



# Two Routes to an Impasse: Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Policy

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## Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Policy

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Like in the early 1990s, Kurdish groups in the Middle East are occupying the headlines today. In Western media, their image as a trustworthy friend remains unscathed in a region that is characterized by confessional wars and a fundamentalist threat. Yet, Kurds have become both part of the problem and part of the solution in the Middle East. They emerged as a credible ally in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Syria (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, and yet, their state-building efforts in northern Syria are increasingly giving Turkey the goosebumps. The mobilization of Syrian Kurds around a self-rule agenda convinced the Turkish government that the Syrian experiment will only exacerbate its own Kurdish problem. Viewed together, these developments undermined the fight against ISIS and Turkey's democratization. Furthermore, they strained Turkey's relations with the United States and European Union.

Only a few years ago, there was great hope about the Kurdish issue. Peace talks between the rebel leader Abdullah Öcalan and the Turkish government were continuing unabated, and the members of the Kurdish political party were allowed to visit him regularly in the prison on the İmralı Island, located 40 miles away Istanbul. In these meetings, Öcalan assessed the government's position and prepared a roadmap

to disarm the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The Dolmabahçe Consensus (Mutabakatı) (2015) represented the peak moment in these exchanges, when the government acknowledged a ten-point democratization program prepared by the rebel leader. Since then, the Turkish government has moved in the opposite direction. It has arrested a large number of elected Kurdish politicians. Among these were Gülten Kışanak, a seasoned politician and mayor of Diyarbakır, who was arrested on October 26, and the co-chairs of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, who were arrested on November 3.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the coup attempt on July 15, pressure on Kurdish movement further intensified since emergency laws that were put in effect across the country allowed authorities to ban protests and prohibit political mobilization against the government.

Why did the Turkish government change its mind? Peace would have created a win-win scenario for all actors involved, including the Turkish government, Kurds, and the international community. This optimistic reading however misses an important part of the puzzle: The Kurdish issue has become deeply politicized inside Turkey and implies different things for the government and its Kurdish opponents. The Justice and Development

Party (AKP) governments have followed an *instrumentalist approach* to the Kurdish issue, relegating it to electoral priorities, presidential ambitions, and foreign policy choices. Meanwhile, Kurdish political actors have often spoken from a *maximalist position*, which has allowed the PKK to determine their policy priorities, including self-rule and Öcalan's freedom. It is the mismatch between these positions, we argue, that created a deadlock in the Kurdish issue. The Syrian civil war turned the deadlock into an open confrontation by hardening these positions and presenting each side with an opportunity to pursue their goals.

These incompatible views on the Kurdish issue have important consequences. First, they exported the problem to neighboring countries, internationalizing the conflict. Turkey's military intervention in Syria against ISIS targets on August 24, 2016 through Operation Euphrates Shield put the AKP government at odds with the Syrian Kurds. Similarly, the PKK's efforts to practice state-building inside Turkey escalated the conflict. Second, such diametrically opposed policies polarized Kurdish society, deepening existing divisions. The threat of insurgent governance mobilized the opponents of Kurdish political party and consolidated them in the AKP ranks. At the other end, the government's policies created mistrust among large sections of Kurdish society. Counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in 2015 and 2016, in particular, hampered the Kurds' relations with Ankara further by paving the way for the destruction of urban centers and loss of civilian lives in southeast Turkey. Finally, in unison, both approaches tied the solution of Kurdish issue to the piety of two strongmen, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the rebel leader Öcalan. The peace process was reduced to a secretive deal between the two sides with no public input and was shelved overnight, when one side defected.

This report tackles Turkey's Kurdish problem with an emphasis on government policies. It aims to detail what we call the instrumentalist approach of the AKP and discusses its implications and consequences for the Kurdish issue. The report unpacks the instrumentalist approach at domestic and international levels. Our analysis at the domestic level suggests that AKP governments viewed the Kurdish issue as a problem to be dealt with in order to stay in power by securing electoral success. Over time, Erdoğan's ambitions for a strong presidency became the most critical item on this agenda. At the international level, the report highlights the fact that the Kurdish issue became subservient to AKP's foreign policy interests in Syria. The Turkish government made a deliberate choice to support Sunni, Arab, and extremist groups at the expense of Syrian Kurds. In doing so, it sent a strong message to Kurdish constituencies at home that it would remain indifferent to the plight of Kurds on the other side of the border.

There are important policy implications of our argument. International actors need to strike a balance between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. Yet, this balancing act has to be done in a principled way. *Sacrificing the Kurdish political movement inside Turkey in exchange for a U.S.-friendly Kurdish regime in northern Syria will not work.* As we explain in the following pages, there are important reasons why the experience of northern Iraq cannot be replicated in Syria. To address the Kurdish problem in a genuine fashion, the Turkish government needs to invest in inclusive policies where its approach to the Kurdish issue is not dictated by electoral and foreign policy concerns. A major reform package that goes beyond discourse is necessary. Meanwhile, the Kurdish political actors have to understand that raising the bar every time an opportunity arises will not solve the Kurdish prob-

lem. They need to build coalitions in Turkish society. Violence and the Kurdish governance model in Syria are not the most effective instruments to accomplish this task.

The report follows the arguments outlined above. The first part provides a historical background on the Kurdish conflict in Turkey until the AKP's rise to power in 2002. It shows that the AKP government found a dramatically weakened PKK and a rejuvenated Kurdish political party. The second part examines the domestic origins of the AKP's failure and suggests that, despite changes in policy instruments, the government collaborated with the Kurds to keep the PKK at bay and stay in power. The third part evaluates the AKP's foreign policy in Syria in light of the Kurdish issue. It shows that the AKP's support for Sunni groups in Syria mobilized radical Islamic groups inside Turkey against Kurdish political actors, which in turn convinced a large portion of the Kurds that the government had no genuine interest in solving the Kurdish issue. Since fall 2015, the Turkish government also engaged in an open conflict with the Syrian Kurds, once its plans to remove Bashar al-Assad from power fell through.

The final part of the report discusses policy recommendations. Our main thesis is that politics of moderation offers the best chance to resolve the Kurdish issue and achieve peace and security in the region. Each side, including the Turkish government, Kurdish political actors, and international community, has to settle for a second-best option. This is the case because no actor has the power and commitment to pursue its own agenda at the expense of others in the long run. The Turkish government has to stop targeting Kurdish political actors and start improving Kurds' standing in Turkish society. It also has to accept the cold

hard facts about Syria. Despite its efforts, the Turkish government cannot transform Syria according to its own priorities, and targeting Syrian Kurds will not get the job done.

Meanwhile, Kurdish political actors have to moderate their demands to garner public support for their cause. Unlike neighboring countries with a Kurdish minority, securing Kurdish rights in Turkey is (and should be) a matter of institutional politics and broad political legitimacy. Kurdish politicians also need to pay attention to the changing demands of their constituency. Neither PKK's self-rule attempts nor arrests of Kurdish political actors generated the kind of public support that the movement once mobilized in the 1990s. Hence, it is time to start considering Kurds' aspirations and day-to-day struggles in Turkish society and start delivering services instead of asking for more sacrifices. The self-governance agenda announced by the umbrella organization Democratic Society Congress (DTK) in December 2015 contrasts with this vision. The DTK document, which was later adopted into HDP's program, promised to establish autonomous regions and transfer state functions to local councils. These councils would have the ultimate authority on the delivery of public goods (health, education, and justice) and on issues related to security, which would be financed by taxpayers.<sup>2</sup> By demanding far-reaching rights which are difficult to sell to the Turkish public, HDP's maximalist approach does not help the ethnic movement inspire support and build coalitions for legislative success.

