 2011.

7 For details, see www.kurdwatch.org.

8 Statement Regarding Terrorist Attacks on Syrian Kurdish Town Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ain, National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria, 20 January 2013, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/1/syriakurd726.htm, accessed 22 January 2013.

9 Cengiz Candar, "Turkey claims Iran providing logistical support for PKK", *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2012.

It is also reasonable to assume that Ankara's apparent readiness to enter into dialogue with the leadership of Turkey's Kurds is connected to the glaring paradox of its ever-closer relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq. Recent years have witnessed a steadily intensifying crackdown against members of the Kurdish Communities Union (*Koma Civikan Kurdistan*, or KCK) in Turkey, a pro-Kurdish umbrella organisation. Commencing as early as April 2009 and leading to up to ten thousand arrests up to the present time, the detainees include elected officials of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, or BDP), human rights activists, lawyers, trades unionists, intellectuals and the like. Yet this process, and the increasingly violent struggle with the PKK that paralleled it, has been conducted alongside Ankara's pursuit of deepening economic, political and energy with the self-governing Kurdish entity across the border in Iraq. Trade with the KRG now accounts for well over half of Turkey's trade with Iraq as a whole, which is Turkey's second or third largest trading partner. Tens of thousands of Turkish citizens work or have established businesses in Kurdish Iraq, many of them Turkish Kurds. Indeed, the potential economic benefits to Turkey's impoverished and predominantly Kurdish-inhabited southeast of the KRG's booming economy is not lost on Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP), which is engaged in a competition for votes in the region with the pro-Kurdish BDP.

The developing energy relationship between Turkey and the KRG is particularly compelling.¹⁰ The estimates of energy reserves in Iraq's north have increased substantially since Erbil decided to enter into its own exploration agreements, a policy regarded as illegal by Baghdad. The problem for the KRG and the companies that operate there – which include such energy 'supermajors' as ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Total – is how to export the oil and gas that has been discovered. Notwithstanding Baghdad's opposition to Iraqi energy trade that it does not itself sanction, Turkey has emerged as a willing destination and transit route for KRG oil and gas. Currently small quantities of oil are being trucked across the border, but pipelines are under construction which could carry the KRG's oil and gas directly across the Turkish border. In addition to the

¹⁰ For background, see "Iraq and the Kurds: the high stakes hydrocarbons gambit", *International Crisis Group Middle East Report* no.120, 19 April 2012.

alleged unconstitutionality of such trade, Baghdad fears that the KRG's autonomous energy policy could result in Erbil's economic independence from the rest of Iraq and threaten the county's territorial integrity. Just a few years ago this was Ankara's position too, and emphatically so, but Turkey now appears either to have altered its assessment of the political implications of an increasingly financially self-sufficient KRG, or to have embraced the possibility of Iraq's further decentralisation and even fragmentation. Even Washington is nervous at Ankara's boldness.¹¹

Barzani; Turkey's new 'best friend' in the region?

Figures in both Ankara and Erbil have described their relationship as 'strategic'. Both have poor relations with the Shia-dominated regime of Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad, have a shared stake in the development of the KRG's energy resources, and once the new pipelines are in operation will also have a shared stake in the safe exportation of energy through Turkey's Kurdish populated southeast. Furthermore, the popularity of Öcalan amongst more radical Kurds, and the example set by the PKK fighters holed up in northern Iraq's Kandil mountains, poses a political challenge to the Iraqi Kurdish authorities, who are also compromised by Turkish military attacks against PKK bases within KRG territory. Unsurprisingly, KRG leaders would prefer to see an end to Ankara's conflict with the PKK. KRG President Massoud Barzani and other leading KRG figures have repeatedly called for the PKK to end its armed campaign, and encouraged both sides to seek a peaceful solution. During his visit to Turkey in April 2012, Barzani declared that he "will not allow the PKK to prevail in the (KRG) region".¹² In Barzani Ankara now believes it has found a Kurdish leader who it can relate to. This is more a paradigm shift than a simple resurrection of earlier tactical alliances, such as that during Barzani's struggle against the Tehran-backed PUK in the 1990s, although both sides retain a wariness borne of earlier periods of mutual antipathy.

