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## Syria's Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey

by Eva Maria Resch

### ABSTRACT

Between the summer of 2015 and 2016 Turkey experienced the most violent year of the Kurdish conflict since 1999. The outbreak of the Syrian war, together with domestic Turkish politics, have had a crucial impact on the reconciliation process between the Turkish government and the Kurdish minority in Turkey. With a special focus on the battle of Kobane and the related increase in power of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), this paper examines how events tied to the Syrian civil war modified the cost-benefit calculus of both Turkey and the PKK, leading to a collapse of peace talks and a renewed outbreak of the conflict.

*Turkey | Domestic policy | Kurds | Syrian conflict | PKK | PYD*



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### Introduction

The current situation in Turkey is highly unstable. The latest and especially violent round of the war between the Turkish army and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants in particular is challenging the country at a time when conditions in the broader Middle East already are heated and unstable. The revival of Turkey's conflict with the PKK signals the end of the policy of rapprochement adopted by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since it came to power in 2002. Promising to inaugurate a "new" Turkey by emphasizing the country's Ottoman past and dominant religious character, the AKP moved to offer a more inclusive state project for the Kurdish minority in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Three decades of bloody conflict led the Turkish government and the PKK to recognize in 2014 that no military solution would resolve the dispute.<sup>2</sup> As a result, a new push towards reconciliation through negotiations was made, which included Kurdish legal representatives of the mostly Kurdish, pro-minority Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) as well as the leadership of the PKK. In these circumstances, the AKP was able to attract the votes of many Kurds who believed in the willingness of the government to grant the Kurdish community equal rights, particularly in view of the AKP's promotion of the less privileged Anatolian society. The HDP, on the other hand, was the first Kurdish party able to attract a large number of votes from outside the Kurdish community, by promoting the rights of all minorities in the country.<sup>3</sup> Thus the so-called "solution process" offered some promise, and

<sup>1</sup> Toni Alaranta, "Turkey under the AKP. A Critical Evaluation from the Perspective of Turkey's EU Negotiations", in *FIIA Working Papers*, No. 84 (February 2015), p. 18, <http://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/480>.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), "Turkey and the PKK: Saving the Peace Process", in *ICG Europe Reports*, No. 234 (6 November 2014), p. 1, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/822>.

<sup>3</sup> Burcu Özçelik, "What the HDP Success Means for Turkey", in *Sada*, 11 June 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=60370>.

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many Kurds and Turks where confident that strong leadership on both sides could finally bring an end to the 30-year conflict. So how and why did the peace process break down?

### 1. The Kurdish situation in Turkey

The long-standing conflict between Turkey's central government and the PKK has had a significant impact on the nation's political and economic outlook. The conflict is estimated to have caused the deaths of between 30,000 and 40,000 people since the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, called for violent resistance in 1984.<sup>4</sup> The Kurdish community in Turkey constitutes around 19 percent of the population and has been heavily repressed during Turkey's modern history. This repression goes back to the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his followers embarked on a state-building project that prioritized nationalism and the homogenization of Turkish society in the making of the new Turkish Republic.<sup>5</sup> Turkey's policy of assimilation, repression and containment proved increasingly unsustainable from the 1990s onwards however.<sup>6</sup>

This was due to several factors. Firstly Turkey had experienced a period of democratization in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The opening of the political process to a more diverse group of social actors was necessarily going to involve greater demands for minority rights. The Kurdish community ramped up their claims for recognition. Many Kurds felt increasingly attracted to armed resistance, with the result that by the 1990s the conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK became heavily militarized. Despite the greater power of the Turkish army, the PKK, benefitted from its ability to find safe havens in the Kurdish areas of Turkey's neighbouring states, particularly Iraq and Syria.<sup>8</sup> It is largely due to this transnational structure<sup>9</sup> that the Turkish government was not able to resolve the conflict and defeat the PKK militarily.

<sup>4</sup> Sandro D'Angelo and Beyza Aybat, *A Call for Peace in Turkey*, Brussels, European Parliament, 28 March 2013, p. 1, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/it/document.html?reference=EXPO-AFET\\_SP\(2013\)491486](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/it/document.html?reference=EXPO-AFET_SP(2013)491486).

<sup>5</sup> Numbers taken from: CIA, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>; and Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State. Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects", in Senem Aydın-Düzgit et al. (eds.), *Global Turkey in Europe III. Democracy, Trade, and the Kurdish Question in Turkey-EU Relations*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, June 2015, p. 157-184 (IAI Research Papers 19), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4263>.

