

Türkiye's Resolution Process and Its Endeavor to Be A Regional Power: Prospects and Constraints*

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Abstract: Scholars have examined Türkiye's Kurdish resolution or peace process (2013-2015) from various perspectives. While some works have pursued a rational choice approach and focused on the Justice and Development Party's (AK Party's) government's strategic calculations vis-à-vis the PKK in initiating a peace process and maintaining it until 2015, others have analyzed Türkiye's experience within the framework of the conflict resolution scholarship. Instead, this paper's starting point is that the 2013-2015 resolution process was not merely a policy to end an internal conflict. Still, it constituted a key aspect of the AK Party's ongoing endeavor to turn Türkiye into a regional power. This paper places the 2013-2015 resolution process within the framework of regional and global dynamics and argues that from the mid-2000s onwards, the AK Party's government's efforts to put an end to the PKK terrorism and resolve the Kurdish question in Türkiye reflected the policy of a middle-power country, i.e., Türkiye, to increase its power and influence in the region instead of a mere domestic peace process. Thus, the end of the resolution process in 2015 constrained Türkiye's potential achievements in the Middle East and beyond.

Keywords: Türkiye, Kurdish question, resolution process, KRG, Syrian civil war

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Türkiye'nin Çözüm Süreci ve Bölgesel Güç Olma Çabası: Beklentiler ve Kısıtlar

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Öz: Akademik çevreler bugüne kadar Türkiye'nin Kürt sorunu ile ilgili çözüm/ barış sürecini (2013-2015) çeşitli açılardan incelemişlerdir. Çalışmaların bir kısmı “rasyonel tercih” yaklaşımını benimseyerek Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK Parti) hükûmetinin barış sürecini başlatıp 2015'e kadar sürdürmesi konusunda PKK bağlamında yaptığı stratejik hesaplara odaklanmıştır. Diğer bazı çalışmalar Türkiye'nin deneyimini “çatışma çözümü” disiplini çerçevesinde analiz etmiştir. Söz konusu yaklaşımlar yerine bu makalenin çıkış noktası; 2013-2015 çözüm sürecinin yalnızca bir iç çatışmayı sona erdirmeye politikası olmadığıdır. Bununla birlikte, bu süreç AK Partinin Türkiye'yi bölgesel bir güç hâline getirme çabasının önemli bir sacayağını teşkil etmiştir. Bu çalışma, 2013-2015 çözüm sürecini bölgesel ve küresel dinamikler çerçevesinde konumlandırmaktadır. Bu kapsamda makale, 2000'li yılların ortalarından itibaren AK Parti hükûmetinin Türkiye'de PKK terörüne son verme ve Kürt sorununu çözme çabalarının, sadece bir iç barış süreci yürütme gayesi taşımanın ötesinde, bir orta güç ülkesinin yani Türkiye'nin, bölgesel gücünü ve nüfuzunu artırma politikasını yansıttığını savunmaktadır. Bu nedenle; 2015 yılında çözüm sürecinin sona ermesi, Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu ve ötesinde ulaşabileceği potansiyel başarıları kısıtlamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Kürt Sorunu, Çözüm Süreci, İKBY, Suriye İç Savaşı

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عملية "الحل/السلام" في تركيا وجهودها لتصبح قوة إقليمية: التطلعات والقيود

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الملخص

درست الأوساط الأكاديمية حتى اليوم عملية «الحل/السلام» لتركيا (2013 - 2015) فيما يتعلق بالفضية الكردية من وجهات نظر مختلفة. تبنت بعض الدراسات نهج "الاختيار العقلاني" وركزت على الحسابات الاستراتيجية التي أجرتها حكومة حزب العدالة والتنمية في إطار مشكلة بي كي كي (KKP) لبدء عملية السلام واستمرارها حتى عام 2015. وقد حلت بعض الدراسات الأخرى تجربة تركيا في إطار نظام "حل النزاعات". وبدلا من هذه المقاربات، فإن نقطة البداية لهذا المقال هي أن عملية "الحل" 2013-2015 لم تكن مجرد سياسة لإنهاء نزاع داخلي. لأن هذه العملية شكلت ركيزة مهمة لجهود حزب العدالة والتنمية لجعل تركيا قوة إقليمية. تضع هذه الدراسة عملية الحل 2013-2015 في إطار الديناميكيات الإقليمية والعالمية. وفي هذا السياق، يناقش المقال بأن جهود حكومة حزب العدالة والتنمية لوضع حد لإرهاب بي كي كي (KKP) وحل المشكلة الكردية في تركيا المبذولة منذ منتصف العقد الأول من القرن الحادي والعشرين تعكس سياسة زيادة القوة الإقليمية والنفوذ لدولة متوسطة القوة، أي تركيا، حيث تتجاوز مجرد السعي إلى تنفيذ عملية سلام داخلية. لذلك، قيدت نهاية عملية الحل في عام 2015 من إنجازات تركيا المحتملة في الشرق الأوسط وخارجه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تركيا، المشكلة الكردية، عملية الحل، حكومة إقليم كردستان، الحرب الأهلية السورية.

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Introduction

“Kurds will not divide Türkiye, but Türkiye will grow with the Kurds!”¹ This statement constituted the main motto of the resolution process (2013-2015), which was a policy initiative developed by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AK Party*) and which aimed to end the PKK violence and resolve the Kurdish question in Türkiye through peaceful means.

