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Erdoğan, Turkey's Kurds and the Regionalisation of the Kurdish Issue

Anthony Derisiotis*

Abstract

The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government in Turkey was committed from the very beginning of its rule to address the longstanding Kurdish issue in a conciliatory approach rather than a confrontational one, rejecting the Kemalist governments' dead-end conflict policies. However, the collapse of the Peace Process in September 2014, which followed the spill-over of the Syrian Civil War and the developments related to the Kurdish town of Kobane in northern Syria, have marked the end of this particular attempt to solve the Kurdish issue, probably ending any potential productive dialogue between AKP and the militant Kurds. The aim of this article is to study the AKP government policy towards Turkey's Kurdish population, from the early and ambitious years, all the way to the Kurdish referendum in Iraq and the effects of the regionalisation of Turkey's Kurdish issue. There are two questions to be addressed: To what extent is the Syria War to blame for the failure and the subsequent shift of the government's policy to the old, confrontational approach? How much of this could be a predetermined political decision, related to Ankara's internal politics, rendering the process Turkey's Kurds expendable?

Keywords: Erdoğan; Turkey; Kurds; Regionalisation; Kurdish Issue; Syria; PYD; AKP; KRG

Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, with the commitment to address the longstanding Kurdish issue in Turkey, employing a conciliatory approach rather than the Kemalist confrontational approach. A Turkish government that commits to end the – otherwise dead-end – conflict policies towards the Kurds should be considered as nothing less than ground-breaking but for the majority of the Turks, given the armed conflict with the PKK since 1984, also provocative and controversial.

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was followed by a nation-building project, since the Turkish-nationalist elite, the Kemalists as they were named after the founder of the republic, regarded the diverse society inherited by the Ottoman Empire as an obstacle to progress and westernisation, therefore deemed that only a homogenous and secular nation-state would be successful in reaching the contemporary level of civilisation (Zeydanlıoğlu 2009: 78-79). Subsequently, they steered towards the creation of a national

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identity, based on the Turkish language and culture and through the elimination of ethnic and religious differences. This forced homogenisation was clearly stated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk during the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925:

Our duty is to immediately Turkify those within the territories of the Turkish national homeland. We will extirpate any elements who may oppose the Turks and Turkism. The quality we seek in those who would serve the country is first and foremost that he be a Turk and Turkist (Ozsoy 2013: 105).

A few years later, İsmet İnönü elaborated:

We are frankly nationalists and nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. In the face of a Turkish majority, other elements have no kind of influence. Our duty is to Turkify non-Turks in the Turkish homeland no matter what happens. We will destroy those elements that oppose Turks or Turkism (Zeydanlıoğlu 2009: 78-9).

The same rhetoric is present in several other statements of that period of time and is particular of the Turkification process that has started with the Armenians in 1915, continued with the Greeks in 1923 and by 1925 it targeted the Kurds. As Sir George Clerk, the British Ambassador in Turkey noted in 1927, the government has begun to apply to the Kurdish element the policy which so successfully disposed of the Armenian minority in 1915. “[I]t is a curious trick of fate that the Kurds, who were the principal agent employed for the deportation of Armenians, should be in danger of suffering the same fate as the Armenians only twelve years later” (McDowall 2000: 200). Indeed, the state tried to solve the issue through compulsory re-settlement during the 1930s. From then on, government politics perceived the issue as a social clash between the past and the present and after the 1950s it underlined regional economic underdevelopment in the southeast (Yeğen 2011: 69-71). As McDowall (2000: 404) has pointed out, the burgeoning Kurdish national movement in the 1980s was borne by economic deprivation, the social injustice and the physical displacement of the 1940s and 1950s, together with ideas of ethnic identity, all of which combined in the late 1970s to create conditions for revolt (McDowall 2000: 404). Up to the 1990s, the Kurdish question, according to Ömer Faruk Gençkaya, remained a “socio-economic problem of underdevelopment enhanced by the feudal structure” (Gençkaya 1994: 187-189).

