



AK Party initiated in 2009 the democratic opening, which appeared promising as it envisaged a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem.

The Kurdish challenge to the Turkish Nation-State

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Özet

Kuruluşunun 90. yılında, Türk devleti mevcut ulus-devlet ile kendine tehdit oluşturan paralel devlet arasında bir mücadele ile karşı karşıyadır. Bu tehdidin birçok sebebi vardır. Kürtlere göre Kemalistlerin geliştirmiş oldukları model tek bir ulusun, yani Türklerin, varlığını tanıyan; Kürtlerin varlığını ise yok sayan bir devlet anlamına gelmekteydi. Bu anlamda modern devlet en azından Osmanlı Devleti döneminde kimliklerini koruyabilen ve özgürlükleri olan Kürtler için bir engel teşkil etmekteydi. Dolayısıyla bu noktada sorulması gereken sorular şunlardır: AK Parti bu sorunla başa çıkabilmek için nasıl bir teşebbüste bulundu? Bu teşebbüsü önceki hükümetlerin teşebbüslerinden ayıran özellikler nelerdi? Bu gelişmelerin sebepleri ve başlıca dönüm noktaları nelerdir? Kürt tarafının geçirdiği değişimler nelerdir?

By the time the AKP came to power in 2002, the Kurdish question could no longer be portrayed as solely a terrorist problem, as had been the case in earlier decades, because the Kurds had fashioned a genuine national movement with a legal party, institutions and strong popular support, which manifested itself in civil disobedience and intifada-like uprisings in the streets.

Abstract

In its 90th year of its existence the Turkish state is facing a race between the existing nation-state framework and the parallel state which is challenging it. The causes for this challenge are manifold but the most important ones are the decades of forced assimilation of the Kurds and the denial of their unique ethno-national identity by this very nation-state. For the Kurds, the model which had been developed by the Kemalists meant a state which recognized the existence of one nation only, that of the Turks, while obliterating altogether that of the Kurds. In this sense, the modern state represented a setback for the Kurds who under the Ottoman Empire had enjoyed at least the freedom to keep their identity intact. The questions that must be posed are therefore: How did the AKP attempt to cope with the problem and in what ways did it differ from its predecessors? What are the causes for, and the main turning points of these developments? What are the changes that the Kurdish camp itself has undergone?

Keywords: *Nation-state, ethno-national identity, parallel state, AKP's paradoxes, delegitimization, Oslo process*

Introduction

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's declarations and actions in the last few months regarding the Kurdish issue and the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) leave one utterly confused. One day

he declares that the PKK members are terrorists, hence he will not sit with them at the same table, and the next day he says exactly the opposite.¹ In fact, throughout his decade in power, Erdogan has been issuing contradictory proclamations on the Kurdish issue. Often, he spoke of Turkish citizenship as being a supra-ethnic identity in which Turks, Kurds and others may enjoy equal citizenship, but he also frequently emphasized, in the traditional Kemalist vein, that in Turkey there is "one state, one flag, one homeland, one nation".² On another occasion, he modified the formula in a way which was favorable to the Kurds, declaring: "we did not say one language; we said one flag, one religion, one state."³ Indeed, under successive Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, the Kurdish issue became multi-dimensional, full of paradoxes and far more complicated than at any time in the past. The questions that must be posed are therefore: What are the causes for, and the main turning points of these developments? What are the changes that the Kurdish camp itself has undergone? How did the AKP attempt to cope with the problem and in what ways did it differ from its predecessors?

Winds of change

In the last decade a convergence of internal and external developments came together to catapult the Kurdish issue onto center stage in Turkish politics. The first cluster of causes was related to the geopolitical changes in the Middle East during the last decade. These include the Gulf war

of 2003; the “Arab spring” upheavals, beginning at the end of 2010; the withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq at the end of 2011; and the Syrian Kurdish self-assertion, resulting in their takeover of their region from the Assad regime in July 2012. Each of these developments opened a new Kurdish Pandora’s box for regional states, and particularly for Turkey.

The second set of causes was related to the transformations in the Kurdish domestic scene in Turkey. By the time the AKP came to power in 2002, the Kurdish question could no longer be portrayed as solely a terrorist problem,⁴ as had been the case in earlier decades, because the Kurds had fashioned a genuine national movement with a legal party, institutions and strong popular support, which manifested itself in civil disobedience and intifada-like uprisings in the streets. What is more, this movement challenged the very ethos of a nation-state on which the Turkish Republic was established.⁵ The Kurdish challenge to the state was a kind of a belated reaction to the years of forced assimilation and denial of Kurdish identity by the state.

