



Volume 5, Special Edition No. 8

June 27, 2011

"The Limping Giant": Turkey and the Kurdish Question

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Mehmet Ali Birand, a Turkish journalist, once said: as long as Turkey avoids solving the Kurdish issue, it will never become the "star" of the region and will remain a "limping giant". For over 30 years now, the Kurdish question has constituted the most serious challenge confronting Turkish society and the Turkish state. The success registered by the Kurdish "Peace and Democracy" Party (BDP) in the June 2011 elections - nearly doubling its seats in parliament from 20 to 36 - marks an important new development. It appears that Turkey's Kurdish minority, and hence the Kurdish question, will now take central stage in Turkish domestic politics and have major foreign policy ramifications as well.

Turkey's army is the second largest in NATO. Nonetheless, it has failed to subdue the guerilla forces of the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been battling against it for more than three decades. . Notwithstanding the capture and incarceration in 1999 of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder and leader of the PKK, the organization is still active and flourishing. Consequently, while the Turkish government has assiduously promoted a foreign policy of regional peacemaking as part of its "Zero Problems" policy, it has been unable to end the conflict in its own backyard.

One principal explanation accounts for the PKK's durability: its gradual and ongoing evolution from a small terrorist organization to a large ethno-national movement that resonates with the majority of Turkey's Kurdish population (approximately 20 percent of Turkey's total population). This came about due to a confluence of regional developments and tactical and strategic shifts among the Kurds themselves, the *zeitgeist* of Turkey's elite, and Turkish society as a whole.

From the regional angle, developments in neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan decisively influenced Turkey's Kurds. Actions by Iraqi Kurds, known in the pan-Kurdish discourse as "Southern Kurds", have intersected with those of their brethren in Turkey at a number of important junctures: in the mid-1970s when the PKK's establishment coincided with the war between the Iraqi Kurds and the Ba`th regime; the establishment of PKK headquarters in Iraqi Kurdistan following the Iraqi Army's retreat in 1992; and the 2004 renewal of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey after the entrenchment of the Kurdish entity in Iraq. Additionally, over the years the borders between Turkey and Iraq have blurred, becoming more and more porous and thus facilitating the exchange of ideas and trends between the two Kurdish communities. In general, the weakening of the classic nation-state paradigm and the rise of multiculturalism as a preferred normative value have emboldened the demands for recognition of Kurdish identity and culture in both Iraq and Turkey.

After subduing the Kurdish uprisings of the 1920s and 1930s and up until the 1970s, the Kurdish region of Turkey was nearly completely calm. Kurdish identity, language and nationality were almost entirely suppressed by the authorities. In the mid-1970s, however, the rise of the PKK pierced the decades of silence. Initially, the PKK aligned itself with the Turkish Left, but disappointment in its lack of solidarity on the Kurdish issue further reinforced Kurdish particularism, and gave form to distinctive Kurdish national claims. Then, in 1982 the PKK initiated a three-stage program in order to achieve its objectives: Stage A, which was supposed to last until 1995, would focus mainly on the internal struggle within Kurdish society itself. During Stage B (1995-2000), a strong guerilla army was to be established, and territory for waging the struggle was to be liberated from Turkish authorities. Stage C was set to begin in 2000, with a comprehensive, armed uprising in the heart of the Kurdish region.

Although many changes occurred along the way, Turkey's Kurds are in the midst of a modified Stage C. Three factors have contributed to the building of a strong national movement: a guerilla army with a strong base in Iraqi Kurdistan; a political party that secures seats in parliament, despite the 10 percent threshold intended to block certain parties from achieving representation, and a national movement, gaining in strength and expressed vis-à-vis an *intifada*-like popular uprising over the last few years, known in Kurdish as a *serhildan*.