The international community and the U.S. in particular need to realize that helping the Kurds' state-building efforts in Syria in return for securing their geopolitical interests in the region might not work in the long-run. The Kurdish leadership and

the war in northern Syria share few commonalities with the (northern) Iraqi experience. The Syrian Kurds have long defined their interests against the U.S. and are using the multiplayer setting of the war to their advantage. Accordingly, the race for enlisting the support of the Kurds only serves the interests of the Syrian Kurds, not the bidders themselves. In addition, the partnership between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds in its current form may undermine Turkish democracy and restrict Kurds' representation by giving the government a free hand at home in return for compliance with the U.S. position in Syria. Finally, the U.S. can do a great deal toward the resolution of the Kurdish problem by rewarding and punishing all actors involved. As we argue in the report, regional cooperation requires a watchful peace which cannot be sustained without the commitment of all stakeholders.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, 1984-2002**

The origins of the current conflict in Turkey date back to the 1960s. The first group of ethnic entrepreneurs to raise the Kurdish issue came from the ranks of the Turkish left (Turkish Workers Party, TIP). Political groups that campaigned for Kurdish rights soon multiplied and eventually became radicalized in the 1970s. The majority of these groups emerged from secular-leftist movements that subscribed to a revolutionary agenda. They engaged in a fierce competition among themselves especially on college campuses. The military coup in 1980 suppressed these groups along with the Turkish left. The PKK was one of them. While others failed to regroup under state surveillance, the PKK survived the coup by relocating its leadership to Syria and northern Iraq and building a public presence in Europe. Öcalan was convinced that with logis-

tical support from regional countries, a guerrilla war could be waged against the Turkish state.

The PKK started its guerrilla campaign in 1984 and simultaneously attacked the remote districts of Şemdinli and Çatak.<sup>3</sup> Within two years, however, the rebel group realized that it could barely survive in the mountains. Forced recruitment and raids on Kurdish villages allied with the state saved the day: the PKK acquired the manpower it needed and polarized Kurdish society through violence. In the 1990s, the PKK expanded beyond the border: It became capable of attacking military installations, economic targets, and state institutions deep inside Turkey. In the meantime, it also established an urban organization, the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (ERNK), for propaganda, financial support, and recruitment purposes. Insurgent violence transformed southeast Anatolia primarily by weakening its ties to the Ankara government. Thousands of schools remained closed, and, at the peak of its power in 1993, the PKK banned all political parties and the distribution of national newspapers in the region.<sup>4</sup>

The 1990s also witnessed the birth of a full-blown ethnic movement. Protests became widespread as government pressure intensified. Detentions and extra-judicial killings, which targeted movement activists, motivated these mobilizations. Ethnic celebrations and funerals for insurgents, where protest campaigns were staged, helped build a Kurdish political identity. These mobilization efforts also brought success in the 1991 election. Several Kurdish activists entered the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) when the newly founded Kurdish political party, People's Labor Party (HEP), struck an electoral alliance with the main opposition, Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP).<sup>5</sup> By the end of 1993, these activists left the SHP in a dis-

pute over the Kurdish issue and later formed a new political party (Democracy Party, DEP). Multiple party closure cases at the Constitutional Court and an increasingly powerful insurgency pushed the Kurdish political party closer to the PKK. Kurdish politics entered a new phase in 1999, when DEP's successor, the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) won 37 municipal mayorships in local elections, giving the ethnic movement an opportunity to govern for the first time.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the PKK was unsure about how to translate its success in guerrilla warfare into political outcomes. It was particularly difficult to set up a well-functioning bureaucracy and manage the rebellion in organizational terms. Öcalan was adamant in enforcing one-man rule in the organization which led to operational difficulties and tactical mistakes. In addition, a nominal understanding of ethnicity that downplayed other forms of belonging in Kurdish society at the expense of ethnicity alienated conservative and Alevite Kurds from the PKK's political program. Accordingly, as the PKK expanded beyond its stronghold on the Iraqi border into Turkey, the rate of civilian support, measured by the PKK's capacity to wage violence, declined.<sup>7</sup> The organization was forced to rely on indiscriminate targeting of civilians and destruction of property. At the end, the PKK was unable to translate its military gains into tangible political outcomes in 1993, the heyday of its military capacity. Instead, it preferred to stay within its comfort zone, relying heavily on guerrilla warfare that imposed costs on the government, and kept the organization together around familiar routines.

The Turkish government also could not reform its long-term policies. A state of emergency (OHAL) was declared in southeast Turkey to contain the PKK and was in effect for 25 years (1987-2002).<sup>8</sup>

The OHAL's borders were drawn with a preventive logic. While seventy percent of insurgent attacks were concentrated in only three districts on the Iraqi border, the government incorporated 87 districts -which would later fall under 13 provinces- into the OHAL framework. Emergency rule practices alienated civilians, while winning hearts and minds remained an unattainable goal. The OHAL legislations suspended individual freedoms, giving security forces a de facto immunity in their dealings with civilians. Wholesale detentions, which according to official statistics, targeted more than 55,000 civilians and resulted in few convictions, worked against the government.<sup>9</sup> Recruiting local allies and outsourcing security to pro-government tribes polarized Kurdish society. The number of village guards, who were mainly Kurdish villagers armed and paid by the government, soared from 6,000 in November 1985 to 95,000 by August 1998.<sup>10</sup> Relying on their privileged position in Kurdish society, village guards became more interested in punishing their local rivals than delivering tangible outcomes on the security front, and have been reported by human rights organizations to have abused civilians in several cases.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the PKK was forced to retreat from Turkey and take up a defensive position on the Iraqi border. However, Turkish governments found it particularly difficult to implement a political program that would back up their military superiority on the battlefield and win back Kurds' loyalties.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, when the AKP came to power in 2002, there were two important outcomes in the Kurdish conflict. First, the PKK was no longer a serious military threat. It was weakened, demoralized, and forced to recede to northern Iraq. The rebels experienced heavy losses and could only survive in a few sanctuaries inside Turkey. The urban organization, ERNK, also became ineffective. Öcalan's cap-

ture in Kenya in 1999 and his cooperation with the Turkish state as a political prisoner only accelerated the PKK's downfall that had started in 1994.<sup>13</sup> To the surprise of many, an opposite scenario materialized in institutional politics. The Kurdish political party survived against all odds and skillfully used state repression to expand its constituency. In the 2002 election, the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP) received the level of support only comparable to the HEP's earlier success in 1991. A rejuvenated ethnic movement and a crippled insurgency were the major legacies of the 1990s.