In a number of cases, Turkish governments focused on foreign incitement, arguing that the Kurds’ discontent was actually provoked by foreign powers, each time blaming external actors it perceived as threats. Under this hypothesis, one realises that from one period to another, the foreign element blamed for provoking the Kurds has been changing. For example, during World War I, Turkey fought against Britain and in the ensuing War of Independence, the Turkish National Movement and London served opposing interests; also, Ankara blamed Britain for the substantial territorial losses suffered by the Ottoman Empire in between 1913 and 1918, therefore it was Britain to be blamed for the 1925 Kurdish Rebellion. This view was also expressed in the Court of Independence verdict. During the Cold War, Turkey joined NATO and stood against the Soviet Union, so the communists were to blame for the Kurdish unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. In the post-Cold War period, it was the US to be blamed, since many people perceived the Washington-backed establishment of

the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq as an agitation of the Kurdish question (Yeğen 2011: 72). Furthermore, successive Turkish governments have blamed foreign involvement in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) issue, implicating Israel, the US and the EU, despite the PKK's classification as a terrorist organisation by the latter two (Derisiotis 2013: 661-662). In recent years, Ankara, since the collapse of the Solution Process (*Çözüm Süreci*) in 2014, has pointed the finger towards the US and the EU for "supporting terrorists" in Syria, citing the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)/People's Protection Units (YPG).

Consequently, this homogenisation process of the Turkish nation-state has led to the denial of ethnic difference, but failed to curb Kurdish nationalism. The Kemalist regime enforced an assimilation process and oppressed the Kurds until 1991, when Özal ended the 1983 ban on speaking Kurdish in public¹ and Süleyman Demirel declared in his Diyarbakır speech, that Turkey recognised the Kurdish reality (Waldman and Çalışkan 2017: 173). The PKK, by that time, has evolved from an organisation that engaged in limited urban warfare in the 1970s, to a bigger and more complicated entity in the 1980s, which consequently spread in neighbouring countries, expanding its operations on Turkish soil in the process. It was evident that neither side was ready to settle through means of political negotiation and compromise. Both the PKK and the state expanded the conflict, which eventually stretched throughout the 1990s. It is important to note, that despite the traditional Kemalist approach, Presidents Özal and Demirel managed to produce some impact in the political view of the Kurdish issue, by initiating an early debate within the Turkish society.

The PKK leader Öcalan's arrest in Kenya and Turkey's EU candidacy in 1999, spurred substantial changes, on the one hand in the Kurdish movement and within the PKK, on the other hand, in Turkish politics. The detained leader renounced the goal of national independence in favour of a politics of "free and equal unity of Kurds and Turks in a Democratic Republic", asked the PKK to restructure itself towards peace-building and called on the state to prepare conditions for disarmament and peace negotiations (Ozsoy 2013: 106). The EU Helsinki Summit in December 1999 granted Turkey candidacy status, dictating a set of political reforms as a prerequisite for full membership, some of which would favour the Kurdish cause. As Turkey placed itself under strong European pressure and the EU accession prospect, the outgoing government passed through parliament a reform package in June 2002, dictated by the EU as a prerequisite for full membership, which gave the Kurds limited Kurdish language broadcasting and instruction rights. Thus, one could argue that the Kurds were *de facto* recognised as a separate ethnic group, terminating the "mountain Turks" discursive label that was used since 1925, denying them national differentiation.

The AKP's Approach towards the Kurdish Issue

Initially, the AKP adopted reconciliatory rhetoric to address the Kurdish issue and approached it under a different context, possibly also due to the outright failure of the Kemalist denial and forced assimilation policy. However, it did not sever itself completely from the Kemalist parameters. Instead, its rhetoric included frequent references to the "southeast" and to keywords such as "terror", "foreign incitement" and "underdevelopment", while it also admitted that economic development alone would not suffice to resolve the issue and suggested recognising the cultural differences of Turkish citizens (Yeğen 2015: 4). But it

was only well after 2002 that substantial change was possible. At its 8th party congress, the PKK went through transformation, adopting a new name and a new, moderate objective, aiming at cooperation with the Turkish government instead of full Kurdish independence. In the meantime, although the AKP came into power in 2002, it only committed to address the Kurdish issue in 2005, under the argument that rather than being an issue of nationalism, it was a problem caused by the forced secularism and the Turkish nationalism imposed by the Kemalist ideology (Yavuz and Özcan 2006: 13). The solution to that would be to put an end to the security context that the Kemalist governments have applied religiously, in favour of a softer approach adopted by the AKP, that would include stressing on common Islamic ties and brotherhood, thus promote an end to the conflict (Yavuz 2009: 173-4).