On March 21, 2013, a letter written by Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the PKK (*Kurdistan Workers' Party-PKK*) terrorist organization, was read out loud by the representatives of the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi-BDP*) during the Nevruz celebrations in Diyarbakır, a Kurdish majority city in southeastern Türkiye. In his letter, Öcalan called for a unilateral ceasefire, the withdrawal of the PKK militants from Türkiye and the declaration of the beginning of a new era where “guns shall be silenced and thoughts and ideas shall speak” (Democratic Progress Institute, 2013).² Although this was identified as the starting point of Türkiye’s resolution process, it was in fact the product of a series of events dating back to 2005.

In 2005, in a speech in the city of Diyarbakır, then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan declared Türkiye’s Kurdish question as his own problem and stated that this problem could only be resolved by further democracy.³ After this declaration, the AK Party government’s first major initiative regarding the Kurdish question came with the Kurdish Opening, which started in 2009 and was later renamed as first the “Democratic Opening” and then the “National Unity and Brotherhood Project”. Although the details of this policy were never publicly revealed, it aimed at ending PKK terrorism in the country and resolving the Kurdish question through peaceful means.⁴ However, a few months after the Kurdish Opening started, this policy created a nationalist backlash and lost pace. Yet, it was later brought to light that despite the negative reaction to the Kurdish Opening among the nationalist circles of the country, the representatives of Türkiye’s National Intelligence Organization (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı-MİT*) continued contacts with some of the top figures of the PKK. It was not until after the 2011 elections that the process of dialogue was suspended because of a number of violent acts perpetrated by

1 Fadime Özkan, “Türkiye Kürtlerle Büyüyecek,” *Star*, 6 Şubat 2013, <https://www.star.com.tr/yazar/turkiye-kurtlerle-buyuyecek-yazi-725285/>

2 “Turkey’s Kurdish Conflict: An Assessment of the Current Process,” Democratic Progress Institute (November 2013): 31.

3 “Başbakanın Diyarbakır Konuşması,” *Sabah*, 12 Ağustos 2005, http://www.sabah.com.tr/Siyaset/Dosyalar/2005/08/12/dosya_basbakanin_diyarbakir_konusmasi.

4 Özlem Kayhan Pusane, “Turkey’s Kurdish Opening: Long-Awaited Achievements and Failed Expectations,” *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 1 (2014): 81.

the PKK. Accordingly, the year 2012 turned out to be the most violent year in Türkiye's struggle against the PKK since the 1990s.⁵ During this period, in approximately 14 months, more than 700 people were killed.⁶ However, the increased level of violence gave way to another series of efforts to end the PKK terrorism in Türkiye and resolve the Kurdish question. On December 28, 2012, "Prime Minister Erdoğan stated in a TV show that talks between state officials and Öcalan were going on".⁷ This announcement was soon followed by two BDP representatives' visits to the jailed PKK leader Öcalan at the İmralı Island.

Scholars have so far examined Türkiye's resolution process from various perspectives. Some works have focused on the AK Party government's rational and strategic calculations in initiating and maintaining a peace process until 2015, such as the AK Party government's efforts to consolidate its position in domestic politics, its willingness to win the votes of Türkiye's Kurds in the upcoming elections, the government's goal to play a larger role in the Middle East, and its need to protect Turkish national security in the face of the Syrian civil war.⁸ Others have analyzed Türkiye's experience within the framework of conflict resolution scholarship. These works have mainly discussed to what extent the conflict in Türkiye was ripe for peace when the resolution process started and in what ways the Turkish experience fulfilled the major criteria for success in peace processes.⁹ For example, while Tezcür (2013) and Dilek and Baysal (2022) argued that there was no mutually hurting stalemate in 2013 and that Türkiye's conditions for ripeness were not at an ideal level at

5 Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question: A Realist Perspective," *In-sight Turkey* 15, no. 2 (January 2013).

6 Cited in Bill Park, "Turkey's Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas – Syria, Iraq and At Home; How They are Related and Where They Might Lead," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 5, no. 1 (July 2013): 43.

7 Cited in Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects," Working Paper 11 (May 2015): 8.

8 For examples, see Burak Bilgehan Özpek, *The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurds: Anatomy of a Failure* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Cengiz Çandar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020): 268-271; F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey's New Kurdish Opening," *Survival* 55, no. 5; Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey"; Michael Gunter, "The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 14, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013).

9 For examples, see Mustafa Coşar Ünal, "Is it Ripe yet? Resolving Turkey's 30 Years of Conflict with the PKK," *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016); Tezcür, "Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question"; Arin Savran, "The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, 2009–2015," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 6 (2020); Bahar Baser and Alpaslan Ozerdem, "Conflict Transformation and Asymmetric Conflicts: A Critique of the Failed Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 8 (2021); Esra Dilek and Basar Baysal, "Peace Negotiation Process and Outcome: Considering Colombia and Turkey in Comparative Perspective," *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 4 (2022); Musa Akgül and Çiğdem Görgün Akgül, "Beyond Mutually Hurting Stalemate: Why Did the Peace Process in Turkey (2009–2015) Fail?" *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 1 (2023).

that time, making a resolution difficult, scholars such as Ünal (2016), Baser and Ozerdem (2021), and Akgül and Görgün Akgül (2023) argued that the initial conditions for ripeness were not sufficient to resolve Türkiye's Kurdish question. These scholars focused on various aspects of the resolution process, including its actors, legal framework, as well as its paradigm, to explain how this policy ended in 2015. This paper examines the resolution process from another angle and places it within the AK Party's broader foreign policy vision and regional strategic calculations. Although some scholars have pointed to the links between the AK Party government's efforts to address the Kurdish question and its foreign policy goals before,¹⁰ this paper focuses explicitly on how the AK Party's regional objectives, its Kurdish initiatives, and its policies to engage the regional Kurds were closely intertwined from the mid-2000s onwards. The paper argues that the 2013-2015 resolution process was not merely a policy to end an internal conflict in Türkiye. Still, it reflected the government's endeavor to turn the country into a regional power.