## MECHANISMS OF ELECTORAL SUCCESS

In its long reign, the AKP governments used a variety of mechanisms to manage the Kurdish question. This process was characterized by neither natural progression toward peace nor experiments of a 'mad scientist'. There were distinct periods of AKP rule (expansion, stability, and decline) that required alternative approaches to the Kurdish issue in order to secure favorable electoral outcomes. The AKP benefitted from the erosion of center-right parties in the 2002 election. It came to power by receiving roughly one-third of the general vote where the bulk of support came from center-right voters who recently switched to the AKP ranks. There was still room for expansion in the 2007 election. The incumbent increased its vote share by another 13 percent, reaching out to almost half of the electorate. This unprecedented victory completed the consolidation of the center-right voters around the AKP and marked the end of a period of rapid expansion.<sup>14</sup>

In the aftermath of its 2007 election victory, the AKP governments adopted a more conservative

approach to protect electoral gains. They sustained a winning coalition by adopting a polarizing discourse where politicians, particularly Erdoğan, increasingly relied on stigmatizing opposition parties and groups.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, the AKP's electoral share remained stable and its gains and losses stayed within the 3-4 percent range in this second period (2008-2014). The era of stability ended with the June 2015 election when the AKP lost almost nine percent of its vote share from the previous election. To recover the losses, another electoral strategy was put in place: The AKP government sought ways to win back defectors. In this third period (2015-2016), Kurdish politicians, who increased their electoral share at the expense of the AKP, became the targets of selective repression in an attempt to regain the support of Kurdish conservatives and Turkish nationalists. This approach rewarded the government with an additional nine points in the snap election of November 2015, re-establishing one-party rule in the TBMM and resuming Erdoğan's efforts for a constitutional change that would overhaul Turkish politics to establish a presidential system.

The AKP's views on the Kurdish issue changed according to its distinct electoral needs in each period. The instrumentalist approach meant that the Kurdish problem became an issue mediated by the desire to stay in power. As a rule of thumb, one can argue that the more AKP rule consolidated nationally, the less it became interested in its Kurdish constituency. In the first period (2002-2007), the AKP government offered several incentives and searched for ways to connect with the Kurds. This was part of the AKP's agenda to expand its electoral base. Political reforms implemented in conjunction with membership talks with the European Union were well received by the Kurdish community whose memory was still fresh with political repression in



recent past. Meanwhile, the injection of money into the economy and efficient delivery of public goods in east and southeast Anatolia created a sense of well-being in the short term and mobilized poor voters who would appreciate such basic offerings.

In the second period (2008-2014), the AKP government tried to keep the Kurds as part of its winning coalition. Perhaps, more accurately, it tried to make sure that the Kurds did not undermine it. The Kurdish issue was increasingly seen as a potential threat because of the PKK's capability to escalate violence and destabilize the government. Two new instruments were employed to keep the Kurds in check: talks with rebel leader Öcalan and the promotion of Islamic solidarity through NGO work and government activity. The former strategy in particular saved the day for the AKP by halting insurgent violence and preventing the formation of an opposition front at critical moments. This dynamic was visible during the Gezi protests, constitutional referendum in 2010, and the presidential election in 2014, when the Kurdish activists refused to align with opposition groups and parties.

In the final period (2015-2016), the Kurdish political party's dramatic gains in the June 2015 election led to a change of heart. The HDP victory brought the AKP's majority rule to an end in the TBMM and prevented Erdoğan from establishing a powerful presidency. To return the votes to its 'rightful owner', the AKP mobilized anti-Kurdish sentiments and campaigned against the Kurdish political party. The government also engaged in a major COIN campaign in HDP strongholds. Towns known for their support of the Kurdish political party experienced round-the-clock curfews, which together with insurgent violence, brought the defectors back to the government side.<sup>16</sup> As soon as the AKP secured a majority in the Novem-

ber 2015 election, Kurds were no longer seen as relevant political actors.

### *Period 1, 2002-2007: Rewarding the Kurds*

The initial reaction of the Kurds to the AKP was hardly promising in the 2002 election. Despite the presence of influential Kurdish politicians such as Dengir Mir Firat, the newly established party received meager support from Kurdish populated areas. For instance, it received only a modest 16 percent from Diyarbakır, a province with immense political and economic importance in the region. By 2007, however, the support for the AKP had risen with lightning speed. Within five years, the incumbent increased its vote share by 20 percent on average in 13 provinces that hosted significant Kurdish populations and were previously under emergency rule. At that point, the Kurdish support to the AKP caught up with national average. How did the incumbent convince the Kurds who were hesitant in the beginning?

First, there was the obvious enthusiasm among the Kurds generated by Turkey's accession talks to the European Union. The AKP government took concrete steps to expand democratic freedoms in the country.<sup>17</sup> The Kurds welcomed this development, as they had borne the brunt of repressive policies in the 1990s. Civilians and politicians were detained, convicted, or faced far worse consequences for giving a speech, attending a demonstration, signing a petition, or simply being a supporter of the ethnic movement. The fact that insurgent violence also stopped for a few years raised prospects for a democratic Turkey, where freedom of expression would be protected under the rule of law.

Then, economic transfers and public goods delivery helped to increase support for the AKP. One of the difficulties associated with the war setting in

the 1990s was the Turkish government's inability to provide social services to its Kurdish citizens. The AKP government addressed this problem. First, there was significant improvement in health services. Notably, the persons per doctor ratio decreased from 2,314 in 2001 to 1,349 in 2006.<sup>18</sup> This forty percent reduction was almost four times better than the average improvement across the rest of the country and a big step for a region formerly under emergency rule and characterized by limited resources. As the 2007 election approached, the government also made a concerted effort to improve its record in education. Between 2006 and 2008, the student per teacher ratio went down significantly, approaching the national average.<sup>19</sup>

Economic transfers also played an important part in securing votes for the government. In the 1990s, financial resources were scarce in the region. Banks refused to lend; there was little government support for the would-be investors; and the wealthy left the region. The situation changed under the AKP government. This was evident in credit offerings, local municipal expenditures, and government support to the private sector. As banks opened new branches, the credit per capita went up drastically. It rose from 22 dollars in 2001 to 288 dollars in 2006 with a spectacular thirteen-fold increase.<sup>20</sup> The local expenditures of municipalities also recorded a significant upward trend between 2005 and 2008.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the support for private sector skyrocketed before the 2007 election. While it rose three-fold in the rest of Turkey (2001-2008), the increase was seven-fold in the region for the same period. More critically, this trend set in after 2006; one year before the general election.<sup>22</sup>

The channeling of economic resources to the region convinced more Kurds of the good intentions of the AKP. However, most of these measures were

politically-sanctioned short-term expenditures driven by electoral expectations. They were far from creating a self-sustaining economy and addressing regional inequalities. The geographical distribution of state expenditures clearly shows that there was no corrective toward southeast Turkey.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, no effort was made to establish an industry that would create employment opportunities in the long term. This was evident in the region's low ranking in electricity consumption compared to the rest of Turkey in the same period.<sup>24</sup> Finally, private wealth measured by bank savings only grew modestly, because most of the capital attracted to the region under the auspices of the government left, once the political incentive was removed. In short, the AKP's economic policies gave a lifeline to the region but kept the Kurds dependent on its good will and intentions.

