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REVISITING TURKEY'S KURDISH PROBLEM

Kemal Kirişçi

Executive Board Member of EDAM.
Professor, Director of European Studies Center and
Jean Monnet Center of Excellence, Boğaziçi University.

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During the course of at least the two past years Turkey had been experiencing a distinct rise in both Turkish as well as Kurdish nationalism. Most importantly, the last two years saw the periodic increase in Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)'s violent attacks on civilian and military targets accompanied by emotional funerals held for the victims. The ability of the PKK to operate from northern Iraq with impunity aggravated the situation. This led to urgent and often unequivocal demands from the opposition as well as the military to mount a military intervention in northern Iraq. The level of tension created by these calls was further aggravated by a nationalist and confrontationist discourse adopted by some Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq. This in turn exacerbated the debate over the status of the city of Kerkük. Turkish nationalist circles went as far as advocating a military intervention to pre-empt the incorporation of Kerkük into the Kurdish federated state. The back-sliding in the reform process that was particularly visible with respect to freedom of expression saw for example the opening of court cases against numerous individuals for the alleged inappropriate use of the Kurdish language and the expression of views threatening to the unity of the country. The tense climate reached a peak in October 2007 when the PKK ambushed a Turkish military unit not far from the border with Iraq killing 12 and kidnapping 8 conscripts. A flurry of political and diplomatic activity followed. In a dramatic turn of events the Turkish military in December and January 2008 mounted a series of carefully managed operations against the PKK in northern Iraq with the support of intelligence received from the United States.

These developments were, of course, in stark contrast to the climate that prevailed during the period when Turkey was engaged in the reform process to meet the Copenhagen political criteria. Undoubtedly, the ambiguity in the EU over Turkey's future membership prospects, not to mention the denigrating discourse adopted by some of the leading European politicians, contributed to Turkey's drift into a more nationalist mood and state of instability. Nevertheless, the result of the elections in July 2007 and the resolution of the crisis around the election of a new president are likely to reinvigorate the reform process in Turkey and may also help a more conducive environment for addressing the Kurdish problem to emerge. The results of the election with its high level of participation, in spite of being held right in the middle of the vacation season, and the overwhelming manner in which the electorate rewarded the governing party Justice and Development (AK Party) may be critical for bringing this about.

What will these developments mean for the Kurdish question in Turkey? Will the Turkish political system finally be able to address the challenges surrounding the Kurdish problem and find a "solution"? Is there actually a "solution" to the Kurdish problem? What form might that "solution" take? How will Turkey deal with the PKK and its incursions from the territories under the control of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq? How might the emergence of a Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq impact the aspirations of Kurds in Turkey? What might be the role of the EU in meeting these challenges? These are the questions that this policy paper aims to address.

Rise of Kurdish and Turkish nationalism

The PKK has a long history of declaring cease-fires periodically. Subsequent to the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the PKK had entered a long period of internal struggles. During this period by and large the PKK did not mount violent attacks in Turkey. This coincided also with a period when numerous reforms were adopted that brought a visible relaxation of the tension in Kurdish populated areas of Turkey. There were even major improvements especially with respect to cultural rights and public expressions of Kurdish identity. However, this climate was shattered by the announcement in June 2004 that the PKK was ending its unilaterally declared cease-fire followed by the explosion of a bomb in a minibus in the highly popular Aegean tourist resort of Kuşadası in August 2004. This came as a shock to the public and a reminder of the violence of the 1990s at a time when stability and economic growth were just beginning to be taken for granted. This initial act of violence was then followed by bolder ones including PKK attacks on the military in especially Kurdish-populated areas neighboring northern Iraq. These attacks as well as the mines planted by the PKK took the lives of an increasing number of especially young conscripts. These numbers continued to increase through the summer and early autumn. The accompanying funerals became populist manifestations of a rising tide in Turkish nationalism and growing demands for a military intervention in northern Iraq.

