



# An Uncertain Road to Peace: Domestic and Regional Challenges in the Turkish-Kurdish Process

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## **Abstract**

After almost three decades of armed struggle, negotiations between the Turkish government and the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, offer a glimmer of hope to end Turkey's most deadly conflict, which has cost up to 40,000 lives until now. Turkey's direct and indirect negotiations with the Kurdish leader have a long history, dating back to the early nineties. New domestic and regional conditions, however, suggest that the current peace effort has unprecedented chances of success. At the same time, a Turkish-Kurdish peace depends not only on an agreement between the government and the PKK, but also on Turkey's rise as a mature democracy in its turbulent region. The European Union, which could play a decisive anchoring role in the country's democratization, has taken a step back, missing its chance of being a facilitator in this long standing conflict. Will a Turkish-Kurdish peace overcome its domestic and regional challenges? Will 2013 be remembered as the turning-point on the road to long-lasting peace in Turkey?

**Keywords:** *Turkey / Kurdish question / Syria / Iraq / Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) / European Union*

## An Uncertain Road to Peace: Domestic and Regional Challenges in the Turkish-Kurdish Process

by Emanuela Pergolizzi\*

### Introduction

After almost three decades of armed struggle, negotiations between the Turkish government and the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, are presenting a glimmer of hope for the possibility of ending Turkey's most deadly conflict, which has cost up to 40,000 lives until now. Öcalan's historic call to his followers to lay down arms, symbolically made on Kurdish New Year's day, has been welcomed as a major political success for the ruling Justice and Development Party. Turkey's direct and indirect talks with the Kurdish leader have a long history, dating back to 1992-1993, when Öcalan lived in exile in the Syrian capital Damascus.<sup>1</sup>

New domestic and regional conditions, however, suggest that the current peace effort has an unprecedented chance of success. At the same time, an overall Turkish-Kurdish peace deal will depend not only on an agreement between the government and the PKK, but also on Turkey's rise as a fully democratic country able to exert soft power in its turbulent neighbourhood. Will 2013 be remembered as the turning-point on the road to long-lasting peace in Turkey?

### 1. Erdoğan and Öcalan: an unpredictable embrace

What led Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who is serving his third and final term as Prime Minister, to put his reputation and political future at stake by opening negotiations with Turkey's historic "*teröristbaşı*" (head terrorist) Abdullah Öcalan? For both sides, the need for reconciliation resulted primarily from the surge of violent attacks, which made 2012 the deadliest year since 1999, with nearly 700 people killed. The economic and political price of the enduring conflict, which has cost Turkey almost USD 450 billion since 1984,<sup>2</sup> has led to a growing awareness on both sides that a military solution is no longer viable. Alongside this mutually harmful stalemate, important domestic interests of the two arch rivals also play a part.

On his side, Prime Minister Erdoğan, hailed by supporters as the country's greatest statesman since the Republic's founding father, Mustafa Kemal, is preparing his bid for

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Paper prepared for the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), June 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of past negotiations, see Cengiz Çandar, "*Leaving the Mountains*": *How May the PKK Lay Down Arms? Freeing the Kurdish Question from violence*, İstanbul, Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), March 2012, p. 57-60, <http://www.tesev.org.tr/en/publications/1/1>.

<sup>2</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan, *İnsanı yaşat ki devlet yaşasın. Demokratik açılım sürecinde yaşananlar*, İstanbul, Meydan, 2010, p. 15.

the 2014 presidential elections, and cannot - in view of the predictable backlash from the nationalist and social-democratic opposition which would result - afford a surge of violence and terrorism in Turkey right now. This became crystal clear when, in September 2012, a heterogeneous mix of 700 journalists, students, teachers, lawyers and mayors, who had been imprisoned for their alleged involvement in the outlawed Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK),<sup>3</sup> engaged in a 68 day hunger strike, demanding greater rights for the 15-17 million Kurds living in the country. Internationally praised for supporting the democratic demands of Arab peoples, Erdoğan feared for his popularity back home, a loss in which could reverberate negatively on Turkey's international image, often heralded as a possible "source of inspiration" for its southern neighbours in transition.

