

BULLETIN

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The Kurdish Issue and the Conflict in Syria in Turkey's Security Policy

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The Syrian civil war and conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are interrelated problems for Turkey's national security. As a result of the evacuation of the Syrian regime's troops, the Kurdish organisations took over control of the northeastern region of Syria. Turkey fears that the Syrian Kurds' autonomy will become a base for PKK guerrilla attacks on Turkish territory, and does not rule out intervention in Syria. Any involvement of Turkey, the U.S. or NATO in the Syrian conflict should, however, mean equal treatment of all Syrian ethnic groups.

After 10 years of rule by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey is increasingly recognised as a prosperous regional power. A fast-growing economy, well-functioning democracy and active foreign policy have led to its success. At the same time, however, Turkey is experiencing serious internal problems, also related to the situation in the region. Prerequisite to further development are social and political stability, which is primarily a solution to the Kurdish issue and not only a Turkish internal matter. The Kurdish population extends to neighbouring states, and the political status of Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds influences their situation in Turkey.

The destabilisation in Syria empowers the activities of Kurdish organisations, including the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). As a result of the Syrian civil war, in July 2012 regions of Syria inhabited by the Kurdish population and adjacent to Turkey came under the control of the Syrian Kurdish organisations. At the same time, clashes between Turkish government troops and Kurdish militants began on the Turkish side of the border. There have also been PKK terrorist attacks with victims from the civilian population. The authorities in Ankara recognise the direct link between the creation of enclaves controlled by the Kurds in Syria and the escalation of PKK activity in Turkey. To that extent, in the beginning of August, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has not ruled out military intervention on Syrian territory in the event of an increased threat of terrorist attacks from the area. Turkey has also carried out a military exercise on the border.

AKP Policies Towards Syria (before 2011) and the Kurdish question in Turkey. The AKP rise to power in 2002 led to a gradual warming of Turkish–Syrian relations. That was possible because of a policy to mend relationships with all of Turkey's neighbours initiated by the government of Prime Minister Erdoğan. With Syria, that policy led to the development of economic ties and Syria's resignation from its claim to the Hatay region of Turkey. The authorities in Damascus also stopped support for the PKK, which was the reason for the Turkish–Syrian conflict in the 1990s.

The government under AKP has taken a number of steps to improve the situation of Kurds in Turkey. Although the PKK, which considered the government's concessions to be inadequate, continued its guerrilla and terrorist activity, the scale of warfare was less than in previous years. In 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan announced a policy of a "democratic opening." This led to a further expansion of Kurds' rights: a Kurdish language TV channel was launched as well as new talks with the PKK and amnesty for some of its members. But before the election to parliament in 2011, the government surrendered to the pressure of Turkish nationalist circles and returned to repression of the Kurds. The Kurdish party in parliament was outlawed, its two leaders stripped of parliamentary seats and numerous activists banned from political activity. After the elections of June 2011, the mandate of one of the activists of the newly established Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party was cancelled (a court decision found him guilty of "terrorist propaganda"), which provoked protests by the entire Kurdish faction, which announced a boycott of parliament. The crisis in relations

between the authorities and Kurdish groups resulted in a wave of PKK violence that has been ongoing since last summer. Another Kurdish guerrilla offensive took place this summer with the escalation of a civil war in Syria.

Turkey and the Civil War in Syria. The wave of revolutions directed against authoritarian governments in Arab countries in 2011 has become a challenge for the foreign policy of the government in Ankara. In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, Turkey played a leading role in supporting democratisation in these countries and gained the sympathy of their societies, and the AKP has become a model for Arab reformist parties. Half a year after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the Turkish leadership started sharp criticism of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Turkey organised camps for refugees from Syria on its territory, as well as enabled the activities of the opposition Syrian National Council in Istanbul. These steps have proven to be more risky than was support for the anti-regime movements in the countries of North Africa. The fall of the current government in Syria is still uncertain—Assad's regime is supported by Iran, China and Russia, and enjoys the authentic support of the two-million strong Alawi community (followers of the Syrian branch of Shia Islam) to which the president's family belong as well as other confessional minorities.

The key issue for Turkey is the Syrian Kurds' political choice and the question of their autonomy. The position of the Kurdish political parties in Syria is not clear, either in relation to the government in Damascus or the anti-Assad opposition and Turkey. Established in October 2011, the Kurdish National Council remains one of the Syrian opposition forces, but a more powerful organisation of Syrian Kurds, the Party of Democratic Unity, has been accused by the opposition and Turkey of collaboration with al-Assad. This party accuses the other opposition groups of being submissive to Turkey, and its links with the PKK raise concerns in Ankara. Regardless of the disputes between the Syrian Kurd organisations, the fact is they control the Kurdish regions in Syria. The possibility is now likely of a repetition of the Iraq scenario in which Saddam Hussein's defeat in the Gulf War in 1991 resulted in a Kurdish autonomous region established in northern Iraq, independent from the government in Baghdad.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in Syria will mean an increase in the political power of the Kurds in the region, which is a challenge for Turkey, taking into account that it has the largest Kurdish population in the region. The government in Ankara has to deal with the consequences of the Syrian Kurds' cooperation with PKK operating on Turkish territory. It seems, however, that the government in Ankara will seek to develop cooperation with the Kurdish forces in Syria. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has already declared that Turkey will not oppose the Syrian Kurdish autonomous region, provided that other political forces in the country would agree to such a solution.

NATO, the European Union and its Member States should encourage the Turkish authorities to conduct a dialogue on regional security with Kurds in Syria. Both Turkey, the U.S. and European countries must, however, be careful in dealing with opposition forces in Syria (Kurdish, Sunni, and others). Support for one of the parties of the conflict may negatively affect relations with other groups. The government in Ankara's tendency to support the primarily Sunni Arab opposition is close to committing this error. In the event of military intervention in the territory of Syria, Turkey would have to reckon with an enemy attitude among both the Alawi and Kurdish populations.

The priority for the international community must be to ensure equal rights for all citizens of post-war Syria regardless of their ethnicity and religion. EU Member States, including Poland, should support the process of building a pluralistic political system. It may be advisable to take steps to promote democratisation similar to those already carried out in post-revolutionary countries in North Africa. It is worth consulting such projects with Syria's neighbours, especially the Iraqis, who are well aware of the Syrian realities. Broader activity will be possible only after the end of the military phase of the conflict. However, plans for support of post-war reconstruction in Syria should already be created. It is also necessary to monitor the situation in territories controlled by the Syrian opposition.

As a member of NATO and an aspiring EU applicant, Turkey has a key role in the Middle East. Therefore, the U.S. and European countries should cooperate with the government in Ankara to resolve the crisis in Syria. The EU should also encourage Turkey to speed up reforms that improve the situation of Kurds in Turkey, whose rights should be enshrined in the Turkish Constitution.