The government could no longer resist the massive political and public pressure and on 17 October 2007, the Turkish parliament adopted with an overwhelming majority a motion authorizing the government to send troops to northern Iraq when it deemed it necessary. The PKK's bold and highly provocative attack on the Turkish military days after the adoption of the motion precipitated a process that led to mostly aerial interventions being mounted against the PKK. The tension was aggravated by a massive car bomb that the PKK exploded in Diyarbakır on January 3, 2008 killing children from a nearby school.

This growing wave of Turkish nationalism was fueled by two additional related developments. The first one is the rise of Kurdish nationalism itself. Traditionally the two nationalisms have often influenced each other. Manifestation of one has usually helped to fuel the other one and of course vice versa. More recently the source provoking Turkish nationalism can be linked partly to developments in northern Iraq. It is difficult to identify a particular date or event but the gradual emergence and consolidation of the Kurdish federated state and the growing prospects that the city of Kerkük would be incorporated into this state played a critical role. Many in Turkey have perceived a potential threat to Turkish territorial integrity from this state, often aggravated by statements and discourse employed by leading Kurdish figures. A case in point was Massoud Barzani's, the leader of Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and president of the Kurdish regional government of Iraq, remark reported in April 2007: "Turkey is not allowed to intervene in the Kerkük issue and if it does, we will interfere in Diyarbakır's issues and other cities in Turkey". The fact that these statements came to attention of the Turkish public at a time when there was already considerable tension resulting from PKK incursions and wide spread rioting in Diyarbakır did not help. Barzani was referring to the pending referendum in Kerkük and arguing that Turkey was intervening in the domestic affairs of Iraq. Turkish governmental and often emotional public opposition to the referendum was made on the grounds that the Kurdish dominated administration in Kerkük was manipulating the demographic balances and forcing the Turkmen population along with the Arab one out of the city. Turkish nationalists have always considered Kerkük to be a primarily Turkmen city and argued that it was unjustly incorporated into the British mandate in Iraq after the end of the First World War.

The second related one was the way in which EU-Turkish relations deteriorated and a powerful sense of being let down by the EU that developed among the Turkish public. The nature of the debate on possible Turkish membership in Europe during the summer of 2005, the actual details of the Negotiation Framework adopted for Turkey in October 2005 and even the manner in which the EU meeting dragged on into the small hours of the night received great attention in Turkey. Opponents of the EU in Turkey were able to exploit skillfully these developments to revive as well as aggravate Turkish prejudice and fears against Europe and the West. They were also able to link the negative attitude towards Turkey in Europe to growing PKK attacks by arguing that the reform process had been imposed on Turkey with the purpose of weakening Turkey's internal cohesion and territorial integrity. The reluctance or inability of the US administration and occupation forces in Iraq to cooperate with Turkey to prevent PKK incursions from northern Iraq made matters worse. The fear about Iraq's disintegration and the emergence of an independent Kurdish state were extensively exploited in Turkey and linked to wider efforts to undermine Turkey attributed to both the US and the EU. The resentment felt toward the EU and the US was very much reflected in the series of large public demonstrations that were held in April and May 2007. The meetings were characterized by a flood of Turkish flags that are regarded to have become a conspicuous symbol of the rise of Turkish nationalism.

The rise of nationalism was certainly not limited to just Kurdish-related issues. It manifested itself in numerous ways. One case in point was the murder of Hrant Dink, a very prominent intellectual and journalist of Armenian origin in January 2007. Dink was a public figure engaged in efforts to reconcile Armenian and Turkish views in relations to the fate of the hundreds of thousands of Armenians that perished during the First World War in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. Dink's efforts and the lively debate over the fate of the Armenians in Turkey in 2004-2005 very much reflected the freer climate that the reforms had created. However, this climate very quickly eroded when court cases were opened against not only Dink but many others for allegedly violating the infamous Article 301 of the new Turkish Penal Code. The Article, ambiguous and rather vaguely worded, penalizes acts and statements injuring or offending "Turkishness". A nationalist lawyer and the chairman of an ultra right wing Turkish lawyers' association (Büyük Hukukçular Birliği), Kemal Kerinçsiz became a celebrity by demanding that prosecutors open

investigations and court cases against many public personalities. Those cases that indeed reached the courts often became public occasions for the display of nationalist slogans. When a court case was opened against Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, the supporters of Keriñsiz turned his court appearances into major manifestations of Turkish nationalism.