<sup>7</sup> Toni Alaranta, "Turkey under the AKP", cit., p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Syria gave asylum to Öcalan from 1990 to 1998. Giving shelter to the PKK was often used by Syria to apply pressure due to resource disputes.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Fantappiè, "Il dilemma del PKK", in *Limes*, No. 10 (October 2016), p. 97-102.

The economic impact of the war in southeast Turkey also prevented the country from fulfilling its economic potential. Bilgel and Karahasan estimated in 2016 that Turkey's GDP would have been 14 percent higher in the absence of the Kurdish conflict, due to economic stagnation in the southeast, the loss of labour due to military service and the more general insecurity that has slowed investments over the last three decades.<sup>10</sup> The conflict thus became more and more costly for the government and the Turkish economy.

Finally, international events during the 1990s had an impact on the Kurdish question in Turkey. Firstly, the 1991 Gulf War and the protection offered by the US and the UK to the Kurdish community in northern Iraq raised awareness of the Kurdish question, mobilizing large numbers of civilians in Turkey and Europe to demand more rights for the community.<sup>11</sup> The granting of candidate status for full membership of the European Union in 1999 put additional pressure on Turkey to resolve the Kurdish question, including the demand for reforms and recognition of the Kurdish minority in the country.<sup>12</sup>

With the coming to power of the AKP, which was willing to expand its electoral base in Anatolia by promoting more equal development between Kurdish and Turkish cities and was eager to start the EU accession process, the central government in Turkey sought a political rapprochement with the Kurdish minority. In its pursuit of a "new" Turkey,<sup>13</sup> the central government moved to emphasize the Islamic character of the country, creating a more inclusive state project for the Kurdish minority.

Besides aiming to fulfil Turkey's full military and economic potential, the reconciliation process also had strong political significance for the AKP and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Already in 2002, a constitutional reform, aiming to change the political system in Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential one, was one of the main points on the political agenda of the party.<sup>14</sup> In this context, Erdoğan sought the support of the Kurdish community for his political goals,

<sup>10</sup> Firat Bilgel and Burhan Can Karahasan, "Estimating the Economic Cost of Turkey's PKK Conflict", in *LSE EUROPP Blog*, 29 September 2016, <http://wp.me/p2MmSR-al6>; Firat Bilgel and Burhan Can Karahasan, "Thirty Years of Conflict and Economic Growth in Turkey: A Synthetic Control Approach", in *LEQS Papers*, No. 112/2016 (June 2016), [http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/LEQS Discussion Paper Series/LEQSPaper112.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/LEQS%20Discussion%20Paper%20Series/LEQSPaper112.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey...", cit., p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Council of the European Union, *Decision on the principles, priorities, intermediate objectives and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with the Republic of Turkey* (2001/235/EC), 8 March 2001, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:32001D0235>.

<sup>13</sup> Günter Seufert, "Erdoğan's 'New Turkey'. Restoring the Authoritarian State in the Name of Democracy", in *SWP Comments*, No. 44/2014 (October 2014), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/erdogans-new-turkey>.

<sup>14</sup> Günter Seufert, "Resümee: Die Schwäche der Nationalstaaten im Nahen Osten zwingt Europa zu einer neuen Kurdenpolitik", in Günter Seufert (ed.), "Der Aufschwung kurdischer Politik: Lage in Irak, Syrien und der Türkei", in *SWP Studien*, No. 10/2015 (May 2015), p. 77-84, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/der-aufschwung-kurdischer-politik>.

promising more political rights to the Kurdish community in the country. Thus, the support of the Kurds could be used not only to increase the political power of the ruling party, but also to create a stronger presidency.

A constitutional reform could indeed have been beneficial to the Kurdish community.<sup>15</sup> As mentioned, the modern constitution of the Turkish Republic denied any affiliation of ethnic groups in the country, context proviso that was regularly used to block the fight for linguistic and cultural rights. A constitutional change to include the recognition and granting of minority rights to the Kurdish community thus constituted a promising path towards reconciliation.

