

Turkey, Syria and the Kurds: There Goes the Neighborhood

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On 3 October 2012, a mortar shell fired from Syria landed in the small Turkish border town of Akçakale, killing two women and three children. It was not the first time that an errant shell had landed on Turkish soil since the beginning of Syria's civil war, and it was not to be the last. Over the ensuing weeks, Turkey and Syria were to trade artillery fire on almost a daily basis, leaving the erstwhile allies on the brink of armed conflict, and prompting Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to declare that his country was ready, even if not particularly eager, for war.

The tension had been brewing long before the Akçakale tragedy. Relations between Damascus and Ankara had turned sour after the first wave of protests that swept across Syria in the spring of 2011, deteriorated further after Turkey opened its doors to the Syrian opposition in exile and the insurgent Free Syrian Army, and reached a critical point when Syria downed a Turkish fighter jet on 22 June this year. The skyrocketing number of Syrian refugees fleeing the fighting had also become a factor. With Turkish camps home to over 100,000 refugees, and with the UNHCR predicting the arrival of up to 180,000 more by the end of the year, Ankara repeatedly called on the UN to create a safe haven in Syria.

However, nothing appeared to have stoked the Erdoğan government's anxiety about the fallout from Syria more than the news, which came at the end of July, that Bashar al Assad's forces had partially withdrawn from Kurdish majority areas in the country's northeast, near the border with Turkey. It was on the heels of such reports – and not after Akçakale, it needs pointing out – that Erdoğan first publicly considered the idea of armed intervention in Syria. When it emerged that the Kurdish takeover of several northeastern towns had been spearheaded by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian

affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Erdoğan warned that "intervening would be our most natural right."¹

Erdoğan's remarks, and the accompanying media storm, were a telling sign of the extent to which Turkey's Syria policy is, and will be, indexed to what Turks refer to the "Kurdish issue" – shorthand for Turkey's continuing struggle to accommodate its own Kurdish minority and to defeat the PKK's thirty year long insurgency.

For better or worse, Ankara believes that Kurdish autonomy inside Syria could become a major threat to Turkey's territorial integrity, fanning the flames of Kurdish separatism at home and offering the PKK new bases, in addition to those in Iran and northern Iraq, from which to hit Turkish targets. In the long term, the thinking in Ankara goes, it could also transform the idea of a Greater Kurdistan – comprising Kurdish areas in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria – from pipedream to possibility.

As activists inside the country report, although the Kurds have taken over parts of the northeast, the regime remains embedded in the area, its security and intelligence forces operating alongside the PYD's.² (There are suspicions that Damascus may be using the PYD to keep a lid on things while fighting rages in other parts of the country). Likewise, those in Ankara fretting about the rise of a "terrorist entity" in Syria may have overestimated the PYD's power and popularity. According to Syrian Kurdish activists, even if the PYD is the best armed and the best organized of the Kurdish factions, its political base is comparatively small. The PYD's autocratic ways and its inability to tolerate dissent rub many Kurds the wrong way. "When the regime goes, the PYD will go with it," is a line frequently heard among the group's dissenters.

In any case, the PYD itself has been at pains to reassure Turkey

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1 See "Erdoğan says PKK threat from Syria may prompt Turkish military retaliation", *Today's Zaman*, 25 July 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-287680-erdogan-says-pkk-threat-from-syria-may-prompt-turkish-military-retaliation.html>.

2 Interviews with Syrian Kurdish politicians and activists in northern Iraq, October 2012.

that it has nothing to fear from the group. "From the beginning we said we are not against Turkey, that we'll keep our border safe, not let anyone pass our border into Turkey," says the PYD's leader Salih Muslim. "They're trying to relate us with the PKK. We have nothing to do with the PKK; we're just protecting our people. We don't want to divide Syria. We are not separatists."³ Of course, conclude the authors of a recent report on Syria's Kurds, the group has plenty of reason to be disingenuous. "The PYD realizes that the post-Assad period is uncertain at best, so there is a great incentive to avoid the wrath of the Turkish military and deny any links with the PKK."⁴

Yet there is obviously much more to the Kurdish issue than the situation in Syria. Today, Turkey finds itself facing a deteriorating crisis inside its own borders. As a recent report by the International Crisis Group makes clear, Turkey's Kurdish conflict is at its most violent since 1999, the year Turkish commandos captured PKK founder and leader Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya.⁵ (The fighting has claimed a total of more than 40,000 lives since 1984.) Increasingly, the Ankara government has pointed an accusing finger at Syria, claiming that Assad has begun to supply the PKK with weapons so as to punish Turkey for harboring the Free Syrian Army.