Erdoğan and the Alternative Approach: Declarations and Initiatives

Traditionally, the Kurdish issue in Turkey has been perceived within the security context, as far as the Kemalist-party governments were concerned. The Kemalist rule was after a secular, Turkish nation-state, something that was rejected by the Kurds from the early days of the Turkish Republic. The AKP in the early years adopted a relatively softer attitude towards the Kurdish issue, in contrast to the secular hardliners that have dominated Turkish politics up to 2002. Then Prime Minister Erdoğan, with his landmark speech in Diyarbakır, on 12 August 2005, marked the first time in modern Turkish history where a state leader admitted that Turkey had mishandled the Kurds. He also stressed that the answer to the Kurds' long-running grievances was more democracy, rather than more repression and that the Kurdish problem could not be solved through purely military means ("Peace be upon to you" 2005). His bold move was the first ever attempt to initiate a vis-a-vis approach to the Kurdish question, since the PKK terminated its cease-fire in 2004, and was met by strong criticism from the Kemalist and the nationalist opposition, the Kurds and the nationalist side of the AKP. He suggested that the common religious bonds between Turks and Kurds, and the democratisation process would provide solutions to the problem. Erdoğan invested in a Muslim solidarity approach, in order to tackle Kurdish nationalism and in the process, his party benefited from this anti-establishment image and drew substantial Kurdish support in the 2007 general election and the constitutional referendum.² Six months later Diyarbakır sunk in chaos, after riots erupted during the funerals of 4 PKK members.

However, the AKP's rhetoric proved meaningless and Erdoğan's promising declarations rather superficial, since the government was very slow in implementing even the ethnic-linguistic rights to the Kurds that have been voted from the outgoing coalition government in 2002. Despite the legalisation of Kurdish broadcasting, the removal of all restrictions became possible only in 2009, while political propaganda during election campaigns in languages other than Turkish, was legalised only in April 2010. Turkey's Kurds, by that time, have lost their faith in the AKP, switched to the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP)³ for the 2009 local elections at the expense of AKP and boycotted the 2010 referendum, underlining also the fact that the new constitution did not mention that Kurds exist in Turkey ("Erdogan pulls it off" 2010).

During the same period, the PKK, also, went through radical changes, as it opted for a more peaceful profile and rather than seeking independence, it proclaimed a commitment to

non-violent activities – mainly negotiations with the Turkish government – in support of Kurdish rights. To emphasise its new perspective, it changed its name to Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) at the organisation's 8th party conference in April 2002. Furthermore, in November 2003 it was renamed People's Congress of Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel), thus, as Akkaya and Jongerden have written, distancing itself from nationalistic and state-building goals, in favour of creating a political structure to work within the existing nation-states (2010: 149). Nevertheless, it continued to refuse disarmament, maintaining its ability to carry out military operations. During 2002 it did not conduct any attacks; however, it periodically issued threats of resuming violence if the conditions of Öcalan's imprisonment were not improved. Kongra-Gel called off the 1999 ceasefire in June 2004, blaming the Turkish security forces and by 2005 its original name was restored.

The 2009 Government Initiative

The AKP government launched a new initiative in the summer of 2009, which was dictated by a number of factors, including the closer economic cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds (James 2009) that was crowned by the opening of a Turkish consulate in Erbil (Calderwood 2011), Ahmed Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbours policy" that led to improved relations with Syria and Iran, the Ergenekon scandal that has somewhat politically weakened the armed forces and the 2009 local elections setback in the southeast for the AKP, that was interpreted as an early warning for the government that the Kurds were expecting much more. The initiative included a reform and reconciliation process, wide-ranging amnesty for PKK rebels, public instruction in Kurdish and was linked to the 2010 referendum on the basis of a new, more democratic constitution. It is rather interesting that the Chief of the General Staff, General İlker Başbuğ, acknowledged in 2009 the right of Turkish citizens to have "sub" or a "secondary" identity, in addition to being Turkish (Barkey 2015: 5).