Concurrently, the Kurdish national movement has made changes in both its *modus operandi* and officially declared objectives. Although his influence is still felt from prison, Öcalan's capture freed the PKK from a leader who behaved like a dictator. The PKK has largely ceased its terror attacks against Turkish and Kurdish civilians alike, and now mostly targets the Turkish military. Moreover, the abandonment of the demand for an independent Kurdish state enabled party ideologues to develop greater tactical and perhaps even strategic flexibility. Kurdish demands now consist of a spectrum of views: some voices call for autonomy under a Turkish federal structure, while others insist on cultural rights

accompanied by a more just distribution of power and resources. Kurdish spokespersons articulated this nuanced stance following the June 12 elections when, in their victory speeches, they declared that Turkey has to change its understanding of "brotherhood" to one which would consist of a "partnership" between Turks and Kurds.

Indications of change from within the Turkish establishment have also surfaced during the last decade. In previous years, the official approach to the Kurdish question was comprised of three parts: Denying the existence of a Kurdish problem; believing that a military solution and the annihilation of the PKK would solve the (non-existent!) problem and nullify any need to make concessions to the Kurds; and presenting the Kurdish issue to the citizens of Turkey and the world, as nothing more than a problem of terrorism. These tactics sought to increase domestic support for government actions and to enlist Iraqi Kurds and the United States in the struggle against the PKK. However, with the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) 2002 rise to power in Turkey, the government's approach to the Kurds was noticeably altered.

At the same time, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's new course of action was replete with contradictions. Publicly, he recognized the existence of a Kurdish problem; granted certain cultural rights to the Kurds; discussed financial solutions for the downtrodden Kurdish region that continues to suffer from poverty and backwardness; and, in October 2009, he declared a policy of "openness" designed to grant amnesty to PKK members. This last initiative, which pardoned PKK members living in Iraq, failed miserably (only 34 PKK members living in Iraq were actually pardoned). The failure may have been due to the fact that Erdoğan never really meant to fully implement it or, alternatively, to the strident opposition of Turkish nationalists, which resulted in Turkish-Kurdish violence.

The June 2011 election campaign marked a further retreat in Erdoğan's position. He resuscitated the traditional discourse denying the existence of a problem, foregrounded an Islamist message to unify the Kurds and the rest of society behind a shared purpose (as an alternative to particularist Kurdish national solidarity), and strengthened the Turkish nationalist message. Taken together, Erdoğan's approach alienated a significant portion of the Kurdish community and pushed them into the arms of the BDP.

The BDP's success places Turkey's Kurdish question at yet another crossroads. The Kurds demand constitutional recognition as an ethno-cultural collective, which would be manifested in the granting of autonomy to the Kurdish southeast, and recognizing the Kurdish language as the second official language of the state. They also insist on the release of Öcalan and the granting of amnesty for PKK members. The new Kurdish reality presents a dilemma for Erdoğan, as he will need Kurdish support when he attempts to fashion a new constitution for the country, a top priority. Fulfilling Kurdish demands for constitutional reform will most likely raise the ire of Turkish nationalists. But if he fails to curry favor with

the Kurds, he risks an eruption of Kurdish violence which would, among other things, hinder his attempt to change the constitution.

In retrospect, the Turkish army failed to subdue the PKK due to the fact that the long-banned and much-reviled organization spurred the materialization of an authentic, albeit still burgeoning, national movement. Moreover, Öcalan's imprisonment did not weaken the movement, but rather strengthened the PKK, and made a (Kurdish) national hero of its leader. With regard to the shortcomings of Turkish foreign policy, efforts to resolve regional conflicts did not have the effect of suppressing the Kurdish national movement. As for Erdoğan's relaxation regarding the expression of Kurdishness in Turkey, it raised expectations for further, substantive change. The failure to meet those expectations then became yet another point of contention.

Turkey today is the home of an undeniably strong Kurdish national movement. The Turkish government can no longer hide behind the banner of fighting terrorism in Turkey, and will have to directly face the fundamental and controversial questions regarding the country's social and political identity, the state's political structure, the distribution of power and resources, and the place of the "other" within. Overcoming these obstacles will turn Turkey into a political giant, whereas failure may incite a widespread Kurdish uprising, with all the internal and regional implications that come with it.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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