The attitude and position taken by the government and state institutions played a role in exacerbating the situation. The government remained paralyzed and failed to adopt legislation to narrow down the scope of Article 301 or rescind it. Many in Turkey have argued that the governmental reluctance to reform Article 301 and to take a much more principled stand against attacks on the freedom of expression and liberal intellectuals was an important factor that helped to create an environment conducive to the assassination of Dink. This reluctance was also complicated by the fact that the then president of Turkey Ahmet Sezer refused to congratulate Orhan Pamuk for his Nobel Prize, adding legitimacy to nationalist arguments that this Prize had been given to him on political grounds. The government also seemed to be reluctant or slow to clamp down on the excesses of nationalist groups. It took a while before the nationalist lawyers' activities were finally stopped and investigations opened against a number of ultra-nationalist groups, including ones composed of former army officers and bureaucrats. One such group, Kuvayi Milliye Association, appears to have been involved in a number of violent and provocative incidents. Investigations were finally opened against it after an arms-cache was found in the house of one of its members in Istanbul in June 2007. Subsequently, court proceedings began late in January 2008 against Kemal Keriñsiz as well as a retired army general and their accomplices.

Similar observations can also be made about the Şemdinli affair. In November 2005 a bomb exploded in a book-store in the Kurdish town of Şemdinli and the perpetrators were actually captured by the public red-handed. They turned out to be persons associated with a special unit of the Gendarmerie. The evidence seemed to suggest that elements from within the state had been involved in the explosion. In spite of the prime minister's promise that evidence would be followed wherever it might lead, many have argued that the government failed to ensure a thorough investigation. The remark by the military's second in command and today the current chief of staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, that he knew the perpetrators as "good soldiers" complicated matters. The government failed to prevent the removal of the prosecutor in charge of investigating the case after he included the chief of staff among the people to be indicted. Many saw this incident as a sign of the limits that the government faced in respect to the military or the security establishment in Turkey.

The government's position was somewhat surprising, because not only had the AK Party government successfully seen through a long series of major reforms that benefited the Kurds but Erdoğan had also become one of the few prime ministers in Turkey to address the Kurdish problem publicly. In August 2005 he visited with a large delegation of ministers from his cabinet in Diyarbakır, the largest Kurdish populated city in Turkey whose inhabitants had greatly suffered from the violence of the 1990s, and acknowledged that mistakes had been made in the past by the Turkish state. This was an unprecedented gesture of reconciliation. He recognized the existence of a "Kurdish problem" and argued that the solution lied in more democracy, more rule of law and economic prosperity. It was against this background that he promised to go to bottom of the Şemdinli affair. However, he too was adversely affected by the rise of nationalism in Turkey and the growing criticism, sometimes coming from within his own party ranks, directed at his government for its failure to curb PKK terrorism. His position was also aggravated by the deteriorating EU-Turkish relations.

The July 2007 elections

The July 2007 elections were exceptional on a number of grounds. Firstly, it came after a tense period of crisis when the political agenda was very much dominated by the Kurdish issue and the issue of whether Turkey's secularism was under threat or not. There had been a series of huge public demonstrations in support of secularism. Turkey had never experienced such demonstrations before amazingly in spite of the tension in the air and the actual size of the

demonstration, no violence erupted. Secondly, a constitutional crisis erupted over the election of a new president. The opposition in an effort to preempt the election of Abdullah Gül argued that a two-thirds majority, a few seats more than what the AK Party controlled in the parliament, would be necessary to start the voting process. Lastly, a minor change in the electoral law made it possible for the pro-Kurdish party, Democratic Society Party (DTP), to circumvent the 10 per cent national threshold requirement by fielding independent candidates rather than run them on a party ticket. Subsequent to their election they were then able to form a party group in the parliament.

