

A “KURDISH RESET”: ERDOĞAN’S LAST CHANCE?

The recent resurgence of PKK violence, coupled by a noticeable lag in the constitutional reform process, has led critics to assume that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s promises to the Kurds, Turkey’s largest minority population, were insincere. Since June 2011, over 800 people have died in renewed clashes in southeastern Turkey, and the unresolved “Kurdish Problem” threatens the premier’s credibility. This paper explores the primary causes behind Erdoğan’s failures, and suggests practical measures that could restore his credibility while ensuring a democratic future to the Republic of Turkey.

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Erdoğan's Kurdish Problem

Syria's bloody civil war, which has already lasted nearly two years, was actually beneficial for the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in some ways. If Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had decided to adopt political reforms rather than direct military measures that resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, perhaps the deterioration of Turkish-Kurdish relations would have taken center stage in the eyes of Western politicians.

When he came into office in 2003, many experts heralded Erdoğan as the leader who would resolve the "Kurdish Problem" by initiating constitutional reforms and negotiating peace terms with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, despite unprecedented government reforms and Erdoğan's new rhetoric, two terms of Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership has not yielded a new social contract. Civilian demonstrations and PKK violence have resumed. Although the prospects for peace may appear to be bleakest since the turn of the century, it is not too late to press the "reset button" and reverse a decade of disappointment. Erdoğan may have failed to bridge the divide between Turks and Kurds, but he can still restore his credibility as a peacemaker between the two peoples, if he chooses to enact drastic reforms.

Erdoğan's promises to the Kurds became hollow when he transitioned from a formerly oppressed political figure to the nation's most successful and popular leader—among the Turkish public—since Atatürk. Once he consolidated his power, Erdoğan backed out of his earlier commitments in order to satisfy the primary constituents of the ruling AKP: conservative Turkish Muslims from Central Anatolia. By addressing the historic demands of the conservative Turks,—regarding the establishment of a more equally shared public space for the secular and religious segments of society—Erdoğan indirectly segregated the Kurds, who still do not fit the broader, yet still restrictive, definition of Turkish national identity.¹ Firmly in the center, Erdoğan no longer covets the support of fringe and minority political movements, like those who advocate for increased recognition of Kurdish identity or Kurdish autonomy, and has abandoned them.

The existing frustration of the Kurds is the result of a series of incidents. At a 2005 rally, before a Kurdish audience in Diyarbakır, Erdoğan declared, "More democracy, not more repression, is the answer to Kurds' long-running grievances."² Despite this rhetoric in the Kurdish-populated city of Diyarbakır, however, Erdoğan took a different course in his addresses to the Turkish public, following the pattern of previous governments, and focusing mainly on security, rather than presenting the issue as one of identity. Similarly,

1 Baskın Oran identifies the ideal Turkish citizen as "lahasumut", an abbreviation in Turkish which stands for "Laic (secular), Hanafi (a branch of Islam), Sunni, Muslim, and Turk."

2 "Peace Be Unto You," *The Economist*, 18 August 2005, <http://www.economist.com/node/4300168>

the so-called “Kurdish Opening” process stalled after 2009, when Erdoğan faced fierce opposition and public *critique*, both from the nationalist Turks who opposed the process, and the supporters of the Kurdish movement who thought Erdoğan did not go far enough. Wanting to appear committed to mainstream Turkish voters, he refused to meet with the representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), because of their refusal to denounce the PKK as a terrorist organization. The same party was later disbanded by the constitutional court for “undermining national unity and cooperating with the PKK,” with little protest from the premier.³ This move triggered a wave of protests, and an even stronger support for Kurdish independent candidates in eastern and southeastern Anatolia in the 2011 elections, who after the campaign, were united under the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in order to bypass the ten percent election threshold (see Figure-1).⁴ More recently, the tragic *Uludere* bombing raid in December 2011, where Turkish F-16s killed approximately 34 Turkish citizens of Kurdish ethnicity along the Iraqi border, caused many to question whether the new power in Ankara was ever interested in resolving the conflict.