11 Sevgi Akarcesme, "Ambassador Tan: U.S. rhetoric at times resembles that of Iran's on the issue of Iraq," *Sundays Zaman*, www.todayszaman.com/news-303463-ambassador-tan-us-rhetoric-at-times-resembles-irans-on-the-issue-of-iraq.html, ; Serkan Demirtas, "Turkey, U.S., to hold intensified Iraq talks," *Hurriyet Daily News*, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-us-to-hold-intensified-iraq-talks.aspx?pageID=238&nID=38575&NewsCatID=338, both 8 January, 2013, accessed 27 January, 2013; Turkey defies Washington and Baghdad to pursue Iraqi Kurdistan energy ties," 19 February, 2013, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/2/turkey4532.htm, , accessed 20 February, 2013.

12 "Massoud Barzani says won't allow PKK to operate from Iraqi Kurdistan," 20 April 2012, www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/4/turkey3893.htm, accessed 26 April 2012.

Whether Ankara now envisages that comparably constructive relationships can be established with Öcalan and/or the BDP leadership – and perhaps the PYD too – is unclear. That Öcalan apparently recently hailed Barzani as the leader of all Kurds might be regarded as a positive indication,¹³ as might a recent meeting between PYD leader Salih Muslim and Turkish officials.¹⁴ Although Muslim claims to welcome the talks between Ankara and the PKK, it is also evident that he remains highly sceptical of Turkey's goodwill towards Kurdish aspirations in general.¹⁵ What does seem clear is that Erbil – or, rather, Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) – and Ankara have adopted complementary approaches to the crisis in Syria, at least to some degree. As we have noted, for Ankara the PYD is often seen as synonymous with the PKK. Many Turks are also convinced that Damascus resuscitated its support for Turkey's Kurds in retaliation for Ankara's support of the Syrian opposition, and that the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the Kurdish-populated areas of the country during the early phase of the uprising was intended to give Turkey pause for thought.¹⁶ In other words, developments in Syrian Kurdistan constitute a vital part of Turkey's general concern over developments in Syria, and as early as July 2012 Turkey's prime minister was warning of the possibility of Turkish air strikes against PKK elements in northern Syria.¹⁷

Again as already noted, Barzani shares Ankara's distaste for the PKK and PYD, and is unhappy at the PYD's apparent domination of the now quite autonomous Syrian Kurdish regions. In July 2012 he sought to moderate their undoubted influence amongst Syria's Kurds by brokering a united front between the PYD and the Kurd-

- 13 “Ocalan calls Barzani the leader of all Kurds”, *Kurdpress*, 9 June 2013, <http://www.kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=4718#Title=%0A%09%09%09%09%09%09%09%09Ocalan%20calls%20Barzani%20the%20leader%20of%20all%20Kurds%0A%09%09%09%09%09%09%09%09>, accessed 20 June 2013.
- 14 Sevil Kucukkosum, “PYD leader meets Turkish officials”, 3 June 2013, *Hurriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pyd-leader-meets-turkish-officials.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48066&NewsCatID=352>, accessed 20 June 2013.
- 15 See the interview with Muslim, “Turkish-Kurdish peace process benefits Syrian Kurds”, reproduced in *Al Monitor*, 17 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/interview-salih-muslim-syria-kurds.html>, accessed 20 June 2013.
- 16 Serkan Demirtas, “Syria supporting PKK,” 23 March 2012, *op.cit.*; Oytun Orhan, “Syria's PKK game,” *Today's Zaman*, 14 February 2012, www.todayzaman.com, accessed 27 February 2013; ‘Turkey enlists northern Iraq's help in countering threat of Syria-PKK alliance’, Abdullah Bozkurt, *Today's Zaman*, 23 March 2012, www.todayzaman.com, accessed 27 February 2013.
- 17 “Turkey warns it would strike Kurdish PKK fighters inside Syrian Kurdistan,” www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/7/turkey4047.htm, 26 July 2012, accessed 25 January 2013.

