
 MDC The Moshe Dayan Center
for Middle Eastern and African Studies  TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS
EDITORS: HAY EYTAN COHEN YANAROCAK & CENG SAGNIC

Vol. 1, No. 11, September 2017

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| From the Editors | 1 |
| Turkey: A Social Media Story - Djene Rhys Bajalan & Michael Brooks..... | 2 |
| Turkey-KRG Relations Revisited: Potential for Crises - Ceng Sagnic..... | 7 |
| Notes | 11 |

From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) is proud to present the September 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, Djene Rhys Bajalan from Missouri State University and Michael Brooks, an award-winning talk show host in the United States, contributed with an article focusing on social media and online communications technology in Turkey. Their article discussed the forms of political activism through social media, both by the government itself and activists. The second article by Ceng Sagnic analyzed the potential for a renewed crisis between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region given the latter's rising bid for independence.

Turkey: A Social Media Story

Djene Rhys Bajalan & Michael Brooks

In late August, the pro-government *Daily Sabah* carried a story pertaining to *Finkafe* a Turkish social media platform run by financier Arif Ünver, a former chairman of the Turkey's Capital Markets Investors Association.¹ At first glance, the article seems like a typical fluff piece which usually seeks to lionize the achievements of a Turkish business to an international audience. If there is one area of modern statecraft in which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has excelled, it has been in extolling the virtues of capitalism *à la Turca*. However, reading between the lines, the write up was more than just page filler designed to separate the laudatory “news” pieces paying tribute to the latest government initiative and the vitriolic editorial attacks launched against the enemies, both foreign and domestic, of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The feature on Finkafe, a company which markets itself under the catchy slogan *100% Yerli Sosyal Medya* (“100% Local Social Media”), reveals some of the thinking of AKP elites regarding cyberspace. Two extracts from the piece are particularly illuminating in this regard. The author of the piece, Erhan Kahraman, notes that social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are popular among Turkish citizens, and points out that all of this online activity “creates next to nothing in terms of value for Turkey as a country. The main revenue from social media use goes to foreign companies and, as mentioned before, the private data of Turkish users is stored on foreign servers.” Kahraman then goes on to quote, approvingly, Ünver, who states that: “Our aim is to offer Finkafe to the public and to provide services to our government.” The value of Finkafe for Erdoğan’s partisans in the media is that it will provide the government with “services,” namely greater control and influence over cyberspace.

Controlling Communication

The desire of authoritarian regimes to control the means of communications is nothing new. Censorship of the printed word has a venerable tradition stretching back to the very inception of the printing press. More recently, regimes from the Soviet Union to Saudi Arabia have sought to control the flow of information to their citizens through the monopolization of radio and television. Yet, the emergence of new communications technologies has often played an important role in undermining the control of authoritarian states and institutions. Just as the advent of the press allowed the pioneers of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century to challenge the authority of Rome more effectively, so too did West German television serve in weakening the grip of the communist authorities in the East.² The impulse of authoritarians to manage public perceptions of reality is nothing new to the Middle East. Dating back to the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), whose censors strictly monitored the flow of information within the Ottoman Empire (including a blanket censorship of any news

related to the murder or assassination of any foreign leader out of fear that it might serve as an example to Ottoman subjects), governments across the region have sought to manage public opinion.³

However, the rise of the Internet in the twenty-first century – and more specifically the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter – has served to disrupt long established methods of control, as demonstrated by the growing significance of social media platforms in recent protest movements across the Middle East. The first indication of the potentially disruptive influence of social media occurred in 2009, during Iran’s Green Movement. Although the movement, which was directed against what many in Iran felt was a rigging of the presidential election, was ultimately suppressed, but the widespread use of Twitter by the opposition movement led some to speak of it as a “Twitter Revolution.” Of course, some commentators have rightly observed that the role of Twitter in the Green Movement has been somewhat exaggerated.⁴ Moreover, as one American political commentator rather succinctly put it, “Twitter cannot stop a bullet...”⁵

