

FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITOR

Turkey's Kurdish conundrum has interconnected domestic and regional dimensions, both of which have flared up in an unprecedented manner over the past year. On one hand, the collapse of a two-and-a-half year ceasefire in July 2015 between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an internationally recognized terrorist organization, has plunged the country's southeast into the worst outbreak of violence since the peak of conflict in the 1990s. This has been coupled by the failure to address longstanding Kurdish demands for comprehensive linguistic rights and greater regional autonomy, which continues to be a point of contention for Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. On the other hand, the rise of PKK-affiliated groups – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) – as dominant Kurdish forces in northern Syria and key allies in the coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), has sparked Turkish fears that the PYD's success in consolidating territory will kindle greater PKK-aligned Kurdish ambitions across the region.

Adding to the weight of challenges that Turkey currently faces are rapidly unfolding developments in the Syrian conflict, the increased threat of terrorism after a string of suicide bombings in Ankara and Istanbul, the deterioration of Russia-Turkey relations following the downing of a Russian fighter jet, and growing tension with Washington over the status of the PYD/YPG.

The US-Russia deal on the “cessation of hostilities” in Syria, which went into effect on 27 February 2016, is the latest diplomatic effort to curb the conflict engulfing the region and may indicate a breakthrough in peace efforts. However, the precariousness of the agreement, the divergent interests of the relevant parties, and Turkey's reservations about the PYD's role, raise serious concerns about the future of the ceasefire.

In this issue of Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ), our authors carefully consider the vortex of catalysts that have inflamed the Kurdish issue – the Syrian quagmire, ISIL terrorism, political polarization in Turkey – and their wider implications for both regional stability and the trajectory of the current conflict in Syria. Our authors underscore the need to revive the Turkey-PKK peace process, which will prevent further setbacks to a coordinated fight against ISIL, as well as initiate a broader effort to bridge Turkish and Kurdish concerns.

True to TPQ's time-honored tradition, especially in covering sensitive issues, we strive to present our readers with a wide range of views from influential players of

different ideological leanings and political convictions. Unfortunately, in Turkey's climate of increasing self-censorship and political polarization, and despite our resolute efforts to represent their views, in this issue we are missing key perspectives, from the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) and two of the opposition parties, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The dwindling scope of debate and their collective silence on an issue with serious ramifications for Turkey's long-term stability do not augur well for the success of an inclusive politician-led process to resolve the Kurdish question, or for the democratic trajectory of the country.

Gülseren Onaç, a member of the Party Assembly of the Republican People's Party (CHP), provides an overview of the situation in the embattled urban cities of Turkey's southeast while underscoring the urgency of halting the government's military measures and finding an inclusive political solution to the Turkey-PKK conflict. Onaç, who has also organized two civic initiatives, namely *Women's Solidarity for Peace (WSP)* and *Life Is What Matters (Aslolan Hayattır)*, argues that the AKP's punitive approach towards the HDP, including attempts to strip HDP MPs of their parliamentary immunity, is counter-productive to the revival of peace talks. She elaborates on other important challenges that need to be overcome in the political sphere, including the AKP's efforts to further centralize power through the strengthening of the presidency, increasing polarization, the severe lack of trust between political parties, and the loss of the EU anchor. Viewing the EU-Turkey refugee deal through a critical lens, Onaç argues that by prioritizing security over democratic values, the EU is setting a dangerous precedent in its future relations with Turkey. Onaç concludes that the CHP will continue to fight for the fundamental democratic values that face serious threats in Turkey, and will seek to bridge important differences in Parliament with regard to the Kurdish issue.

