

DECENTRALIZATION FOR PEACE IN TURKEY, IRAQ & SYRIA

Decentralization discussions in Turkey date back to the late 19th century, well before the republican era. However, an objective analysis of the topic remains elusive due to the Turkish state's fears of partition. In analyzing Turkey's Kurdish policies particularly since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the author highlights a critical structural contradiction: while Ankara appears to encourage further autonomy of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), it continues to view Kurdish autonomy aspirations in Turkey and Syria as existential threats that need to be quashed. According to the author, addressing long-standing Kurdish demands for decentralization through administrative reform across the Middle East is essential to pave the way for long-term stability in not just Turkey, but for the whole region.

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The Republic of Turkey is ill. The violent upheaval taking place just over the border in Iraq and Syria have laid bare the flaws in the very foundation of its present administrative structure. To keep the republic on its feet in the 21st century, structural administrative reforms must be undertaken. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) that has been governing Turkey since 2002 and publicly elected President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan can actually and/or potentially act as a stabilizing force given the fact that it has the backing of over 50 percent of voters, or the AKP may choose to leverage this strong public support to centralize power even further. The Kurdish issue highlights the need for a conversation about administrative reform, and the jury is out, but maybe not for long judging by the existential challenges Turkey faces.

Talk of decentralization may be traced back to the exiled opposition Prince Sabahaddin in the late 19th/early 20th century, and more recent examples were advanced by the Democratic Republic Program submitted to Parliament in 1996 by independent mainstream politicians Necdet Uğur and Tarhan Erdem or, even more recently, in the unfinished work of Parliament's constitution drafting committee from 2014-15. Yet, the Republic presently faces existential challenges presented not only from the implosion of Iraq and Syria and the subsequent emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), but also from the breakdown in the "peace process" between the state apparatus and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This should instill in all a sense of urgency when it comes to reinvigorating the discussion of decentralization which has essentially been shelved.

Kurds live in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Approximately half of these people are citizens of the Republic of Turkey. Apart from the two million in Syria, the remainder are more or less equally divided between Iraq and Iran. All four segments have different grievances as each of these four countries have different historical backgrounds and currently utilize different practical political structures. It is essential to study these differences and to explore whether decentralization in general will soon be the norm and a *panacea* for the woes of Kurds in these countries. There is also a structural contradiction in Ankara's policies as the Turkish government seems to be encouraging further autonomy of the federal Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) while fiercely resisting it in Turkey and Syria.

Of the four countries with Kurdish populations, Kurds have acquired an "official constitutional collective status" by acceding to their own semi-autonomous region only in Iraq. This occurred in 2003 even though the region's internal borders are "disputed," for they are not agreed upon legally by the Iraqi Parliament. However, following ISIL's attack on Erbil during the summer of 2015 and its subsequent

repulse, the KRI extended the territory it effectively controls militarily to what is considered to be permanent natural geographical borders including oil rich Kirkuk. KRI President Masoud Barzani gave instructions to start preparations for an official referendum on independence. Ankara remained silent about these developments, thus hinting at tacit approval.

Furthermore, the Turkish Energy Ministry announced a bid for the construction of a gas pipeline that will connect the national pipeline network to the Iraqi border. Iraqi Kurdistan's gas potential with its volume and geographical proximity appears to be the best alternative to Russian and Iranian gas, which Turkey currently depends on, but tensions have increased with both of these countries due to conflicting policies, especially in Syria. Even though

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steps are being taken to get the infrastructure ready on the Turkish side of the border within two years, the fate of this deal hinges crucially on financing and also on a legal stamp of approval from Baghdad, which will inevitably mean Iraqi Kurdistan moves closer to severing its ties with Iraq.

