



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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The Kurdish Question in Turkey: A Critical Juncture

Egemen Başar Bezci

The Kurdish issue in Turkey, long a matter which has bedeviled the Turkish state, has now reached a boiling point. One of the recent signs was the statement by Interior Minister Beşir Atalay on July 25, 2009 that the government is intending to bring an end to the Kurdish question through new progressive policies. Ever since, the Turkish political arena is full of speculation regarding the likely future course of events, and the various parties to the issue are now busy positioning themselves. Imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan's long-awaited speech laying out his "road map" for solving the issue promises to add further fuel to the fire, as many Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals expect him to suggest that his Kurdistan Workers' Party (Parti Karkerani Kurdistan – PKK) gradually lay down its arms, after a 25-year armed struggle against the state authorities.

There are three prominent actors to the drama, each with their own particular world view and preferred solutions: the PKK; the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP); and the Turkish Military. According to the PKK, the first step towards achieving a solution should be a government-initiated above-board dialogue with Öcalan or other PKK officials, to be followed by the granting of political, social, and cultural rights to the Kurds and concluded with the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish state. The AKP's plan for a solution is to gradually grant Kurdish demands within the framework of Turkey's EU accession process and the Copenhagen criteria, while concurrently strengthening the Islamic bonds between Turkey's Kurds and the rest of Turkish society and isolating the PKK domestically and internationally. The Turkish Military, for its part, favors solving the PKK

problem through military means while granting individual rights to Kurdish citizens. Given these starkly clashing visions, a solution to the Kurdish question is hardly imminent.

Turkey's recent endeavors to domestically and internationally isolate the PKK have hurt the PKK substantially. For example, it no longer possesses a safe haven in northern Iraq, and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government banned the PKK-linked Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (Partiya Çareseriya Demokratik a Kurdistan – PCDK) from participating in the recent regional elections. An additional blow was delivered on February 4th of this year, when the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the PKK's Iran branch, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan – PJAK), a terrorist organization. In an effort to break its isolation, the PKK has, among other things, sought to sabotage Turkish-Israeli relations, which includes a counter-terrorism component. Already in February 2008, Murat Karayilan, the leader of the Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Ciwaken Kurdistan – KCK; the PKK's front organization), declared that the Israeli and Kurdish peoples share an affinity, as they are surrounded by nations who do not recognize them. However, he continued, if Israel continued to support the Turkish struggle against the PKK, the latter will consider Israel as an enemy of the Kurds. In addition, Öcalan, in his weekly discussions with his lawyers which are then publicized, has openly espoused anti-Semitic conspiracy theories regarding Kurdish issues. For example, on June 17, 2009 Öcalan stated that if the Kurds become too weak, Israel will take control on the Kurdish region, Şanlıurfa, said to be the birthplace of the prophet Abraham. While seeking to break its isolation in the international arena, the PKK strives to compel the Ankara government to negotiate with it. According to the PKK, the first phase of the solution is for Ankara to negotiate with the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi – DTP), which is known as the PKK's legal political representation. The next phase should involve discussions for a general amnesty for all captured PKK militants, including Öcalan. The third and final phase should be the establishment of a federal state in the southeastern part of Turkey, the traditional center of Turkey's Kurdish population. Just a few days ago, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan held a meeting with Ahmet Turk, the President of the DTP, aimed at displaying the government's willingness to arrive at a solution. In response, opposition party leaders delivered fiery parliamentary speeches in the name of Turkish nationalism. Deniz Baykal, the head of the Republican People's Party (CHP – Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), stated that the AKP was collaborating with terrorists, while Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the ultra-right wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP – Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), declared that the government was in

essence betraying the state by its talks with “terrorists”. The MHP, he warned, was even willing to “go to the mountains” to protect the country.

The AKP government’s approach to the Kurdish question is two-fold. In order for Turkey to remain on the path towards EU membership, it must fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria. The AKP is aware of the fact that the slow EU accession process will gradually solve the problem of the Kurds' place in Turkish society, socially, politically and culturally. Nevertheless, doing so will not be sufficient to definitively separate Kurdish society from the PKK, and surely not in the short run. In order to do so, the AKP government has adopted an Islamic *umma*-oriented approach to Kurdish society, aimed at strengthening common Islamic bonds. The approach is deficient, however, because of three main issues. Firstly, public support for Turkey’s EU accession is declining and the AKP cannot pass the so-called EU accession laws without public support. Secondly, the Kurds’ definition of Islamic ties is different from the AKP government’s understanding of the notion. The government defines Islamic bonds via reference to the Hanafi school of Islamic legal thought. However, most of the Kurdish population adheres to the Shafi’i school, while a minority is Alevi. Moreover, the AKP’s Hanafi approach entails a Turkish-Islamic synthesis which does not attract the Kurdish population. Thirdly, the AKP government’s definition of the solution is outside of Turkey’s mainstream secularist framework, raising the possibility of a clash between the AKP government and other state institutions, especially the Military. This is even more the case in the wake of the "Ergenekon Affair", involving alleged plots to overthrow the government by retired military leaders and like-minded politicians, which has raised tensions in the sphere of civil-military relations.

The Turkish Military has always had unique standing among Turkish state institutions. This position stems largely from the Military’s role as founder and modernizer of the Turkish Republic. Especially on so-called red line issues such as Kurdish secessionism, Cyprus and relations with Greece, the Military endeavors to maintain its preeminence by a variety of means. On the Kurdish issue, it seeks to defeat insurgents by force, while stimulating social and economic development programs in regions damaged by the years of violence. This approach does not, however, imply recognition of a distinct Kurdish identity. According to Chief of the General Staff İlker Başbuğ, Kurdish ethnic identity cannot be recognized as a legitimate group identity within the Turkish nation-state. However, he stated, Kurds are allowed to pursue their identity on an individual level.

It appears, then, that Turkey will continue to be polarized by the Kurdish question. Regardless of the AKP government's possible adoption of measures advancing Kurdish social and political rights, the PKK is unlikely to agree to lay down its arms. From another angle, the AKP government will have serious problems with the Military regarding the Kurdish question. The PKK's violent struggle is the 29th Kurdish insurgency which Turks have faced since the beginning of the 19th century. Therefore, a viable permanent solution to Turkey's Kurdish question can only be one which involves a change the fundamental paradigm of the Turkish state. This new paradigm should include every social, political, ethnic and religious group in Turkey as integral parts of the state.

Egemen Başar Bezci is a visiting researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center, from Bilkent University.

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