ish National Council (KNC), a more pro-Barzani but divided group of Syrian Kurdish factions.¹⁸ Furthermore, his KDP has also been engaged in establishing and training a Syrian *peshmerga* that could form a fighting arm for the more pro-Barzani elements of the KNC and which might also prove more sympathetic to Syria's Arab opposition forces, as is Turkey of course. However, the PYD has sought to prevent them from crossing into Syria from their northern Iraqi bases, which is just one indication of how unsuccessful Barzani's efforts to forge greater Syrian Kurdish unity have been thus far, and of how dominant the PYD remains in Syrian Kurdistan.¹⁹ Furthermore, in May 2013 the PYD arrested seventy-four members of an armed pro-KDP faction that apparently did manage to cross into Syria. In retaliation, Barzani closed the KRG-Syrian border.²⁰ Skirmishes between the PYD and other Syrian Kurdish factions have reportedly occurred on a number of occasions at least since mid-2012.²¹ Given that Iraqi Kurdistan's other ruling party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), appears to favour - and some of its members might even have joined forces with - the PYD, Syrian Kurdish divisions could undermine the unity of the KRG.²² On the other hand, Barzani has expressed his support for the Syrian federation idea,²³ and he recognises the disadvantages that division carries for the Syrian Kurdish cause. The interest Barzani has taken in the possible emergence of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish region has introduced a note of disquiet into Ankara-Erbil relationships. Ankara is uneasy at the prospect of the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish zone in Syria, and seems simultaneously mistrustful of the role Barzani might be playing though supportive of his attempts to

18 David Pollock, "Syrian Kurds unite against Assad, but not with opposition," *Policywatch 1967*, The Washington Institute, 31 July 2012. For more on the KNC, see "*The Kurdish National Council in Syria*," Carnegie Middle East Center, 15 February 2012, www.carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502, accessed 25 January 2013.

19 *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, International Crisis Group (ICG), Middle East Report No.136, 22 January 2013, pp.4-5, 25.

20 Wladimir van Wildenburg, "Border arrests reveal disunity, conflict among Syrian Kurds", *Al Monitor*, 21 May 2013, accessed 5 June 2013.

21 Wladimir van Wildenburg, "Danger of Kurdish civil war in Syrian Kurdistan," *Rudaw*, 8 July 2012, www.rudaw.net/english/science/columnists/4931.html, accessed 25 January 2013. Also see www.kurdwatch.org.

22 Eric Bruneau, "Taking the fight to Syria: Kurdish rivalries play out over the border", *Niqash*, 30 May 2013, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=3228>, accessed 5 June 2013.

23 Ipek Yezdani, "Syrian Kurds aim to establish 'federal state'", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 February 2012, www.hurriyetdailynews.com, accessed 27 February 2013.

undermine the PYD.²⁴ In short, it is a set of circumstances that is shot through with paradox and contradiction.

Where might these developments lead? The PKK

The 'Imralı process' has been a curious initiative thus far and remains hard to assess. It is of course just the latest of a number of attempts by the AKP government to address Turkey's Kurdish difficulties through non-military means.²⁵ The AKP enjoys considerable support amongst Turkey's Kurdish voters, especially from the roughly half of them that reside in Turkey's cities. It is in electoral competition with the BDP in Turkey's southeast, and may also be motivated by the aspiration to further limit the domestic political role of the Turkish military, which in the past has been largely responsible for 'securitising' Turkey's approach to its Kurdish question. Furthermore, the drawn out struggle against the PKK has been economically, politically and socially very costly for Turkey, upsetting its western friends, draining the national budget, and pitting citizen against citizen. The AKP government's efforts started with Prime Minister Erdoğan's recognition, in a speech in Diyarbakır in August 2005, that Turkey has a 'Kurdish issue' and that 'mistakes' had been made in the handling of it. His answer to the problem then was more democratisation in Turkey generally. Indeed, reforms did produce a softening of the restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language, notably in the media. However, it wasn't until the 2009 launch of the 'Kurdish opening' that any real progress seemed likely. The way for this had been paved by the so-called Oslo Process, a series of secret talks with Kurdish elements that were led on the Turkish side by Hakan Fidan, now the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, or MIT).²⁶

There were deliberations with civil society and a National Assembly debate, but for a variety of reasons the initiative came to a halt in 2011. The government coupled the initiative with an intensifica-

24 "Turkey warned Iraqi Kurds that autonomy would not be applied in Syria: PM," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 2 November 2012, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-warned-iraqi-kurds-that-autonomy-would-not-be-applied-in-syria-pm.aspx?pageID=238&nID=33802&NewsCatID=338, accessed 20 February 20, 2013.