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the Internet and social media did play an important role in the Arab Spring protests. Indeed, the initial successes of anti-government movements in both Tunisia and Egypt again led many in the media and academia to emphasize the revolutionary potential of online communication technology.⁶ Indeed, one of the unlikely heroes to emerge from the tumult of the Arab Spring was a young Egyptian Google executive, Wael Ghonim.⁷ A study conducted at Washington State University, which assessed the influence of social media on the protest movements, argued “that social media carried a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for the success of political uprising...”⁸ Some studies have, of course, provided a more nuanced picture of the role of social media in the mobilization of opposition forces in the Arab World. Research from Pew Research Center has noted that, while the role of social media in the movement against President Hosni Mubarak was not insignificant (in particular in terms of mobilizing college students and getting news out of the country), the fact that 65 percent of the country was not online means that one should be wary of overstating the importance of social media in Mubarak’s ouster.⁹

Erdoğan’s Online *Drang nach Osten* (“drive towards the East”)

Considering the growing importance of social media platforms to protest movements across the Middle East, it should not have been surprising that they also played an important role in the anti-government “Gezi Park” protests that broke out in Turkey in May 2013. This is all the more apparent when one considers that, unlike in Egypt where only about a third of the country was online, Internet use in Turkey in 2013 was approximately 46 percent.¹⁰ As one scholar directly involved in the protests noted, social media constituted an important organization tool for the movement’s activists.¹¹ Yet, it is important to remember, Gezi was ultimately a failure. Again, Facebook and

Twitter continue to be woefully inadequate protection against water cannon, pepper-spray, and bullets. Moreover, since 2013, Erdoğan has only gone from strength to strength at a time when Internet use in Turkey has risen 58 percent. Indeed, Erdoğan even managed to face down a *coup d'état* in July 2016, the story of which also involved the use of social media. Interestingly enough, it was not only the coup plotters who made use of Internet (they used the online messaging service WhatsApp). One reason pro-government forces were able to mobilize so rapidly against the putsch was Erdoğan's ability to communicate to the broader public through the iPhone application, FaceTime. New communications technology, clearly, can be a two way street.¹²

Nevertheless, Gezi Park seems to have constituted an important turning point in the attitudes of Erdoğan and, more generally pro-AKP, elites towards social media. It would mark the beginning of a new phase in which the government (which is now nearly synonymous with both Erdoğan and the AKP) would adopt a pro-active "online" strategy. Just as Erdoğan has been able to establish a near monopoly on more traditional forms of print and wireless media, so too does he seem intent on laying claim to cyberspace.¹³

Of course, some government efforts to control the flow of online information follow well established models of censorship. Turkey has banned the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia – much to the chagrin of students across the length and breadth of the country – on the grounds that it was running a "smear campaign" against Turkey.¹⁴ Moreover, the Turkish authorities have also, at times, blocked access to Twitter and Facebook to avoid negative media coverage.¹⁵ However, such methods, which were used by Turkish authorities long before Gezi, are somewhat heavy handed and restrictions on specific websites can often be circumvented by using Virtual Private Networks (VPN).

Another more traditional form of control extended to the online world is the use of social media posts as evidence in prosecutions of individuals deemed to have violated Turkey's prohibition on "insulting" the president. One of the more bizarre examples in this regard revolves around an Internet meme highlighting the physical similarities between the *Lord of the Rings* character Gollum and President Erdoğan. In the spring of 2016, a man was sentenced to a suspended prison sentence and stripped of his parental custodial rights by a court in the seaside province of Antalya for sharing the image. In a peculiar addendum to this story, a year later another man, this time in the western Anatolian province of Aydın, was successfully able to beat the charge.¹⁶ Significantly, he was only able to do so by arguing that Gollum was a sympathetic character and thus comparing him to Turkey's president did not violate the law. Evidently, keeping an eye on individuals' social media posts has become a new and highly efficient way of policing the thoughts and opinions of the population.