The AKP’s own policies and constraints constituted the third set of causes. The 2003 decision not to allow the US-led coalition forces to launch attacks against Iraq from Turkish lands, the AKP’s efforts, up to a certain point in time, to join the EU, the attempts to appeal to both Kurds and Turks in Turkish election campaigns, and the pressures from the Turkish ultra nationalist camp, together formed the background to the volatile and zigzagging policies of the AKP toward the Kurds.

Turkey’s policy towards the Kurds under the AKP displays many paradoxes which in turn exacerbated Ankara’s dilemmas and the challenges facing it. Domestically, AKP governments exhibited greater liberalism and openness toward the Kurdish issue than any of its predecessors, yet the PKK and the Kurdish national movement as a whole were solidified significantly by the time of AKP’s third term in 2011.

Regarding relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, the AKP began its first term by adamantly opposing official relations or formal recognition, lest this entity became a model for emulation by the Kurds in Turkey. However, by its third term, the AKP had become one of the most important partners of the KRG, thus contributing willy-nilly to the latter’s contagious effect on Turkey’s Kurds. Similarly, one of the motives for the marriage of convenience with Syria under Bashar al-Assad was the need to curb PKK activities which had been backed by Damascus, but it was this very AKP government which decided in 2011 to end this special relationship following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and thus open up another Kurdish front, in the south. Finally, one of the objectives for Turkey’s initial rapprochement with Iran was the need to coordinate policies vis-à-vis the Kurds in the entire region, but the subsequent estrangement between Ankara and Tehran, especially in the last year, has revived to a certain extent Iran’s support of the PKK.

While these policies may reflect pragmatism and flexibility on the part of the AKP, they nonetheless have added to the complexity of the Kurdish question. As a rule, it was the Kurds who always felt encircled by hostile states. Now Turkey’s situation mirrors that of the Kurds, as Ankara feels encircled by a Kurdish problem on many fronts, and in which internal and external challenges have become intertwined. Indeed the AKP has had to devise a different strategy for each of the Kurdish fronts, while having to differentiate between “good Kurds” and “bad Kurds” in Turkey itself, as well as between “good Kurds” in Iraq and “bad Kurds” in Syria.

To be sure from a military standpoint the objective situation might not be as threatening as it might initially appear. The Turkish army, one of the biggest in NATO, infinitely dwarfs the outlawed PKK guerrilla army, whose numbers are estimated at 6000. However, what is more important is Ankara’s own threat perceptions. In the 1990s, the two domestic issues that determined Turkey’s threat perceptions were radical

Islamism and Kurdish revisionism.⁶ But with the ascendance of the pro-Islamist AKP to power in 2002, the threat of radical Islamism gradually lost its urgency, leaving the Kurdish problem alone at the top. As a matter of fact, the real danger did not lie in the military realm but rather in the severe harm being done to the social fabric of society, thus posing a major challenge to the foundational ethos of the state.

The AKP's dilemma: Coping with a terrorist organization or a national movement?

The Kurdish problem has been steadily growing for many years, like a snowball in slow motion. From the late 1940s and for more than thirty years afterwards, the so-called "silent years", no Kurdish problem officially existed in the Turkish public sphere. When the matter suddenly flared up in the mid 1980s, it was widely perceived and officially portrayed as purely a terrorist problem that could and should be solved by force. However, the "terrorist problem" has gradually metamorphosed into a national movement with profound impact on all facets of Turkish life, politically, economically and socially.⁷ Moreover, it proved to be Ankara's Achilles heel, for it was periodically manipulated by its neighbors, each in its own turn, with a view to destabilizing Turkey.

What were the AKP's strategies for coping with the problem? Ideologically, the AKP sought to engage the Kurdish rank and file by appealing to the Islamic bond of solidarity between Turks and Kurds. This approach was, in fact, reminiscent of Kemal Ataturk's during the Turkish war of independence in the early 1920s, when he employed the bond of Islam as an important tool for gaining Kurdish support and mobilizing them to fight in the war against the invading Christian states. Of course, the prime difference between these two governments is the AKP's genuine commitment to Islam and its desire to spread Islamic norms and practices throughout the country, including among the Kurds.⁸ To encourage this new form of Islamo-Ottoman bonds, the AKP dispatched 10,000 imams to the Kurdish region to preach to the Kurds (in Turkish).⁹

Economically, the AKP declared its willingness to encourage investments in the underdeveloped Kurdish southeastern part of the country and to offer new opportunities for Kurdish businessmen and entrepreneurs.¹⁰ Yet, after a decade of the AKP being in power the Kurdish areas remained the most underdeveloped region in the country. Similarly, the AKP government began dealing with the acute problem of forced displacement of Kurds, which had reached its apex in the 1990s. Realizing that this has become a hotbed for PKK supporters the AKP agreed in 2004 to pay compensation for village evacuations.¹¹ However, on the ground not much was achieved.