Justice and Development Party's Foreign Policy Vision

Ahmet Davutoğlu, who, until 2016, was one of the most influential foreign policy figures in the AK Party governments, first as the chief foreign policy advisor of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan (2003-2009), then as the Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014), and finally as Türkiye's Prime Minister (2014-2016), argues that Türkiye has a unique position in the world and thus must be identified as a central country both in geographical and historical terms. Geographically, Türkiye is "in the midst of Afro-Eurasia's vast landmass", and accordingly, it possesses multiple regional identities. Historically, Türkiye carries the Ottoman heritage, and thus, it is an actor where "diverse Caucasian, Balkan, Middle Eastern, Iraqi Turcoman, and Anatolian elements" meet.¹¹ Top AK Party officials also embraced this foreign policy vision from the early 2000s. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan declared in 2005: "Istanbul is not only a center combining the, but also a central symbol combining and synthesizing civilizations".¹²

10 See Gönül Tol, "Turkey's KRG Energy Partnership," *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2013, <https://foreign-policy.com/2013/01/29/turkeys-krge-energy-partnership/>; Ömer Taşpınar and Gönül Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds: From Predicament to Opportunity," US-Europe Analysis Series no.54, 22 January 2014, Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, https://oli.gmu.edu/docstore/600docs/1403-651-2turkey%20and%20the%20kurds_predicament%20to%20opportunity.pdf

11 Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey* 10, no. 1 (2008): 79.

12 Quoted in Bülent Aras, "The Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 3 (2009): 6.

According to Davutoğlu, during the Cold War era, Türkiye was a “wing country” within the strategic framework of NATO. It had a clearly defined role in the Western alliance regarding the containment of the Soviet Union. However, while the end of the Cold War put an end to this clarity and made Turkish policymakers anxious because of the uncertainties about Türkiye’s future role in world politics, it also “provided Türkiye with a historic opportunity to become a global power”.¹³ This historic opportunity was based on Türkiye’s capacity as a secular and democratic country with a Muslim-majority population to lead a political transformation in the Middle East, where state borders were drawn mainly by imperialist powers and thus carried a strong potential for change.

Davutoğlu identified Türkiye as a unique regional actor with its Ottoman past. He argued that Türkiye should expand its sphere of influence in its neighborhood as a leading country in multiple regions. From time to time, Davutoğlu even expressed fear that Türkiye would collapse if it did not consider its pivotal position and enlarge the country’s sphere of influence.¹⁴ In a 2012 speech, Davutoğlu stated: “Between 2011-2023, we will meet again with our brothers in those territories from which we have withdrawn or lost between 1911-1923. We will also reconstruct the international order”.¹⁵

President Tayyip Erdoğan’s opening speech in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (GNAT) in 2015 gave a similar message to domestic and international audiences in terms of Türkiye’s willingness to expand its influence in the region, taking advantage of its Ottoman past. Erdoğan explained:

As Türkiye, we have always kept and will keep our hearts as well as our doors open to our brothers in Syria and Iraq, just like we have done to our brothers in the Balkans, Central Asia, North Africa, and other regions of Africa and Asia. Our historical past, cultural affinity, civilizational partnership, and shared humanitarian values with these brothers are essential for us. Places that we call “Syria and Iraq” today were geographies that, only a century ago, were not different for us from Mardin, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, and Hatay. Seeing those living in Syria and Iraq as separate from our citizens would embarrass us in the face of history, and the eyes of our ancestors, and, more importantly, our martyrs.¹⁶

13 Behlül Özkan, “Turkey, Davutoğlu, and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119.

14 *Ibid.*, 125.

15 Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Davutoğlu’ndan Şok Açıklamalar,” *Yeniçağ*, 22 January 2012, <https://www.yeni-cagazetesi.com.tr/davutoglundan-sok-aciklamalar-62378h.htm>.

16 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Opening Speech for the 25th term, second

The AK Party government's efforts to resolve Türkiye's Kurdish question through peaceful means as well as its policy to improve Türkiye's relations with the regional Kurds, especially with the Iraqi Kurds, from the mid-2000s onwards were part of this endeavor to expand Türkiye's power and influence in the region in connection to the country's Ottoman heritage. Turkish policymakers expected that the resolution of the Kurdish question would provide an immense opportunity for Türkiye in foreign policy and strengthen the country's hand in its external relations.¹⁷

Ahmet Davutoğlu believed Türkiye's new foreign policy vision was enabled by the domestic transformations that the country started to experience in the early 2000s. On one hand, Türkiye's increasing economic power and growing self-confidence under the AK Party's rule gave Turkish policymakers the opportunity to act as influential peacemakers in the neighboring regions.¹⁸ On the other hand, the reconciliation of Islam and democracy played an important role in Türkiye's soft power projection in its neighborhood.¹⁹ Thus, Türkiye acquired the potential to take advantage of its cultural and historical connections in the region and pursue a proactive foreign policy in the 2000s. In 2013, Davutoğlu asserted that Türkiye had returned to the lands of the former Ottoman Empire and that it would play a leading role in creating an order in these lands. He stated: "Without going to war, we will again tie Sarajevo to Damascus, Benghazi to Erzurum, and to Batumi".²⁰

However, Türkiye's prolonged Kurdish question and the PKK violence were major setbacks for the AK Party officials' goal to establish Türkiye as a regional power in the former Ottoman territories.²¹ İbrahim Kalın stated in 2008 that the Kurdish issue "crippled Türkiye's ambitions to speak confidently about democracy, transparency, and human rights in the Middle East".²² As

legislative year of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey," 1 October 2015, https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/td_v2.goruntule?sayfa_no_ilk=122&sayfa_no_son=133&sayfa_no=125&v_mecelis=1&v_donem=25&v_yasama_yili=&v_cilt=2&v_birlesim=001.