However, perhaps the most novel and the most insidious form of the Turkish government's online strategy has been its cultivation of a "troll army," one which can both actively promote Erdoğan's political agenda online as well as intimidate those who

dare to challenge his authority. The origins of the AKP's troll army are murky, but seem to date back to September 2013. At the time, journalists in the US, Europe, and Turkey reported on government plans to recruit a 6,000 strong social media army from among the AKP faithful who would be tasked with promoting the government narrative.¹⁷ Certainly, there is nothing particularly sinister about a political party attempting to use new forms of communication to spread a message. This is certainly the way that the head of the *New Turkey Digital Office*, Gökhan Yücel, sought to present the effort in an interview with the *Independent* in 2015, likening the efforts of his office to those of Obama's 2008 election campaign. However, despite Yücel's attempts at intellectual obfuscation, any comparison with Obama's campaign is disingenuous at best.¹⁸

While some of the AKPs online activists may well be involved in "legitimate" public relations activities, there is a dark underbelly to the Turkish government's online presence. Pro-government trolls have been active in the dissemination of what has come to be known in the West as "fake news." For instance, in the summer of 2017, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of Turkey's main opposition party – the Republican People's Party (CHP) – led a march protesting the imprisonment of a member of his parliamentary caucus, and shortly after the event a doctored photo of Kılıçdaroğlu sitting next to Fetullah Gülen appeared online. This was a clear attempt to delegitimize Kılıçdaroğlu by linking him to Gülen, the exiled cleric whom Turkish authorities accused of being the mastermind behind the failed July 2016 *coup d'état*.

Emblazoned above the picture are the words: "So you have never actually met?" and underneath it the caption claims that the picture depicts the two together at a meeting of the "Atatürkist Thought Association." To believe that Gülen, a leading Turkish Islamist who, until recently, enjoyed excellent relations with Erdoğan and the AKP, would attend the meetings of what only can be described as an ultra-secularist cult dedicated to the veneration of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, takes a certain degree of credulity. However, what is most perverse about this particular example of disinformation is that the original undoctored image shows Gülen seated alongside none other than Erdoğan himself.¹⁹

Perhaps the most chilling characteristic of the AKP's online army is their willingness to attack those deemed to be enemies of the "New Turkey" (a common slogan for Erdoğan's supporters). One of the more innocuous examples of this seems to have been the mobilization of an online army to against the Hollywood epic, *The Promise*, a film which depicts the Armenian genocide, a sensitive subject for Turkish nationalists.²⁰ However, the online army does not just delegitimize what it deems to be unacceptable content, it also includes assaults on individuals in the media. Numerous Turkish journalists critical of the government have been subject to sustained campaigns of intimidation from anonymous social media accounts, as well as from pro-government public figures. A 2016 report from the International Press Institute catalogued the role of pro-government trolls in stifling reporting by threatening journalists with physical and sexual violence.²¹ Indeed, it is not only Turkish journalists who have been targeted

by the AKP's online legions. Foreign journalists too have been subject to vicious online campaigns.²²

Of course, given the opaque nature of the Turkish government, it is difficult to discern how many of these anonymous online accounts are run by professional apparatchiks in the pay of the state or the AKP, how many are bots, and how many are just “patriotic” Turkish citizens acting autonomously. However, there seems to be little doubt that the AKP is actively attempting to re-engineer Turkey's cyberspace. Should Finkafe succeed in displacing Facebook and/or Twitter, this would no doubt be a major step in that direction and welcomed by Turkey's rulers. It is far easier for them to pressure a company based in Istanbul and Ankara rather than one based in Silicon Valley. However, the more likely scenario will be that Finkafe will fail. Nevertheless, Erdoğan's Online *Drang nach Osten* will no doubt continue.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from Turkey's social media story and, more broadly, the story of social media in the recent transformations that have shaken the Middle East is that the internet communications revolution is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, social media and online communications technology have had an enormous impact on those organizing against the dominant political orders in the Middle East. There is no doubt that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter became important tools for activists seeking to rapidly organize and mobilize their supporters, as well as for ensuring that their political message can reach the broader public, without the filtering of government controlled media. Yet, on the other hand, there is nothing inherently revolutionary (in a political sense) about social media. As the importance of the Internet and social media have grown, so too have authoritarian regimes' interest in it. And as the Turkish case shows, authoritarian regimes are developing strategies not only to mitigate some of the disruptive effects of social media but also to actively seize the initiative online.

Michael Brooks is the host of the Michael Brooks Show, an independent global affairs and entertainment program. He is also the co-host of the award winning political talk show the Majority Report. He has studied in both the United States and Turkey and holds BA in International Politics from Bates College.