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Figure 1: 2002, 2007, and 2011 election results by party (% vote), Kurdish region

2002	AKP	DEHAP	2007	AKP	DTP-IND*	2011	AKP	BDP-IND*
E. Anatolia	32.2	21.4	E. Anatolia	54.6	19.4	E. Anatolia	51.5	26.7
S.E. Anatolia	27.7	26.7	S.E. Anatolia	53.1	24.4	S.E. Anatolia	51.3	32.3

Source: Adapted from Bahar, H. (2007) ‘The Real Winners and Losers of Turkey’s July 2007 elections.’ *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 11:3. Available online at <<http://www.gloria-center.org/2007/09/bahar-2007-09-07/>> (accessed on 31 October 2012).

The combination of the Erdoğan’s preferential treatment toward the AKP’s electoral base and flip-flopping on his commitments to Kurdish voters not only caused Kurds to re-evaluate the premier’s priorities, but also strengthened their commitment to their political movement. Young Kurds continue to join the PKK’s ranks, thus reigniting the conflict.

Figuring in the emergence of organized Kurdish independence movements in Iraq and Syria, Turkey’s fears of a greater Kurdistan may finally become a reality. Hence, if Erdoğan is committed to maintaining Turkey’s borders, avoiding an escalation of

3 Şebnem Arsu, “Turkey Bans Kurdish Party,” *The New York Times*, 12 December 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/12/world/europe/12istanbul.html>

4 The BDP was officially established in 2008, a year before the final verdict to ban the DTP.

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violence, and delivering on his promises of social reform, then negotiations with the PKK may be his only path. He must follow the words of Theodore Roosevelt and not simply talk, but “act big” by changing the language of the conflict and initiating discussions on constitutional reforms that can serve as a gateway to a larger public debate about the Turkish identity. Failure to accomplish these goals will likely perpetuate Turkish and Kurdish grievances for another generation and haunt Erdoğan’s increasingly tarnished legacy.

The Language of Conflict

Erdoğan, on several occasions, has admitted that the Turkish state shares responsibility for perpetuating the conflict with the Kurds, something the majority of Turks are still reticent to do. The next step is to change the language of the conflict itself, and discourage any discourse that segregates the two ethnic groups. Identification of Kurds as “Mountain Turks” was employed in the past both as a derogatory term, and as a tool to delegitimize Kurdish aspirations for equality. Stigmatizing “Bad Kurds” aimed to encourage “loyal citizens” to turn on their compatriots; describing the 30-year conflict as “The Kurdish Question”, or “The Kurdish Problem”, falsely absolves the responsibility of the state. According to Dov Friedman, “The existence of Kurds in Turkey either poses a question –a challenge– to the Turkish state, or represents an inherent problem within it. The phrasing lumps Kurds together as an undifferentiated entity, and distances them from the Turkish Republic. It also suggests that blame for the lack of resolution rests on the Kurds themselves.”⁵

Blaming the Kurds, who were identified with terrorism or political dissent by the majority of Turks, enables Ankara to justify policies that often do not discriminate between armed guerillas and disgruntled civilians. It also rejects the notion that fundamental problems exist in the constitutional definitions of Turkish (and therefore Kurdish) national identity.

In his recent address at the fourth general congress of the AKP on 30 September 2012, Erdoğan failed to present any new proposals regarding the Kurdish issue. Furthermore,

⁵ Dov Friedman, “Kurdish Issue, Turkish Problem,” *The Council of Foreign Relations*, 29 October 2012, <http://blogs.cfr.org/cook/2012/10/29/guest-post-kurdish-issueturkish-problem/>

in reference to the introduction of optional Kurdish language courses in the education system, he credited the AKP for lifting “the barriers of a Kurdish mother to speak to her baby in Kurdish,” as if it was a gift. Not only did his language reinforce an unequal relationship between Turks and Kurds, it also egregiously misevaluated Kurdish interests.⁶ Kurds prioritize recognition of their rights by the state to be able to express their identity freely, and to fully educate their children in Kurdish language.⁷ Perhaps Erdoğan was simply offering accolades to his party, but considering that the remainder of his speech levied responsibility upon Kurds to distance themselves from the PKK, it is indicative of a deep-rooted trend in Turkish governance.⁸