The concept of decentralization and regional self-governance are themes that run through several of the articles in this issue of TPQ. Former Consul General of Turkey in Erbil from 2010 to 2013 and currently an independent analyst, Aydın Selcen elaborates on this concept arguing that long-term stability in Turkey and throughout the Middle East will remain elusive without efforts to establish systems that are more open to power-sharing for the region's populations. Focusing on Turkey's dualist Kurdish policies which have become particularly pronounced after the failure of the Arab Spring revolts, Selcen opines that Ankara is encouraging autonomy for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), while fiercely resisting it in Turkey and Syria. In Turkey, Selcen notes that the government's rhetoric reveals a commitment to further centralizing power, rather than delegating it to prospective regions. Selcen concludes by emphasizing the need to revive the debate on decentralization through

administrative reform, and allow for a democratic delegation of power that accepts the legitimacy of localized Kurdish political demands.

Henri Barkey, Director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC, evaluates the growing discord between the US and Turkey over the conflict in Syria. At the crux of the issue, argues Barkey, is the role of the PYD in Syria, which has bolstered its international legitimacy as the most effective ally in the US-led coalition against ISIL, but which Turkey considers to be an extension of the PKK, and therefore a terrorist group. Turkish fears revolve around the PYD/YPG's ambitions for territorial expansion in northern Syria; it particularly seeks to prevent the PYD from uniting the three autonomous cantons under its control into a contiguous territory along Turkey's southern flank, explains Barkey. However, Ankara's uncompromising approach, going as far as challenging the US to choose between Turkey and the PYD, is brinkmanship without purpose, argues Barkey, because it only exacerbates divisions to the benefit of their joint adversaries.

Also addressing US-Turkey relations in the context of the war in Syria and its implications for Kurdish politics in Turkey, Tolga Tanış, *Hürriyet* newspaper's Washington correspondent, assesses the factors that contributed to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's major foreign policy pivot in late July 2015 to establish greater security cooperation with the US and open its airbases to the anti-ISIL coalition. Tanış highlights two important turning points leading up to this pivotal moment: the June 7 parliamentary elections which resulted in a historic electoral victory for the pro-Kurdish HDP and denied Erdoğan a parliamentary majority for the first time in 12 years, and the victory of the PYD/YPG against ISIL in the Syrian-Turkish border town, Tal Abyad. Tanış notes that the confluence of the PYD's growing international importance as a successful coalition ally in the fight against ISIL, and HDP's achievements in the domestic sphere were interpreted by Erdoğan as a threat to his oft-voiced political agenda to transform the country from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. These developments ultimately drove Erdoğan to open Turkey's airbases as leverage over the US and as a bulwark against Kurdish advances, claims Tanış.

While the breakdown of the Kurdish peace process has been a significant blow to the promising steps taken by both Turkey and the PKK towards a resolution of the conflict, Michael Gunter, a professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University in the US, argues that it is not "back to square one." On the contrary, the conflict has entered new territory by virtue of the institutionalization of the Kurdish issue in Turkish politics, which was cemented by the HDP's success in becoming

the first pro-Kurdish party to clear the 10 percent election threshold and gain seats in Parliament. Furthermore, Dr. Gunter suggests that the regionalization and internationalization of the conflict have raised the stakes for all of the states and groups involved more than at any other time over the course of the 30-year conflict.

Further elaborating on the resumption of Turkey-PKK clashes, Nigar Göksel and Berkay Mandıracı, Senior Turkey Analyst and Turkey Researcher respectively with the International Crisis Group (ICG), provide context for the complex web of dynamics surrounding the collapse of the peace process, the security environment in the southeast, and the regional implications of the conflict spilling over into northern Syria. While the talks between Turkey and the PKK marked progress towards the resolution of the conflict, Göksel and Mandıracı point out that due to a lack of trust both sides were preparing for a military confrontation should negotiations fail. The authors highlight that Turkey's reluctance to aid in the defense of Kobani was an important turning point that galvanized the mistrust between the governing AKP and the PKK, and drew the ire of many Turkish Kurds. Underscoring the urgency of returning to the negotiating table, the authors outline the parameters of what should be a two-track peace process: the enforcement of a monitored ceasefire and the resumption of peace talks, and a Parliamentary-led process that addresses the longstanding rights-related demands of Turkey's Kurdish-speaking population.