Djene Rhys Bajalan is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Missouri State University. He has previously both taught and studied in the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Iraqi Kurdistan. He holds a Ph.D. in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford.

Turkey-KRG Relations Revisited: Potential for Crises

Ceng Sagnic

For years it was the conventional wisdom that Turkey would use force to prevent a semi-autonomous Kurdish region emerging in northern Iraq. Yet after several years of exchanging hostile rhetoric, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Turkey became economic partners instead. The rhetorical confrontation between Ankara and Erbil has been resurrected as semi-autonomous Kurdistan has decided to hold a referendum on its independence from Iraq on September 25, 2017. Despite Turkey's threats against the KRG, there are several factors that suggest this crisis will not lead to an armed confrontation between Turkey and Kurdistan.

The Iran Factor

Turkey was the midwife for the KRG's economic growth and, to some extent, for its successful oil sales ever since the semi-autonomous region lost its 17 percent share of Iraq's budget in 2014.²³ Nonetheless, growing relations between Erbil and Ankara did not necessarily come at the expense of Erbil-Tehran relations. The KRG, including its main ruling party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has maintained a steady and stable dialogue with Iran. The region's president, Masoud Barzani, who also leads the KDP, has reportedly turned down multiple invitations to visit Iran during the past two years, but a relatively limited cooperation with Iran, extending from trade relations to military support for *Peshmerga* forces, continued with no significant disruptions.²⁴ With that being said, the ruling KDP has definitely favored stronger economic relations with Turkey over improving existing cooperation with Iran for many reasons: Turkey provided an outlet to the sea and thus to global markets; it served as the closest country for KRG to import technology and services; it allowed businessmen from the region to interact with Western investors based in Istanbul; and, it strengthened the region's standing as an alternative to the Iranian-influenced central government of Iraq. However, at the same time, the growing ties with Ankara did not damage the KRG's minimal but stable relations with Iran. Indeed, the Kurds turned to Iran when they needed mediation with Baghdad or to relieve Iran's pressure on the KRG government, which Tehran exerted through its support for Kurdish opposition parties in the region.

Considering the KRG's desperate need for an outlet to the sea, exporting oil exclusively through Turkey would essentially mean an unconditional dependence on Ankara. Despite this reality, the KRG never gave up hope for using Iraq's territorial waters to export its oil. Iraq, a mutual ally of the US and Iran, is Kurdistan's only possible alternative to Turkey. Exporting its oil through Iran would ring alarm bells in Washington and further strengthen the Iranian-backed Kurdish opposition parties in the KRG. Therefore, although tension continues to escalate between Baghdad and Erbil over the latter's bid for independence and attempts to unilaterally annex the disputed territories, stable relations between Iraq and a potentially sovereign Kurdistan could undercut Turkey's domination over Erbil's trade routes.

In February 2016, Turkish authorities halted the flow of oil from Kirkuk through Turkey, citing an attack by the PKK that allegedly targeted the pipeline.²⁵ The 23 day long suspension ended after Ankara reportedly fixed the damage. However, after the PKK announced that it had not attacked the pipeline,²⁶ Iraqi Kurds acknowledged that Ankara had closed the pipeline in order to coerce the KRG. A repetition of a similar measure against the semi-autonomous government could be harmful now, but it would be disastrous later, if the KRG declares independence. There is no doubt that the Kurdish leaders in Erbil are aware of this risk and thus they are trying to keep the doors to Iran and Iraq open in the event that they need an alternative means for exporting the region's oil. This hedge, coupled with Erbil's minimal but mostly stable relations with Iran, constitutes the delicate part of Turkey-KRG relations. Although the KRG invests a great deal more to maintain its strong partnership with Turkey, it keeps the Iran and Iraq options on the table as an insurance policy. However, both alternatives to Turkey run through Tehran. Therefore, if economic relations between Turkey and the KRG deteriorate, Iranian influence in the KRG will expand. The Kurds feel like they could live with this scenario because their strategic alliance with the US would balance Iranian influence in the KRG, but Turkey would be considerably less comfortable in this case for a set of reasons that are directly related to the balance of power in Syria.