That may very well be the case – Syria supported the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s and has reason enough to do so today – but it should not deflect attention from the homegrown factors fueling the conflict in Turkey. Despite a number of impressive reforms over the past decade, including new cultural and language rights, key Kurdish demands remain unmet. These include public education in Kurdish, a degree of political autonomy, and Öcalan's transfer to house arrest. Meanwhile, the arrests of as many as 8000 activists, politicians and journalists on charges of links to the PKK, often on very thin evidence, have exacerbated concerns that Erdoğan's government, unable to hand the Kurdish movement a decisive defeat at the polls, is doing so through the courts.⁶ (The Kurdish-majority southeast is indeed one of the few places in Turkey where the AKP repeatedly fails to win the largest share of the vote.) The crisis has taken on added urgency since more than 700 Kurdish prisoners across the country launched a hunger strike to protest Öcalan's jail conditions and to demand new rights for the Kurds.

Less than a decade ago, Turkey's Kurds could have placed at least some of their hopes in the EU. With Turkish leaders dancing to Brussels' tune between 2002 and 2005, the Kurds had reason to trust that the EU accession process would deliver what no Turkish government could – a lasting solution to the political, economic and security crisis in the southeast. Tellingly, support for EU membership among the region's Kurds was said to hover around 90 percent.⁷



That era is now gone. The EU accession process is in the midst of a gradual slide into irrelevance. During Erdoğan's two-and-half-hour speech laying out his party's vision for 2023, the centenary of the Turkish Republic, the stalled membership talks did not receive so much as a single mention. Support for membership has plummeted from 74 percent in 2004 to as little as 38 percent today. A recent poll which found that a whopping 78 percent of Turks believe their country will never enter the Union is equally significant.⁸ To no one's surprise, the EU's ability to spur political change is quickly melting away. The Kurds' sympathy for the bloc might remain, but their faith in its power is badly shaken. "Before, we treated the Europeans like royalty," says İrfan Enc, a Kurdish politician from Şırnak. "And now, with all due respect, I don't attach much importance to what they say."⁹

The EU's waning importance in the Kurdish equation has been accompanied by the rise of another outside actor – Iraqi Kurdistan. For years, at least from Turkey's perspective, the quasi-state in northern Iraq seemed part of the Kurdish problem. Today, with regard to both the situation in the Turkish southeast and the changing political mosaic in Syria, it may be part of the solution.

With a few notable exceptions – the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) continues to ignore Turkish pleas to clamp down on PKK rebels ensconced in the Kandil mountains – relations between Erbil and Ankara are thriving. Over half of the foreign companies registered in northern Iraq are Turkish, trade volume has reached \$12 billion, having quadrupled from only five years ago, and few are the roads, shopping malls and housing developments not built by Turkish contractors. Where trade and investment ties have shown the way, politics have followed. This was highlighted most recently by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's visit to Erbil in August and KRG leader Massoud Barzani's appearance at the AKP congress in late September. Both would have been unthinkable just five years ago.

3 Phone interview with the author, 29 October 2012.

4 İlhan Tanir, Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Omar Hossino, *Unity or PYD Power Play? Syrian Kurdish Dynamics After the Erbil Agreement*, London, Henry Jackson Society, October 2012, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2012/10/15/unity-or-pyd-power-play-syrian-kurdish-dynamics-after-the-erbil-agreement>.

5 International Crisis Group (ICG), "Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement", *ICG Europe Report*, No. 219 (11 Sep 2012), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/219-turkey-the-pkk-and-a-kurdish-settlement.aspx>.

6 For more on the so-called Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) trials, please refer to the ICG report and the more recent study by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), *Turkey's Press Freedom Crisis. The Dark Days of Jailing Journalists and Criminalizing Dissent*, New York, CPJ, October 2012, <http://cpj.org/reports/turkey2012-english.pdf>.

7 See, for example, Ali Çarkoğlu, "Who Wants Full Membership? Characteristics of Turkish Public Support for EU Membership", Ali Çarkoğlu and Barry Rubin (eds.), *Turkey*

and the European Union. Domestic Politics, Economic Integration and International Dynamics, Abingdon and New York, Frank Cass, 2003, p. 171-194, <http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/290/1/stvkaf01974.pdf>; Edward Moxon-Browne, Cigdem Ustun, "Turkey and the European Union: Divergent Discourses?", *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2009), p. 34-52, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1473657>.