17 Taşpınar and Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds," 2.

18 See Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, "A New Sector in Turkish Foreign Policy: Mediation," *Boğaziçi Journal: Review of Social, Economic and Administrative Studies* 25, no. 2 (2011); Doga Ulas Eralp, ed., *Turkey as a Mediator: Stories of Success and Failure* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016); Meliha Benli Altunışık and Lenore G. Martin, "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 4 (2011).

19 Aras, "The Davutoğlu Era in Turkish Foreign Policy," 4-5.

20 Quoted in Tülin Daloğlu, "Davutoğlu Invokes Ottomanism as a New Order for Mideast," *Al-Monitor*, 10 March 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/03/turkey-davutologu-ottoman-new-order-mideast.html>.

21 Savran, "The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party," 781.

22 Quoted in Henri Barkey, "Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, no. 237, 10 May 2010, p. 7, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2010/05/10/turkey-s-new-engagement-in-iraq-embracing-iraqi-kurdistan-pub-40773>.

long as this intractable conflict remained and continued to shape Turkish politics, it would have negative implications for Türkiye's relations with Kurds living inside and outside of Türkiye's borders and constrain Türkiye's potential to shape regional politics. In other words, Türkiye's Middle East policy "was held hostage to the Kurdish problem" for a long time, and now this had to change in order to transform Türkiye into a regional power.²³

Within this background, it was no coincidence that the AK Party's policy to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means and its efforts to improve Türkiye's relations with the Iraqi Kurds went hand in hand for several years. After the first high-level direct meeting between Türkiye and the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) took place in 2008, President Abdullah Gül stated in 2009: "Very good things are going to happen regarding the Kurdish issue in the coming days".²⁴

Türkiye's Resolution Process and Its Rapprochement with the KRG

When the AK Party government came to power in 2002, Türkiye was on its path to overcome the negative consequences of the 2000 and 2001 economic crises. On one hand, both the IMF program and the European Union (EU) accession process were directing Türkiye towards a significant economic and political reform agenda. The EU had officially declared Türkiye as a candidate country in 1999, and accordingly, Turkish policy makers began to carry out EU harmonization reforms from the early 2000s onwards. The reform packages, which started with the tripartite coalition government of the Democratic Left Party, Nationalist Movement Party, and the Motherland Party (1999-2002) continued under the AK Party rule. In the meantime, as a result of Türkiye's effective fight against the PKK throughout the 1990s, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured, brought to Türkiye, and put into jail in 1999. The PKK subsequently declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew its militants to northern Iraq, which created a period of calm in Türkiye in the early 2000s. On the other hand, the early 2000s were also a period when Türkiye's geostrategic importance was widely acknowledged. With the AK Party in power, the US was especially interested in Türkiye due to "its desire to set an example of democracy in an Islamic context".²⁵ This

23 Taşpınar and Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds," 11.

24 "Gül: Kürt Sorununda İyi Şeyler Olacak," *T24*, 10 March 2023, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/gul-kurt-sorununda-iyi-seyler-olacak,33742>.

25 Ziya Öniş, "Beyond the 2001 Financial Crisis: The Political Economy of the New Phase of Neo-Liberal Restructuring in Turkey," *Review of International Political Economy* 16, no. 3 (2009): 417.

favorable atmosphere allowed Turkish political leaders to work for reform both in the economic and political domains.

However, the US War in Iraq significantly disrupted the regional dynamics and increased Turkish policymakers' concerns and threat perceptions about the future of the country and the region. Most importantly, the US cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds during the Iraq War and the uncertainties created in this context encouraged the PKK to put an end to its unilateral ceasefire vis-à-vis Türkiye in the summer of 2004 and to revive its attacks on Turkish targets. Furthermore, the US decision to withdraw from Iraq played an important role in reshaping Türkiye's regional calculations. The Status of Forces Agreement, which President George W. Bush signed with the Iraqi leaders in 2008 regarding the gradual withdrawal of American troops from Iraq²⁶, as well as President Obama's determination to accelerate the troop withdrawal process when he became president in 2009, increased Turkish policymakers' anxiety about whether Iraq would be able to maintain its territorial integrity in the foreseeable future or if it would experience some ethnic or sectarian partition.²⁷ The possible emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq caused a significant level of concern in the minds of Turkish policymakers.

Although Turkish policymakers often approached the Iraqi Kurdish leaders with suspicion in the past and complained about their tolerance of the PKK presence in the Qandil Mountains, these anxieties urged the AK Party government to pursue an engagement policy with the Iraqi Kurds. In the wake of the Iraq War, the KRG emerged as a politically and economically stable region compared to the uncertainties and instabilities that permeated the rest of Iraq. Thus, improving relations with the KRG could not only be part of a broader effort to resolve Türkiye's age-old Kurdish question and, at the same time, keep Iraqi Kurdish ambitions under control, but it could also provide ample opportunities for Turkish policymakers in their goal to turn Türkiye into a regional power.