### *Period 2, 2008-2014: Pacifying the Kurds*

In the second period, Kurdish political actors were instrumental in maintaining the AKP's winning coalition. It was critical to keep the PKK at bay and avoid security casualties which could turn the public opinion against the government. Initiating talks with Öcalan emerged as an effective instrument in this period. Although it delivered low dividends politically, the government also supported Islamic actors, organized mostly as NGOs, to challenge the hegemony of the ethnic movement in the region. By the end of the second period, Kurdish political actors failed to register any concrete gains from the peace talks with the government. In this period, the AKP not only sustained one-party rule and its level of support in consecutive elections but also prevented Kurdish activists from uniting with opposition parties and movements critical of government policies.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, this period is commonly viewed as the golden age of the Kurdish issue. Domestic and international media praised government efforts and remained confident of their success.<sup>26</sup> An analysis of key legislation that includes constitutional amendments (2010) and the democratization package (2014), however, suggests that the Kurdish problem was hardly the center of attention in domestic politics. Constitutional amendments that were approved by a referendum in September 2010 only included an article which allowed MPs to keep their seats in the TBMM if their party was closed down by the Constitutional Court.<sup>27</sup> Later, the democratization package, which was approved by the TBMM in March 2014, legalized the use of local languages on the campaign trail and recognized the right to teach Kurdish in private schools.<sup>28</sup> Yet, both items had limited significance, partly because they were established practices by then. Besides, there was limited interest in education in Kurdish language among the locals. Meanwhile, roughly two thousand people, most of whom were members and administrators of the Kurdish political party, were arrested (2009-2011) for being a member of the PKK's new urban organization, the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK).<sup>29</sup> The Kurdish political party itself, the Democratic Society Party (DTP), was closed down by the Constitutional Court around the same time in December 2009.

How then did the government keep Kurds on its side? More than anything else, it had to do with opening talks with the rebel leader. The way that negotiations were conducted was highly strategic. *By designating Öcalan as the sole decision maker and keeping talks secret, the government acquired an enormous leverage on Kurdish political actors without facing pressure from the Turkish public. Accordingly, both the “democratic opening” (2009-*

2010) and the “peace process” (2013-2015) were not transparent processes. The talks were held in secret between the rebel leader and officials from the Turkish Secret Service (MIT). The Kurdish political party became a messenger between the PKK and the rebel leader with no real say. For the same reason, opposition parties and the TBMM were excluded from the process. When minutes of a single meeting were leaked to the press, Erdoğan expressed his discomfort about the newspaper in no uncertain terms: “if this is journalism, then down with your journalism...This news hurt the peace process”.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, the AKP government fielded a group of ‘wise men’ (Akil Adamlar) to build public support for the peace process. The group included academics, entertainers, businessmen, and journalists who toured the country to inform the public.<sup>31</sup> The major problem was that wise men knew no more than anyone else about the peace process. When questioned by the audience about the substance of the talks, they were forced to mention that they were not informed by the government about its specific content. Hence, through the wise men, the government sent out feelers to measure public reaction.<sup>32</sup> After six years of talks, the government rejected all rebel demands and put pressure on Öcalan to make calls to the PKK to leave the country first (which he did) and then lay down their arms. Öcalan's belief that he could be free one day after making concessions to the government cost the ethnic movement dearly. As a matter of fact, *every round of new concessions made negotiations harder, simply because successive electoral victories reduced the relevance of the Kurdish issue for the government.*

The peace process had two major outcomes. First, it eliminated the PKK's capacity to wage violence.

Despite violent intervals, the government entered elections without being bothered by violence. Second, Kurdish political actors refused to ally with the opposition at critical moments. This approach was visible during the Gezi protests (2013) and the presidential elections (2014). The underlying rationale, as pro-Kurdish journalists also acknowledged, was to be on Erdoğan's good side in order to get a better deal from him.<sup>33</sup> During the Gezi protests, the Kurdish political party was cautious.<sup>34</sup> While it had a presence in Taksim Square, its strongholds were among the few places where there were no protests. One year later, the HDP entered the presidential race with its own candidate. In doing so, it divided the opposition vote and allowed an easy victory to go to Erdoğan. Öcalan hinted at that possibility as early as February 2013 and saw no reason not to support him.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, the co-chair of the HDP, Demirtaş, who later claimed<sup>36</sup> that he would not allow Erdoğan to become an all-powerful president, played his part in the process and paid his respects to Erdoğan by giving him a standing ovation in the TBMM.

The other strategy that the AKP employed in this period was to promote Islam. This agenda served two specific purposes. First, it offered Islamic brotherhood as an alternative source of identity for the Kurds. Second, it allowed the AKP to distinguish itself from the Kurdish political actors. This ideological separation was set in motion in the mid-1990s when the predecessor of the AKP, the Welfare Party (RP), received substantial support from the Kurds by opposing the secular agenda of the ethnic movement. Kurdish political actors discovered secular politics during the socialist wave of the 1970s and became increasingly attached to it as the PKK downplayed Islam and challenged social hierarchies in Kurdish society. Like in Aceh, Indonesia, ethnic entrepreneurs had nothing to

gain personally from an Islamic message (mainly because they were products of state modernization projects!), and knew how Islam failed as a unifying ideology in past rebellions.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the emphasis on youth and women, two groups who were traditionally at the bottom of the Kurdish social hierarchy, helped with rebel recruitment and attached certain demographic groups firmly to the ethnic movement.

Meanwhile, several state agencies, NGOs, and political movements took part in the Islamization agenda. A newly invented tradition, Holy Birth Week celebrations (Kutlu Doğum Haftası) that commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, was especially instrumental. They were organized by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) and the Ministry of Education as mosques and schools served as key sites for an impressive number of activities.<sup>38</sup> With the help of NGOs affiliated with Hizbullah, an Islamist group with a violent history in the region, Holy Birth Week celebrations also mobilized thousands in mass demonstrations, especially in Diyarbakır. Right around the same time, the Gülen movement targeted teenagers from poor households through boarding schools, kick-starting an Islamic renaissance in the region. The Diyanet also expanded its 'Lecture and Enlighten' (Vaaz and İrşat) program, extending its outreach to remote villages in order to win local residents to Islam and oppose any separatist (Kurdish) tendencies.

### *Period 3, 2015-2016: Punishing the Kurds*

After securing the presidency, Erdoğan and the AKP government became less committed to keeping good relations with the Kurdish political actors. Erdoğan in particular was disillusioned by the Kobani demonstrations.<sup>39</sup> In early October 2014,

Kurdish protestors took to the streets in an attempt to pressure the AKP government to help defend Kobani, a Kurdish town in northern Syria, against ISIS attacks and unleashed a wave of violence throughout the country (more on this later).<sup>40</sup> In the wake of Kobani demonstrations, the government also brought a new legislation (İç Güvenlik Paketi) to the TBMM that severely curtailed freedom of assembly and gave security forces extensive powers.<sup>41</sup> Around this time, in January 2015, the AKP also insisted that Öcalan issue a call to the PKK to lay down arms. As a counter-proposal, the Kurdish political actors announced a 10-point program on democratization in late February.<sup>42</sup> The program was prepared by Öcalan as a pre-condition for the demilitarization of the rebel group.