8 See Emre Peker, "Turks to European Union: No, Thanks", *The Wall Street Journal Blogs*, 29 August 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/emergingurope/2012/08/29/turks-to-eu-no-thanks>.

9 Interview with the author, October 2012.

Even if Turkey still fears that the KRG's growing appetite for sovereign rule may be fuelling the Kurds' dream of a national homeland, it is doing precious little to allay Erbil's estrangement from Nouri al Maliki's government in Baghdad. In fact, to judge by its decision to ink an oil deal with the KRG in May 2012, a decision made over Maliki's explicit objections, Turkey may be switching from Iraqi marriage counselor to home wrecker. (Reports are also making the rounds that Ankara has offered the KRG security guarantees in case Baghdad and Erbil come to blows.) To those who wonder why a Turkish government that once saw a robust Iraqi Kurdistan as a major strategic threat should now embrace it as a prized ally, Soner Çağaptay and Parag Khanna offer several possible reasons. First, they say, a stronger Iraqi Kurdistan would create a buffer between Turkey and a chronically unstable southern Iraq. Second, it would help Turkey counter Iran's Shiite axis, stretching from Baghdad to Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁰

Another reason is Kurdish oil and gas. Having concluded that the benefits of dealing directly with Erbil outweigh the risks of losing business in Baghdad, energy giants like ExxonMobil and Chevron are lining up to tap into northern Iraq's vast oil and gas reserves. Turkish companies are following suit. According to Matthew Bryza, "Turkish banks, construction companies, and energy brokers stand to profit from massive investments in [Iraqi Kurdistan's] energy infrastructure and from energy trade." Eager to feed as much of the oil and gas as possible into Turkey's own pipelines, the Ankara government hopes to send natural gas onwards into the Southern Corridor, and "elevate Turkey's strategic significance as an energy transit hub for Europe, the Caspian, and the Middle East."¹¹ With estimates of northern Iraqi gas reserves ranging from 1 to an eye-popping 6 trillion cubic meters (TCMs), the EU should take heed, particularly in the face of speculation that its Nabucco pipeline project may be short on potential suppliers.

Finally, there is growing recognition in Ankara that Barzani's KRG may be an important player in the search for a solution to Turkey's Kurdish conflict. Unlike many Kurdish nationalists in Turkey who appear either unwilling or unable to question the PKK's tactics, Barzani has explicitly stated that the rebels' armed struggle no longer makes sense. This has made him a credible interlocutor for the government in Ankara as well as a popular figure among those Turkish Kurds who seek an alternative to mainstream Kurdish politicians. His leverage among Kurds in Syria has also raised eyebrows. It was Barzani, after all, who managed to orchestrate an agreement, however tenuous, between the PYD and a group of Kurdish factions opposed to Bashar al Assad in July.

This, plus the nature of Turkey's relationship with northern Iraq, i.e., the extent to which Ankara has used business, trade and geopolitics to draw the region into its orbit, may ease the Erdoğan government's anxieties about the consequences of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Signs of this are already on the horizon. In early August, following a visit to Erbil during which he met with Barzani and a host of Syrian Kurdish leaders,

Davutoğlu announced that – as long as it was not unilaterally imposed – his country "would not oppose" Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

The notion that Turkey's model for reconciling with the Kurds of Iraq will serve it well as it grapples with the Kurdish issue in Syria is an appealing one, but calls for a few provisos. First, it would be naïve for Ankara to believe that it can have the definitive say in the future of Syria's Kurds. Erdoğan's government has already realized that it cannot simply will its policies into place (see "zero problems"); the best it can hope for is that things in northern Syria go as they did in northern Iraq, and that Kurdish parties close to Barzani manage to supplant the PYD. That said, Turkey would be wise to support Barzani's mediation efforts in Syria and press the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council, the main opposition body, into accepting at least some Kurdish demands. The Kurds may have temporarily reconciled with each other, but are still miles from closing ranks with the Arab-dominated SNC. Finally, and most importantly, Turkey must know that any modus vivendi it finds with the Kurds of Syria – and of Iraq, for that matter – will not be sustainable until and unless it finds a solution to its own Kurdish problem.

10 Soner Çağaptay and Parag Khanna, "Why Syria's Fragmentation Is Turkey's Opportunity", *The Atlantic*, 24 October 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/why-syrias-fragmentation-is-turkeys-opportunity/263890>.

11 Matthew J. Bryza, "Turkey's Dramatic Shift toward Iraqi Kurdistan: Politics before Peace Pipelines", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 57, <http://turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/2012-02bryza.pdf>.