## 2. Political steps towards the opening

The AKP and its leader, Erdoğan, made various overtures to the Kurdish minority following their electoral victory in 2002. The new government declared itself willing to create a more inclusive environment for the Kurdish community. It abrogated the state of emergency that had been in place in the southeast of the country for twenty years and enabled the creation of a Kurdish TV channel and Kurdish departments in some universities.<sup>16</sup>

A more inclusive state project was offered in particular by the reinforcement of the common religion of the Kurdish and Turkish communities. Many of the more conservative members of the Anatolian society, composed of Turks and Kurds alike, had trouble identifying with the top-down secularization process launched by Atatürk.<sup>17</sup> By focusing on the common Islamic religion, the AKP was therefore able to attract conservative voters not only among the Turkish community but also among Anatolia's Kurds.

Another element that potentially helped the reconciliation process was the AKP's fondness for the Ottoman past, whereas previous governments largely rejected the Ottoman past and relations with the Arab world, trying to steer the country towards the West. National divisions had mattered much less under the Ottoman Empire than they did during the republic, a trait that Kurds could find reassuring.

<sup>15</sup> Henri J. Barkey and Direnç Kadioglu, "The Turkish Constitution and the Kurdish Question", in *Carnegie Articles*, 1 August 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=45218>.

<sup>16</sup> Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey...", cit., p. 162; Dilek Kurban, "To Europe and Back: The Three Decades of Kurdish Struggle in Turkey", in Senem Aydın-Düzgüt et al. (eds.), *Global Turkey in Europe. Political, Economic, and Foreign Policy Dimensions of Turkey's Evolving Relationship with the EU*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, May 2013, p. 176-177 (IAI Research Papers 9), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/127>.

<sup>17</sup> Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey: The New Model?", in Robin Wright (ed.), *The Islamists are Coming. Who They Really Are*, Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center Press and United States Institute of Peace Press, 2012, p. 126-136, <http://brook.gs/2bCjsNk>.

In the regional context, the AKP's rapprochement with President Masoud Barzani in 2007 of the Regional Government of Kurdistan in Iraq marked a new phase in Turkey's relationship with Kurdish political movements and representatives located outside the country. The development of diplomatic relations with the Kurdish community in Iraq certainly had an economic rationale in that it aimed at shifting Turkey's energy supply away from Russia, while making the country a potential energy supplier to Europe. For Turkey, however, having a good relationship with the Iraqi Kurds was also a way to prevent them from siding with the PKK.

Another important factor in the reconciliation process was the charismatic leadership of the leaders of the Kurdish community. Whereas previous Kurdish representatives reached nearly exclusively the Kurdish electorate, HDP co-leaders, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, successfully appealed to the many Turkish people by addressing the rights of not only the Kurdish community but also other minority groups in the country, including women and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

Whereas the fear of a possible splitting away of the Kurdish regions had induced the central authorities in Turkey to adopt more repressive policies, the AKP acted differently. In December 2012 the government announced that the Turkish Secret Service (*Millî İstihbarat Teskilatı*, MIT) had started negotiations with the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>18</sup> These negotiations were supposed to unfold along a multi-phased period that would start with a truce and end with disarmament of the PKK and its transformation into a political party. The Turkish government, the leaders of the PKK and political exponents of the HDP were all included in the process.

Additionally, the PKK demonstrated its willingness to participate in the negotiations in a statement from Öcalan, who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999, which was read by representatives of the HDP at the Newroz celebrations across Turkey in 2013.<sup>19</sup> The letter, written in prison, called for disarmament and announced that "The Turkish people who live in what is called Turkey today – ancient Anatolia – should recognize that their common life with the Kurds, under the flag of Islam, rests on the principles of amity and solidarity".<sup>20</sup> This statement was important in that it emphasized a willingness to focus on characteristics common to the Kurds and the more general population in Turkey, even if the PKK traditionally does not emphasize religious values due to its Marxist origins.

<sup>18</sup> Dilek Kurban, "To Europe and Back", cit., p. 183-184; Kevin Matthees and Günter Seufert, "Erdoğan and Öcalan Begin Talks. A Paradigm Shift in Turkey's Kurdish Policy and a New Strategy of the PKK", in *SWP Comments*, No. 13/2013 (April 2013), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkey-paradigm-shift-in-kurdish-policy>.

<sup>19</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Ocalan's Message Is Much More Than a Cease-Fire", in *Al-Monitor*, 24 March 2013, <http://almon.co/6xz>.