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The Turkish public is divided on how to solve the crisis, and confused regarding the AKP’s strategy. A recent poll indicated that only 43.9 percent of Turkish citizens believe in their military’s capacity to neutralize the PKK, and 41.6 percent believe the government should begin negotiating with the PKK to lay down their arms.⁹ Adopting new terminology that accepts both the security and identity challenges of the conflict could convince the public that the political leadership is committed to reforms. This would allow for future negotiations over the content of a new constitution that recognizes the democratic, multi-ethnic character of the Turkish society. If successful, it may reinforce the model for other Kurdish actors in the region.

Reforms and Negotiations

Critics of the AKP argue that Turkey’s democratization efforts were contingent upon the country’s accession to the European Union. Erdoğan has reinforced this claim by taking an increasingly nationalist and authoritarian tone in recent years. In his recent address at the AKP Congress, the premier made no mention of the EU, maybe a hint that hopes for accession and democracy should be put on hold. On the other hand, the AKP passed a referendum of several constitutional amendments in September 2010 in its effort to

6 Translation from the statement of Erdoğan, “*Annenin yavrusuyla Kürtçe konuşmasının önündeki engeli AK Parti açmıştır*,” in “*Erdoğan’ın Konuşmasının Tam Metni*,” [Full text of Erdoğan’s Speech], *Bugün.com.tr*, 30 September 2012, <http://politika.bugun.com.tr/erdogan-in-konusmasinin-tam-metni-haberi-207046>

7 Aliza Marcus, “Erdoğan vs. The Kurds,” *The National Interest*, 18 July 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/erdogan-vs-the-kurds-7209>

8 Şaban Kardaş, “Erdoğan’s Way: Turkish Politics in the Wake of the AKP Congress,” *The German Marshall Fund of The United States*, 10 October 2011, http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1349961320Kardas_ErdogansWay_Oct12.pdf

9 According to “Political Attitudes Survey, Part 1,” *Metropoll Strategic and Social Research Center*, September 2012, <http://www.metropoll.com.tr/>

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undo the draconian legacy of the military junta of 1980. If Erdoğan chose to include the BDP in this reform process, the partnership would help deflate the current spate of violence.

A new constitution would be subject to tremendous debate, which the AKP should encourage in order to reach a broad consensus between political factions. The

Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) published a report on the “Kurdish Problem” in 2010, highlighting several references to Turkish identity and “Turkishness” in the constitution that ought to be amended in order to reflect the heterogeneity of Turkish society. In addition, the report pointed out that laws concerning the establishment of political parties, state education, expression of non-Turkish identity, and the public use of Kurdish language must be altered.¹⁰ Many of the report’s suggestions are insightful, however reforming Turkish legislation –such as The Anti-Terror Law (TMY)– should only be done after a lengthy ceasefire and return to the negotiation table.

Although amendments to the legislation may reshape the ideological conceptualization of Turkish identity, it does not prevent PKK terrorism. In order to better guarantee a comprehensive transition, the AKP must resume negotiations with the PKK leadership in conjunction with constitutional reforms. Erdoğan is reluctant to grant amnesty to the PKK officials after the public relations nightmare he suffered in October 2009, when the release of 34 PKK militants was turned into a victory parade for the Kurdish organization. Instead, he can offer amnesty as a part of a relocation plan, similar to the arrangements made for some of the more nefarious Palestinian prisoners involved in the exchange for captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2011. As another gesture of good will, hundreds of youths who were arrested for participating in civil demonstrations could be released, and legal cases against prominent Kurdish journalists and politicians could be dropped.¹¹

Erdoğan should undertake groundbreaking initiatives in order better manage the flow of events *vis-à-vis* the Kurds. Accelerating constitutional reform will allow him to dictate the image of a new Turkey, while re-engaging in negotiations with the PKK and releasing prisoners will earn him credit among many Kurds. The process would also allow Erdoğan to develop a larger regional vision that maintains Turkish sovereignty over the Kurdish southeast.