Accordingly, Turkish companies began investing heavily in northern Iraq in the mid-2000s. Türkiye's exports to Iraq rose from approximately \$2 billion in 2004 to more than \$10 billion in 2013. A significant portion of

26 "Who Made the Decision to Withdraw U.S. Troops from Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 27 September 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2016/live-updates/general-election/real-time-fact-checking-and-analysis-of-the-first-presidential-debate/who-made-the-decision-to-withdraw-u-s-troops-from-iraq/>

27 Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, no. 237 (10 May 2010): 4, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2010/05/10/turkey-s-new-engagement-in-iraq-embracing-iraqi-kurdistan-pub-40773>.

these exports went to the KRG.²⁸ While there were 485 Turkish companies operating in northern Iraq in 2009, this number increased to 1500 companies in 2013.²⁹ Indeed, Turkish businesses invested in many sectors there, ranging from construction and oil/gas extraction to banking and telecommunication.³⁰ During this period, Turkish products became quite visible in the KRG, and Turkish companies engaged in important projects such as the construction of the Erbil International Airport and the transportation of the KRG oil to international markets through Türkiye. Due to the Turkish construction sector's experience in a variety of neighboring regions, including Russia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, Turkish companies especially took part in many vital construction projects in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the destruction caused by the Iraq War.³¹

The energy aspect of Türkiye's KRG policy was also vital. With the growth in the Turkish economy in the early 2000s, Türkiye's need for energy also grew significantly. In order to maintain the country's economic growth, Turkish policy makers wanted "to strengthen its [Türkiye's] energy security, ensure diversification of suppliers, and establish itself as an energy hub between the energy-producing countries to its east and the energy-consuming countries to its west".³² However, in 2011, 51% of Türkiye's crude oil imports were still from Iran, and 58% of its natural gas imports were from Russia.³³ Sanctions against Iran had already constituted an essential problem for Türkiye's trade and energy relations with its neighbor. Furthermore, especially with the Syrian crisis from 2011 onwards, Türkiye's energy dependence on Iran and Russia began to pose additional constraints for Turkish foreign policy since Türkiye was on the opposite side of the Syrian civil war with both actors (Tol, 2013).³⁴ While Türkiye pursued a strong anti-Assad position in Syria, Iran and Russia were the allies of the Assad regime. Thus, the KRG's rich energy resources attracted Turkish policymakers' attention as new sources of energy

28 Henri J. Barkey, "On the KRG, the Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process, and the Future of the Kurds," *Global Turkey in Europe*, Woodrow Wilson Center, Working Paper no. 12 (July 2015): 4, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/192714/gte_wp_12.pdf.

29 Christina Bache Fidan, "Turkish Business in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (Winter 2016): 121.

30 Soner Cagaptay, Christina Bache Fidan, Ege Cansu Sacikara, "Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth," *PolicyWatch* 2387, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 March 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-and-kr-undeclared-economic-commonwealth>.

31 Bache Fidan, "Turkish Business in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 121-122.

32 Gönül Tol, "Turkey's KRG energy Partnership," *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/29/turkeys-kr-energy-partnership/>

33 "Turkey," U.S. Energy Information Administration, last updated 1 February 2013, <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/TUR> (accessed March 6, 2013).

34 Tol, "Turkey's KRG energy Partnership."

alternatives to those of Russia and Iran. In 2013, the AK Party government reached an energy deal with the KRG. Approximately 475.000 metric tons of Iraqi Kurdish oil began to be exported through Türkiye's Ceyhan Port from 2014 onwards.³⁵

Türkiye's economic engagements with the KRG increased from 2008 onwards, mainly within the framework of the AK Party's initiatives to resolve the Kurdish question in Türkiye. Indeed, Türkiye's investments in the region facilitated these initiatives and Türkiye's relations with the Iraqi Kurds in various domains. Türkiye's first consul General to Erbil, Aydın Selcen, explained this situation with the argument that "diplomacy between Türkiye and the KRG first advanced through the path opened by the businessmen, contractors, and oilmen, and then further paved the way for them".³⁶ During Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek's 2011 visit to Erbil, which marked the beginning of Turkish Airlines' Istanbul-Erbil flights, Şimşek spoke both in Kurdish and Turkish, arguing that Türkiye has overcome its fears [regarding the Kurdish issue].³⁷ During the ceremony at the Erbil International Airport, Şimşek mentioned that he was from Batman (a Kurdish majority province in Türkiye's southeast) and that he brought greetings from the people of Türkiye and Batman to Erbil. Şimşek emphasized that he came to Erbil to strengthen the brotherhood between the Turks and Kurds.³⁸ In his speech, Mehmet Şimşek also made a reference to Türkiye's initiative to build a strong cooperation with its neighbors via the 'zero problems' motto". He then finalized his speech in Kurdish again, emphasizing that "Türkiye and the Kurdish people have been together for 1000 years". Şimşek called out to the audience: "No one will be able to ruin this brotherhood as long as the world goes on" (Haber7, 2011).³⁹

During this period, Türkiye's economic engagements with the KRG were closely intertwined with Masoud Barzani's key role in Türkiye's efforts to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means. Turkish policymakers considered Barzani an influential Kurdish leader with leverage over the Kurds in the region and, more importantly, an alternative Kurdish figure to the PKK leader Öcalan. Thus, the AK Party officials thought Barzani's involvement could help mobilize support for the resolution process among the Kurds in Türkiye and the region.

35 Laure Al Khoury, Ammar Karim, and Kamal Taha, "Iraq to Resume Kurdish Oil Exports to Turkey Saturday: Statement," *Al-Monitor*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/iraq-resume-kurdish-oil-exports-turkey-saturday-statement>.