<sup>20</sup> Lisel Hintz, *Opportunity Missed: Identity Alignment and Turkey's Kurdish Question*, memo prepared for presentation at the Contemporary Turkish Politics Workshop at Rice University's Baker Institute, 14 October 2016, <https://pomeps.org/?p=8793>.

### 3. The Syrian war and the battle of Kobane

In March 2011 the wave of anti-authoritarian uprisings in the Middle East, dubbed in the West as the Arab Spring, reached Syria. The harsh government reaction to the early demands for reform in Syria quickly led to the militarization of the conflict as opposition to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad spread across the country. In Syria, the severe repression of the Kurdish community and the inability of the Kurds to organize efficiently under the Assad regime had made the community very susceptible to the ideology of Öcalan, to whom Syria had granted political asylum after he was expelled from Turkey in 1990. While Öcalan was eventually expelled in 1998 in the context of a Turkish–Syrian rapprochement, in 2003 the Party of Democratic Union (PYD) was founded in northern Syria by former members of the PKK.<sup>21</sup>

When the Syrian people started to rebel against the government in Damascus, the central authorities' lack of resources to fight both the rebels and the Kurdish community enabled the military wing of the PYD, the People's Protection Units (YPG), to occupy large areas of northern Syria from 2012 onwards. An autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava was created in 2014, governed by the Syrian offshoot of the PKK.

The Turkish government was one of the first foreign powers to state, in March 2011, that Assad should step down to allow for an end of the civil conflict and democratic reforms.<sup>22</sup> Erdoğan was hoping that his Western allies, notably the US, would intervene to overthrow the Assad regime, with which Turkey has had a long series of disagreements related primarily to the use of natural resources and a territorial dispute over the province of Hatay.<sup>23</sup> Then US President Barack Obama decided to limit US intervention in Syria to operations against the Islamic State (IS), which by mid-2014 had established itself as one of the major players in the Syrian civil war. The intervention of Russia and Iran on the side of the Syrian regime made it clear that the conflict would not be solved as rapidly as some had originally hoped. In this context, the lack of constraints on the Kurdish community in Syria became a growing source of concern for Ankara. With the US increasingly relying on Kurdish forces in the fight against IS, Ankara's anxieties became more acute. Whereas the PYD's gains initially seemed to accelerate the Turkish government's

<sup>21</sup> Rodi Hevian, "The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: A Research Guide", in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 2013), p. 94-104, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide>.

<sup>22</sup> Sevil Küçükkoşum, "Turkey Anxious Over Protests in Syria", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 March 2011.

<sup>23</sup> The historically Syrian Province of Alexandretta was given in 1938 to Turkey by the French to preserve Turkey's neutrality during the Second World War. This loss promoted Syrians call for a resurrection of Arab nationalism, contributing to the creation of the Ba'ath party. Christopher Phillips, "Turkey and Syria", in Nicholas Kitchen (ed.), *Turkey's Global Strategy*, LSE IDEAS Special Report, May 2011, p. 35, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/SR007.aspx>.

search for a solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey, the battle of Kobane, a mostly Kurdish Syrian town just south of the border with Turkey, can be identified as a game changer.

The Islamic State attacked Kobane in September 2014.<sup>24</sup> Due to Kobane's proximity to the border, many of its Kurdish inhabitants have close family ties with Kurds in Turkey, and thus their call for intervention was heard loudly across Turkey. Whereas the Turkish government remained firm, the rapid spread of the Islamic State resulted in the international intervention led by the United States on the side of the Kurdish community and the fighters of the PYD's military wing, the YPG.<sup>25</sup>

### 4. Turkey's political actors ahead of Kobane

The attack on Kobane represented a moment of truth for the Turkish government. The call by Syria's Kurds for international help tested the honesty of Ankara's determination to solve the Syrian civil conflict.<sup>26</sup> However, these calls for intervention to save the Syrian branch of the PKK, which the Turkish army had fought against for thirty years, suffering significant human and military losses, was hardly well received in Turkey's nationalist constituencies. Moreover, intervening on the side of the Syrian Kurds would mean additional power for the autonomous region of Rojava, which was already the main centre of power in northern Syria. The supply of foreign (mostly US) arms and the Kurds' territorial gains in northern Syria were increasingly perceived in Ankara as potentially threatening the balance of power between the Turkish army and the PKK.