The program dealt with several issues. Most important, it suggested creating structures of regional rule and incorporating Kurdish rights into the constitution. To expand the Kurdish political space, it also requested changes in anti-terrorism and political party laws. Finally, the program asked the government to find ways to re-integrate demobilized rebels into society and allow them to operate in institutional politics. The government refused to make any promises about its implementation. The only concession that the Kurdish political actors received was the indirect acknowledgement of the democratization program. Four government officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan and three MPs from the HDP, announced the program to the public in a joint press conference held in Dolmabahçe Palace. Based on information received from an anonymous source familiar with the meeting, the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet* also insisted that Erdoğan was aware of the meeting.<sup>43</sup> A few weeks later, however, the Dolmabahçe Consensus (Dolmabahçe Mutabakatı) ended with one short interview that

Erdoğan gave to the press on his return from Ukraine. He rejected all rebel demands and expressed his disapproval about the way that national security issues were discussed in front of the press.<sup>44</sup>

The June 2015 election was the critical turning point. The government lost nine percent of its vote from the previous election and the Kurdish political party entered the TBMM on its own as a group for the first time. The HDP successfully built coalitions with several groups in Turkish society including liberals, leftists, and young voters.<sup>45</sup> Winning an astonishing 80 seats in the TBMM, the HDP blocked the path to Erdoğan's all-powerful presidency by preventing the AKP from forming a majority government. If allowed to stand, this result would also have improved the HDP's bargaining position vis-a-vis the AKP government substantially. At this point, Erdoğan made a qualitative change in his approach to the Kurdish problem. This change was also predicated on the escalating violence in southeast Turkey. In his speeches, he began to target Kurdish political actors and presented them as a terrorist threat. Anti-Kurdish mobilizations gained momentum across the country, as the PKK also re-started a campaign of violence after the election.<sup>46</sup>

The AKP's response to these developments was a massive COIN campaign, where police forces and gendarmerie were given the green light to adopt civilian control measures. Long curfews and special security zones became widespread across the region.<sup>47</sup> According to human rights groups, 321 civilians died during curfews imposed on urban areas.<sup>48</sup> Some of the deaths occurred simply because civilians could not access medical aid. Estimates suggest that also three-to-four hundred thousand people left their homes to avoid violence. The government justified these tactics as part of its fight

against terrorism and cited the urban encroachment of the insurgency in southeast Turkey. During the ‘peace process,’ the newly formed youth wing of the PKK, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) dug holes in the ground and set up barricades to block the entry of security forces into certain neighborhoods and to realize the self-rule agenda promoted by Öcalan in his prison writings.<sup>49</sup> However, similar to the experience of its influential predecessor, the ERNK, the YDG-H’s role was reduced to organizing violent attacks against security forces. As such, despite the use of novel repertoires, neither PKK presence nor the share of rebel violence in urban areas was an entirely new development in the long history of the Kurdish armed conflict.

Most interesting in all of this, perhaps, was the use of both military and legal means by the government to cut down civilian support for the Kurdish political party. More specifically, suppressing voter turnout emerged as the key mechanism to secure favorable electoral outcomes in Turkey’s November 2015 election, especially in southeast Turkey. Even before the June 2015 election, there was a deliberate effort to relocate ballot boxes and reduce the number of polling stations that would require voters to travel long distances in order to vote.<sup>50</sup> Then, between the two elections, roughly three thousand people were detained. A considerable part of these detentions targeted mayors and officials from the Kurdish political party. In September 2016, another innovative measure was in place: the government removed 28 mayors from office under terrorism charges and appointed trustees to replace them.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the craze of curfews announced in southeast Turkey, which started in August 2015 and continued through April 2016, served the same objective by displacing civilians. Accordingly, in the November 2015 election, while

turnout decreased by 3.5 percent in HDP strongholds, it went up by almost two percent in AKP strongholds.<sup>52</sup>

As such, electoral priorities of the government were an important determinant of its COIN policy.<sup>53</sup> Governors targeted the HDP strongholds with curfews but refrained from doing so when electoral expectations were involved. To understand this dynamic, a little background on electoral geography of the region is necessary. Fifteen districts in southeast Turkey host half of the electorate in the region. Astonishingly, there was no overlap between the curfew districts and the vote-rich districts. Not experiencing civilian control measures, the vote-rich districts awarded the AKP with an additional line of support in the November election. Accordingly, 56 percent of all AKP gains in the November election came from these areas.

In this part, we have examined the domestic origins of the AKP government’s Kurdish policy and argued that electoral expectations and establishing a powerful presidency were its main determinants. This argument explains why Kurdish policy shifted more than once under the AKP rule, and the Kurdish political actors were unable to extract any practical concessions from the government. We now turn to the second source of the AKP’s instrumentalist approach and show how the Turkish government’s foreign policy in Syria also shaped its policy toward the Kurds.

## **TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF KURDISH PROBLEM**

The role of the Kurdish issue in contemporary Turkish foreign policy remains largely understudied. In the 1990s, the international dimension of

the Kurdish conflict was primarily about diasporic communities in Europe and rebel bases in northern Iraq that provided a number of resources to the PKK, including safe havens and logistical support.<sup>54</sup> Neither Syrian Kurds nor the Turkish government's foreign policy priorities were part of the story. This has changed with the Syrian civil war. The Turkish government saw Syrian Kurds as a threat to its geostrategic ambitions in Syria and became alarmed by the fact that their self-governance attempts might send the 'wrong message' to its own Kurdish community. Syrian Kurds were long influenced by Öcalan's secular brand of Kurdish nationalism, joined the PKK in large numbers, and had close ties with the Kurds inside Turkey.

Over time, Turkey's position evolved from hostile neutrality to open confrontation with the Syrian Kurds. Initially, the Turkish government promoted regime change in Syria by supporting the Sunni-Arab rebels. In doing so, it developed an uneasy relationship with the Syrian Kurds who refused to fight against the Assad government and faced constant pressure from ISIS.<sup>55</sup> The intervention of Russia in the Syrian civil war beginning in September 2015 eliminated the possibility of regime change in Damascus and this decision fortified the ranks on the battlefield, accelerating the scramble for Syria. Accordingly, as U.S. and Russian-backed forces began to compete for territory (that once belonged to ISIS), this development also allowed the Turkish government to enter Syria, bringing it into open conflict with the Syrian Kurds and their coethnics inside Turkey.

### *Syrian Karma*

For almost two decades, the Syrian government supported the PKK's fight against Turkey. It hosted the rebel leader Öcalan who stayed in the safety

of Damascus and allowed its Kurdish citizens to mobilize around the rebel group. Turkey and Syria came to the brink of war in 1998, and nothing less than the departure of Öcalan from Syria to Europe resolved the issue. A decade later, the relations between the two countries were better than they had ever been. Erdoğan and Assad were now close friends, even spending their holidays together. Joint cabinet meetings were held, a document on strategic partnership was signed, and restrictions on the free travel of people and goods were lifted.

Societal ties also developed quickly. As early as 2003, Turkish became the most preferred foreign language course at the University of Aleppo.<sup>56</sup> Syrians who visited Turkey increased nine-fold in a decade, reaching nine-hundred thousand by 2010. The volume of trade also grew exponentially and presented new opportunities for Turkish businessmen. According to official statistics, Turkish exports to Syria increased nine-fold in this period, and hit the 1.8-billion-dollar mark in 2010. Border provinces especially benefitted from deepening relations. For instance, a globally-recognized shopping mall, Forum Mersin, was built in Mersin with foreign capital. The belle époque of Turkish-Syrian relations ended with the Syrian civil war that was triggered by the Arab Spring. For the AKP government, this was an opportunity to extend Turkey's influence over Syria.