36 Selcen, Aydın, "Erbil Başkonsolosluğu Nasıl Açıldı?" *Gazete Duvar*, 26 March 2017, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2017/03/26/erbil-baskonsoloslugu-nasil-acildi>.

37 Cumhuriyet, "Kürtçe bizim Zenginliğimiz," *Cumhuriyet*, 14 April 2011, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kurtce-bizim-bir-zenginligimiz-239044>.

38 "Maliye Bakanı Erbil'de Açılıştta Sürpriz Yaptı," *Haber7*, 14 April 2011, <https://ekonomi.haber7.com/ekonomi/haber/733002-maliye-bakani-erbilde-acilista-surpriz-yapti>.

39 "Maliye Bakanı Erbil'de Açılıştta Sürpriz Yaptı."

Soon after the resolution process started in early 2013, Barzani was invited to Türkiye for the historic Diyarbakır encounter in November, where President Erdoğan greeted Masoud Barzani as his “dear friend” and identified the Iraqi Kurds as “Türkiye’s brothers”. Erdoğan asserted in Diyarbakır:

“We’re one and together, not till the bazaar but to the grave, to Armageddon. We are members of the same geography, land, and civilization.” President Erdoğan also declared: *“100 years ago, borders were drawn with rulers. Yet, they cannot draw borders to our fondness. They cannot draw borders between our common civilization and common future. They can never separate our hearts from one another”*.⁴⁰

The words above demonstrate how the AK Party government’s policies to resolve the Kurdish question and improve relations with the Iraqi Kurds from 2008 onwards were not only a domestic endeavor, but also part of a broader vision to transform Türkiye into a regional power by taking advantage of the country’s Ottoman legacy and by utilizing its historical and cultural connections. In the same Diyarbakır meeting, Masoud Barzani’s message, which made strong references to peace, had similar connotations. Barzani said:

“This is a historic day, a very precious day. I am with you here in Diyarbakır, bringing greetings to the people of Türkiye from the people of Kurdistan. We have entered an era in which history will be written anew. This is the era of mutual acceptance, of living together as brothers. When this peace process was announced, Erdogan began by stating that there would be no naysaying from now on in Diyarbakır. Today, I am very happy; today, a Turkish leader is working for brotherhood. The time has come for peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. Peaceful coexistence should be our fundamental principle”.⁴¹

Indeed, Kurds constitute an important regional actor in the Middle East. Although half of the Kurdish population of the Middle East lives in Türkiye,

40 “Diyarbakır’da Barzani-Erdoğan Mitingi,” *Sözcü*, 16 November 2013, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2013/genel/diyarbakirda-barzani-erdogan-mitingi-408071/>

41 Nagehan Alçı, “An Atmosphere of Peace, not of Farewell,” *Al-Monitor*, 19 November 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/11/erdogan-kurds-peace-visit-diyarbakir-barzani-public-appeal.html>.

there is also a sizable Kurdish minority in Iraq, Iran, and Syria.⁴² Thus, relations with the Kurds have been an important element of Türkiye's power considerations in the region. Türkiye, after resolving such a major problem as the Kurdish question, would grow much stronger in its neighborhood.

However, as the AK Party government embarked on a number of initiatives to resolve the Kurdish question from the mid-2000s onwards, improve relations with the Iraqi Kurds, and pursue a key role in the Middle East, the beginning of the Syrian uprisings posed a significant constraint for Türkiye in this regard. In fact, when the uprisings began in Syria in March 2011, Türkiye's first reaction was to try to convince the Assad regime for internal reform. However, when the AK Party leaders did not observe any reform or democratization initiatives from the Syrian regime despite numerous contacts with regime officials, they adopted a solid anti-Assad position. Subsequently, Türkiye opened its borders to Syrians fleeing the conflict and began to host the Syrian opposition. As the Assad regime's response to the uprisings got more violent and led to civilian deaths, Türkiye's support for the Syrian opposition increased significantly.

The Syrian Challenge

The Syrian conflict turned into a significant challenge for Türkiye in two ways. First, Syria was the AK Party's most successful case of "zero problems with neighbors policy". In fact, Türkiye and Syria had problematic relations in the 1980s and 1990s mainly due to the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's residence in the Syrian capital Damascus and the PKK presence in Syria as well as in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.⁴³ However, after the capture of Öcalan in 1999 and his subsequent imprisonment, Türkiye and Syria signed the Adana Accords, which initiated a process of rapprochement between these countries. During this period, PKK camps in Syria were closed, and Türkiye and Syria began to cooperate in the areas of security and counterterrorism.

Especially with the AK Party in power, Turkish-Syrian relations improved further. The free trade agreement between these two countries came into effect in 2007, while Türkiye began to act as a mediator in the Syrian- Israeli peace talks in the same year. Moreover, in 2009, visa requirements between Türkiye and Syria were removed.⁴⁴ Between 2006 and 2010, Turkish exports to Syria grew from \$609 million to \$1.85 billion. The Syrian trade route also increased

42 Taşpınar and Tol, "Turkey and the Kurds," 1.

43 Özlem Tür, "Turkish- Syrian Relations: Where Are We Going?" UNISCI Discussion Papers, 23 (2010) <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76715004010.pdf>

44 See *ibid.*

Türkiye's exports to Jordan and the Gulf countries.⁴⁵ By the late 2000s, Türkiye and Syria were holding joint cabinet meetings, and Erdoğan and Assad went on vacation with their families. Furthermore, Prime Minister Erdoğan's close friendship with Bashar Al-Assad, who was subject to the West's isolation due to the latter's alleged involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, was boosting Erdoğan's popularity on the "Arab Street".⁴⁶ A Turkish Foreign Ministry official identified the AK Party government's Syria policy as "Türkiye's biggest diplomatic investment" in those years.⁴⁷ Prime Minister Erdoğan also stated in 2009:

"When I watch Syria from my own country, I get emotional. For example, I am affected when the Saudi King comes to Syria, but I am also equally affected when my brother Bashar Assad goes to Saudi Arabia. Now, similarly, I am waiting to see my brother Bashar Assad's visit to Lebanon. With all these [developments] in this region, unity, togetherness, and cooperation will bring us a bright future. I have always longed for this, and now we are succeeding in these. Is it possible not to feel the excitement of these beautiful days?"