The conflictual relations between the PKK and the Turkish government have been shaped by Turkey's fear of the Kurdish regions splitting away. Even though the PKK repeatedly declared that it was aiming not for secession from Turkey but for an autonomous region within the country, the increased importance of the Syrian Kurds resurrected these old fears in Ankara. Kobane demonstrated that the ongoing peace process had not yet built the needed trust between the Turkish government and the leadership of the Kurdish community in the country.

For the PKK, Kobane provided a significant boost in power. Its strategic importance and the risk of yet another victory by the IS, by then still buoyed by its triumphal conquest of north-central Iraq and eastern Syria, drove the intervention not only of Syrian fighters but also of an alliance of international forces on the side of the

<sup>24</sup> UN Human Rights Council, *Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria*. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/27/CRP.3), 19 November 2014, p. 12, <http://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/27/CRP.3>.

<sup>25</sup> Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "U.S. Frustration Rises as Turkey Withholds Military Help from Besieged Kobane", in *The Washington Post*, 9 October 2014, <http://wapo.st/1tD11JS>.

<sup>26</sup> "Kurds Protest against Turkey as IS Advances on Kobane", in *BBC News*, 7 October 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29518448>.

Kurdish community. Airstrikes by the US-led coalition and the supply of arms and assistance to help defend the city increased the military power of the YPG.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the Peshmerga ground troops of the KRG, traditionally opponents of the PKK due to leadership disputes, came to fight on the side of the YPG.<sup>28</sup> The brave resistance to the attacks, and the shocking pictures of thousands of people fleeing Kobane, led to a wave of solidarity with the Kurdish community on an international scale. In this context, the PYD was recognized internationally as one of the most important fighters in the battle against the Islamic State in Syria, in stark contrast with the official designation of the PKK by the US and NATO as a terrorist organization. This event bolstered the PKK's negotiating power in Turkey and thus had a decisive impact on the peace process.

### 5. A "new" Kurdish movement

Whereas the Turkish government was uncertain about the way the PKK would use its new power in Syria, its disregard of the dramatic situation in Kobane made it clear to many Kurds that Turkey's goal was still the suppression of Kurdish political influence.<sup>29</sup> The slow pace of negotiations and the lack of significant political concessions during the peace process made the Kurdish community sceptical about the honesty of the government's declaration that it was willing to end the conflict and recognize Kurdish rights. Accusations of Turkish government's support for the Islamic State, the refusal of the government to intervene on behalf of the Kurdish community in Kobane and the obstruction of foreign powers' efforts to install humanitarian corridors to help the population, eroded what residual trust still lingered.<sup>30</sup>

The first domestic outcome of the Kobane crisis in Turkey was thus heavy clashes between the Kurdish community and the army in the southeast from 6–8 October 2014, which left 51 people dead. The clashes began with Kurdish protests<sup>31</sup> about the lack of government action to help their "Kurdish brothers" and the determination of the government to maintain order in the country and avoid a spill over effect from the conflict.

<sup>27</sup> Gengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics across the Middle East", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, July 2015, p. 7, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/18205>.

<sup>28</sup> Yoosef (Aso) Abbaszadah, "KRG's Military Help to Kobane from International Relations Perspective", in *Rudaw Analysis*, 28 January 2015, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/27012015>.

<sup>29</sup> "Kobane: Air Strikes 'Stall IS Advance' on Syrian Border Town", in *BBC News*, 10 October 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29555999>.

<sup>30</sup> Gengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics across the Middle East", cit., p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Constanze Letsch and Ian Traynor, "Kobani: Anger Grows as Turkey Stops Kurds from Aiding Militias in Syria", in *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014, <https://gu.com/p/429q2/stw>.

When it was liberated and successfully defended in February 2015, Kobane became a sort of Stalingrad for Kurds in all countries in which they live. Divided across various nations for the past hundred years, fighters from all Kurdish communities – even the Peshmerga faction that, as mentioned previously, historically has been the opponent of the PKK – came to fight in Kobane. The internationally praised fight against the Islamic State revived Kurdish nationalism and pride. Demands for an autonomous Kurdish state in the Middle East were increasingly heard, and many Kurds in Iraq and Syria hoped the crisis would lead in the end to the creation of a Kurdish state.<sup>32</sup> These demands could more easily spread across borders, and thus between the Kurdish communities, because those borders have become highly porous as a result of the uprisings in Syria and Iraq and the enormous numbers of refugees they have produced.