Public support towards the initiative was weak in the beginning and there was strong criticism even within the government's own constituencies, despite the nationwide popularity of the Erdoğan administration (Somer & Liaras 2010: 162). The government aimed at PKK's disarmament, peace and economic development in the east and southeast provinces. It succeeded in triggering serious debates on the Kurdish issue, but brought forward scepticism, especially from the nationalist opposition parties and from the pro-Kurdish DTP, all of which denounced the initiative. As far as the Kurds were concerned, there were two developments that undermined Ankara's initiative. Firstly, the April 2009 prosecution of fifty-three Kurds, including mayors and local politicians from the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), lawyers, activists and trade union members, plus another fifty of the same profile between June 2009 and February 2010, for being leaders or members of the Communities Union of Kurdistan (KCK).⁴ Secondly, was the exclusion of the Kurds' principal demands from the constitutional reform package, among which were the recognition of the right to mother tongue education, the redefinition of citizenship and the decentralisation of Turkey's administrative system (Kurban 2014: 354). On December 2009, the Constitutional Court, still under the Kemalist influence, closed down the DTP.

The Kurdish demands seemed to have had little impact within the religious and conservative elites. As far as sympathy towards pluralism is concerned, the

religious/conservative thinking is not very different to that of the secular elites. The Kurdish demands also play their role in this, since the constitutional recognition as a separate nation that a number of Kurdish nationalists want, went far beyond the recognition of ethnic and cultural rights. Also, the prime minister's harsh criticism of the DTP alienated some Kurdish nationalist voters, even if the party emphasised distributing "selective incentives" in the form of material benefits to Kurdish regions (Eligür 2009: 489). National rights to minorities are very difficult to address in most countries, more so in the Turkish republic that is based on the "one nation, one state" rhetoric. The Turkish governments can argue that demands such as these are a threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Somer & Liaras 2010: 153). President Erdoğan has made clear in 2016 that Turkey is about "one nation, one flag, one homeland and one state" and that his government "will not allow the establishment of a state within the state, under the pretext of autonomy" (Khalidi 2016).

The AKP has suffered losses in the 2009 local elections, dropping to 38.4 percent nationwide, compared to the expected 42 percent ("AKP'nin oy hedefinde kriz revizyonu % 42" 2009) and to the 46.6 percent in the 2007 general elections, whereas its only positive result was that it actually won the election. Its decline was due to a number of reasons, including the government's failure to address the impact of the economic crisis and its authoritative policies towards the liberal and secular segments of the society (Eligür 2009: 489). Erdoğan's Kurdish initiative was also to be blamed. According to a January 2009 survey, 46.4 percent of the electorate considered the opening up of a state-regulated Kurdish broadcast television channel⁵ a mistake.⁶ This was also reflected within the party, especially with the nationalist and the Islamist segments of its electorate, and some of its voters favoured the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Islamist Felicity Party (SP) respectively ("Vatandaş, açılımları samimi bulmadı" 2009).

Roughly 8 years after its rise to power with the prerogative of the Kurdish support, the AKP, despite projecting a less violent and more reconciliatory vision towards the PKK –in the early days at least – and the will to adopt alternative approaches to the Kurdish issue, it had lost its influence on the Kurds, especially in the Kurdish-dominated east and southeast provinces (Çarkoğlu 2009: 13).

Results from the 2009 local elections showed that the ruling party had suffered its first serious nationwide setback after a steady rise since 2002, mainly due to the downturn in the economy. In the southeast though, the AKP's failure to lure enough DTP votes and increase its status within the Kurdish population, was mainly due to its Kurdish policy. In the municipal elections in Diyarbakır, the DTP secured 65.4 percent of the vote, up 7.1 percent since 2004. The AKP candidate, Kutbettin Arzu, incurred a 3.7 percentage points' loss for AKP, and the party dropped to 31.6 percent (Akyol 2009).