Alongside this and also with a view to his presidential ambitions, Erdoğan is currently engaged in a struggle in the parliamentary "battlefield", in which the AKP is seeking to outmanoeuvre the opposition in rewriting the constitution. While all parties agree that there is a need to revise the constitution, which was drafted and approved during the period of rule by the military junta in the early 1980s, the opposition is unwilling to accept the Prime Minister's ambitious dream of a stronger presidency *à la française*, fearing that it could open the door to greater authoritarianism in the country. In the face of staunch opposition from the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), in order to unlock the current impasse, the AKP is counting on the support of the 36 independent parliamentarians affiliated to the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Hence a dialogue has commenced between the AKP and the BDP, which would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

Erdoğan's open references to the *eyalet* system,<sup>4</sup> where Kurdistan was an administrative entity which did not threaten the Ottoman Empire, immediately triggered reactions from the nationalists in both the MHP and the CHP. The latter have denounced an alleged alliance between the AKP and the terrorists of the PKK, formed in order to rewrite the constitution "in the shadow of the guns"<sup>5</sup> and without the consensus of the people. A recent survey<sup>6</sup> has confirmed that public opinion is dramatically split on the issue, with 53.8 percent of the population opposing a federal solution and 63.8 percent being against Kurdish autonomy within Turkey.

In a country in which ethnic identities have never been explicitly recognized, and where even during the Ottoman Empire a certain degree of autonomy was granted only to non-Muslim minorities under the "Millet" system, Erdoğan's constitutional gamble entails far more than an agreement with the BDP. It also requires deeper public debate

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<sup>3</sup> The KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*) is an umbrella organization allegedly founded by Abdullah Öcalan, which brings together the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) of Iran as well as the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD). In Turkey, the KCK is said to serve as the political wing of the PKK.

<sup>4</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Eyalet sistemi: Özal'dan Erdoğan'a...", in *Radikal*, 2 April 2013, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikalyazar&articleid=1127679>.

<sup>5</sup> Serdar Özgür, "CHP'li Günaydın: AKP ile PKK beraber bir anayasa yazacak", in *Radikal*, 29 April 2013, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikaldetayv3&articleid=1131553>.

<sup>6</sup> Özer Sencar, *Turkey's Pulse: "The New Resolution Process"*, Ankara, MetroPOLL, 7 April 2013, <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/report/turkey-pulse-the-new-solution-process-april-2013>.

and soul-searching - a “psychological operation”<sup>7</sup> as the Prime Minister himself has stated. In view of this, 63 “wise people” were entrusted with the task of leading the public debate on the Kurdish issue through meetings and conferences in seven Turkish regions, but no guarantee of success is yet in sight in Erdoğan’s high-stakes gamble.

In the meantime, on a distant but related level, Abdullah Öcalan, the undisputed and unchallenged spiritual leader of the PKK, is grappling with the difficult task of uniting the multiple forces within the Kurdish movement in order to avoid the risk of implosion. Alongside the changes made to the Turkish political landscape by the AKP’s first electoral victory in 2002, the PKK has experienced a parallel period of comprehensive renovation of its organization and ideology, changing its course from a uniquely military to a political project, with a preference for deliberation and debate. The Kurdish movement’s unexpected democratic shift was enabled by a simultaneous convergence of different factors.

Firstly, the progressive decrease in the weight of the Turkish military, Turkey’s historic Kemalist and nationalist stronghold, in the decision-making processes was key to the gradual incorporation of Kurds in the Turkish body politic. The arrest of hundreds of prominent figures of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) during the Ergenekon<sup>8</sup> and Balyoz<sup>9</sup> cases weakened a pillar of the country’s nationalist establishment, opening the way to a Kurdish involvement in politics which had been inconceivable just a few years ago.