10 “A Roadmap For a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Policy Proposals from the Region for the Government,” *Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, [Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation], 2008.

11 Michael Gunter, “The Closing of Turkey’s Kurdish Opening,” *Journal of International Affairs Online*, 20 September 2012, <http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/closing-turkey%E2%80%A9s-kurdish-opening>

Avoiding a “Greater” Kurdistan?

Soner Çağaptay argues that Erdoğan has a “crucial choice” to make: to support Kurdish aspirations for independence, or to be its most vocal opponent.¹² The third, ambiguous path that he has taken for nearly a decade has not succeeded. In recent years the AKP government has exhibited a high level of communication with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and has given limited aid to a few of the Kurdish organizations fighting Assad in Syria.^{13 14} This support has created a buffer zone between Turkey and the violence in Iraq and Syria. However, it seems that even if Erdoğan would not endorse a future Kurdish state, there may be little he could do to stop the unification of two contiguous Kurdish regions.

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And what of Turkey’s own Kurdish population? Would they support the PKK’s resurgence and advocate the decentralization of government to provide semi-autonomy for themselves, or will they seek a complete secession from the Turkish Republic à la Ireland from the United Kingdom, or would they be satisfied with constitutional reforms?

Erdoğan could choose to promote unity over separation through economic growth and opportunism. It is true that many Kurds have already migrated out of southeastern Turkey, yet a nationwide effort to improve their quality of life would reduce feelings of inferiority and the subsequent inclining toward acts of terrorism. This could be accomplished through the incorporation of NGOs, trade unions, and human rights organizations in the realization of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*) or “GAP”, incentivizing investments, partnership with Kurdish companies for the trade with the Kurdish Region of Iraq (and potentially Syria), and the inclusion of both KRG and Kurdish leadership within Turkey, in the development, maintenance, and security of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline.

As a poll conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations and Pechter Polls among Palestinians living in East Jerusalem in 2010 demonstrates, economic stability,

12 Soner Çağaptay, “Why Syria’s Fragmentation is Turkey’s Opportunity,” *The Atlantic*, 24 October 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/why-syrias-fragmentation-is-turkeys-opportunity/263890/>

13 Ankara has had difficulties dealing with the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of the PKK.
14 Kemal Avcı, “Erdoğan Adviser: Assad Provokes Turkey Through PKK and PYD,” *Rudaw in English-The Happening*, 17 August 2012, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/5102.html>

employment, and the availability of efficient government services are valued higher than the unpredictable future of independence.¹⁵ If Erdoğan is serious about the prospects of peace, then economic investment is the foundation that would allow constitutional reforms to take root and stabilize Turkey.

Conclusion

Although Erdoğan has arguably granted more civil liberties to the Kurds than any of his predecessors, rising domestic and regional tensions indicate that the Kurdish public is not satisfied with the *status quo*. To end the conflict, Erdoğan and the AKP must proactively seek radical alternatives. As such, relieving the social and economic inequalities faced by many Kurds would address core grievances, while also delivering greater security. This transition may ultimately cost Erdoğan a portion of his electoral base, but continuing to pay lip service to the Kurdish issue only encourages terrorism, and will probably lead to a similar outcome as his predecessors.

15 “The Palestinians of East Jerusalem: What Do They Really Want?,” *The Council on Foreign Relations, Pechter Middle East Polls*, 12 January 2011, <http://pechterpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Detailed-Survey-Results-on-E-Jerusalem-1-10-11-1034pm-Eastern.pdf>