The Oslo Meetings

In between 2005-2011, the AKP government managed a largely secret effort, in the form of a series of meetings between Turkish intelligence service officials and the PKK leadership. These came to be known as the Oslo Meetings, and after 2009, they ran parallel to the government's Kurdish initiative to reach an agreement on the disarmament of the armed

group. During 2009-2011, the talks were more intense and they involved third parties, such as the Kurdistan Regional Government and Abdullah Öcalan. However, the meetings failed to produce results and representatives from both sides withdrew by 2011. After a rather calm two-year period, following the collapse of the meetings and the June elections, violence between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK resumed in a fierce manner in 2011. The clashes reached their peak in 2012, when PM Erdoğan – referring to the PYD – stated that Turkey would not allow a terrorist entity on its borders; he described the establishment of such an entity as Ankara’s red line (Dolan 2016).

There was a considerable government effort in 2009-2010 to deny the PKK’s and Öcalan’s participation, especially after the Republican People’s Party (CHP) started questioning the meetings (Daloğlu 2013). Erdoğan stated that he would never accept the PKK as the representative of the Turkish Kurds. However, an audio recording of the meetings that leaked to the public after the June 2011 elections, proved that the Prime Minister, in an unprecedented and highly controversial move, had secretly sent the director of the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation (MİT), Hakan Fidan, to act as his special envoy in a meeting with PKK officials that were actually wanted by the Turkish state (Fitsanakis 2017).

One can conclude that the Turkish government was in fact pressing forward with plans to potentially reach an agreement with the PKK; however the extent to which it was willing to compromise was unknown. The secrecy surrounding the Oslo meetings and the persistent denial on the PKK’s participation from government officials, were clear signs that the government wanted to avoid infuriating the nationalist and ultranationalist feelings. Therefore, the reaction from the opposition parties was bound to be instrumental to any future developments, especially from the MHP and the AKP’s nationalists, which leaves little room for political concessions from the government’s side. The AKP’s strategy in 2011 was to secure nationalist votes, as opposed to Kurdish votes, in contrary to 2007, thus the failure of the Oslo meetings was a calculated or even predetermined result for Erdoğan’s policy.

The Solution Process and the 2013 Ceasefire

Towards the end of 2012, the government, deeply concerned with the developments in north Syria, launched a new attempt to bridge the decade-long conflict with the PKK. This was essentially a new round of informal peace negotiations with the PKK leadership and the pro-Kurdish BDP, called the Solution Process that triggered further reforms in October 2013 (Özdemir & Sarigil 2017: 189). The jailed PKK leader, Öcalan, responding to a series of confidence-building measures, called for an end to the armed conflict while PKK’s acting leader, Murat Karayılan,⁷ enforced an indefinite ceasefire on PKK operations. The Turkish armed forces suspended their operations in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq, practically accepting PKK’s long-standing demand for mutual ceasefire (Mathees & Seufert 2013: 1). It is interesting that the Turkish government has been rather diligent in the Kurdish issue, especially compared to the Kemalist regimes of the past, even though its efforts quickly proved superficial; all of this activity represented a radical change from Turkey’s traditional views and produced strong negative reaction from the nationalist political parties. Essentially, Ankara brought the PKK and the BDP at the same table of negotiations, effectively accepting the BDP as the official political wing of the PKK, something practically impossible during

the Kemalist governments and, also, their main argument for banning a series of pro-Kurdish parties in 24 years.

After the 7 June 2015 elections where the AKP failed for the first time since 2002 to secure the majority vote and even before coalition talks began, the government terminated the Solution Process. Also, in a *déjà vu* situation similar to the 2011 elections, the AKP government once again declared that there “no longer existed a Kurdish question in Turkey” and that “all possible rights had already been granted”. As one more initiative came to an end, the entire country was swept up in a renewed conflict. A curfew was imposed in hundreds of predominantly Kurdish districts, the PKK attacked and killed Turkish soldiers and police officers, and Turkish nationalist groups targeted many Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) buildings in revenge (Tekdemir and Göksel 2015; Göksel and Tekdemir 2018: 392-393). In two suicide bombings, in Suruç and Ankara, 104 people were killed and many more were wounded (Balta 2016: 23).