25 For an overview, see *Turkey: the PKK and a Kurdish settlement*, International Crisis Group, 2012, *op.cit.*

26 Umit Cizre, 'The emergence of the government's perspective on the Kurdish issue', pp.1-12; Cengiz Candar, 'The Kurdish question: the reasons and fortunes of the 'opening'', pp.13-19, both *Insight Turkey*, 11(4), Fall 2009.

tion of its repression of Kurdish sympathisers and a hardening of its language – or, rather, the use of inconsistent and contradictory language – such that in April 2011 Erdoğan claimed ‘there is no Kurdish issue in this country’.²⁷ More broadly, the government’s democratisation reform programme slowed or even reversed. Publicly, the government ruled out talking to the PKK or its leader Abdullah Öcalan, notwithstanding the insistence on the part of many Kurdish figures that he remained the head of Turkey’s Kurdish movement. Erdoğan also refused to shake the hand of BDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş (he still refuses to do so). Turkey’s opposition parties criticised the initiative and withheld their support and participation. Large swathes of the Turkish public shared the scepticism and even hostility. This sentiment was hardened by the PKK’s continuing acts of violence, which intensified in 2011, and by the festive joy with which the homecoming of thirty four PKK militants was greeted as they crossed into Turkey from northern Iraq in October 2009. Kurdish spirits were dampened by the subsequent detention of a number of the returnees. All in all, it seemed there were reasons to doubt the good faith of both the government and the Kurdish movement, the objectives of both sides remained obscure, and neither the public nor the political class had been prepared. The December 2011 Uludere bombing of 34 smugglers who were mistaken for PKK fighters, the subsequent failure to fully apologise or explain the incident;²⁸ the intensification of the detention of thousands of KCK activists; the continuing harsh rhetoric surrounding the Kurdish issue of the prime minister in particular; and the intensification of violence already noted, all reinforced the impression that Turkey was not at all ready for a breakthrough.

So, does the ‘Imralı process’ suggest that anything has changed in Turkey? Perhaps the most remarkable difference is that the formerly demonised PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan is now central to the process, although Erdoğan somewhat curiously seeks to distance the elected government from the process by insisting that contacts with Öcalan have been made by officials rather than members of the government. The decision to engage with Öcalan seems in part

27 Tulin Daloglu, “Erdoğan’s many positions on the Kurdish issue”, *Al Monitor*, 23 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/erdogan-kurdish-issue-flip-flop-turkey-peace.html>, accessed 6 June 2013.

28 Amberin Zaman, “AKP report on Uludere airstrike condemned as ‘whitewash’”, *Al Monitor*, 2 May 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/uludere-massacre-kurdish-smugglers-peace.html>, accessed 6 June 2013.

to have been inspired by his successful appeal in November 2012 to around seven hundred imprisoned Kurdish activists to end their two month old hunger strike. The appeal appeared to demonstrate both his unmatched influence and also his good will.²⁹ After a series of consultations with the PKK leaders in the Kandil mountains, Kurdish activists based in Europe, and the BDP – members of which also acted as go-between – a message from Öcalan was read out at the Kurdish new year, or *Newroz*, gathering on 21 March 2013 in Diyarbakır.³⁰ In his message he referred to the common past of Turks and Kurds, asserted that they live together under the “flag of Islam”, and that they need to create a common future. In particular, he pronounced that “the period of armed struggle is ending, and the door is opening to democratic politics”. He went on to insist that “we have now arrived at the stage of withdrawing our armed forces outside the borders”. On 8 May, PKK fighters did begin to trek through the mountains to their northern Iraqi bases, a process that is expected to be completed sooner rather than later. However, and contrary to Erdoğan’s wishes, they did not first disarm, and in early June a brief firefight broke out between PKK fighters and Turkish soldiers inside the Iraqi border.³¹

Remarkably perhaps, Öcalan’s address made no direct mention of what concessions Ankara had made in return. Nor has Erdoğan been at all forthcoming, although it is for the government to initiate the next phase of the process – at the time of writing, no details of what this might look like had yet emerged. Perhaps it needs time to digest the outcome of the novel although somewhat curious innovation of the sixty-two Erdoğan-approved ‘wise people’ tasked to consult civil society throughout Turkey and organized on a regional basis.³² In fact there are few indications that the prime minister will be willing or able to meet Kurdish expectations. Although these remain largely unspecified, they are believed to include Öcalan’s re-

29 Jenna Krajeski, “After the hunger strike”, *The New Yorker*, 29 November, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/11/after-the-kurdish-hunger-strike-in-turkish-prisons.html> accessed 6 June 2013.