### 6. Domestic political outcomes in Turkey

In the new political context created by the Kurds' stand in Kobane, the situation became critical not only for the AKP, but also for the HDP. On the one hand, the party did not want to leave the negotiation table; but, on the other, having its roots in Turkey's Kurdish community, support for the peace talks with the AKP threatened to harm its credibility. Without concrete concessions for the Kurdish community, the HDP could no longer continue with the peace process. On 28 February 2015, the party's leaders published a ten-point document formulated by Öcalan, which proposed steps towards democratization and an end to the conflict.<sup>33</sup> This document can be seen as the last attempt to secure the trust and political support of the Kurdish community.<sup>34</sup>

Although the government initially announced it would accept the proposals, only two weeks later Erdoğan declared that there was no such thing as a "Kurdish question" in Turkey.<sup>35</sup> This statement put an end to the peace process. Just two days later, HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş declared, "we will not make you the president", referring to Erdoğan and his planned constitutional reform, making the hashtag "#SeniBaşkanYaptırmayacağız" a worldwide trend.<sup>36</sup> With the HDP's

<sup>32</sup> Müzehher Selcuk, "Die Hegemonie der PYD unter den Kurden Syriens und ihr Verhältnis zur PKK und zu Damaskus", in Günter Seufert (ed.), "Der Aufschwung kurdischer Politik: Lage in Irak, Syrien und der Türkei", in *SWP Studien*, No. 10/2015 (May 2015), p. 37-46, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/der-aufschwung-kurdischer-politik>.

<sup>33</sup> Galip Dalay, "The Kurdish Peace Process: From Dialogue to Negotiation?", in *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Reports*, 22 April 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/04/2015422115349145185.html>.

<sup>34</sup> To gain a better understanding of this call, see "Kurdish Leader Ocalan Seeks End to Turkey Armed Struggle", in *BBC News*, 28 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31673830>.

<sup>35</sup> "What More Do Kurds Want, Erdoğan Asks", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 15 March 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?PageID=238&NID=79720>.

<sup>36</sup> "We Will Not Make You the President, HDP Co-Chair Tells Erdoğan", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 March 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=517&nID=79792>; "HDP Leader's One Sentence Speech Pledges, Erdoğan Won't Be the President", in *Bianet*, 17 March 2015,

refusal to support the constitutional overhaul, one of the most important incentives for, and the main common goal of, the peace process went missing. This made it necessary for the AKP to search for a new source of support, which it found in the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP),<sup>37</sup> ultimately leading the AKP to take a more authoritarian path and change its rhetoric about not only the PKK, but also the HDP.

Supporters of the HDP and the PKK declared at the time that the withdrawal from the peace talks and the rejection of the ten-point programme by the AKP was related to Erdoğan's belief that the process would no longer be beneficial to the government due to the rising popularity of Demirtaş. The HDP's increasing support was reflected in the June 2015 elections,<sup>38</sup> when the party received 13 percent of the votes, preventing the AKP from gaining an absolute parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002.

Offering Erdoğan's personal power struggles as the sole explanation for the breakdown of the peace process would only show one side of these events, however. The increase in power of the Kurdish community also affected the PKK, which saw in Syria the realization of many of the objectives they had been fighting for in Turkey. In this context, the PKK used the 2013 armistice to install an autonomous system for tax collection and territorial control (through checkpoints) in south-eastern Turkey.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the PKK never fully withdrew its fighters from the territory as it had agreed to do in the negotiations, and instead sent many fighters to support the YPG in Kobane.

In response, the Turkish government formulated a new rhetoric of collaboration between the HDP and the PKK, marking the former as terrorists and terminating the peace talks with the PKK. With the removal of immunity for members of parliament in May 2016,<sup>40</sup> and the subsequent imprisonment of HDP co-presidents Yüksekdağ and Demirtaş and ten other deputies, political power was wrested from the Kurdish community.

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<http://bianet.org/english/politics/163078>.

<sup>37</sup> "AKP, MHP Signal Joint Campaign for Referendum", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 February 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=109860>.

<sup>38</sup> Burcu Özçelik, "What the HDP Success Means for Turkey", cit.

<sup>39</sup> Mustafa Akyol, "Who Killed Turkey-PKK Peace Process?", in *Al-Monitor*, 4 August 2015, <http://almon.co/2hie>.