The Regional Aspect of the Kurdish Issue – Syria

Syria got entangled in the Arab Spring whirlwind on March 2011, which marks a point of reference for Turkey’s foreign politics, since Ankara’s choices from that point onwards have put significant pressure on its regional aspirations. It overestimated its influence on the Assad regime while Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu placed too much faith in his *soft power* approach, which failed to moderate the regime’s reaction towards the demonstrators. Consequently, the Turkish government switched from its initial balanced and supportive stance towards the regime, to a more critical one and swiftly tilted its support in favour of the Syrian opposition. Within three months from the start of the demonstrations, Ankara became one of the principle supporters of the Syrian National Council and its Free Syrian Army. One year later, Ankara’s relations with Damascus hit rock bottom, when a Turkish jet was downed by Syrian forces (Demirtaş 2013).

As it was previously mentioned, the Syrian Civil War and the developments in the north parts of the country forced Ankara to return to rapprochement efforts with the PKK. The trigger was the June 2012 withdrawal of the Syrian armed forces from the north and northeast parts of the country, known as the Rojava⁸ that are mainly inhabited by Kurds. Damascus control in the Kurdish areas was essential for Ankara, despite the collapse of their relations. The area, though, quickly came under the control of the PYD and the Kurds gained an advantage that proved important as the conflict between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Assad’s forces escalated. In view of a post-Assad Syria, the Kurds mobilised to secure the best bargaining position, raising Ankara’s concerns that the expansion of the Kurdish-controlled area in north Syria could serve the PKK in Turkey (Demirtaş 2012). Furthermore, the PKK affiliated-PYD declared the Rojava area a *de facto* autonomous region on November 2013.

The Regionalisation of the Kurdish Issue and Ankara's Choices: The Kobani Case

The AKP rule brought significant changes in Turkey's foreign politics, switching from a rather prudent approach to Davutoğlu's proactive "zero problems with neighbours" policy. Despite Turkey's initial regional success, the real tests were yet to come. The Arab Spring triggered another fundamental change, as Ankara steered towards a regime change in Syria, marking itself as a revisionist under Erdoğan's rule. The AKP's pro-sectarian, Sunni-oriented Syrian policy found its Sunni proxies within the wide spectrum of the Syrian opposition (Çandar 2016: 44-47) and Ankara saw an opportunity to serve her interests in the northern parts of the country. The Syrian Armed Forces withdrawal from the Rojava, led jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and the Jabhat al-Nusra to claim the area, thus becoming useful tools for Ankara's attempts to limit the PYD control. The Islamic State's efforts to expand on Kurdish-controlled lands reached its peak with the siege of Kobani, on September 2014; a border town with relatively small strategic value but one that symbolised the Syrian Kurds' struggle against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or just Islamic State (IS).

The Turkish government came under strong international criticism for conspicuously being absent from the battle for Kobani, for avoiding to confront the IS and for refusing to step up its support for the international coalition against the jihadist organisation. Ankara even refused to allow Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to cross into Syria to reinforce the YPG forces that were fighting against the Islamic State (Letsch & Traynor 2014). However, on 20 October 2014, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, in a major shift of policy, stated that Ankara was helping Iraqi Peshmerga fighters to cross its borders and join Syrian Kurdish forces against the IS in Kobani. Ankara's inaction in Kobani drew strong criticism both in and out of the country but it was not unexpected. The withdrawal of the Syrian Armed Forces in 2012 created a major concern for the Turkish government, which feared that the newly formed power vacuum would enhance Kurdish control in the area, thus provide the basis for an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria, next to the Iraqi KRG and along Turkey's borders. Kurdish autonomy in Turkey and Syria is unacceptable by the AKP and as Henri Barkey has pointed that "the canton system is anathema to the Turks" (Krajeski 2014), both of which have materialised.