However, the Syrian regime's rejection of the AK Party leaders' request for reform in the face of the 2011 uprisings and Assad's preference to violently suppress the uprisings paved the way for the AK Party government's policy to provide political and financial support to the anti-Assad opposition. In the summer of 2011, Türkiye allowed the Syrian opposition to hold a conference in Antalya while also permitting the organization of the Free Syrian Army in Hatay.⁴⁸ This turn of events inevitably brought the Turkish-Syrian affinity to a breaking point and not only damaged this particular relationship but also disrupted Türkiye's regional aspirations, of which the rapprochement with Syria constituted an important dimension.

In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan, as a leader willing to maintain his popularity among the Arab public, experienced what Ziya Öniş identified as "an ethics versus self-interest dilemma" in 2011.⁴⁹ While Turkish policymakers

45 Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy. Middle East and North Africa Programme," Briefing Paper, 04 (2012): 3-4, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/1212bp_phillips.pdf

46 Ibid.

47 Cited in Phillips, "Into the Quagmire," 2.

48 Ibid., 6.

49 Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self-Interest," *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012).

were interested in preserving the close partnership built between Türkiye and Syria when the uprisings began, they also wanted to position Türkiye right next to the Arab peoples' challenge against the authoritarian regimes in the region. Having thought that the Assad regime would not be able to endure for long in the face of this challenge, Türkiye opted for a solid anti-Assad position. However, this policy stance eventually had negative consequences for Turkish foreign policy when it turned out that the Assad regime was here to stay.

Türkiye's second major challenge from the Syrian conflict was closely related to the first one. It was about the rise of the PKK threat to Türkiye in connection to the Syrian conflict, which was then gradually turning into a civil war. When Türkiye embarked on an anti-Assad position regarding the Syrian conflict, the Assad regime responded by reviving its historical position about the PKK. Bashar Al-Assad then withdrew his forces from the Kurdish-populated areas of northern Syria and left several provinces along the Türkiye-Syria border to the control of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat-PYD*).

These developments significantly alarmed Turkish policymakers because, as Türkiye was finally coming to terms with the KRG in northern Iraq, they had to face the emergence of another Kurdish entity, this time in northern Syria. However, in contrast to the Masoud Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in northern Iraq, which had an age-old rivalry with the PKK, the PYD and its armed wing People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel-YPG*) were identified as the Syrian affiliate of the PKK. Thus, according to Turkish policymakers, the newly emerging Kurdish entity along the Turkish-Syrian border posed an existential threat to Türkiye. In July 2012, then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan identified the structure emerging in northern Syria as a structure of terror and stated in a TV interview that it was not possible for Türkiye to have a positive attitude about the cooperation between the PKK, which is a terrorist organization, and the PYD in the Turkish-Syrian border areas.⁵⁰ Similarly, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, in a meeting with KRG President Masoud Barzani, stated that "the PYD must be put under control". In a joint declaration, Davutoğlu and Barzani asserted that those violent groups and organizations that try to take advantage of the power vacuum in Syria would be perceived as a common threat.⁵¹ Thus, it was

50 "Başbakan Erdoğan'ın Konuşmasının Tam Metni," *Hürriyet*, 26 July 2012, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/basbakan-erdoganin-konusmasinin-tam-metni-21069980>.

51 "Davutoğlu'ndan PYD'ye 'Ayar'," *Milliyet*, 2 August 2012, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/davutoglu-ndan-pyd-ye--ayar--gundem-1575162/>

evident in the summer of 2012 that Turkish policymakers were significantly concerned about the PYD/YPG's control over several provinces along the Turkish-Syrian border, and they identified this development as a national security threat to Türkiye.

A few months after the PYD/YPG established control in northern Syrian provinces, the AK Party government initiated the resolution process. Thus, the AK Party officials' initial reaction to the developments in northern Syria was to engage the PYD/YPG rather than confront it. In 2013, then Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu invited PYD Co-Chair Salih Muslim to Türkiye, where he held meetings with Foreign Ministry officials.⁵² During Muslim's visit, Davutoğlu explained that, especially after the beginning of the resolution process, Türkiye established extensive contacts with all the Kurdish groups in Syria and added that during this process, "Türkiye was encouraging the Syrian Kurdish groups to play a more active role in the Syrian opposition".⁵³ These remarks were a reminder of how the resolution process was part and parcel of Türkiye's efforts to be a central country in the region and increase its profile as a regional power.