<sup>40</sup> Gulsen Solaker and Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkish Parliament Strips MPs of Immunity in Blow to Kurdish Opposition", in *Reuters*, 20 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-politics-immunity-idUSKCN0YB0VC>.

## 7. New developments

These events led to the highly conflictual situation that exists in Turkey at the time of writing (May 2017). The latest outbreak of violence has had a strong impact not only on Turkey's politics, but also society and economy. Turkey's population is more split than it was in the past, and recent studies show that political polarization has increased massively.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Turkey's economic situation has worsened significantly. Less economic growth, less domestic and foreign investment, and the Turkish lira at a record low are all related to the unstable political and security situation in the country.<sup>42</sup> The outbreaks of violence and numerous terrorist attacks by IS, which has killed hundreds of people in a series of attacks since summer 2015, have also had a dramatic impact on tourism, one of Turkey's most important sources of income. The sharp decline in the number of visitors led to a 41.2 percent drop in revenue from tourism in 2016 compared with the previous year.<sup>43</sup>

The slim majority won by Erdoğan in the April 2017 constitutional referendum is proof of this instability and fragmentation, and although the president's power has been consolidated, Erdoğan is presently leading a highly divided country. The referendum showed that the AKP was not able to attain an absolute majority in the parliament on its own and that it needs the 10 percent-odd of votes won by the MHP. It was necessary for this coalition with the MHP to adopt a nationalistic tone and exclude the Kurdish minority. This alliance has created a dilemma for the ruling party, however: The coalition with the MHP thrives on the conflict with the Kurdish minority, and any reconciliation with the PKK is unthinkable for the MHP. On the other hand, Erdoğan's electorate voted for the coalition because they promised security, which is impossible to achieve without reconciliation. Thus, whereas in the short run Erdoğan has been able to shut down his political opponents, the domestic outcomes are likely to come back to haunt him.

The PKK for its part has used its new power to undertake a revived fight within Turkey. In this respect, the PKK has followed the example of warfare pursued by the PYD in Syria by shifting from the traditional battlegrounds in rural areas to the cities.<sup>44</sup> This has made it more difficult for the Turkish army to distinguish between civilians and PKK fighters. The repression of the HDP has increased the visibility of the PKK, making it the primary actor speaking for the Kurdish minority

<sup>41</sup> Emre Erdoğan, "Turkey: Divided We Stand", in *GMF On Turkey*, No. 118 (April 2016), <https://shar.es/1RVTH6>.

<sup>42</sup> Between 2011 and 2015, the economic growth fell from 11.1 to 6.1 percent and the investments decreased from 23.8 to 9.2 percent. Numbers taken from FocusEconomics, *Turkey Economic Outlook*, updated 7 June 2017, <http://www.focus-economics.com/countries/turkey>.

<sup>43</sup> Salih Tosun, "Tourism Revenues in Turkey Has Decreased in 2016", in *Turkey and Facts*, 31 October 2016, <https://turkeyandfacts.com/tourism-revenues-in-turkey-has-decreased-in-2016-22ee7cf67fb8>.

<sup>44</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), "The Human Cost of the PKK Conflict in Turkey: The Case of Sur", in *ICG Europe & Central Asia Briefings*, No. 80 (17 March 2017), p. 2, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/342>.

in Turkey. However, with the increasingly brutal conflict forcing 100,000 people to leave their homes, support for the PKK has decreased. Whereas during the forced displacement in the 1990s many inhabitants of the southeast moved to the big cities, mixing with Turkish society, today migration is reportedly moving towards Kurdish cities, which will increase the ethnic polarisation of the country and add a further element of instability.

Even though the Kurdish movement has gained in strength, the PKK should be wary of becoming too confident about its new power. First, the Kurdish community should be aware that the support of international powers can be inconsistent, just as it was a hundred years ago when Kurdish hopes for an independent state were dashed by the British and French colonial powers of the time. The US military has already declared that it is supporting Arab rebel groups in Syria in order to limit the increase in Kurdish power.<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, the PKK suffers from many internal divisions.<sup>46</sup> Whereas Öcalan proclaimed that secession is not the goal of the PKK, the recent increase in power has encouraged a revival of the dream of an independent Kurdistan among many nationalist Kurds. The PKK has also experienced significant internal changes. Whereas PKK fighters in the 1990s had to undergo a long process of ideological and military training in the mountains of Quandil, the rapid expansion of the area of influence of the Kurdish PYD has necessarily made the training process shorter. This suggests that the character of the movement is changing, with potential ramifications in the relationship, goals, tactics and objectives.<sup>47</sup>

The biggest loser in this process is the HDP. The imprisonment of the party's co-leaders Yüksekdağ and Demirtaş has prevented the party from speaking on behalf of the Kurdish community in parliament and in the realm of traditional politics. With the HDP shut down, the peace process in Turkey also seems to be terminated for now.