The Syria Factor

The Islamic State's siege on Kobani in 2014, which led to the Syrian Kurds receiving direct military assistance from the US-led coalition, and eventually becoming military allies for the US, changed Turkey's strategic calculus in Syria. As of today, containment of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), allegedly supervised by the PKK, is the backbone of Turkey's Syria policy. Although the epicenter of the Turkey-SDF dispute is Syria, the PKK is still in the Qandil Mountains of the KRG, requiring Turkey to maintain a sizeable military and intelligence presence in this region. Turkey's strong presence in the KRG allows it to collect the much-needed real time intelligence on the PKK, and the Kurdish nationalist movement in general. Nevertheless, much of the PKK activity takes place in the zone of the KRG controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is not quite as closely aligned with Ankara as the KDP. Presumably, all of Turkey's intelligence operations in the PUK zone are overwhelmingly dependent on mediation with the PUK by the Erbil-based KDP. In the post-referendum Kurdistan, be it a sovereign or a semi-autonomous region, Turkey's access to the PUK zone will remain vital for its national security. If Turkey chooses a confrontational posture towards the KRG's post-referendum process, it would be risking its access to Erbil and jeopardizing its anti-PKK intelligence operations in Kurdistan.

Nonetheless, the Kurdistan Region is not only an intelligence-gathering theater for Turkey. The KRG still serves as the primary diplomatic bridge between Ankara and the PKK, in the absence of active peace negotiations with the separatist Kurdish party. Ankara and the PKK are not anticipated to engage in renewed peace talks as long as the

crisis continues in Syria, where the growing military capabilities of the Syrian Kurds have changed the balance of power with Turkey. If the situation between Ankara and Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey and Syria continues to deteriorate, Turkey may well need Erbil's discreet mediation with the PKK.

Furthermore, the KRG's participation, via its Syrian proxies, alongside PKK-influenced Kurdish parties, in a future Kurdish-led self-rule in northern Syria is still a possibility. Turkey's embargo on Kurdish-ruled northern Syria, and deteriorating relations between the US-backed SDF and the Syrian regime, leave the KRG as the SDF's only possible economic outlet. In the long term, the US may even decide to mediate between the KRG and the Syrian Kurds to achieve a certain level of economic cooperation between the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq, which will make the participation of the KRG's Syrian proxies in self-rule inevitable. If this ends of being the case, maintaining stable relations with the KRG will be even more important to Ankara.

The US Factor

KRG-US relations are definitely experiencing a tough test as the regional government is determined to hold the scheduled independence referendum despite the opposition from members of the US-led international coalition. While the region's president, Masoud Barzani, turned down several alternatives proposed by the coalition,²⁷ the US government and the UN over the past month, as well as the Ministry of Peshmerga, the main military apparatus of the KRG, issued several statements reaffirming that Peshmerga forces will remain loyal US allies.²⁸ The US-led coalition still relies on the military bases in the KRG-controlled areas of northern Iraq, including the Erbil International Airport, to supply its ongoing operations in Syria.

However, the KRG may still face sanctions from the US after it holds the referendum, which is likely to trigger, at a minimum, small-scale skirmishes with Shi'i militias of Iraq. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the US and the KRG for continued military cooperation and financial aid in 2016 is the primary aspect of bilateral relations that will be at risk in the post-referendum era. The US may suspend mediation efforts between Iraq and the KRG, which may well be seen as a green light for Baghdad to implement tougher measures against the KRG, including a military option. Nonetheless, the KRG believes US sanctions will be temporary, and it plans on continuing its diplomatic efforts to maintain its relations with the US, regardless of Iraq's attitude towards it. Kurdistan will remain a US ally, precisely because there is no better option for the Kurds, who are striving to become a sovereign entity ruled by a secular and Western-backed government.

In the event that the KRG remains a loyal US ally, even in the case of temporary sanctions imposed by Washington because of its unilateral referendum, Turkey would be faced with the unbearable scenario of having to live with another Kurdish neighbor in the US camp. Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East has been an awkward

failure, transitioning from the declared strategic goal of “zero problems” with its neighbors to “only problems” with its neighbors in the course of several years. The KRG, as it stands, remains the only Turkish ally in the region that has not joined the US or Iranian camps to confront Turkish ambitions.