President Erdoğan is convinced that the Kurds of Syria and of southeast Turkey pose a bigger threat than does the Islamic State (Tisdall 2016) and he considers Kurdish autonomy unacceptable. He has signalled that he was more strongly committed to ousting Assad than to defeating the jihadist organisation; therefore he was unlikely to materially help Kobani without US and Kurdish commitments towards that goal (Cagaptay 2014). On October 4, in a meeting with Turkish intelligence officials and amid the ongoing siege, PYD leader Salih Muslim has been urged to bring his forces under the ranks of the Free Syrian Army and its political organisations which offered no more political rights to the Kurds than the Assad government did; thus the Rojava administration that has been self-declared on November 2013 would cease to exist (Yıldız 2016; Erkuş 2014).

Ankara aimed to manipulate the Islamic State versus PYD conflict, as the means to keep the Syrian Kurds' aspirations of autonomy under control, but its controversial policy backfired, both locally and internationally. Washington's policy towards the Islamic State

required Turkey's support to the YPG fighters in Kobani and Ankara's active cooperation in preventing foreign fighters from transiting its territory to join the jihadist militants in Syria. A senior US official said that there was growing angst about Turkey dragging its feet to act to prevent a massacre less than a mile from its border, and that Turkey inventing reasons not to act, was not how a NATO ally acts (Landler, Barnard, and Schmitt 2014). The EU has been pressing Erdoğan for better border control in order to stop the flow of foreign fighters to the IS, while the Turkish president dismissed those demands, arguing that the foreign fighters are a European security issue. Within Turkey, street battles raged between angry Kurdish protesters and riot police, in the worst street violence seen in the country in years that left over 30 people dead, mainly in the southeast provinces, as well as Istanbul and Ankara (Butler & Hogg 2014; Lowen 2014; James, Black, and Letsch 2014). The AKP government relapsed into a collision policy with the PKK, compatible with the Turks' fear of it. Essentially, PM Erdoğan dismissed his 2005 Diyarbakır speech. Turkish forces hit PKK targets in Hakkari, for the first time since the peace talks have started (Fraser 2014). On 1 November, a series of peaceful demonstrations took place in Turkey, called by the HDP in an international day of solidarity with the besieged town of Kobani.

Ankara's hardships with its Kurdish-related features of its Syrian policy should be approached also as a *déjà vu* failure in its overseas Kurdish politics. Ankara's divergence from the US strategy in Syria, led Washington to seek an alternative way to deal with the jihadist fighters' influx as well as the Islamic State's weapons and oil smuggling, together with the war against the organisation itself. The Syrian Kurds undertook that challenge and succeeded in pushing the IS from north Syria, along the border with Turkey, establishing also their strategic presence in the majority of north Syria, as the US' most important ally and the dominant strategic force, something Turkey was trying to avoid in the first place. This resembles the case of the establishment of the KRG, when Ankara's hesitation to join the 2003 Iraq war drove the US to an upgraded alliance with the Iraqi Kurds.

The KRG Referendum and the “Communicating Vessels” Effect

As soon as the KRG President, Masood Barzani, announced that there would be an independence referendum on 25 September 2017, there was an immediate reaction from Turkish officials, initially contained to Ankara's “disappointment with KRG's irresponsibility” wording (“Erdoğan says Iraqi Kurds' independence referendum ‘does not serve anybody's interest’” 2017; “Iraqi Kurds' independence move irks Turkey, US” 2017) but gradually getting ramped up to “treachery”, threats of blockade and military action (El-Ghobashy & Fahim 2017; “UN regrets Iraq's Kurds went ahead with vote” 2017). Alongside, came the pointless questioning of the legitimacy of the referendum that won 92% of the vote, by the same person who declared victory in Turkey's constitutional referendum that barely crossed the 50% threshold.

The KRG referendum, despite being undone within a month, enhanced the nationalists within Turkey and caused a tear in the Erdoğan-Barzani common anti-PKK policy of the past. Barzani's Kurdish nationalism has worked as an alternative to the PKK in Turkey's southeast and the conservative Kurds in Turkey have often supported the AKP in Turkish elections. Additionally, there is a “communicating vessels” effect between the Turkish Kurds

of the southeast and the Iraqi Kurds, where millions of Kurds on either side of the border are relatives. Therefore, Erdoğan's threats of large scale military operations against the KRG and Barzani, are unlikely to materialise, as they would have potential domestic political consequences for the AKP in any upcoming elections. Erdoğan's political risk in this case would be to alienate himself from a substantial part of the Kurdish population that rejects the PKK and the HDP and have supported the AKP's "Yes" vote at the referendum, as Erdoğan himself claimed; a move that could cost the AKP numerous Kurdish votes. Under these circumstances, it seems that Erdoğan's rhetoric and attitude towards the Kurdish referendum would not just cost him the allegiance of a close neighbour in the Middle East and one with substantial influence over the Kurdish population, but it would also potentially harm his fragile relations with the anti-PKK segment of Turkey's Kurds.

