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The Kurds and the Turkish State: Drifting Apart?

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In mid-August 2015, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), a Kurdish umbrella organization, declared that self-rule was the only option for the Kurds of Turkey.¹ This was followed by the September statement from KCK executive member Murat Karayilan that "the historic and significant process the Kurdish people are going through will witness the founding of Free Kurdistan."² Events during the past three months have led to one of the stormiest periods in the history of Kurdish-Turkish relations. On the one hand, for the first time in Turkish history, a Kurdish party – the People's Democratic Party (HDP) – managed to pass the 10 percent minimum threshold for entering the parliament in national elections, and for a short while even contributed two ministers to the interim government that was established after the vote. On the other hand, however, a violent and ongoing conflict has erupted between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Turkish military that is proving to be one of most severe in Turkish history. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's zigzag policies towards Turkey's Kurdish community and the strengthening of the Kurdish national movement all over the Middle East provide context and an explanation for these contrasting developments.

During the last four years, Turkey's strategy in the ever expanding civil war in Syria utterly failed to achieve its twin aims of toppling the Assad regime and preventing the establishment of a Kurdish entity on its southern border. Cognizant of this failure, and in light of a combination of domestic factors and external developments, Turkey adopted a new approach, beginning in late July 2015. Domestically, the HDP's success in the June 7 elections was an anathema in the eyes of Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). This is

¹["KCK says declaring self-rule now only option for Kurds,"](#) *Today's Zaman*, August 12, 2015.

² ["Karaliyan: We are at the stage of founding Free Kurdistan,"](#) *ANFNews*, September 26, 2015. It should be noted that he used the less challenging term "free" and not "independent."

not only because the HDP's success came at their expense, but also because it reflected the strengthening of Kurdish civil society and its influence on the political system in Turkey. On another level the government's claims about the continuing Kurdish terror being carried out by the PKK were undermined following two years of the group's self-imposed ceasefire as part of a peace process designed to end more than thirty years of violent conflict. The peace process was initiated in 2013, but registered little concrete progress. No less troubling from the government's perspective were the achievements of the Syrian Kurdish militias (People's Protection Units – YPG) fighting the Islamic State forces in Syria,³ and their attempts to create territorial contiguity between their three semi-autonomous cantons that were first established in 2012 and even gain access to the Mediterranean Sea. These developments deepened the ties between the Kurds in Turkey and the Kurds in Syria, and added to the government's fear that developments in Syria would have spillover effects in Turkey.

Turkey was also concerned that its regional and international standing was eroding. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's long trumpeted "zero problems with its neighbors" foreign policy had proven to be utterly bankrupt, resulting in more rivals than friends, including Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. Cynics dubbed this ineffective policy "zero friends with its neighbors."⁴ In addition, Turkey's standing in the international community has suffered as a result of its indirect aid to Islamic State forces, whose actions in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere have shocked much of the world. Turkey's friendship with the United States has also suffered severe setbacks. Most recently, the two states have sharply disagreed on the best way to deal with the conflict in Syria, particularly Washington's decision to support the YPG forces in the war against the Islamic State. Turkey's opposition to this decision was not due to its love for the Islamic State, but its fear that the YPG, a branch of the PKK, would be further strengthened as a result of its military achievements and extensive U.S. assistance. Moreover, there were signs that certain European countries were exerting pressure to remove the PKK from the European Union's list of terror organizations in light of the YPG's battlefield success against the IS. But perhaps the most troubling development, from the Turkish perspective, was the July 14 nuclear agreement with Iran, which carries the potential of reducing Turkey's importance, in the eyes of NATO, as a forward line of defense against a nuclear Iran.

The new Turkish strategy is designed to address all of these challenges. It consists of the following elements: developing tighter military cooperation with

³ The PKK in Turkey and the YPG (and its political arm, the PYD) in Syria share strong ties.

⁴ Piotr Zalweski, "[How Turkey Went From 'Zero Problems' to Zero Friends](#)," ForeignPolicy.com, August 22, 2013.

the U.S. and NATO members; participating in coalition air-strikes in Syria; establishing a buffer-zone on the southern border of Turkey; arresting IS members and destroying its infrastructure in Turkey; and, most importantly, putting a stop to the growing momentum of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and Syria and severing the ties that bind the two communities.

How is Turkey implementing its new strategy and what are the obstacles it faces? Turkey's stated aims of cooperating with the U.S. and NATO is to fight the Islamic State and the PKK. For the first time in twelve years, Turkey is allowing the U.S. and NATO to use the Incirlik Air Base to stage operations against the Islamic State, in sharp contrast to its persistent refusals of American requests in years past.⁵ In 2014, the AKP government again refused to allow the U.S. coalition to use the Incirlik Air Base to attack the IS, forcing the U.S. to stage its operations from Jordan or the Gulf, which increased the cost of the operations and reduced the effectiveness of the attacks. After lengthy discussions, Turkey granted the U.S. access to Incirlik in late July 2015, because, among other things, the Islamic State had begun to turn against Turkey. The tacit agreement between Turkey and the U.S. was that the U.S. could use Incirlik in exchange for turning a blind eye to Turkey's bombing of PKK strongholds in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Turkey's offensive against PKK bases in Iraq in recent months has been massive,⁶ and has been publicly supported by the Obama Administration.⁷ According to the Turkish government, it has resulted in the deaths of 1,337 PKK members and 129 Turkish soldiers and police officers.⁸ The PKK strongly contests those numbers, and, for its part, carried out numerous reprisal attacks against government targets in southeast Turkey. At the same time, Turkey also took steps to improve its standing in NATO, requesting an urgent hearing of members that was held at the end of July to address the best ways to fight the IS and the PKK.