### *Governing Syria*

When protests turned into civil war in Syria in 2011, the Ankara government predicted a short fight that would lead to the overthrow of the Assad government. Taking their cue from Iraq, the AKP leaders argued that political power should be transferred to the (Sunni) majority in Syria. This perspective rested on the idea that a Sunni gov-

ernment in Damascus would be more inclined towards expanding cooperation with Turkey and to accept the latter's leadership position. It was also informed by a historical precedent. In the late Ottoman period, the Istanbul government ruled Syria in alliance with a Sunni Muslim bloc, and this political framework worked extremely well until World War I.<sup>57</sup>

To install a Sunni government in Damascus, the Turkish governments worked closely with rebels. First, they organized the Syrian political opposition. The Syrian National Council was announced in Istanbul in 2011 and spearheaded the formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces, the political body recognized by the international community as the legitimate Syrian government. Second, they played important roles in the war effort. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was hosted, trained, and assisted by Turkey. When exposed, the MIT's secret delivery of weapons to Syrian rebels became a diplomatic scandal.<sup>58</sup> Finally, Turkish governments pursued a lax border policy for those who wanted to fight the Assad government. This approach benefitted foreign nationals who were interested in waging a global jihad in Syria, and provided manpower for ISIS and other extremist groups.

At the beginning, it was unclear how the Syrian civil war would affect Turkey's Kurdish question. When the Turkish government made a concerted effort to support Sunni-Arab rebels around an Islamic agenda, radical groups inside Turkey found an opportunity to expand and mobilize. Hundreds of Turkish citizens, who went to Syria to fight against the Assad government, became involved in Jihadist networks and acquired radical ideas. Just like the Hizbullah experience in the 1990s, radical Islamists operated in secrecy and yet lived in

geographical clusters. Gaziantep and Adiyaman in particular provided fertile grounds for recruitment and civilian support. The Weavers Group (Dokumacılar Grubu), which operated as an ISIS cell, stood out amongst others by organizing major violent attacks inside Turkey. Its members were all recruited from Adiyaman. Interviews with relatives of group members and opinion leaders in the city suggest that the group practiced its own version of Islam and utilized social ties to recruit teenagers with limited economic prospects.<sup>59</sup>

The main target of Islamic radicals inside Turkey was the Kurdish political actors. This had to do with two factors. First, ISIS was fighting against the Kurds in Syria. Second, Kurdish nationalism expanded its geographical coverage in southeast Turkey after 2002 and came into contact with Islamist constituencies. These new settings were characterized by confessional and ethnic rivalries. Not surprisingly, the first major suicide bombing attack by ISIS took place in Şanlıurfa, targeting a group of college students who had gathered to show solidarity with the defense of Kobani against ISIS assaults. Several suicide attacks that followed this incident also targeted the Kurdish political party. The most spectacular example was the bomb explosion in the center of Ankara on October 10, 2015 where 107 civilians died and more than 500 were wounded. Being the deadliest explosion in Turkish history, the attack aimed at a peace rally organized by the Turkish left and the HDP that opposed Turkey's involvement in Syria against the Kurds.<sup>60</sup>

The major event that crystallized the Kurdish opposition to the AKP's Syrian policy was the Kobani demonstrations. Kobani was a Kurdish town in northern Syria under siege by ISIS starting in September 2014. It was only a few miles away from the Turkish border. Its proximity to Turkey



allowed the media to report on the events on a regular basis, leading to round-the-clock exposure of civilians to what was unfolding across the border. When Kobani came close to falling into the hands of ISIS in late September, the Kurdish political actors mobilized inside Turkey. Civilians, attempting to join the war effort in defense of Kobani, were pushed back by the Turkish security forces.<sup>61</sup> The fact that these skirmishes were broadcast live frustrated the Kurdish community further.

The AKP's Syria policy played a key role in the unfolding of events. Kobani was isolated from other Kurdish towns controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Barzani's forces would have had to travel across ISIS-held territory to reach the town. The only option was to create a corridor from the Turkish border, but Erdoğan refused to do so. To its credit, the Turkish government allowed 130,000 civilians fleeing Kobani to enter Turkey and permitted a small contingent of Iraqi Peshmerga to join the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military arm of the PYD. Yet, despite tremendous international and domestic pressure, Erdoğan was reluctant to support the Syrian Kurds. He let ISIS weaken them day by day. Erdoğan worried that the Kurds' claim to autonomy, including establishing self-governing cantons, would complicate Turkey's plans for Syria as well as its own Kurdish issue.<sup>62</sup>

As a response, Kurdish political actors organized the largest Kurdish mobilization in modern Turkish history. Thousands took to the streets across Turkey to protest the AKP's unwillingness to help the town of Kobani. Street protests on October 6-7 often turned violent and involved rioting and destruction of property.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, provinces such as Gaziantep, where radical Islam and Turkish nationalism grew with Syrian war witnessed

inter-communal clashes.<sup>64</sup> Protestors viewed the defense of Kobani as a heroic act against a powerful predator, and Erdoğan was depicted as a cold-hearted, calculating actor in this narrative. When the dust settled, 46 civilians were dead and 682 were injured. The mobilization of Kurds registered two points about the changing nature of the Kurdish issue: first, it had evolved into a transnational problem and Syrian Kurds had become a part of it; and, second, the AKP's foreign policy priorities in Syria, which worked against the Syrian Kurds, were strongly contested by the ethnic movement in Turkey.

### *Scramble for Syria (Fall 2015-)*

Russia's intervention into the Syrian civil war on behalf of the Damascus government unsettled military balances on the battlefield. Assad's forces began pushing back against the rebels and contesting rebel control over Aleppo. The relations between the Syrian Kurds and the U.S. had already entered a new phase a few months ago, and the American policy makers now considered the Kurds as useful allies in the fight against ISIS. They formed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015 – a military force that mainly consisted of YPG units supported by smaller non-Kurdish dissident groups. ISIS also began to lose territory both in Syria and Iraq as it struggled to keep a vast region under its control after a period of rapid expansion. As a result, the struggle for territorial control gained pace while taking the option of regime change in Damascus off the table. With other options closed, Turkey decided to join the race for territorial control and quickly found out that it has conflicting interests with the Syrian Kurds.<sup>65</sup>

In the meantime, the Syrian Kurds vastly expanded their territories by fighting only one enemy,

ISIS. They also wasted no time to translate their territorial gains into a political outcome. In March 2016, the PYD announced the autonomous federation of Rojava that united the self-governing cantons of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobani. Rojava now has a flag, a constitution and a political body.<sup>66</sup> This political experiment partly owed its success to an implicit understanding between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds. Both sides overcame issues of mistrust and were content with the idea of replicating the Iraqi Kurdish experience in northern Syria. The U.S. was looking for a credible ally to fight against ISIS and the Syrian Kurds saw an opportunity for state-building with the help of a powerful benefactor as their Iraqi counterpart had done in the aftermath of the Gulf War.