However, there were at least three other striking aspects of the election that may have very serious implication in terms of the future of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Firstly, the AK Party won an unequivocal victory. It increased its votes from just over 34 per cent in 2002 to just about 47 per cent, a more than ten point increase that even the party leadership had not predicted. The number of AK Party seats decreased from 363 to 341 but that was a result of the entry into parliament of two additional political parties. Moreover, the new parliament is considered one of the most representative parliaments in Turkey since 1983. It allows for the representation of approximately 85 per cent of the electorate compared to 54 per cent in the previous parliament.

The second important aspect of the elections is the return of a pro-Kurdish party to the parliament. The DTP was able to enter the parliament with 20 seats receiving almost 4 per cent of the national votes. This is the first time that openly pro-Kurdish politicians have made into the parliament since their predecessors from the Democracy Party were ejected from the parliament in 1994. The third important aspect of the election is the way in which the AK Party was able to win significant levels of the Kurdish vote. The AK Party increased its votes in 12 major Kurdish-populated provinces from approximately 15 per cent to 41 per cent while the DTP received 33 per cent of the votes compared to approximately 40 per cent that the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP) had received in 2002. In this way the AK party has 33 of its deputies elected from these provinces against 20 from the DTP while the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) have no deputies elected from these 12 provinces.

DTP deputies seem much more open to dialogue and to the democratic process. Yet like their predecessors they refuse to openly condemn terrorism and distance themselves from the PKK. Although after the elections it was not clear how far the DTP would be able to distance itself from slipping back into the nationalist discourse, not to mention violence, the DTP did call at their party congress late in October 2007 for "territorial autonomy". This provoked intense media and public reaction that was followed by the filing of a case with the Constitutional Court for the closure of DTP on the grounds that the party constitutes a threat to the independence; national unity and territorial integrity of the Turkish Republic.

The Kurdish vote and the Kurdish question under AK Party government

How can one explain the success of the AK Party and what might this mean in terms of the Kurdish question in Turkey? There are a number of factors that can be cited.

Foremost is the fact that the AK Party, unlike CHP or MHP, did not employ a blatantly Turkish nationalist discourse and instead put the accent on dialogue, further democracy and reforms. Many Kurds were also very conscious of the fact that many of the improvements that took place with respect to their cultural rights occurred during the reign of the AK Party government. Secondly, the government's success with respect to the economy and the expectation that this would continue if the AK Party were re-elected, influenced Kurdish votes much as it did in the rest of Turkey. Thirdly, according to a prominent Kurdish politician and member of DTP Orhan Miroğlu, during the run up to the elections the government was able to win over "hearts and minds" by attending to the immediate needs of especially poor households by distributing coal and basic food stuff provisions as well as enabling many Kurds to purchase homes at low interest from the Turkish Mass Housing Authority (TOKİ). Furthermore, the government channeled important levels of agricultural subsidies as well as funds into the health sector of the region. Lastly, a conviction that the DTP may not after all be able to address and resolve the day-to-day

infrastructure is likely to have played a role as well. It is also possible to talk about an important additional factor. Kurdish society especially in major urban centers is becoming much more plural and assertive. A couple of years ago this could not have been imagined. Economic liberalism has enabled businesses to develop in the area. Kurdish business interests represented by local chambers of commerce such as the Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce (DTO) have advocated much more moderate views on the Kurdish problem and emphasized the importance of creating a stable environment for economic growth and employment. This has led them to openly criticize the PKK and the use of violence as sources of instability undermining prospects of economic growth. They have argued that violence has been one of the key factors causing unemployment, poverty and prostitution in the region. The former president of the DTO ran in the last elections on an AK Party ticket and was elected as a deputy. Similar developments can be observed with respect to the broader civil society in the region. A case in point is the women's rights organization known as the Women's Center (KAMER). KAMER is very active in the whole region with projects in a number of Kurdish cities as well as rural areas aiming to improve the condition of women in the region and also to combat honor killings. The leader of KAMER, Nebahat Akkoç, a highly respected Kurdish woman with a once nationalist background has distanced herself from the PKK on the grounds that the PKK demands women rights to be subordinated to the "struggle for self-determination".