The 2019 Factor

The Kurds of Turkey emerged as a game-changing actor in Turkish domestic politics in the aftermath of the April 16 constitutional referendum this year. The ruling AKP’s alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) failed to deliver the results expected from the referendum, whereas Kurdish votes from the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited southeastern Turkey saved the day for Erdoğan. This was a rather unexpected development as the AKP seemingly believed that its alliance with ultra-nationalists would bring about a referendum victory well over 50 percent, with votes from the MHP having delivered 11.9 percent of the vote in the previous elections before the constitutional referendum. Hence, the AKP’s proposed constitutional change got a similar percentage of votes to what the ruling party had won in the 2016 elections. Calculations indicated that the AKP’s popularity decreased in the west of the country, while it increased its votes in the Kurdish region. Most of these votes are believed to have come from conservative Kurds.²⁹

Another challenge to the AKP is about to emerge as another ultra-nationalist, the former deputy parliament speaker Meral Akşener, declared that she will be founding a new party after splitting from the MHP. Polls conducted a few days after Akşener’s announcement showed her future party’s votes at around 14.4 percent, leaving the MHP with roughly 4 percent, which is below the electoral threshold for parliament. Akşener, whose popularity comes from opposing the MHP’s alliance with the AKP, is not likely to join forces with Erdoğan in the 2019 elections. As the AKP’s partner MHP is expected to lose a significant portion of its voting base to Akşener, Erdoğan will need Kurdish votes to achieve the required 50 percent +1 margin to win the presidential election in 2019.³⁰

The AKP-MHP alliance, coupled with the reconciliation between Erdoğan and conservative Kemalists, who were purged by the AKP from the military in the mid-2000s, have also created an ideological dilemma for the AKP. Ultra-nationalist sentiments with calls for abandoning all of Turkey’s existing coordination with the West, including the NATO, for the sake of a new foreign policy doctrine that will make Turkey an ally of Russia and China are on the rise in Turkey.³¹ Even though the AKP and Erdoğan are not devoted friends of the West, the ultra-nationalist ideology that is essentially secular and pan-Turkish has caused rifts between the AKP and the Islamic congregations that support the party.³² Ultra-nationalists and conservative Kemalists have been useful allies for the AKP in thwarting the threat posed by the attempted coup of 2016, but the alliance has reached a level that has put the ruling party’s ideological consistency at risk, which concerns the party’s ideological base.

Destroying relations with the KRG in the wake of its independence referendum will further strengthen ultra-nationalist and Kemalist doctrines in Turkey and will complicate, if not annihilate, the possibility of offering a new alliance to conservative Kurds for the 2019 elections.

Prospects for Turkey-KRG Relations in the Post-referendum Era

The Turkish military has recently held an exercise along the border with Iraqi Kurdistan,³³ following warnings by President Erdoğan³⁴ and the Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım³⁵ who have vowed to take action against the KRG if the referendum goes through as scheduled. Nonetheless, there is not much information available to determine whether these threats were made to satisfy the ultra-nationalists and Kemalist partners of the ruling party or whether they were a sincere reflection of Turkey's plans to take economic, diplomatic, and military measures against the KRG. The KRG does not appear to be overly concerned, yet it has continuously repeated that its independence should not be considered a threat to its neighbors.³⁶

Turkey's foreign policy dilemma in the region, alongside the ruling AKP's declining popularity among nationalist Turks with the emergence of a new nationalist/center-right party, is putting the 2019 election at risk for Erdoğan. Meanwhile, Turkey's national security, challenged by the militant PKK, requires a certain level of coordination with the KRG for continued intelligence operations in northern Iraq. Erdoğan still needs the KRG's communication channel to the PKK, as the intensifying conflict has the strong potential to require some form of indirect talks in the near future, particularly before the 2019 presidential elections.

Turkey-KRG relations may not remain the same after the September 25 referendum in Kurdistan. Turkey is likely to implement some measures against the KRG, but it is unlikely these will include economic sanctions or a military intervention; instead, Turkey's opposition is likely to remain limited to rhetoric and diplomatic pressure on Erbil.