The scramble for Syria added another complication to AKP's policy in Syria. We call it the al-Jazira Syndrome. With the dissolution of the Ottoman state in World War I, Western powers created nation-states in the Middle East. Turkish officials were historically alert about the prospects of client states around Turkey.<sup>67</sup> They believed that European powers were interested in carving out political units populated by minorities in Anatolia. The British involvement with Assyrians and Kurds in northern Iraq and the French support enjoyed by Armenian and Kurdish nationalists in Syria communicated the idea that these groups could mobilize their co-ethnics inside Turkey, if given an opportunity. Hoybun (1927-1946), a rebel organization of Kurds and Armenians, tried this strategy without much success in the interwar period.

The quest for territorial control guided partly by security concerns pushed Turkey into Syria by providing military assistance to the FSA. Erdoğan suggested that Turkey was interested in extending its reach as far as Al-Bab in the south, which

would bring the only highway to Aleppo and western regions under Turkish control. The main idea however was to prevent the Kurds from physically uniting their newly established cantons. As the YPG made a push toward the west by crossing the Euphrates River, air strikes by the Turkish forces periodically hit the Kurdish group. As of October 2016, the conflict took an interesting turn, when the FSA forces directly engaged the SDF/YPG in the east of the Afrin canton. This aggressive move suggests that Turkish government is now interested in occupying some of the territory under Kurdish control as well as using its absence from the Mosul campaign to its advantage.

In sum, the AKP's foreign policy interests in Syria played a major role in shaping its Kurdish policy. First, support for Sunni rebels radicalized groups inside Turkey who violently targeted the Kurdish political actors. Erdoğan's refusal to help the Syrian Kurds mobilized their co-ethnics inside Turkey, who protested to show their anger and disappointment with the government's Syria policy. Second, as the door for regime change closed in Syria with Russian intervention, the AKP's growing interest for territorial control paved the way for an open conflict between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. The scramble for Syria continues as of November 2016, and one can only expect it to intensify with major consequences for the region, if no agreement is reached in the near future.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The future of Kurdish issue in Turkey will in part be determined by the policies of three actors. These are international community (mainly the U.S.), the Turkish government, and the Kurdish political actors. Each side can insist on policies that best

serve its interests. The U.S. may refuse to settle for anything short of securing its geopolitical interests in the region; the AKP government can prioritize domestic political concerns in its approach to Kurdish issue at home and abroad; and the Kurdish political actors can try to govern themselves without taking into account larger forces at play. Our analysis suggests that each of these scenarios represents a plausible alternative but would be a failed policy in the long run. This is the case because none of these actors are capable of forcing its policy preferences on others in the long-haul. Instead, we argue below that all sides should settle for a second-best option. Politics of moderation can bring a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish issue and in turn promote peace, security and democracy in the Middle East.

### ***Politics of Moderation***

The overwhelming success of the U.S. in the Gulf War (1990-1991) led to the creation of Iraqi Kurdistan as an autonomous region in 1992. Kurds assisted the U.S. war effort against Saddam Hussein and proved that they were reliable allies in the long run. Turkey's stiff resistance to a Kurdish state in northern Iraq was broken by giving it a free hand in its dealings with the PKK. Massoud Barzani cooperated with the Turkish government on security issues and developed close economic ties with Turkey's southeast. The U.S. policy makers seem to see the situation in northern Syria in similar terms. There are two problems with this assessment. First, unlike the Gulf War, there are multiple actors involved in Syria with divergent interests, and the resolution of the civil war is rather complex. Kurds are yet to pledge their full allegiance to the U.S. and the coalition forces. Second, it is unlikely that Turkey can develop the kind of relationship with the PYD that it had with Barzani. The

PYD espouses a revolutionary brand of Kurdish nationalism that the Turkish government fears the most. As such, enlisting the support of the Syrian Kurds against ISIS was the right thing to do, and yet, it would be overly optimistic to think that they can (or are willing to) serve the U.S. interests in the region against a Russian-backed alliance.<sup>68</sup>

There might be two repercussions of giving the Syrian Kurds a green light toward self-rule. First, *allowing the Turkish government to punish its own Kurds so that the U.S.-Kurdish partnership would work smoothly in Syria without Turkish opposition would be morally wrong and short-sighted.* Early signs from those who are close to the new Trump administration suggest that the U.S. might be interested in giving a free check to Turkey in its domestic affairs in return for its acquiescence in Syria.<sup>69</sup> This approach might deal a heavy blow to Turkish democracy by suspending the political rights of Turkey's Kurdish community and facilitating radical changes in Turkey's constitutional order. It might also destabilize the Middle East further as it would give a political cause and a physical sanctuary to the PKK to start a new campaign of violence. Second, self-rule attempts of the Syrian Kurds would put considerable political pressure on Iraqi Kurdistan and the Barzani leadership, a staunch ally of the U.S. in the region. It is worth remembering that long before the PKK and its leader influenced the political trajectory of the Syrian Kurds, the same strategy was put in place in northern Iraq, gaining ground in the early 1990s. It was only the U.S. support against the PKK inside Turkey and in favor of an autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq that turned the tide, a fact that Öcalan lamented deeply.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, the short-term objective of U.S. policy makers needs to be de-escalating the conflict

between the Turkish government and the PYD. As the struggle for territorial control intensifies in northern Syria, the U.S. is stuck between a rock and a hard place. This is partly the case because thus far the U.S. government adopted ad hoc measures to save the day. Recent developments on the battlefield show that the benefits of this approach will expire sooner than expected. The Turkish government is eager to get something out of the chaos in Syria since it was effectively excluded from the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and its dream of removing Assad from power fell on deaf ears. Meanwhile, as pragmatists, the Syrian Kurds seem to take advantage of every opportunity to expand their territory and give it a political makeover. As the primary actor in the conflict, the U.S. has to intervene firmly to discourage expansionism.

Currently, there are two wars being fought in Syria; a war fought over control of the central government and one over northern Syria. With the Russian intervention in support of Assad against the Sunni insurgency, the U.S. does not have the final say in the center-seeking war and will be forced to accept the reality on the battlefield. However, the localized conflict in the north involves the allies of the U.S. and a rogue actor (ISIS) who has been roaming freely in these lands. Turkey has a window of opportunity to put the Syrian Kurds in their place: the Turkish government faces no audience costs or budgetary constraints at home, and works with a compliant military that has received a make-over after the coup-attempt on July 15. For the Syrian Kurds, the chaos in Syria represents an historic moment to establish territorial control and build a self-defense force before Assad consolidates his power or ISIS violence returns. For each side, the only constraint seems to be the U.S. and their own military shrewdness.

As a result, the increasing reliance of the U.S. on the Syrian Kurds to avoid audience costs at home is breeding another conflict nearby. The U.S. has to aim for a compromise in northern Syria that includes the FSA, Turkish government, Syrian Kurds, and perhaps the Assad government. It might be possible to get rid of ISIS with the help of the Kurds, but as post-Hussein Iraq suggests, what happens afterwards is perhaps more critical in the long run. It is time for the U.S. to start using sticks to reduce tensions and manage expansionist aims. Currently, there is not a win-win scenario in the Syrian civil war: therefore, all actors involved will have to pay their dues to avoid major conflicts in the future.

The Turkish government also needs to confront the cold hard facts about Syria today. Most important, transforming Syria around Turkey's priorities will not materialize. It is true that the AKP governments were particularly invested in regime change. They trained, financed, and supported rebels; bore the costs of ISIS violence; and even accepted millions of refugees with the implicit understanding that these would give them leverage over Syria.<sup>71</sup> Yet, the growing involvement of outside actors and the urgency of the ISIS threat pushed the U.S. government towards working with the Kurds, and took Turkish demands off the table. It would not be a wise policy for Turkey at this point to switch targets and blame the PYD for what went wrong in Syria.