Politically, the AKP initiated in 2009 the "Kurdish opening" or the "democratic opening" (acilim), which appeared promising as it envisaged a peaceful solution to the problem.¹² It even engaged secretly the PKK to this end.¹³ In early 2009, a Turkey state delegation led by Hakan Fidan, later to be appointed as director of the National Intelligence Service (MIT), approached Abdullah Ocalan and requested that he produce a statement of his views. The result was the "Road Map" document written by Ocalan from his prison in Imrali Island where he has been serving life imprisonment since his abduction and conviction in 1999. As its author suggests, the "Road Map" document was aimed at presenting solutions to the Kurdish question and bringing democratization to Turkey.¹⁴ It was indeed the centerpiece of the secret dialogue between the AKP and the PKK which took place in Oslo probably between 2009-2011 and which was broken off in mid 2011. Erdogan subsequently acknowledged the existence of such talks saying "they did meet; I myself had given the instructions."¹⁵ We do not know whether the AKP's Oslo initiative was a strategic plan that had failed to gain traction, or merely a tactical move aimed at winning the support of the Kurdish electorate in the June 2011 elections. The co-chair of the Kurdish Peace and Democratic Party (Baris Democratic Partisi; BDP) Selahattin Demirtas, is certain that it was the latter: Here is what he had to say:



Prime Minister Erdogan labels the BDP an extension of a terror organization.

The fundamental result that the government hoped to get from the meetings was buying time. The fact that the meetings were carried on from the 2009 local elections up to the June 2011 parliamentary elections and then terminated makes us think that the government wanted to stall the PKK in order to gain votes.¹⁶

What is certain is that the results of the June 2011 elections left the impression that the AKP did choose the right track, for it had succeeded in attaining the majority of the Kurdish votes.

Shortly after this impressive success, however, a combination of internal and external factors eclipsed the AKP's gains. The AKP's "civilian soft coup" against the Turkish military and the trials of high ranking military personnel, including the chief of staff, caused severe disorientation and

demoralization in the army, weakening significantly its hand vis-à-vis the PKK. One particular incident illustrates the awkward situation into which the military had been put: A commander of a military station near the Iraqi border asked his headquarters whether he should return fire at attacking PKK militants because he did not want to be put on trial later on.¹⁷ The clipping of the army's wings had another unexpected result, namely that it removed the major common denominator that had united the AKP and the Kurds: the goal of depoliticizing and weakening the military.

Another important development which surfaced even before the June 2011 elections was the growing nationalist tendencies of the AKP. Whereas in 2005, Erdogan had portrayed Turkey under the AKP as a multi-ethnic and multi-

religious society far removed from the nationalist-chauvinist stance of earlier governments, five years later, the AKP itself began adopting an increasingly nationalist tone with a view to winning the votes of Turkey's ultra-nationalist sector.¹⁸ This new stance contributed to the polarization of Turkish society and to the growing rift between Turks and Kurds. It also further empowered the radicals in the Kurdish camp itself. Indeed, nationalism was on the rise in both sides especially among the youth.¹⁹

From the Kurdish perspective, the AKP's policies were perceived as moving one step forward and two steps back. While the AKP took such moves as opening a Kurdish TV station or easing the ban on the use of the Kurdish language, it has also detained more than 7,000 Kurdish activists in recent years.²⁰ Parallel to the "Kurdish opening", the AKP government cynically initiated a broad wave of arrests of officials, politicians, academics and NGO workers on the fabricated grounds of belonging to a terrorist organization. Demirtas explained the rationale behind these arrests that had begun on April 14, 2009, saying that they roughly coincided with the period when the İmralı (Ocalan) and Oslo meetings began. Accordingly, he concluded that the government had used the law-enforcement mechanism in order to strengthen the AKP's hand in negotiations with the PKK and its leader.²¹ Be it as it may, the government's half-hearted gestures to the Kurds in the realm of culture and language could no longer satisfy the national-political expectations of a movement which was on the rise.