The second factor was the success of the Kurdish tactical manoeuvre to circumvent the 10 percent electoral threshold to enter parliament by participating in national elections with individual candidates, to whom the rule does not apply. Thanks to this stratagem, in 2007 the Kurdish political movement was able to send deputies to the parliament for the first time. Once gathered within the Democratic Society Party (DTP)<sup>10</sup> - and, after its ban, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) - Kurds managed to gain a 26 percent<sup>11</sup> increase in their vote tally in the 2011 general elections, winning 36 seats. Indeed, focusing efforts on the political arena also led to unexpected results in the 2009 local elections, in which the DTP won nearly one hundred municipalities in Turkey’s southeast, taking back several cities from the governing party and becoming the AKP’s sole rival for the Kurdish vote.<sup>12</sup> The changes brought about in the BDP-run

<sup>7</sup> “PM Erdoğan, wise men meet for settlement”, in *Today’s Zaman*, 7 April 2013, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-311876-event-of-the-week-pm-erdogan-wise-men-meet-for-settlement.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ergenekon* is an alleged clandestine and terrorist organization with possible ties to members of Turkey’s military and security forces. Over 500 people have been taken into custody under the accusation of being part of the organization.

<sup>9</sup> *Balyoz Harekâtı* (“sledgehammer”) was the name of an alleged secularist military coup dating back to 2003. Over 300 suspects, including admirals, generals and colonels, were sentenced to prison in 2012 on charges of attempting to overthrow the government.

<sup>10</sup> The Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP) was a Kurdish political party founded in 2005 and banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court four years later for being “the focal point of activities against the indivisible unity of the state”. The party was succeeded by the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP).

<sup>11</sup> See electoral data in the website of the Turkish government’s Supreme Electoral Council: <http://www.ysk.gov.tr>.

<sup>12</sup> Dilek Kurban, “To Europe and Back: The Three Decades of Kurdish Struggle in Turkey”, in *Global Turkey in Europe Policy Briefs*, No. 7 (March 2013), <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=869>.

municipalities, such as bilingual services and the restoration of the former Kurdish names of streets and squares,<sup>13</sup> demonstrated that political power could push the boundaries of autonomy well beyond what guns and guerrilla had achieved.

Finally, the gradual detachment of the Kurdish political wing from the PKK's armed movement increased the pressure on Öcalan to enter into negotiations with the Turkish government. Part of the PKK seems to be in favour of moving the struggle to the political arena, and Murat Karayılan, acting field commander of the movement, has surprisingly declared himself to be ready to enter politics.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, there is stiff opposition coming from the so-called "hawkish wing"<sup>15</sup> of the movement located in the Kandil mountains. Indeed, the most senior and authoritative members of this wing, such as Duran Kalkan, Cemil Bayık and Mustafa Karasu, have strongly criticised the negotiation process.<sup>16</sup> Their suspicions are based on the memories of the negotiated 1999 withdrawal, when 500 PKK militants were killed despite the assurances given by the government. After more than a decade, the AKP has already given proof of a similar - yet less violent - U-turn, with the so-called "Kurdish opening" being still-born after the detention of nearly 2,000<sup>17</sup> Kurdish students, journalists, politicians, and lawyers for their alleged membership of the PKK's urban wing, the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK). Nonetheless, and paradoxically, the growing number of ongoing trials, whose count reached 49 in July 2012,<sup>18</sup> stands as evidence of the fact that the heart of the Kurdish struggle has already shifted from the mountains to the court rooms. Seen from this perspective, the negotiations with the Turkish government were not merely an option, but indeed the only way of obtaining greater rights for the Kurdish population.

The BDP-PKK duo was then pushed to act, and to do so quickly. While debates over the negotiations with the government were waging within the movement, a new potential threat emerged at the south-eastern borders of the country. Established in December 2012, a new party is seeking to become a third contender between the BDP and the AKP in Turkey's Kurdish provinces. The Free Cause Party (*Hur Dava Partisi*) is said to be related to the Turkish Hizbullah, the outlawed Islamic group which fought a violent "conflict within the conflict" against the PKK until 2002. Enjoying good relations with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, the Free Cause Party, whose abbreviated form (Huda-Par) means "Party of God" (just like Hizbullah), hopes to attract the Kurdish Islamic vote, given that its followers are frustrated by both the moderation of the BDP and the militancy of the PKK. Violent clashes reported in April 2013 at the University of

<sup>13</sup> "Kürtçe park isimlerine iptal", in *Radikal*, 22 July 2012,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikaldetayv3&articleid=1094883>.