These developments are very significant in terms of the evolution of the Kurdish problem in Turkey and are clearly a function of a Turkey that is becoming more plural and democratic. Kurdish civil society in the past had been squeezed between the repression of the state on the one hand and the PKK on the other hand. One of the critical tests of local civil society beginning to distance itself was manifested in the internal elections of professional organizations representing architects, engineers and doctors as well as bar associations. These elections became more competitive compared to the past when often they were dominated by PKK-authorized candidates. Furthermore, the leadership of these civil society groups increasingly became advocates of more moderate views and democratic dialogue. Another significant test came early in 2006 subsequent to the destructive rioting that took place in Diyarbakır at the instigation of the PKK. More than thirty civil society organizations, after a long internal debate, were able to come together and make a public declaration against terrorism and the use of violence. They called for a democratic dialogue in addressing the Kurdish problem. This group reiterated their position in September the same year when a bomb went off by a recreation park, killing innocent civilians most of them children. Civil society groups reacted in a similar manner to the car bombing too. These developments are a stark contrast to the days back in especially the first half of the 1990s when the PKK literally ruled Diyarbakır and other major cities, preventing even the sale of newspapers in Turkish, not to mention the running of its own court and collecting taxes. This was a period during which no Kurd would have dared to hold and for that matter express views independent of the PKK.

One other important development that needs to be highlighted in terms of the Kurdish problem in Turkey is that Kurds who have migrated to urban centers in western parts of Turkey, by and large, have integrated. These Kurds tend to hold much more moderate views even if among the youth there are those who are radical and indeed close to the PKK.

The AK Party's broad base of representation adds significantly to its ability to address the Kurdish problem. However, a number of major challenges still remain. The vote that went to the AK Party instead of the DTP does not necessarily mean a complete distancing from the discourse and objectives of the DTP on the part of the Kurdish electorate. It does not mean a categorical shying away from the PKK either. It only seems to suggest that Kurds are ready to operate in a more pluralist environment in hope that their problems in general and especially economic problems will actually be addressed. The list of problems is an extensive one.

These problems range from the adverse cultural, legal, social and economic consequences of the massive displacement that took place during the course of 1980s and 1990s to problems to do with identity and matters of representation. It is estimated that 2 to 3 million Kurds were in one way or the other displaced, often forcefully, from their habitual areas of residence.

The future

The series of military interventions against the PKK has considerably placated public opinion in Turkey. There is also a general recognition that the government was successful in both mobilizing international support for the interventions as well as in ensuring that these interventions remained limited to punishing the PKK and not hurting civilian Kurds. At the same time the visible success of military operations against the PKK has also raised the expectation that the government would, for once, seriously address the Kurdish problem in Turkey. In this respect, the AK party government is going to have to work on balancing at least four different sets of competing opinions and interests. Firstly, it will have to balance a wide range of opinion within the parliament, from that of the pro-Kurdish DTP to the staunchly Turkish nationalist MHP even if it may not necessarily need their support when it comes to policy adoption and implementation. Secondly, it will need to balance opinion within the political party. The party does have numerous ethnic Kurdish MPs representing their respective constituencies in east and southeastern Turkey. At the same time, there are AK Party members of parliament who represent constituencies sympathetic to Turkish nationalism and MHP. Thirdly, outside the parliament, the government is going to have to look over its shoulder to check the military and its hard line allies. During the course of the first half of 2007 the military, in an unequivocal manner, demonstrated the extent to which it can still intervene in day-to-day politics. The military has long considered Islamic fundamentalism and Kurdish nationalism as the biggest threats to Turkey. In the eyes of the military, the AK Party's secular credentials are suspect and the military together with their allies are likely to watch very carefully what the government does on the Kurdish question too. They will not shy away from stating their red lines even if the outcome of the latest election will restrain them to a certain extent. Yet, the very fact that the government was able to work with considerable harmony with the military over the last few months in mounting military interventions against the PKK in northern Iraq may to some degree help the hand of the government. Furthermore, the fact that in a book published by a prominent Turkish journalist, Fikret Bila, a number of former four star generals including the instigator of the 1980 military coup, Kenan Evren, have openly admitted that they had made mistakes in respect to the Kurdish problem in the past may make it somewhat easier for the government to introduce reforms. Ultimately, the policy on the Kurdish problem will be a function of the interaction between the liberal and the hard line traditionalist approaches that characterize Turkish politics.