30 For the full text, see <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/3/turkey4603.htm>, accessed 6 June 2013.

31 “BDP hopeful of end to clashes with PKK”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 5 June 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/bdp-hopeful-of-end-to-clashes-with-pkk.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48228&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 19 June 2013.

32 Kadri Gursel, “Erdogan asks ‘wise people’ to make case for peace”, *Al Monitor*, 15 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/erdogan-wise-people-commission-peace-process.html>, accessed 19 June 2013.

lease or transfer to house arrest – something that Erdoğan has specifically denied he has agreed to; the winding down of the so-called ‘village guard’ system of government-sponsored and armed Kurdish citizens; the release of the thousands of KCK activists currently held in detention; a reform of Turkey’s notorious anti-terror laws that are frequently used against political activists thought to be sympathetic to the Kurdish cause (and which at the time of writing being threatened against Turkey’s ‘Gezi Park’ protestors);³³ education in Kurdish; establishing Kurdish as co-equal with Turkish as an official language of the Republic; the replacement of the current ethnic definition of citizenship with a civic one; an end to the ten percent electoral hurdle for parliamentary representation; and, above all, some kind of devolution, self-determination, or ‘democratic autonomy’ that would, in effect, introduce something tantamount to a federal political system in Turkey.³⁴ There appear to be few indications that Erdoğan, his party, the opposition parties, or public opinion is at all ready to concede many, if any, of these demands. Erdoğan appears to think in terms of an Islamic ‘brotherhood’ between Turkey’s Turkish and Kurdish citizens, and appears not to recognize the pressure to adopt a pluralistic approach that is inherent in Kurdish ethnic identity demands.³⁵ Furthermore, the behaviour and rhetoric of the government during the past few weeks and months of protest in Turkey hardly suggests that it is set firmly on a course of further democratisation, reform and inclusiveness – an observation made by PKK and BDP leaders.³⁶

Unsurprisingly then, again at the time of writing, there is disquiet amongst some Kurdish leaders. In addition to impatience, voiced by Öcalan among others, at the government’s somewhat tardy response in the wake of the PKK withdrawal to across the border,³⁷

33 “Police to consider protestors in Istanbul’s Taksim Square terror organisation members: Minister”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 16 June 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/police-to-consider-protesters-in-istanbul-taksim-square-terror-organization-members-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48875&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 17 June 2013.

34 “Kurdish conference ends with list of demands from gov’t”, *Today’s Zaman*, 17 June, 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-318516-kurdish-conference-ends-with-list-of-demands-from-govt.html>, accessed 17 June 2013.

35 Johanna Nykanen, “Identity, narrative and frames: assessing Turkey’s Kurdish initiatives”, *Insight Turkey*, 15 (2), Spring 2013, pp.85-101.

36 “PKK says Turkish police crackdown may hurt Kurdish peace process”, *Reuters*, 5 June 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/05/us-turkey-protests-kurds-idUSBRE95410T20130605>, accessed 17 June 2013.

37 “Government needs to move on: PKK leader”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 June 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/government-needs-to-move-on-pkk-leader.aspx?pageID=238&nID=48932&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 19 June 2013.

PKK fighters in particular, led by Murat Karayılan, have been skeptical from the beginning.³⁸ Indeed, Karayılan has openly expressed his doubts regarding Ankara's sincerity and the prospect of a renewed and even intensified war.³⁹ At the June 2013 Kurdish gathering in Diyarbakır, Ahmet Türk, a senior BDP figure, voiced similar doubts about Ankara's intentions.⁴⁰ It does indeed seem unrealistic to assume that so long and bitter a conflict can be overcome easily or quickly, and without considerable sacrifice on the government side too. In short, a satisfactory outcome to the process should not at all be taken for granted. The major obstacles are still to be overcome. A case can even be made that neither the government nor the PKK are in great need of a settlement. Each deeply mistrusts the other. The PKK remains able to recruit and raise funds, might reasonably feel that time is on its side in light of the wider development in the region, and will seek to preserve its legitimacy. For his part, Erdoğan runs the risk of incurring the wrath of Turkish nationalist sentiment, of seeming to legitimise Öcalan and the PKK, and of failure. Nor is it necessarily the case that Öcalan, for all the status and symbolic significance he undoubtedly possesses, entertains aspirations that precisely accord with all elements of Turkey's wider Kurdish movement.⁴¹