⁵ During the 2003 Iraq war, the AKP government refused to allow the U.S. to use the base. At the time, Turkey's refusal was taken as a slap in the face by the United States and made the war against Saddam more difficult. However, it ultimately turned the Kurds of Iraq into a U.S. ally, when they provided the U.S. with access to Iraq from the north, which was supposed to be provided by Turkey.

⁶ For example, from July 24 to 26 Turkey's military attacked no less than 400 PKK targets. Metin Gurcan, "[Is PKK the real target of Turkish Strikes?](#)" *Al Monitor*, translated by Timur Göksel, July 25, 2015.

⁷ Benjamin Rhodes, a senior adviser to the president, said, "The U.S., of course, recognizes the PKK specifically as a terrorist organization. And, so, again Turkey has a right to take action related to terrorist targets." See: Patrick Cockburn, "[Turkey conflict with Kurds: Was approving air strikes against the PKK America's worst error in the Middle East since the Iraq War?](#)" *The Independent*, July 26, 2015.

⁸ "[PKK: Dozens of Turkish soldiers killed in ongoing clashes](#)," *Rudaw*, September 27, 2015.

From the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Turkey sought to establish a buffer zone on its 900 kilometer long border with Syria in order to (1) resettle there the 1.8 million Syrian refugees who had fled to Turkey;⁹ (2) prevent Turkish Kurds from establishing close ties with the Kurdish cantons in Syria that are known by the Kurds as “Rojava,” (Western Kurdistan); and (3) prevent Syrian Kurds from extending their territorial control to the Mediterranean Sea. Russia’s recent deployment of forces to stabilize the Asad regime was a serious setback to Erdoğan’s Syria strategy and complicated Turkey’s efforts to establish a buffer-zone on its southern border.

Behind this flurry of activity lies the failure of Erdoğan and the AKP in the June parliamentary elections, which prevented Erdoğan from changing the structure of government and concentrating power in the president’s office. In order to reverse this failure, Erdoğan called for snap general elections in November and targeted the PKK, while also attempting to delegitimize the HDP. The goal of Erdoğan’s political and military actions is to recoup the votes he lost in the June election by winning Turkish nationalist votes and weakening the HDP’s support due to its close association with the PKK.

The attacks on the PKK strongholds in northern Iraq came despite the fact that the PKK had maintained its two-year ceasefire in the face of various Turkish provocations. The PKK had had strong incentives to maintain the ceasefire. These included (1) the need for time to evaluate the depth of the government’s interest in the peace process; (2) a desire to present to the world, and in particular to the European Union, a positive image that would make it possible for the PKK to be removed from official lists of terror organizations; (3) a chance to present a message of peace and democracy that would increase the chances of the HDP’s success in the June elections; and, (4) preventing provocations that would lead to the Turkish military taking action against the Kurds in Syria. Nevertheless, the July 20 terrorist attack carried out by an IS terrorist against Kurdish activists in Suruç, the PKK’s retaliatory killing of two Turkish police officers, and the Turkish military’s massive offensive against the PKK led to an immediate popular Kurdish response of renewing attacks against Turkish targets and participating in mass demonstrations against the government.

Erdoğan’s latest gamble may help him win back nationalist votes, but at the same time it presents many risks. The renewal of civil war in Turkey has already begun to exhaust Turkey militarily and economically, and may even return the military to the center stage of Turkish politics, reversing Erdoğan’s success in removing the generals from politics. Moreover, while Turkish nationalists may

⁹ Nick Tattersall and Phil Stewart, “[U.S., Turkey aim for zone cleared of Islamic State in northern Syria](#),” *Reuters International*, July 27, 2015.

vote for the AKP, the opposite is also possible—the Kurdish electorate that in the past voted for the AKP may be pushed into the HDP camp as a result of the state’s renewed fighting with the PKK. There is already a precedent for this: when the Turkish government opposed the Syrian Kurds who were defending Kobane in late 2014, it translated into the AKP losing a large number of voters to the HDP in the June 7, 2015 elections. Further, the government’s hope of severing ties between Kurds in Turkey and Syria increasingly seems like a pipe-dream, this in an era of rising trans-border Kurdish nationalism and the new media revolution.

On the international level, the improved standing of the Kurdish national movement as a result of battlefield success against the IS comes at a time when the international community’s large militaries have failed miserably against the Islamic State, putting the United States in a tough position. Will it be able to continue distinguishing between the “good Kurds” of the YPG in Syria and the “bad Kurds” of the PKK in Turkey, at a time when these two groups are joined at the hip? Will the U.S. allow Turkey to attack the YPG at a time when the U.S. needs the YPG on the frontline against the IS?

The Kurds of Turkey and the Turkish state are now at a crossroads. President Erdoğan, who initiated the peace process with his country’s Kurds a few years ago, has completely reversed his course and unleashed a brutal war against them. For its part, the Kurdish national movement in Turkey seems to be imitating the drive for self-determination that is taking place in both “Bashur” (the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq) and “Rojava” in Syria. Thus, the radicalization of the Kurdish and Turkish camps may lead to an unbridgeable chasm, whatever the results of the upcoming elections in Turkey may be.

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