<sup>14</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Kandil sonrası yeni hayat...", in *Radikal*, 27 April 2013,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikalyazar&articleid=1131283>.

<sup>15</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Leaving the Mountains", cit., p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "O resimdeki şifreler", in *Milliyet*, 7 March 2013, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/o-resimdeki-sifreler/siyaset/siyasyazardetay/07.03.2013/1677174/default.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Fatih Yağmur, "KCK'da 2000 tutuklu", in *Radikal*, 1 July 2012,

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikaldetayv3&articleid=1092791>.

<sup>18</sup> The German Democratic Turkey Forum lists a total of 49 trials over the years 2010-2012. See "Backgrounder on the Union of Communities in Kurdistan, KCK", in *DTF reports*, updated 22 July 2012, [http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/enw/index.php?title=Backgrounder\\_on\\_the\\_Union\\_of\\_Communities\\_in\\_Kurdistan,\\_KCK](http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/enw/index.php?title=Backgrounder_on_the_Union_of_Communities_in_Kurdistan,_KCK).

Diyarbakir, involving the members of a student association affiliated with the Huda Par, allowed the Kurdish-Islamic group to move into the spotlight. The party has announced that it will participate in the municipal elections scheduled for March 2014. Although it is premature to speculate about its actual following, both the AKP and the BDP are carefully monitoring its rise, fearing the appearance of a new strand of extremism. Nonetheless, Öcalan's charisma and undisputed spiritual leadership seem the only glue that is strong enough to keep the emerging divisions within the Kurdish community together, and he still remains the only viable interlocutor for the Turkish government.

Converging interests and political needs have thus pushed Erdoğan and Öcalan into a tight, yet uneasy, embrace. Turkey's future and Kurdish rights still depend on whether the two will be bold enough to take risks in the name of peace. However, beyond domestic factors, regional dynamics might eventually determine the fate of the process.

## 2. Beyond the borders: the negotiations and shifting regional dynamics

### 2.1. Syrian Kurds: an unwelcome neighbour?

Despite Turkey's tendency to deal with the PKK negotiations as an exclusively domestic issue, the Kurdish question has a cross-border nature, and is likely to greatly alter, and itself be affected by, regional dynamics. The peace process has in fact reshuffled the strategic cards of all the actors with whom Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has pursued his "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy.

This applies, first and foremost, to Syria, which shares a 911-kilometre border with Turkey. Prior to the start of the protests in 2011, Syria had been the successful example of Ankara's strategy of engaging former rivals and entering into economic and political agreements with them. The improving relations between the two countries yielded concrete results in terms of security cooperation, with the Syrian regime ensuring its support for Ankara against the PKK in Syria's Kurdish-populated border towns and villages. But as the regime decided to turn a deaf ear to Turkish advice to set the country on a peaceful course towards reform, Ankara changed sides, joining the anti-Syrian camp in the fall of 2011. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad did not appreciate its former ally's proactive role in hosting the Syrian opposition, and retaliated by opening a political space for the Kurds. Salih Muslim, the head of the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), was allowed to return to Syria and to build an organizational hub and a *de facto* autonomous region in Syria's north.

This explains Davutoğlu's harsh criticism of the PYD, which he described as a puppet<sup>19</sup> of al-Assad, much like the regime's Shabiha militia, and which he even labelled the "Kurdish Shabiha".<sup>20</sup> Kurds could have been a decisive factor in favour of the Syrian uprising, yet they have chosen to remain on the sidelines of the conflict, reluctant both

<sup>19</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Kürt sorunu'nda Türkiye-Suriye izdivacı...", in *Radikal*, 17 December 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal.aspx?atype=radikalyazar&articleid=1112291>.