### Conclusion

The democratization process in the 1980s led to increased claims for minority rights in Turkey, boosting the self-confidence of the PKK. The significant economic impact of the conflict in the 1990s, however, and the rise of the AKP in 2002, led to a situation in which both the government and the Kurdish minority developed a degree of shared interests in resolving the conflict diplomatically. This, combined with Erdoğan's political aspirations, led to the initiation of the peace process with

<sup>45</sup> Liz Sly, "U.S. Military Aid Is Fueling Big Ambitions for Syria's Leftist Kurdish Militia", in *The Washington Post*, 7 January 2017, <http://wapo.st/2iQcSYD>.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Fantappiè, "Il dilemma del PKK", cit.

<sup>47</sup> Maria Fantappiè, "Quick Thoughts: Maria Fantappie on Syria's Kurds", in *Jadaliyya*, 15 April 2016, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/24275>.

the PKK. Yet, the sudden increase in power held by the Syrian Kurds following the outbreak of Syria's civil war changed the picture. The creation of the autonomous region of Rojava stoked Kurdish nationalist sentiments further, leading some to call for the establishment of a Kurdish national state, potentially straddling the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The battle of Kobane stoked the anger of Turkish Kurds, given the refusal of the government to intervene to defend the city from the so-called Islamic State. This provoked a change in the cost-benefit calculus of the Turkish government, leading it to abandon the peace process and increase repression of the HDP, which had withdrawn its support for Erdoğan's constitutional overhaul.

Although the leadership of the PKK in Turkey has stated repeatedly that its aim is autonomy within Turkey and not independence, the PKK has used the peace process to make its own rules and has undertaken a new, more integral mode of warfare in response to the latest events in northern Syria. With the loss of political influence by the HDP, the Kurdish minority in Turkey is again led by the actions of the PKK, which has returned to embrace armed struggle against the Turkish state, most recently by mounting attacks in urban areas.

For Ankara, the HDP's refusal to support the constitutional reform championed by the AKP and the stunning electoral result by Demirtaş and his party in 2015 led to the implementation of a new political strategy. Whereas the initial plan was to include the Kurdish electorate in a "new" Turkey by focusing on the common Islamic religion and the promotion of the less privileged, more traditional Anatolian society, the new rhetoric is addressed to the nationalists in Turkey, who have strongly opposed any concessions vis-à-vis the Kurdish minority in the country.

On 17 April 2017, Erdoğan was thus able to obtain the necessary votes for a constitutional change without granting more political rights to the Kurdish community. But even though the recent constitutional referendum significantly increased Erdoğan's political power, it also made clear that his support has decreased dramatically and he needed the support of the MHP to win the referendum. Since this support is conditioned on the rejection of Kurdish political claims, in the current political environment any form of reconciliation seems impossible. Whereas the president could use his increased power to resume peace talks with the Kurdish population in the country, Erdoğan's recent rhetoric suggests the two actors may be on an unavoidable collision course.

The economic impact of the conflict with the PKK, the sharp divisions within Turkish society and the conflicts with the government's traditional allies will make the country more difficult to govern as well as more exposed to foreign threats. Reconciliation with the Kurdish community is thus indispensable to fulfil the AKP's promise of stability, security and a strong Turkey.

The strong support for the HDP showed that the Kurdish community in Turkey, as well as a large part of the Turkish community, was willing to find a solution to the Kurdish question through a legal and diplomatic path. Following the shutdown

of the HDP and the elevation of the PKK as the sole representative of the Kurdish community, the chances for reconciliation and settlement of the conflict now seem more distant than ever. However, the revival of political talks in the long term is the only way to reach a settlement of the conflict. To this end, it is vital for all Kurdish actors, including the PKK, the HDP and the Kurdish community in Turkey, to be clear about their domestic and regional aspirations. Only in this way can a solid peace agreement and thus a successful reconciliation process be carried out to settle Turkey's long-standing conflict with its Kurdish minority.

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