Where might these developments lead? The KRG

No doubt recalling earlier clashes with the PKK, such as during the mid-1990s, Barzani is wary of the expanded PKK presence on KRG territory that is a consequence of the 'Imrali process', seeing it as a potential rival and as posing the risk of intensified Turkish military activity inside KRG territory should the process be derailed.⁴² He

38 Patrick Markey and Isobel Coles, "Insight: Hopes, suspicions over peace in Kurdish rebel hideout", *Reuters*, 27 March 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/27/us-iraq-turkey-pkk-insight-idUSBRE92Q0J520130327>, accessed 19 June 2013.

39 Tim Arango, "Rebel keeps Kurds' guns close at hand in peace talks with Turkey", *New York Times*, 11 April 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/world/middleeast/rebel-kurd-karayilan-defiant-in-turkish-talks.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed 19 June 2013.

40 "Ahmet Türk blames Ankara government, warns the peace talks will fail", *Kurdpress*, 11 June 2013, <http://www.kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=4733#Title=%0A%09%09%09%09%09%09%09Ahmet%20T%C3%BCrk%20blames%20Ankara%20government,%20warns%20the%20peace%20talks%20will%20fail%0A%09%09%09%09%09%09%09>, accessed 19 June 2013.

41 For these arguments, see Gunes Murat Tezcur, "Prospect for resolution of the Kurdish question: a realist perspective", *Insight Turkey*, 15 (2), Spring 2013, pp.69-84.

42 Denise Natali, "PKK challenges Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan", *Kurdnet*, 10 May 2013, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/5/state7069.htm>, accessed 19 June 2013.

has also expressed his hope that “we are expecting that after the problem is solved, they will go back to their homes”.⁴³ As we have seen however, the KRG authorities have welcomed Turkey’s attempt to resolve its domestic Kurdish struggle. In any case, Erbil is far more preoccupied with its relations with Baghdad and with Ankara, and developments in neighbouring Syria. In June, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki paid a visit to Erbil in the latest attempt to patch up the government’s multi-faceted quarrel with the Kurds in the north. Barzani described these talks as the ‘last chance’ to resolve the differences between Erbil and Baghdad, and once again appeared to threaten Kurdish secession should they fail.⁴⁴ The visit resulted in the establishment of seven joint committees to address the energy, budgetary, territorial, border crossing responsibilities, and other differences that have brought Baghdad and Erbil to the brink of armed conflict, which even now consists of armed stand-offs around Kirkuk, and which has led to a deepening of the chasm between them.⁴⁵

Again, it is not at all self-evident that much progress will ensue. Within a few days of the meeting, in moves certain to infuriate Baghdad further, Erbil announced that an agreement had been signed to give a Turkish company exploration rights to six blocks within the KRG’s territory;⁴⁶ that the US company Chevron has been granted a third exploration block in the KRG;⁴⁷ and that an oil pipeline from the KRG to Turkey would be completed by September 2013, that the Anglo-Turkish company Genel Energy would begin exporting oil via the pipeline in 2014, and that gas exports to Turkey would begin in 2016.⁴⁸ Alongside the progressive removal of Kurds from the federal government, of Kurdish officers from the federal army, and of Kurdish boycotts of the federal parliament, the KRG appears

43 Isobel Coles, “Iraqi Kurdistan president Massoud Barzani says Baghdad talks last chance”, *Reuters*, 3 June 2013, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/6/state7108.htm>, accessed 19 June 2013.

44 Ibid.

45 Armando Cordoba, “Maliki visit to Erbil results in joint committees to resolve disputes”, *Rudaw*, 9 June 2013, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/090620132>, accessed 19 June 2013.