<sup>20</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Kurdish initiative may affect Syrian Kurds", in *Al-Monitor*, 14 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/kurdish-issue-initiative-elections-turkey-syria.html>.

to fight against the regime and to engage in dialogue with Turkey. The AKP-PKK negotiations, however, seem likely to produce perceptible changes on both fronts. Less than a month after Öcalan's declaration of a cease-fire, PYD leader Salih Muslim was quoted by the Fırat News Agency as saying: "We are ready for dialogue, we are ready to sit down without conditions".<sup>21</sup> Suspicion on the Turkish side, however, is holding back dialogue with the PYD, even though Davutoğlu has already listed his conditions in the following way: "Anyone who wants to talk with us has to fulfil three requirements: 1) It should not support the regime. 2) It should not take for granted any *status quo* until a parliament democratically elected by the Syrian people is formed. 3) It should not support terrorism in Turkey".<sup>22</sup>

The air strikes that hit the Kurdish province of Hasaka in north-eastern Syria and the towns of Ziyaret and Şerawa on April 2013 stand as striking evidence that Davutoğlu's first condition is already met and that former ties between the PYD and the regime are broken. "We are fighting against the regime", confirmed Salih Muslim to the Fırat News Agency. "If Turkey wants to establish relations with us, we are all for it".<sup>23</sup> The PYD is organizationally strong and active on the ground but must now revise its strategy. In particular, it needs to recalculate its alternatives in case the Assad regime falls. The Iraqi Kurds already tried to persuade the PYD to broker a power-sharing agreement with the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella organization of about 16 Kurdish parties close to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in June 2012.<sup>24</sup> Having said this, Turkey is also uneasy at the prospect of the Kurds autonomously siding with the Syrian opposition. The news that over 1,500 PKK members<sup>25</sup> have left Turkey for Syria to fight alongside the Free Syrian Army in order to protect the Kurdish regions of the north has heightened Ankara's concerns. Erdoğan has openly stated that he will not accept the emergence of a Syrian twin of the Iraqi KRG.<sup>26</sup>

Be that as it may, as in the case of Iraq, Turkey will necessarily have to adapt to the regional situation that will develop on its southern border. What it can still prevent, however, is the emergence of a PKK-PYD joint threat. The possibility of disarming the PKK and neutralizing Turkish fears of a cross-border Kurdish threat depend on the peace process with Öcalan. Should this process be successfully concluded, Ankara may soften its stance against its Kurdish-Syrian neighbours.

## 2.2. Transnational challenges with Iraq

The talks with the PKK are also intricately linked to dynamics between Turkey and (Northern) Iraq. Since 2007-8, Turkey has made a remarkable turnaround towards Arbil, which has turned from a safe haven for PKK militants into a strategic partner for

<sup>21</sup> "Salih Müslim: Davutoğlu'nun şartları manasız", in *Fırat News*, 11 April 2013,

<http://www.firatnews.com/news/guncel/salih-muslim-Davutoğlu-nun-sartlari-manasiz.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Işın Elçin, "PYD'ye uc sart", in *Yeni Şafak*, 10 April 2013, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/politika-haber/pydye-uc-sart-10.04.2013-509147>.

<sup>23</sup> "Salih Müslim: Davutoğlu'nun şartları manasız", cit.

<sup>24</sup> Gonul Tol, "The PKK cease-fire and Syria's Kurds", in *The Middle East Channel*, 22 March 2013, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/22/the\\_pkk\\_cease\\_fire\\_and\\_syrias\\_kurds](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/22/the_pkk_cease_fire_and_syrias_kurds).

<sup>25</sup> "Turkey to form a new front against Assad", in *Sabah*, 30 April 2013, <http://english.sabah.com.tr/national/2013/04/30/from-turkey-to-forming-a-front-against-assad>.

<sup>26</sup> "Suriye'nin kuzeyinde Kürt devletine asla izin vermeyi", in *Sabah*, 26 July 2012, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2012/07/26/suriyenin-kuzeyinde-kurt-devletine-asla-izin-vermeyiz>.

Ankara. Economic relations have blossomed, with Ankara currently standing as the KRG's main trading partner, with nearly 1,023 Turkish firms operating within its territory. In May 2012, the two countries extended their cooperation to the field of energy, agreeing to build one gas and two oil pipelines which will openly bypass the Baghdad-controlled Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline.<sup>27</sup> These mutually beneficial relations, as well as the KRG's economic dependency on Turkey, have allowed Erdoğan to engage in negotiations with the PKK with the support of a new, reliable ally.