Concluding Remarks

The AKP came to power with substantial Kurdish vote support and with a manifesto that promised more democracy, whereas the Kurds were expecting full cultural rights. Despite high expectations, the government never managed to win enough domestic support for cultural reforms and subsequently failed to curb Kurdish nationalism.

From the AKP's 2011 election manifesto that did not contain any plans to address the Kurdish issue, apart from a few references on its short-lived 2009 attempt onwards, Erdoğan has essentially replaced the Kurdish votes with the Turkish nationalist vote. The dead-end Oslo meetings and the abrupt termination of the Solution Process in 2015, immediately after the HDP's success in reaching the election threshold and AKP's failure to win the majority vote, due also to the MHP's boosting, attest that turn. His government was and still is under pressure regarding Syria, as well as north Iraq, whereas domestically he has been pursuing his prime objective, which has been the move towards a presidential system. He was already acting as a *de facto* president under such a system, often interfering with the government's work. For the November 2015 snap election he, instead of PM Davutoğlu, had handpicked the candidates' list, nominating ones with nationalist tendencies in the western part of the country and clearing potential opponents. On May 2016, he effectively forced PM Davutoğlu's resignation, with whom he had substantial disagreements, among which were the negotiations with the PKK and the handling of the Kurdish issue.

In the post-coup period, he boosted his authority under the country's state of emergency and he allied with the nationalist MHP, rendering any possibility for new negotiations with the PKK or agreement for further rights to Turkey's Kurds, impossible. Beyond Turkey's borders though, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds strategic value for the West has been enhanced, by playing a capital role in the war against the IS, in Mosul and in the battle for Raqqa and Deirez-Zor, whereas the US and the Iraqi government have excluded the Turkish armed forces from military operations in Syria and Iraq respectively.

Erdoğan's agenda has been focused on dominating party and domestic politics and on consolidating his power, and the Kurdish votes at times proved instrumental to that, especially in the early years of the AKP rule. As the years went by and the AKP's promises were not materialising, the Kurds' votes increasingly turned more complicated to claim, than the nationalist ones. The manipulation of the Kurdish issue for his domestic political reasons,

at a time that the Kurdish-inhabited lands in the Middle East have been tested to the limit from regional and international tensions and conflicts has turned Turkey's geographical advantage into a geostrategic disadvantage. The turmoil in Syria and Iraq has enhanced the Kurdish issue and Erdoğan appears to be failing to comprehend the risks of addressing it under the pretext of his domestic political ambitions; or he is simply choosing not to address it realistically, and he dismisses opposing voices with mere populist remarks, aiming at short-term benefits of nationalist nature.

Notes

1. Turgut Özal abolished Law 2932. He also initiated dialogue with pro-Kurdish parties, the Demokrasi Partisi (DEP) and Halkın Emek Partisi (HEP), however, his initiative was not welcomed by the Kemalist elite.
2. The AKP secured 46.6% of the total votes and obtained 341 seats in the TBMM.
3. It was banned on 12 December 2009.
4. The KCK is a political organisation related to A. Öcalan's ideology and an umbrella to the so-called "Apoist" political parties, namely the PKK (Turkey), the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK) in Iraq.
5. TRT-6/TRT Kurdi was launched on 1 January 2009.
6. According to the A&G survey, the TRT6 was disapproved by 28.9% (AKP), 59.1% (CHP), 70.1% (MHP) and 53.2% (DTP) of the voters.
7. Murat Karayılan has been the PKK's acting leader since 1999 and commander of the organisation's armed wing.
8. "Rojava" means *west* in Kurdish and is referring to western Kurdistan, also known as Syrian Kurdistan.

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