46 “Iraqi Kurdistan gives Turkish company six oil exploration blocks”, *Reuters*, 18 June 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/18/turkey-kurdistan-oil-idUSL5N0EU44120130618>, accessed 19 June 2013.

47 “US energy giant Chevron signs oil deal with Iraqi Kurdistan”, *Kurdnet*, 18 June 2013, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/6/invest921.htm>, accessed 19 June 2013.

48 “Turkey-Kurdistan oil pipeline to be completed September”, *Kurdnet*, 19 June 2013, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/6/invest922.htm>, accessed 19 June 2013.

to be becoming ever more distant from Baghdad – and ever closer to Ankara. It is very difficult to envisage under what circumstances this trend could now be reversed, although there is clearly a risk to Iraq's Kurds that they might become over-dependent on a Turkish neighbour that has proved unreliable in the past and that has over decades earned a reputation for its hostility to Kurdish aspirations for self-determination. On the other hand, and for all Barzani's occasional bluster, the KRG does not appear ready to declare full independence. It would incur the wrath of its neighbours, including Turkey; would not gain Washington's support; and it is in any case not – yet – in a financially secure enough position to go it alone. Indeed, given its reliance on energy exports, Iraqi Kurdish independence could only sensibly be envisaged if Ankara proved ready to countenance it. This would be more likely should Arab Iraq descend into deeper sectarian conflict, which cannot be ruled out.

Where might these developments lead? Syria

Whatever the outcome of the Syrian conflict, the predicament of that country's Kurdish minority - particularly those that live along the borders with Iraq and Turkey - will constitute a key element of it. One scenario for the country as a whole is a continued and violent process of fragmentation – perhaps on parallel to Iraq's and Lebanon's - in which Alawite, Kurdish and perhaps other groups carve out precarious and fortified self-governing entities. Syria's 'western Kurdistan' is already quite autonomous from the rest of Syria, and it could become dependent on Turkey and the KRG whether it wishes it or not. On the other hand, should the Assad/Ba'athist/Alawite regime emerge intact, it will be interesting to see whether it would be prepared to mount a challenge to a PYD-governed Kurdish zone, or whether it might instead accede to some limited autonomy, including respect for Kurdish culture. The prospects for such a happy accord would perhaps be reduced in the unlikely event that pro-Barzani elements amongst Syria's Kurdish National Council gain more influence in the region. A victory for the SNC would probably be the most challenging outcome for the country's Kurds. Clashes between Kurds and the more Islamist elements within the Syrian opposition have been the fiercest - and Turkey is suspected of enabling these particular elements of the Syrian opposition. On the other hand, some Turkish-supported elements of the SNC could perhaps emerge as more accommodating towards a more pro-Barzani Kurdish entity. Taken as a whole however, the

otherwise fragmented SNC remains impatient with any indication of Kurdish exceptionalism, and a future Arab-Kurdish clash in Syria could well be in prospect, regardless of who eventually emerges as triumphant in Damascus.

Given its relationship with the KRG and the 'Imrali process', it would seem sensible that Ankara prepares itself to work with whatever reality emerges in northern Syria. At the time of writing it is unclear whether Ankara is fully prepared to accommodate itself to Syrian Kurdish autonomy. It is certainly the case that such an outcome might be more palatable to Turkey - and Erbil - if it were under KDP/KNC rather than PYD/PKK control. They are unlikely to get what they want on this score, however, but they need be careful lest they encourage a scenario of internecine conflict among Kurds which could even split the KRG's PUK from the KDP.⁴⁹ Such a scenario would appear still more likely if the 'Imrali process' falters, and could pit a PKK/PYD (and perhaps PUK) grouping against a KDP/Syrian KNC faction in a regional intra-Kurdish struggle, with Turkey favouring the latter and Iran (and Russia) the former.