Ceng Sagnic is a junior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) - Tel Aviv University. He serves as the coordinator of the Kurdish Studies Program and co-editor of Turkeyscope. cengsagnic[at]gmail.com

Notes

¹ Erhan Kahraman, "Turkish social media users now explore alternatives to global networks", *Daily Sabah* August 21, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2017/08/22/turkish-social-media-users-now-explore-local-alternatives-to-global-networks> Finkafe's official webpage can be accessed at www.finkafe.com

-
- ² James M. Markham, “TV Brings Western Culture to East Germany”, *New York Times*, February 13, 1984, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/13/arts/tv-brings-western-culture-to-east-germany.html?mcubz=3>
- ³ “Newspaper Censorship” in Gabor Agoston and Bruce Alan Masters (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Infobase, 2009), 131-132.
- ⁴ Golnaz Esfandiari, “The Twitter Devolution”, *Foreign Affairs*, June 8, 2010 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/08/the-twitter-devolution/>
- ⁵ Jared Keller, “Evaluating Iran’s Twitter Revolution”, *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2010 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/06/evaluating-irans-twitter-revolution/58337/>
- ⁶ John Wihbey, “The Arab Spring and the Internet: Research roundup”, *Journalist’s Resource*, September 25, 2013 <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/international/global-tech/research-arab-spring-internet-key-studies>
- ⁷ Josh Halliday, “Arab spring: Google’s Wael Ghonim on the fall of Mubarak”, *Guardian*, 18 May, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2011/may/18/google-wael-ghonim-mubarak>
- ⁸ Catherine O’Donnell, “New study quantifies use of social media in Arab Spring”, *UWNEWS*, September 12, 2011 <http://www.washington.edu/news/2011/09/12/new-study-quantifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring/>
- ⁹ Heather Brown, Emily Guskin and Amy Mitchell, “The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings” *Journalism*, November 28, 2012, <http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/turkey/> (Accessed September 13, 2017).
- ¹¹ “Gezi Park protests and the role of Social Media: an interview with Zeynep Alemdar, Turkey” (August 1, 2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jzg3nPJ9ZsE>
- ¹² Metin Gurcan, “What went wrong with Turkey’s WhatsApp coup”, *Al-Monitor*, July 19, 2016 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/contents/articles/originals/2016/07/turkey-coup-attempt-basic-cause-was-premature-birth.html>. Also see Erdoğan addresses Turkey via FaceTime amid attempted coup –video”, *Guardian*, July 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2016/jul/15/erdogan-facetime-turkey-coup-attempt>
- ¹³ “Media Ownership Monitor: Government control over Turkish media almost complete”, *RSF*, October 27, 2016, <https://rsf.org/en/news/media-ownership-monitor-government-control-over-turkish-media-almost-complete>
- ¹⁴ Can Sezer and David Dolan, “Turkey blocks access to Wikipedia”, *Reuters*, April 29, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-internet-wikipedia/turkey-blocks-access-to-wikipedia-idUSKBN17V06Q>
- ¹⁵ Will Worley, “Turkish government ‘blocks Twitter and Facebook’ as part of alleged media ban following Ankara blast”, *Independent*, March 13, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ankara-explosion-turkey-twitter-facebook-ban-a6929136.html>
- ¹⁶ “Turkey guilty verdict for depicting Erdoğan as Gollum” *BBC*, June 23, 2016 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36610000>. Also see “Turkish doctor acquitted of insulting Erdoğan with Gollum comparison”, *Middle East Eye*, April 18, 2017 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/doctor-who-shared-erdogangollum-meme-acquitted-turkey-1976719610>
- ¹⁷ Ayla Albayrak and Joe Parkinson, “Turkey’s Government Forms 6,000-Member Social Media Team”, *The Wall Street Journal*, (September 16, 2013 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-government-forms-6000member-social-media-team-1379351399> ; “Erdoğan to use Twitter as propaganda tool”, *Deutsche Welle*, September 19, 2013, <http://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-to-use-twitter-as-propaganda-tool/a-17101031>; Emre Kizilkaya, “AKP’s social media wars”, *Al-Monitor*, November 15, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/akp-social-media-twitter-facebook.html>
- ¹⁸ Isabel Hunter, “Turkish ruling party’s social media campaigners deny being a troll army”, *Independent*, June 6, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-president-s-social-media-campaigners-deny-being-a-troll-army-10301599.html>
- ¹⁹ Ali Osman Arabacı, “Does the photo show that Gülen and Kılıçdaroğlu came together in 1994?” *Teyit*, July 31, 2017. <https://teyit.org/en/does-the-photo-show-that-gulen-and-kilicdaroglu-came-together-in-1994/>
- ²⁰ Raf Sanchez, “Christian Bale historic romance The Promise is targeted by Turkish online trolls who deny the Armenian genocide”, *Telegraph*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/21/christian-bale-historic-romance-promise-targeted-turkish-online/>