Since the 1990s, the KRG has allowed the stationing of the PKK's military wing in the Kandil Mountains, and has tolerated the presence of thousands of PKK supporters in the Makmour Camp, where they have resided since 1994 as political refugees. Engaging in a high-risk process such as that with Öcalan would not have been possible for Ankara without the full support of Massoud Barzani, who made it crystal clear from the very beginning that he was ready to assist with the implementation of the talks.<sup>28</sup> The assistance of the KRG's President became pivotal when the PKK announced the withdrawal of its members to the camps in Zap, Avaşin and Metina in Northern Iraq. The success of the whole peace process depends on the safety of these militants, and Barzani's role is strategic in this regard.

While the retreat of PKK militants from Turkey to Iraq proceeds peacefully, the PKK and Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) are involved in a more subtle power struggle which Ankara is watching with some concern. Rivalries between the two groups date back to the 1990s, when they engaged in armed conflict, and continued for a decade until a tacit agreement was reached after Öcalan's imprisonment in 1999. Since then, a peaceful coexistence has been in place, thanks also to the KRG's acting as a safe haven for PKK militias. At the same time as the preparations for the next elections in the Kurdistan Regional Government, scheduled for September 2013, some commentators have, however, seen a shift in PKK tactics within Northern Iraq.

PKK leaders operating in Iraq, such as Murat Karayılan, are said to be uneasy at Barzani's growing power and his ambition to present himself as the representative and legitimate patron of all Kurds. Using their networks to encourage the opposition against the governing KDP, PKK militants have made harsh remarks about Barzani's leadership through the movement's websites and social media. Their support for the opposition Goran party is unlikely to weigh heavily on the electoral results, but the PKK's engagement in Iraqi politics may open new perspectives in the short term. The growing number of PKK members expected to enter Northern Iraq as a consequence of the Turkey-PKK peace process may generate new challenges in Turkey-Iraqi relations in terms of security cooperation. In view of its cross-border nature, the peace process is highly vulnerable to emerging regional dynamics. The outcome of the difficult road to peace depends on these unpredictable shifts at both the domestic and the regional levels.

<sup>27</sup> Nathalie Tocci, "Turkey's Kurdish Gamble", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 1310 (April 2013), <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=888>.

<sup>28</sup> Burcu Karakaş, "Barzani: Çözümü destekliyoruz", in *Milliyet*, 27 March 2013, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/barzani-cozumu-destekliyoruz/siyaset/siyasetdetay/27.03.2013/1685685/default.htm>.



### 3. A difficult road ahead

#### 3.1. Erdoğan's double-edged sword

The unfolding of domestic and regional events reveals a highly unstable situation, whose evolution is largely unpredictable. Sticking to its promises, the PKK released eight Turkish captives in March 2013, and started silently to withdraw to Northern Iraq on 8 May 2013. Despite the hopes and commitments of both sides, however, deeper obstacles challenge the uneasy journey towards peace.

On the Turkish domestic front, the process depends not only on disarmament and retreat, but also on the legacy of contrasting beliefs and national feelings deeply rooted in the history of the Kemalist republic. There is no question that society, exhausted by three decades of bloodshed and violence, longs for a solution. What is less clear is whether it is ready to swallow the bitter pills that the negotiations entail in both political and social terms.

Now that the government is confronted with the momentous task of rewriting the 1982 military-drafted constitution, reaching a consensus which can both satisfy the Kurds and win the support of broader Turkish society is an arduous task. Any answer to the demands of the Kurds in terms of rights and regional aspirations implies a broader redefinition of "Turkish nationhood" and identity, which Turkish society will not easily accept.

The first meetings of the commission of "wise persons" with the public have confirmed these difficulties. While the "wise persons" were generally welcomed in the Kurdish-majority southeast, tensions quickly grew as they travelled towards the Aegean region, the nationalist stronghold, in which 49 percent of the population still opposes peace with the Kurds.