In light of the electoral victory that the AK Party has won and its commitment to introducing a new "civilian" constitution, the prospects that a new era will begin with respect to addressing the Kurdish question is a real one. However, will this resolve the Kurdish question? That too is a tough question. What actually constitutes a "solution" to the Kurdish question is highly contested and so far has not really been openly debated at the governmental level. The likelihood is the AK Party will initiate such a debate. However, it is highly unlikely that the AK government will entertain any ideas that may suggest structural changes to the nature and governance of the Turkish state. It would be unrealistic to think that the "solution" of the Kurdish

problem would take the form of transforming Turkey from a unitary state to a federal one. The same applies to the notion of territorial autonomy or even the notion that Kurdish could become an official language of Turkey. Yet, it is highly likely that a series of practical problems that Kurds in Turkey suffer from, such as economic underdevelopment, unemployment, dislocation etc... will be addressed. Similarly, greater freedom will be achieved for Kurds to express their views as well as their identity. Further progress may also be achieved in respect to education in the Kurdish language and media broadcasting in Kurdish languages. It is also likely that these languages will become much more publicly visible. It is also possible to foresee an important effort to improve governance at the local level and relations between ordinary Kurds and the Turkish state. Now that a difficult threshold has been crossed with military interventions into northern Iraq, most probably the government will continue to show a resolution to combat PKK attacks. However, it is likely that at the same time it will emphasize dialogue and economic interdependence with the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq and continue to nurture smooth relations with the US in respect to Iraq and the PKK. It will also continue to make sure that whatever future military intervention that takes place, will remain very limited in scope and continue to involve the air force rather than land forces.

It goes without saying that the EU's engagement of Turkey will be of paramount importance for the above developments to occur. The EU at a minimum is going to have to make sure that some parity is achieved in the pace and spirit of the accession process with that of Croatia. The Turkish public will seek unequivocal evidence that in return for further reform the EU will come and meet Turkey half way and that with these reforms Turkey will stand a fair chance of membership. The EU's engagement will not only be critical in political terms but also economic ones. The Turkish economy, against all odds, is doing well but it is obvious that the performance would become even better if the "markets" sensed a strong EU commitment. The recent volatility in the world economy makes this even more important. EU commitment would also strengthen support for reforms and have positive repercussions for the economic development of the Kurdish populated areas. The willingness of the EU to continue to support the emerging moderate Kurdish civil society and maintain pressure on the DTP to play politics according to the rules of "democratic pluralism" will help. A strong EU engagement would also be a very powerful incentive for Turkey and the government not to drift into an adventure in northern Iraq. An ability on the part of EU member states to take a principled stance against PKK terrorism would crown the process. Accompanied by the recent turn about in US policy towards the PKK and to a certain extent in northern Iraq, this would help to diffuse the ability of nationalists to abuse public opinion with their arguments that the EU and the US are actually trying to undermine Turkish independence and unity.

The impact of the EU would only be felt in the very, very long run. It is only down the line in 15-20 years that one is likely to see a Turkey that resembles Spain. Today, it is an economically prosperous and politically stable and secure Spain that is courageously addressing the thorny Basque question, not to mention the Catalan one. It is able to openly debate the issue of the right of self-determination of the Basques and Catalans. Would Spain be where it is today without the confidence and the sense of security that membership in the EU has given Spain? If Turkey is gradually going to converge towards a "solution" to the Kurdish problem, in whatever form it takes, it will need this sense of confidence and sense of security. It is no wonder that retired

General Başer back in 2004 saw EU membership as the ultimate guarantee of Turkish domestic and external security. Just as today Spain is an unequivocal asset for the EU, a Turkey that resembles Spain will be such an asset as well, in a region that is and will continue to be in dire need of such an asset to address and resolve its multitude problems including the ones resembling the "Kurdish problem".



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Seher Yıldızı Sok. No: 23/5 34337 Etiler, istanbul
Tel: + 90 212 3521854 Fax: + 90 212 3515465
www.edam.org.tr info@edam.org.tr