Through a military strategy lens, Metin Gürcan, columnist for *Al-Monitor* and a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Bilkent University, analyzes the post November 1 election power struggle between the AKP and the PKK in juxtaposition to the peak of the violent Turkey-PKK conflict in the 1990s. In a political environment where both the AKP and the PKK are feeling empowered due to their perceived international importance in relation to current dynamics in Syria, there is less incentive for either side to de-escalate, Gürcan notes. He also highlights several changing characteristics, including the sphere of clashes moving from rural areas to urban spaces, the involvement of PKK youth militias, the use of proxies by the PKK, and the increasing importance of the regional context, which denote a new volatile phase in the conflict. He explains that the current status of the clashes is in limbo between insurgency and terrorism, and therefore Ankara should alter its enemy-centric approach employing counter terrorism tactics and instead adopt a hybrid approach that focuses on winning the hearts and minds of the population affected by the conflict.

In his article, Namo Abdulla, Washington Bureau Chief for *Rudaw News Network*, provides an overview of how the rise of ISIL has provided a platform for the promotion of Kurdish nationalism. Abdulla points out that the disintegration of the

Sykes-Picot borders – which left the Kurds as one of the largest ethnic minorities under assimilationist rule in the aftermath of World War I – and the current context in Syria are creating an unprecedented opportunity for Kurds in both Iraq and Syria to assert their right to self-determination. Abdulla characterizes Kurdish gains as being both domestic and international: in the KRI, the *peshmerga*'s instrumental role in combating ISIL has emboldened Masoud Barzani's government both at home and abroad while the central Baghdad government has grown weaker; and in Syria, the PYD is widely regarded as the anti-ISIL coalition's most successful partner on the ground. Abdulla concludes that while the emergence of ISIL has brought devastation to the Kurds in Iraq and Syria and rolled back the democratic process in the KRI, Kurds are closer than they have been in a century to independence.

In approaching the Kurdish question, Süha Atatüre, an Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at Nişantaşı University in Istanbul, presents a theoretical reflection on the interplay between the hegemony of the nation-state and its social forces. Dr. Atatüre explains that the 20th century model of the nation-state, which placed a premium on social cohesiveness and cultural homogeneity, is undergoing a transformation in the 21st century with the emergence of the democratic state. However, according to Atatüre, tension is growing between the emboldened citizenry of the 21st century and states that are trapped in the ideological rigidity of the 20th-century conception of nationalism. This tension is particularly reflected in the dynamics between nation-states and their minority populations, asserts Atatüre. Therefore, in order to solve social issues in the 21st century, including the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Atatüre argues that states need two key elements: political will to solve social and ethnic problems and theoretical consciousness that is grounded in the realities of the present day.

Christina Bache Fidan, a Research Fellow at the Center for International and European Studies (CIES) at Kadir Has University and a founding member of Women in Foreign Policy, an Istanbul-based initiative to improve women's participation in foreign policymaking, assesses the growing diplomatic and economic relationship between Turkey and the KRI over the past decade. Fidan points out that following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Ankara began to change its policy towards the KRI from one based on enmity to one based on strategic friendship, which was motivated by the influence of regional factors as well as economic considerations. Since the mid-2000s, the bilateral economic and trade links between the KRI and Turkey have been steadily increasing and Fidan notes that there is a robust Turkish presence in key sectors inside the KRI such as infrastructure and construction, banking, and energy resources. Touching on the human security dimension in the KRI, Fidan argues that it is under threat from a number of converging forces – the existential threat of

ISIL, the rapid decline in global oil prices, Baghdad's refusal to disperse 17 percent of its federal budget to the KRG, the burden of hosting approximately two million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees – all of which are putting immense economic pressure on the KRG's capacity to provide basic services to both its refugee population and its own citizens.