Undoing historic taboos in the hearts and minds of the public requires a through involvement of all political parties. However, the AKP has made no credible effort to bring the major opposition party, the CHP, into the process. It came therefore as no surprise that CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's first press conference to set out the CHP's stance on the Kurdish problem took place on May 10: almost two months after Öcalan's cease-fire declaration, and more than six months after the start of negotiations.

As society polarizes on the Kurdish question, with no signs of improvement in sight, it is not clear how Erdoğan can turn this increasingly complex situation to his advantage if he continues to run alone. The stakes could not be higher for the AKP's leader, who has presented himself as the lead actor in Turkey's tortuous road to peace. This "winner takes it all" approach risks turning into a dangerous "lose-lose" game if the Turkish Prime Minister does not seriously engage all political parties and the plurality of Turkish society. The Gezi Park protests, which started on May 28, seem to have opened Pandora's box within Turkish society, highlighting the growing popular frustration with the Prime Minister's authoritarian style of governance. Both Erdoğan's political fortunes and the fate of the Kurdish process depend on how the Prime Minister

will handle Turkey's polarization by broadly engaging with the multiple sections of Turkish society.

### 3.2. Europe's missed chance

In terms of the broader regional outlook, Erdoğan's insistence on treating the Kurdish question as a mere domestic issue openly contrasts with its inextricable ties to regional stability. The complex knot of interests, running from the Syrian war to oil exports from the Iraqi KRG, gives the Kurdish population living in Turkey, Syria and Iraq a pivotal role in shaping the region's future.

In this framework, Europe's silence is deafening. Since the recognition of Turkey's EU candidacy in 1999, a rights-based solution to the Kurdish issue has constituted one of the pillars of the EU's political conditionality towards Turkey. Nevertheless, the European institutions have gradually retreated from playing a frontline role on Turkey's domestic evolution. With the fading of the EU's soft power towards Turkey, the AKP government has adopted Brussels-backed reforms selectively and on the basis of its own interpretation, most notably as regards civil-military relations and the judiciary. While Europe could play a decisive anchoring role in Turkey's democratization, it has deliberately taken a step back, progressively losing influence over Turkey as the credibility of its accession policy has waned.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the loss of EU influence over the region is also sub-optimal as regards European energy security. The resolution of the Kurdish issue and the stabilization of Turkey's south-eastern borders stands as a *conditio sine qua non* for the construction of the planned pipelines between Arbil and Ceylan. Supporting Turkey's peace process with the PKK could thus result not only in the rise of a consolidated democracy with strong influence in the Middle East, but also in a stronger economic partner in the energy field. Diversifying gas and oil exports in a market dominated by Russia and Iran has been a shared goal of both Turkey and the EU.

Aware of its waning influence, the EU made a number of declaratory steps in the wake of Öcalan's historic cease-fire. On 6 February 2013, the European Parliament devoted a plenary debate to Turkey-PKK negotiations. The assembly expressed its full support for the peace process, stressing how its success would play a vital role in ensuring security and stability in the whole region. The Parliament also highlighted that a solution to the Kurdish question has important implications for EU enlargement. "As a candidate country, Turkey has to meet the Copenhagen political criteria, including the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities", declared the Irish Minister of European Affairs, Lucinda Creighton, speaking on behalf of the Council Presidency when opening the European Parliament debate, "the Kurdish issue has implications in all of these areas".<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Dilek Kurban, "To Europe and Back: The Three Decades of Kurdish Struggle in Turkey", cit.

<sup>30</sup> European Parliament, *Dialogue for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey*, Strasbourg, 6 February 2013, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20130206+ITEM-012+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>. A video recording of the session is available on the EPTV website: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/plenary/video?debate=1360159508851>.

Having broken the ice with these declarations, however, the EU seems to have fallen again into a neutral silence. The EU could play a pivotal role in helping Kurds and Turks to open a new chapter in their troubled history by engaging Turkey in a credible accession process and providing the democratic guidelines for its historic constitutional reform. Success in the peace process offers the promise of consolidating Turkey as a mature democracy, and diffusing positive spillover effects across the Middle East.

*Updated: 8 June 2013*



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