Whereas, in Syria, Kurds established a de facto “tri-cantonal” administration abutting the Syrian-Turkish frontier called “Rojava” (meaning “West” in Kurdish). It consists of a strip on the border including the cantons of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, from west to east respectively. After pushing back ISIL out of Kobani again in the summer of 2015, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the main Syrian Kurdish militia outfit affiliated with the PKK, managed to connect the easternmost canton with the central one to achieve partial geographic contiguity. Kurdish forces under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces then crossed the Euphrates to the west on through the Tishrin Dam and are currently poised to take the essentially Kurdish populated town of Manbij. It looks like Afrin might be connected to Kobani through a corridor via Azaz and then Manbij to the south of the Turkish border.

In Turkey, after the June 7 parliamentary elections, the PKK declared the end of a de facto two-year ceasefire, and the government responded with security and military measures that can, even in the best light, be described as severe, and at the worst, disproportionate. At first appearing to be rather reluctant, Turkish Armed Forces

together with the Police Special Operations branch entered towns and cities with armored units. This was a military move not seen since the 1990s, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of the inhabitants of these southeastern towns.

In his New Year's address, President Erdoğan said, "3,100 terrorists have been killed since the beginning of the summer" while in early January Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu told AKP MPs that "operations will continue unabated." In response to this violent armed conflict and civilian unrest, the Kurdish political umbrella organization the Democratic Society Congress unveiled a 14-point "self-administration" plan (suggesting decentralization) in Diyarbakır to be discussed in the Turkish Parliament, and was almost immediately crucified for advocating a formal partition of Turkey.

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Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that a dispassionate analysis and discussion of decentralization has proven to be rather elusive if not impossible in Turkey. Yet, beginning that discussion now will be very timely and this must be emphasized. To this end, it may be useful to start by studying the motives of the Turkish government's

foreign policy, which appears to be encouraging rather than opposing the push for autonomy for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. It should be noted that the gap between Ankara's mantra-like foreign policy rhetoric of "national unity and territorial integrity" in Iraq compared with its actions on the ground is increasingly widening to the point of contradiction. At the same time, it may also be seen as proof that the potential for the AKP government to take rational action is there when push comes to shove.

Turkey opened its General Consulate in Erbil on 10 March 2010. Since then, the KRI president and prime minister have paid numerous visits to Turkey. On his last visit, President Barzani was received by his counterparts in Ankara with the Iraqi Kurdistan flag on full display at the Presidential Palace, at the headquarters of the National Intelligence Service (MIT), and the Army Special Forces. The tailor-made Turkish Energy Company (TEC) has partnered with Exxon in oil fields not only in Iraqi Kurdistan proper but also in the so-called "disputed" territories. Turkish Airlines has begun to operate three regular flights to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, three so-called Islamic banks have opened branches, a trade attaché was assigned to the Consulate, which started distributing long-term multiple entry visas free of charge

and real investment has started trickling in. During his terms as prime minister, Erdoğan paid the first-ever official visit to Erbil in Turkey's and Iraq's history.

Since the mid-1990s Turkish Armed Forces have maintained an armored battalion at Bamerne, elements of that tank battalion at Amadiya and Suri, and a commando battalion at Kanimasi, together with 130 special forces based in Erbil, Selahaddin, Zakho, Dohuk, Batufa, Sulaymaniyah, and Amadiya as liaison teams. The *peshmerga* received training from the Turkish army in Dohuk, Erbil, and Diana. In Bashiqa, 20 km north of Mosul, around 80 Turkish Special Forces personnel have trained mostly Sunni Arabs, but also some

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Turkmen and *peshmerga* units for over a year. Presently a 400-strong commando detachment supported by 25 M60A3 tanks has brought the number of Turkish military personnel at that camp up to approximately 600. With the reinforcement of the Bashiqa training camp, the number of uniformed Turkish personnel in Iraq has risen to about 3,000.

The KRG ramped up independent oil exports to more than 600,000 barrels per day through the new pipeline via Ceyhan in Turkey. But with the price of crude down from over 100 dollars two years ago to under 30 dollars today, it is still left with a monthly deficit of 717 million dollars. Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said that the KRI has been abandoned by the entire world in its war against ISIL. It remains yet to be seen whether Ankara will rush to the rescue of the KRG. If it does, this move should dissipate whatever doubts remain concerning Turkey's support for the KRI's increased autonomy, which is just shy of independence.