One implication of the Syrian crisis has been the resurgence of sectarian rifts in the region, which have further damaged Ankara's relationship with Baghdad and, indeed, Iran. Iran has stood by its ally in Damascus, while Maliki too has expressed his sympathy for the Assad regime. Given the largely Alawite makeup of the Syrian regime, and the essentially Sunni nature of the opposition, the fact that Iran and Turkey found themselves on the side of their respective Syrian co-religionists has - rightly or wrongly - been interpreted as suggesting that a sectarian undercurrent is now evident in regional diplomatic alignments. Turkey's AKP government's evident preference for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood faction within the SNC has added further to these rifts.⁵⁰ These developments might well encourage Iran, Iraq and Syria to work to undermine Turkish interests, including its approach to the region's Kurdish issues. In particular, Tehran is uneasy at the close relationship between An-

49 Eric Bruneau, "Taking the fight to Syria: Kurdish rivalries play out over the border", *Niqash*, 30 May 2013, <http://www.niqash.org/articles/print.php?id=3228&lang=en>, accessed 21 June 2013; *Syria's Kurds: a struggle within a struggle*, Middle East Report no. 136, International Crisis Group, 22 January 2013.

50 Christopher Phillips, *Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, December 2012, p.7

kara and Erbil, and might well seek ways to undermine it. In this, some within the PUK might be willing accomplices.⁵¹

Turkey's dream or its nightmare?

Turkey's approach to the KRG appears to have undergone a paradigm shift in recent years. In so far as it is driven by a residual 'zero problems', 'soft power' motivation that seeks the lowering of barriers, a reduction of tensions, and economic integration and interdependence, it might be regarded as 'neo-Ottoman'. However, as it strays towards a deeper inclusiveness towards Iraq's Kurds that serves to draw the KRG away from Baghdad, it smacks of a 'National Pact' preference for a Turkish-Kurdish federation based on the notion that there is, or should be, a kind of 'brotherhood' between the two peoples. The 'Imrali process', again with Erdoğan's apparent emphasis on 'brotherhood' rather than ethnic pluralism, can be interpreted in the same way. The Syrian case is more complex, but there is little doubt that Ankara has very particular concerns about how northern Syria evolves and how it interacts with the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iraq. This extension of Turkish influence into neighbouring Kurdish populated areas does not require a redrawing of the map – in that sense, we may not be witnessing the end of the Sykes-Picot arrangement and the break up the region's states, nor the arrival of a sovereign Kurdish state. Ankara does not want this to happen. However, this scenario does challenge the regional balance of power and influence, and this is its problem. Turkey cannot pacify the region's Kurds without a degree of Kurdish contentment and complicity, and it is as yet too early to say whether Turkey will take the steps necessary for this to emerge inside its own borders. Nor can we be certain how events will pan out in Syria, and to what degree Ankara will learn to live with any autonomous Kurdish zone that might establish itself there.

A resetting of Turkey's relationships with the region's Kurds will also require the acquiescence of Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran. Will Baghdad and perhaps Damascus too, accept a situation in which 'their' Kurds move deeper within Ankara's economic, political and energy trade orbit? Or will they, with Iran and driven by sectarian

51 B. Mohammed, "Barzani's foreign policy risks damaging Kurdistan's interest," *Kurdish Aspect*, 3 February 2013, www.kurdishaspect.com/doc020413BM.html, accessed 22 February 2013; "A PUK leader warns against Turkish 'trap'," *Insight Kurdistan*, 3 January 2013, www.insightkurdistan.com/tag/tigris/, accessed 22 February 2013.

considerations as well as Kurdish ones, prefer to undermine Kurdish autonomy and any pacification of Turkish-Kurdish relations that might appear within reach? Will sectarian chaos and conflict in Iraq and Syria ‘deliver’ the Kurdish regions of those countries to Turkey as the only source of stability, economic exchange and even protection? In the meantime, Arab reconciliation to Kurdish autonomy does not look likely, and nor does Tehran’s passivity in the face of its deepened isolation – should that isolation persist. Iran’s hold over its own Kurdish populations is also in the mix,⁵² and Tehran has a track record of using the PKK to unsettle Turkey. In the current circumstances, a disaffected PKK might also be useful in obstructing Turkey’s ambition to rely on Kurdish energy supplies in place of Iranian. In short, for Turkey to achieve peace on its Kurdish borders, it may need to both satisfy Kurdish aspirations, and weaken the capacity or inclination of Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran to undermine the benefits to Turkey that this might bring. These are tall orders, and both Turkish policies and regional circumstances could preclude such a happy outcome.

52 Wladimir van Wildenburg, “Iranian Kurdish struggle linked to Turkey, Syria”, *Al Monitor*, 14 June 2013, accessed 23 June 2013.

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