Inside Turkey, the AKP government has an equally urgent task to accomplish. It needs to address the trust deficit between the Kurds and the Turkish state and take no less than legal steps to secure the rights of Kurds as citizens. Allowing the Kurdish issue to be guided by electoral expectations and the foreign policy agenda may deliver short-term dividends but promises no stability when the incumbent, rather than law, determines the extent of

rewards and punishments. A good starting point for the AKP government is to refrain from punishing Kurdish political actors through legal and other means.<sup>72</sup> Lifting the immunity of Kurdish MPs and jailing journalists from pro-Kurdish newspapers (Özgür Gündem, Azadiya Walat) may stop political mobilization of the Kurds, but it does not present a long-term solution. Along with citizenship rights, Kurds need what we call an affirmative-action plan. They live shorter than the national average; they have limited access to basic services; and they hardly possess the necessary human and social capital to compete in the national economy. A Kurdish affirmative action plan needs to break the culture of dependency and political patronage that kept Kurdish society underdeveloped and its social hierarchies almost fixed in modern times.

The Syrian Kurds have emerged as the major beneficiaries of the Syria's civil war by a large margin. They expanded their territories, won a powerful friend, the U.S., and began practicing self-governance. This might be the right moment when the Syrian Kurds need to pace themselves and not push further for more territory and political unity. It is true that areas under Kurdish control are not united. But the Syrian Kurds cannot convince all (U.S., Turkey, Syria, Russia, and other regional powers) at once of their maximalist demands. Unlike in northern Iraq, both sides of the conflict are supported by powerful outside actors who have made strong commitments and would therefore not easily accept a proposal that disrupts the balance on the battlefield against their favor. After all, it remains to be seen what the consolidation of Kurdish rule in northern Syria will offer to other minority groups in the region.

Kurdish political actors inside Turkey might also be better off with moderation. Scaling down de-

mands and distancing themselves from Syrian Kurds are two potential solutions that can serve them well in this impasse. Self-rule experiments in southeast Turkey attracted the wrath of the incumbent: they cost lives and created tremendous destruction when the Turkish security forces and the PKK engaged in an intense urban warfare in 2015-2016. The PKK's ill-judged belief that the Kurds were ready for self-rule and that the conditions were ripe for autonomy turned out to be fatally wrong. Kurdish political actors lost civilian support, as the discourse of democratic autonomy and self-governance died in the trenches of Cizre. Instead, this period will be remembered in the history of the Kurdish conflict as the heyday of civilian victimization. *Most ironically, it was the Kurdish movement in Turkey that paid a heavy price for the political success of the Syrian Kurds.*

Solving the Kurdish issue also requires taking into account the demands of the Kurdish electorate. For the Kurdish political party, this means building coalitions with other political parties and civil society groups, and de-prioritizing Öcalan's freedom as well as his political agenda. The Kurdish political party tried this strategy only twice in its history (1991, 2015) and achieved tremendous success. Yet, the AKP governments, the PKK, and the old guard within the movement oppose this move vehemently. For their own reasons, they want to keep the Kurdish political party as a subsidiary of the rebel group. As long as the Kurdish political party fails to declare its independence from the warring parties, it is forced to stay in survival mode and to give the PKK the right to defend and lead the Kurdish movement, as urban clashes of 2015-2016 vividly demonstrated.

This vicious cycle needs to be broken if the Kurdish movement wants to solve the Kurdish question with a negotiated settlement that involves all

stakeholders in Turkey. A secretive deal secured from higher echelons of the Turkish state does not promise a long-term resolution. The deal has to have a legal basis and should be considered legitimate by most in Turkish society. Meanwhile, improving Kurds' everyday lives should re-enter the to-do list of Kurdish politicians. The authors of this report have a hard time remembering the last time that Kurdish politicians searched for ways to improve the socio-economic position of Kurds in Turkish society. It is time for Kurdish politicians to stop asking for favors from the AKP officials or sacrifices from civilians, and instead find ways to do coalition-building with other groups and deliver material benefits to their constituency.

## CONCLUSION

Since 2015, the AKP government has been fighting the Kurds on two fronts. In southeast Turkey, massive counterinsurgency operations have brought daily life to a complete halt. In Syria, the clashes with the SDF/YPG have become increasingly commonplace over the previously ISIS-controlled territory. It is challenging to remember that until late 2014 there was almost complete consensus in Turkey and abroad that the AKP governments had taken courageous steps to solve the Kurdish issue, and we could expect a negotiated settlement anytime soon.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the Turkish government rarely assigned strategic importance to Kurds in its foreign policy until recently (something we call hostile neutrality) and instead concentrated its efforts to remove Assad from power. How do we explain this dramatic shift in the Turkish government's policy toward the Kurds?

We suggested in our report that the AKP government has no fixed position towards the Kurds. *Its*

*approach is best characterized as instrumental. It views the Kurdish issue/actors as a function of its own priorities in domestic politics and foreign policy.* Electoral outcomes and the presidential ambitions of Erdoğan shaped how the government interacted with Kurdish political actors and Kurdish constituencies. Accordingly, we witnessed a variety of tactics employed over time depending on the AKP's electoral needs. The government injected hard cash into the region in 2007; negotiated with Öcalan in 2013; and then three years later put Kurdish cities on round-the-clock lockdown. Recently, the government's interest in reinstating capital punishment, targeting primarily the Kurdish political actors, and Öcalan in particular, is likely to facilitate a rapprochement with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and generate sufficient political capital for a constitutional amendment that might transform Turkey's parliamentary system into an executive presidency.

The Turkish government's policy on Syria impacted the Kurdish issue in two ways. First, it created a major security problem for the ethnic movement and its leftist allies inside Turkey. It indirectly boosted radical Islamic groups and increased Ankara's reluctance to help the Syrian Kurds. As a response, the Kurdish political actors inside Turkey mobilized to show their disappointment in the Kobani case. Second, Syrian Kurds became a problem for the AKP government when their agenda clashed with that of Erdoğan's. Russian intervention took the possibility of replacing Assad with a Sunni government off the table. Afterwards, the U.S. support to the Syrian Kurds excluded Turkey from the process.<sup>74</sup> Finally, Syrian Kurds emerged as the public enemy number one partly because they now directly challenge Turkey's interests.

To move forward, we argued in the third part of this report that politics of moderation is neces-

sary for the resolution of Turkey's Kurdish issue. If history is any guide, this is the route that is least likely to be taken. However, we hope that the Turkish government, Kurdish political actors, and the international community will think this through and implement policies that will not leave any side out in the open. Politics of moderation offers a credible route to a negotiated settlement. It does so by forcing all sides to moderate their extreme demands. The Kurds have to settle for less than self-rule in Turkey; the AKP government needs to accept the fact that it will not get the return on its investment in Syria, and the Syrian Kurds are not best suited to protect the U.S. geopolitical interests in the Middle East. In sum, managing the Kurdish issue is an important part of guaranteeing peace, security, and democracy in the region precisely because it forces all sides to co-exist by settling for second-best options.

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