-
- ²¹ Çağla Zimmermann, “Feature: Turkey trolls’ use of insults stifling reporting”, *Free Turkey Journalists*, September 13, 2016, <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/feature-turkey-trolls-use-of-insults-stifling-reporting/>
- ²² “Foreign journalists become targets after Istanbul attacks”, *Turkish Journal*, December 2016, <http://www.turkishjournal.com.au/2016/12/foreign-journalists-become-targets-after-istanbul-attacks/>
- ²³ Ofra Bengio, “Turkey: A Midwife for a Kurdish State?”, *The Jerusalem Post*, June 12, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Turkey-A-midwife-for-a-Kurdish-state>
- ²⁴ “Masoud Barzani to visit Iran after seven-year gap: official”, *Waar Media*, October 4, 2016, <http://waarmedia.com/english/masoud-barzani-visit-iran-seven-year-gap-official/>
- ²⁵ “Turkey starts repairs on Iraqi Kurdish oil pipeline as violence flares”, *Reuters*, February 27, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-iraqi-kurds-oil/turkey-starts-repairs-on-iraqi-kurdish-oil-pipeline-as-violence-flares-idUSKCN0W00EU>
- ²⁶ “Karayılan’dan Barzani’ye çağrı”, *Vatan*, March 4, 2016, <http://www.gazetevatan.com/karayilan-dan-barzani-ye-cagri-921232-gundem/>
- ²⁷ “Iraqi Kurds reject US request to postpone referendum”, *The National*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraqi-kurds-reject-us-request-to-postpone-referendum-1.619062>
- ²⁸ “Peshmerga ministry confident of continued US funding”, *Rudaw*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/english/kurdistan/160820172>
- ²⁹ Ceng Sagnic, “Beyond Turkey’s Referendum: Prospects on Shifting Post-Referendum Alliances” *Turkeyscope*, April 26, 2017, <http://dayan.org/content/beyond-turkey-referendum>
- ³⁰ “İşte Akşener’in partisinin de dahil edildiği ilk seçim anketi sonuçlarıKaynak: İşte Akşener’in partisinin de dahil edildiği ilk seçim anketi sonuçları”, *Yeniçağ*, September 13, 2017, <http://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/iste-aksenerin-partisinin-de-dahil-edildiği-ilk-secim-anketi-sonuclari-172627h.htm>
- ³¹ Doğu Perinçek, “Avrasya Sürecinde Tarihsel Mevzilenme”, *Aydınlık*, August 26, 2017, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/avrasya-surecinde-tarihsel-mevzilenme-dogu-perincek-kose-yazilari-agustos-2017>
- ³² “Cemaatler Rahatsız”, *Yeni Şafak*, September 4, 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/cemaatler-rahatsiz-2521957>
- ³³ “Irak Sınırında Tatbikat 5’inci Gününde”, *Milliyet*, September 22, 2017, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/irak-sinirinda-tatbikat-5-inci-gununde-sirnak-yerelhaber-2293247/>
- ³⁴ “Erdoğan: Referandumdan vazgeçin”, *Deutsche Welle*, September 19, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-referandumdan-vazge%C3%A7in/a-40593634>
- ³⁵ “Başbakan Yıldırım’dan Barzani’ye uyarı”, *Türkiye*, September 18, 2017, <http://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/politika/504206.aspx>
- ³⁶ “Kurdistan independence not to change neighbors borders, official”, *The Baghdad Post*, June 26, 2017, <http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/13586/Kurdistan-independence-not-to-change-neighbors-borders-official>