Simultaneously in Turkey, President Erdoğan reiterated that there will be no more peace talks with either the PKK directly nor with the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) indirectly. On Syria, Davutoğlu declared that the Kurds' main political organization, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), should not be allowed to take part in the Geneva-III peace talks as part of the opposition. Meanwhile, a new constitution drafting committee was formed in the Parliament with equal participation from all four parties present, however on 16 February 2016 CHP left the committee, citing its objections over the AKP's attempts to strengthen the presidency. All of this is to

say that there is no silver lining on the horizon for a meaningful decentralization discussion. The single exceptional evidence to the contrary remains Ankara's special relation with Erbil.

“Decentralization through administrative reform is the solution for the Kurdish question in Turkey and its immediate neighborhood.”

The dominant mentality in Ankara is and has always been to see legislation as regulation. On the other hand, the politicization of the Kurdish issue was always seen as the mother of all problems by the establishment. Therefore, it proved impossible to consider decentralization as mere administrative reform. It almost always entailed the imagined partition of the country and the end of the Republic

as we know it. Events on the ground in Iraq and in Syria also forced Ankara's hand. Since 2003, the oft-repeated “territorial integrity and national unity” foreign policy mantra crystallized in the slogan-like talking point “one Iraq” actually reflected the fear of unfolding developments on the ground concerning the Iraqi Kurds triggering a chain reaction among Kurds in Turkey. At the same time, it exposed a burgeoning conflict between the newly-elected AKP's activist near-abroad foreign policy ambitions and the establishment's orthodox Westphalian approach. The AKP has also willingly or unwillingly brought the military's inherited primacy over Kurdish issues into question.

Before the Arab Spring, there was no apparent structural contradiction in the AKP's overall Kurdish policies: the government courted Assad, pursued economy-based rapprochement with Iraqi Kurdistan, and initiated a peace process with the PKK. But once the Arab Spring hit Syria in 2011, and peace talks with the PKK unraveled following the June 7 parliamentary elections in Turkey, relations with the KRI remained the single bright spot. Administrative reform was put on the back burner, and the debate on the drafting of a new constitution centered on the issue of moving from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. Although there exists no draft text on which to base an argument, the ardent rhetoric from Erdoğan has led many observers to believe that the AKP aims to centralize power rather than delegate it to prospective regions.

The KRI is going bankrupt or is already bankrupt, and as a federal region dependent upon Baghdad, is unable to either borrow or print money. Turkey must make a strategic decision and provide the KRG with the necessary funds. On the Syrian peace talks, Turkey adamantly opposed the participation of the PYD in the Geneva-III peace

negotiations. Inside Turkey, security operations are winding down, the government has declared a transition to the rebuilding phase but the tension is palpable, so with the snow melt in late March-early April, renewed and wider armed conflict may be expected in rural areas. This will be the backdrop of the constitution drafting effort.

For Turkey to find a healthy outcome to its present regional challenges and its own Kurdish issue, level-headed statesmanship is essential. It is the nature of peace talks with armed organizations like the PKK to remain secret. Yet, fundamental rights like education in Kurdish are part of legislation, not secret negotiations. Administrative reform is part and parcel of drafting a new constitution for Turkey. Global demands for better governance and for better democracy overlap with the Kurdish question. Half of the world's Kurds are Turkish citizens, and like the rest of the citizens of the country, they are demanding more agency (participation in the decision-making process), more proximity (for administration to be physically nearer the administrated) and more accountability (to know the representative to hold accountable for deeds that affect citizens' lives).

Achieving these objectives means administrative reform for a more decentralized system with more power delegated to elected representatives of the Republic's citizens rather than officials appointed by the capital. In brief, a leaner state is needed to allow leeway for governing instead of business-as-usual governance. Shorter administrative lines will mean more efficient governance. More direct democracy will mean more satisfied citizens. All of that will re-energize Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. In brief, decentralization through administrative reform is the solution for the Kurdish question in Turkey and its immediate neighborhood.