On another level, the AKP's attempts to sap the power of the ethno-national Kurdish bond by stressing Islamic loyalty began causing a backlash. In an attempt to pull the rug out from under the feet of AKP's appeal to the more conservative-Islamic parts of Kurdish society, Kurdish organizations have started to mobilize Islam for their own purposes. Thus, in recent years the PKK has employed Imams, Friday prayers and an Islamic discourse in order to compete with the AKP. One of these initiatives was "civic Friday prayers," which are held in the open and in

which the sermons are conducted, for the first time, in Kurdish and not Turkish. The Kurds came to describe these prayers as "anti-state prayers," during which Kurds vocally demand their rights. Blaming the AKP for promoting "religious assimilation" a group of Kurdish imams and Islamic scholars called Diyar-der launched a boycott against state-controlled mosques. One of the participants in these prayers said: "We boycott the state, the party that runs it and their mosques that pretend nothing is happening to the Kurds in Turkey."²²

Erdogan did not remain idle vis-à-vis these moves, which potentially threatened to undermine his base of support among the Kurds. One tactic was to accuse the PKK and the BDP of being non-Muslims. Thus, in one of his visits to Diyarbakir, he attacked the PKK, saying that they were not religious and that moreover, they perceived Ocalan as their prophet: "They are cheating you, so let us teach them a lesson", he declared.²³ Another means for delegitimizing the Kurdish opposition, especially the PKK was to periodically label them as Zoroastrians, i.e. infidels.²⁴ Thus, in one of his speeches, Erdogan declared that "the terrorist organization [PKK] is far from God, it is Zoroastrian."²⁵ On yet another occasion he charged that "the terrorists' place is clear. They are Zoroastrians"²⁶

A parallel state vis-à-vis the nation-state

If there is one issue that unites Kurds in Turkey, be they pro-AKP or pro-BDP, it is their demand for recognition of their particular collective identity. During the Kemalist era, Kurds were designated as "mountain Turks" or "reactionaries";²⁷ something now deemed utterly unacceptable by the Kurds. Accordingly, the Kurdish national movement in Turkey underwent of late an important development: the bifurcation in the means of struggle between violent and non-violent methods. At the very time that the PKK and the Turkish army escalated their mutual attacks, the Kurdish non-violent movement also reinforced its efforts to obtain greater visibility and recognition by the Turkish state and the world at

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large. The reinforcement of the Kurdish national movement took various forms including acts of civil disobedience, demonstrations, protests, hunger strikes and even boycott of parliament activities.

The latest expression of this kind of activity was the hunger strike among some 700 Kurdish prisoners, which included members of the BDP and ordinary, unaffiliated Kurds as well. The strike which lasted for 68 days between September and November 2012 had among its aims the release of Ocalan from prison. Ironically enough, it was only Ocalan's call to stop the strike that convinced the strikers to do so, but the government did not reciprocate by releasing him. These Ghandi style protests were much more difficult for the government to cope with because such tactics, if adopted in the future, are likely to gain for the Kurds international attention and sympathy, and thus bring pressure to bear on Ankara much more than armed attacks could do.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish national movement has also redoubled its efforts to build what was termed "the parallel state" in Turkey. BDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas called on the government to change its policies, saying: "Leave this lawlessness to one side and start acting like a government and a state -- there is a people in front of you. Look, a Kurdish state is being constructed in the Middle East."²⁸ While Demirtas might have been referring to the KRG, he probably also sought to send a message about the sit-

uation of the Kurds in Turkey as well. The body behind the establishment of "the parallel state" is the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK), a semi-clandestine organization considered to be the PKK's arm for infiltrating into Kurdish society. The KCK's activities were reinforced following the BDP's success in the municipal elections of 2009, which resulted in 99 municipalities being headed by Kurdish mayors.²⁹ Allegedly, the KCK controls the mayors and deputies of the legal party, the BDP. It also collects the "revolutionary tax" both in Turkey and abroad. According to an audit by the ministry of finance, the Kurdish municipalities have paid at least €12 million to the guerrillas.³⁰ Prime Minister Erdogan himself acknowledged the existence of the "parallel state" and his determination to clamp down on those involved, warning: "Turkey cannot accept a parallel state. People who criticize these operations support and serve terrorism. We will not put down our weapons."³¹

For all of Erdogan's warnings, the Kurdish national movement was given a further boost by the contagious effect of the uprising in Syria, which has impacted the Kurds in Turkey on three different levels. First, the AKP's vigorous anti-Assad stance and its support for the Syrian opposition led Assad to renew his support for the PKK as a quid pro quo. Second, the bolstering of the Syrian Kurds' position as a result of their takeover of the Kurdish regions in Syria in July 2012 and their demands for a federated political system became a source of emulation for

the Kurds of Turkey. Third, the border between Turkish and Syrian Kurds became porous, thus strengthening cross-border influences between the two communities.