The year 2014 turned out to be a time when serious problems about the resolution process began to appear, and mainly in connection with the Syrian conflict. The most important incident of 2014 was the battle for "Ayn al-Arab (used as 'Ayn al-Arab' by YPG)", where PYD/YPG mobilized an important resistance against the attacking ISIS forces.⁵⁴ The ISIS attack played an essential role in bringing together different Kurdish actors for Ayn al-Arab's struggle against this terrorist organization and increasing Kurdish nationalist sentiments.⁵⁵ In response to the ISIS attack, the PYD/YPG asked for help from several countries, including Türkiye. However, Türkiye's hesitant response to this request created serious disappointment among Türkiye's and Syria's Kurds. In fact, Turkish policymakers' response to the battle for Ayn al-Arab was one more example of the carrot-and-stick strategy they had been implementing towards the PYD/YPG since the beginning of the resolution process. During the battle for Ayn al-Arab, PYD Co-Chairman Salih Muslim once again visited İstanbul and met with Turkish officials from the Ministry

52 "Aynı Sofradalar," *Milliyet*, 1 August 2013, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/ayni-sofradalar-1744704>

53 "Salih Müslim'in Ziyareti Önceden Planlanmıştı," *Anadolu Ajansı*, 30 July 2013, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/salih-muslimin-ziyareti-oceden-planlanmisti/229000>.

54 Alan Taylor, "The Battle for Kobani," *The Atlantic*, 8 October 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/10/the-battle-for-kobani/100828/>

55 "FT: Kobani Kürtlerin Milliyetçi Heveslerini Diriltti," *BBC News Türkçe*, 24 October 24 2014, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/10/141024_ft_kurtler.

of Foreign Affairs and the National Intelligence Organization.⁵⁶ As a result of these meetings, despite initial reluctance, Turkish policymakers allowed the passage of heavy artillery and Iraqi Kurdish fighters (peshmerga forces) into Ayn al-Arab through Türkiye's borders to support the PYD/YPG in their fight against ISIS.⁵⁷ However, during the same period, Türkiye's Chief of General Staff referred to the PYD as a separatist terrorist organization.⁵⁸

Concluding Remarks

Despite its ups and downs, the AK Party's policy to resolve the Kurdish question through peaceful means played an important role not only in restraining the PKK attacks in Türkiye, but also in improving Türkiye's relations with the Iraqi Kurds from 2008, and in allowing Turkish policymakers to maintain contact with the PYD/YPG on a political basis between 2013-2015. As described above, all these efforts were part of a broader endeavor on the part of the AK Party governments to turn Türkiye into a regional power. The AK Party leaders thought that for a long time, Turkish governments could not take advantage of the country's historical and cultural connections in the region, and instead they pursued an isolationist and passive foreign policy.⁵⁹ According to them, Türkiye in fact had "historical, strategic, and geographic depth in the Middle East".⁶⁰ Thus, it was in Türkiye's best interest to act as a central country in the international system, to pursue a proactive foreign policy, and to get involved in Middle Eastern affairs, utilizing the country's Ottoman heritage. However, especially from the mid-2000s onwards, Turkish policymakers acknowledged that only with the resolution of its Kurdish question could Türkiye acquire its real potential and play a leading role in the region's political and economic developments. The US decision to withdraw its troops from Iraq in 2008 encouraged Türkiye to take the necessary steps to address the Kurdish question and improve relations with the Iraqi Kurds.

However, the beginning of the Syrian conflict demonstrated that the AK Party's policy "to grow with the Kurds" had limits. Türkiye's relations with

56 Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "Kobani'ye Askeri Koridor Teklifi," *Milliyet*, 9 October 2014, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/kobani-ye-askeri-koridor-teklifi/siyaset/ydetay/1951885/default.htm>.

57 Constanze Letsch, "Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Arrive in Kobani to Bolster Fight Against ISIS," *The Guardian*, 1 November 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/01/kurdish-peshmerga-kobani-isis-syria>.

58 Cansu Çamlıbel, "PYD Lideri Salih Müslim: Ankara'nın Şam'la Savaşında Asker Olmayız," *Hürriyet*, 13 October 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/pyd-lideri-salih-muslim-ankaranin-samla-sava-sinda-asker-olmayiz-27373368>.

59 Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Worldviews and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40 (2009): 178.

60 *Ibid.*, 186.

the PYD/YPG turned into complete enmity when the resolution process ended in the aftermath of the Turkish general elections in June 2015. After the elections, the suicide bombing by ISIS, which killed 32 activists in Şanlıurfa's Suruç province on July 20, 2015, as well as the killing of two policemen in Ceylanpınar by the PKK on July 22, 2015, with the accusation that they were in contact with, turned out to be the last couple of straws that put an end to the resolution process (See Bozarıslan, 2015).⁶¹ The connection between the PKK and PYD/YPG made it very difficult for Türkiye to remain silent in the face of their gains within the framework of the Syrian civil war. Furthermore, the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum, which took place in September 2017, once again demonstrated that Türkiye was uncomfortable with possible Kurdish independence in the region.

Although Türkiye's relations with the KRG and especially their economic exchanges are still going on, long gone are the days when Türkiye was expected to resolve its Kurdish question through peaceful means and engage all the regional Kurds in Iraq and Syria on its path to becoming a regional power. Türkiye is still an ambitious country in the region. Turkish policymakers have been working hard to enhance Turkish presence and visibility in regional and global affairs. Türkiye's efforts to reach a negotiated solution between Russia and Ukraine in the early days of the Ukraine crisis, as well as its role in the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative, Turkish leaders' unequivocal support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the country's active engagement with the Tripoli-based government in Libya, constitute just a few examples of this preference. However, as long as Türkiye's Kurdish question remains unresolved, it will likely continue to haunt Turkish endeavors in its neighborhood and act as a stumbling block for more outstanding achievements that Türkiye can make in the future.

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61 Mahmut Bozarıslan, "Turkey Drawn into Vortex of Violence," *Al-Monitor*, 26 July 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-suruc-bombing-violence.html>.

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