Within the scope of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" strategy, preventing divergences over foreign policy issues from spilling into bilateral relations has been the guiding principle behind Turkey's dealings with both Russia and Iran. However, developments in Syria have led to a breakdown in Russia-Turkey relations and may also be stretching the limits of Turkish-Iranian cooperation. Majid Rafizadeh, an Iranian-American political scientist and a Harvard University scholar, assesses the changing dynamics of the Turkey-Iran relationship, making the argument that it is increasingly becoming defined by three concentric focuses – the KRI, the Syrian civil war, and the regional economic landscape – which taken together render Turkey and Iran odd bedfellows. Ultimately, Rafizadeh argues that while competition for influence in the KRI and the support of different factions in Syria pit the two powers against each other in regional conflicts, close economic ties and trade relations remain strong incentives to avoid confrontation or the escalation of conflict for both sides.

Pantelis Touloumakos, a Research Associate at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, evaluates Turkey's increasingly frustrated Syrian policy in light of the geostrategic empowerment of the PYD/YPG. He argues that Turkey's main fear is that the PYD, which maintains close ideological alignment with the PKK, will carve out their own proto-state in contiguous territories next to Turkey's border, thereby prompting further assertiveness from Turkey's restive Kurdish population. While Ankara has responded with serious concern to PYD/YPG's expansion, the author also highlights that the PYD/YPG's value to the anti-ISIL coalition poses a limitation to Ankara's attempt to sideline its role in future negotiations for a transition in Syria. Touloumakos, who is also a PhD candidate at the University of Athens, asserts that Turkey's downing of the Russian jet on 24 November 2015 was an attempt to push for a no-fly zone in Syria, which Ankara views as crucial to halting PYD advances in northern Syria.

Since the release of our Fall 2015 issue, we have featured four blog posts in line with our effort to provide TPQ readers with analyses on topical issues as they develop. Our blog contributors commented on a range of topics, from the normalization of Turkey-Israel relations with an emphasis on energy cooperation prospects, to

Turkey-EU relations and the breakdown of relations between Turkey and Russia. We continue to welcome blog submissions from our readers.

With this Winter issue, we are delighted to welcome a new volunteer, Emel Dilek, who will be joining TPQ as a marketing and business development specialist. As someone with a talent for facilitating creative marketing partnerships and sponsorships – she has recently established partnerships with Contemporary Istanbul, Turkish Bankers Association of the UK, Cornucopia Magazine, Istanbul Guide, and has been a long-time supporter of the American Turkish Society – Emel brings a wealth of experience to the TPQ team. We are also happy to announce that we have established a partnership with the Turkish Banker’s Association – United Kingdom. On April 16th, members of the TPQ team will attend their 19th annual Turkish Bankers Ball and journal hardcopies will be distributed there.

We are deeply saddened by the unexpected loss of Mustafa Koç, the Chairman of Koç Holding, on 21 January 2016. Mustafa Koç was deeply committed to establishing a better future for Turkey, both through education and vocational training, which created jobs for tens of thousands of people across the country. He not only contributed significantly to Turkey’s economy, but supported social development while remaining dedicated to universal democratic values. We knew him as a steadfast friend and supporter of TPQ, and we are truly grateful for his dedication to the advancement of intellectual discussion in Turkey and its neighborhood.

We would like to extend a special thanks to the premium sponsor of this issue: BP Turkey. We appreciate the continuing support of our other corporate sponsors: Akbank, Beko, Borusan Oto/BMW, Esen Yacht, Finansbank, Generali, Monaco Tourism Authority, Odea Bank, STFA, TEB, and Turcas Petrol. We are particularly grateful to Kadir Has University for its generous support, and our media partners *Hürriyet Daily News* and *Natural Gas Europe* for the outreach they have provided.

As always, we thank the authors of this issue for sharing their expertise and insights, and welcome feedback from our readers.

Süreya Martha Köprülü