Due to all these developments the Turkish government and militant Kurds have gone to new extremes since the summer of 2012. The PKK escalated significantly its operations in Turkey, among other things, due to the fact that a third of its members are believed to be Syrian Kurds. In another development, the PKK changed its strategy from “hit and run” to “hit and stay” attacks. Thus, it attempted for the first time in its history to take control of a certain area in Hakkari. So serious the situation appeared that an army ex general, Osman Pamukoglu, stated that “Hakkari slipped from our hands.”³²

For its part, the Turkish army escalated its activities against the PKK. The following statistics published by military sources may give a clue to the intensity of fighting. Over five months the army reportedly carried out 974 operations, killed 373 PKK fighters and lost 88 soldiers.³³ PM Erdogan claimed in September 2012 that 500 PKK militants had been “rendered ineffective”, namely killed within one month.³⁴ For its part, the PKK maintained that the army had carried out 223 operations as against 303 operations of the PKK, in which the PKK killed 1035 soldiers and lost 101 guerrillas.³⁵ According to a more objective source, between June 2011 and November 2012 more than 870 persons lost their life in the conflict.³⁶ Indeed, these numbers and the wide coverage by the media of such operations indicate that a small scale civil war is taking place.

At the same time another important change took place in the Turkish discourse: While the Kurdish issue has been a taboo for decades, in the last few months it became the most debated issue in public life. The trickle became an avalanche following the upheavals in Syria and takeover of the Kurdish region in the summer of 2012. Many intellectuals and journalists now talk of the need to solve the Kurdish problem peacefully so as to

pull the rug out from under the feet of the PKK; to ward off the Kurdish danger emanating from Syria; to keep the KRG-Turkish marriage of convenience on track; and finally, to safeguard the vested interests which many Turks, including even members of the MHP, the ultra nationalist party, have in the KRG.

Many Turks and Kurds alike have pinned their hopes on the new constitution which is currently being drafted, desiring that it will establish a new framework for state-Kurd relations and enhance the prospects for a peaceful solution to the issue.³⁷ However, rather than bringing representatives of the BDP into the process, the AKP sought to marginalize them and even to close down the party because of its alleged organic links with the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government as well as European countries and the US. Erdogan, who labeled the lawful BDP “an extension” of a “terror organization,”³⁸ continues to threaten to strip the BDP’s parliament members of their immunity and put them on trial. Such posture has contributed further to the alienation of the Kurds from the Turkish state and accelerated the moves for the establishment of the Kurdish parallel state.

Conclusion

In its 90th year of its existence the Turkish state is facing a race between the existing nation-state framework and the parallel state which is challenging it. The causes for this challenge are manifold but the most important ones are the decades of forced assimilation of the Kurds and the denial of their unique ethno-national identity by this very nation-state. For the Kurds, the model which had been developed by the Kemalists meant a state which recognized the existence of one nation only, that of the Turks, while obliterating altogether that of the Kurds. In this sense, the modern state represented a setback for the Kurds who under the Ottoman Empire had enjoyed at least the freedom to keep their identity intact. Thus, the delegitimization of Kurdishness by the state brought about the delegitimization of the state in the eyes of many Kurds.

The dismantling of the Kemalist state by the AKP aroused hopes among the Kurds that this move would be followed by a revolutionary change toward the Kurds as well. Indeed, the early years of AKP rule were marked by some openness toward the issue. However, a decade on, the Kurdish question is far from being solved. The inconsistent, zigzag policies of the AKP are one of the causes. The fact that the government perceived every Kurd who is fighting for recognition of his identity to be a terrorist is another one. The growing Islamo-nationalist tendencies of the AKP have also contributed to the growing chasm between Turks and Kurds. Seen from the Kurd-

ish perspective, for all the positive actions of the AKP, by 2012 the government's red line continued to be "protecting the ethnically Turkish, unitary, centralized character of the existing system. The government continued to have a backward, apprehensive approach regarding recognition of the fundamental rights that Kurds derive from their status as a people"³⁹ To sum up, unless the AKP accepts a multi-ethnic model of a state for Turkey, the race might end with the parallel state demanding a separate state. One can already hear such voices, not only among Kurds but also Turks as well.⁴⁰

DİPNOTLAR

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- 40 Interviews with Kurds and Turks who asked to remain anonymous.