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POINT OF VIEW



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TURKEY AND THE KURDISH PROBLEM

NEW APPROACHES IN THE FACE OF THE MIDDLE EAST CRISES

Krzysztof Strachota

NUMBER 30
WARSAW
FEBRUARY 2013

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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES
OŚRODEK STUDIÓW WSCHODNICH im. **Marka Karpia**

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ISBN 978-83-62936-19-9

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MAIN POINTS

- For almost a hundred years (since World War I and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire) stability – or rather, the permanent threat to stability – has been a key challenge for the Middle East. One of the central elements of this threat has been the so-called Kurdish problem, that is, the issues that continually arise between the states of the region and the Kurdish minority living in the area, as well as the tensions among the individual states caused by a range of issues related to local Kurds. The country most affected by the Kurdish problem is Turkey.
- The last decade has been a period of deep tensions and re-evaluations across the Middle East, with both domestic as well as wider, geopolitical ramifications. This, in turn, has led to a rapid erosion of the regional order that until now had ensured at least some degree of stability. The Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria (since 2011) are the two most striking examples of the changing reality. The return of the old political order across the Middle East appears rather unlikely.
- In the context of the Arab Spring, little attention has been paid to the changes undertaken by both the Kurds and Turkey. In both cases the past decade has ushered in significant internal transformations, and in both cases these changes have reflected the broader processes occurring in the region. What is more, in both cases these transformations have been an important factor driving fundamental changes across the Middle East.
- At the end of 2012, the Kurdish people (regardless of their internal heterogeneity) are the strongest they have been in their recent history: they have managed to take effective control over the areas they inhabit in Iraq and Syria, and they have obtained significant political and military power in Turkey.

Consequently, the Kurdish people are no longer perceived only as an object and a tool in the Middle Eastern politics, but are increasingly being seen as an independent entity on the region's political scene.

- The changes witnessed in Turkey over the last decade have had an even greater impact on the region: namely, Ankara's evolutionary but consistent process of re-modelling the state and its foreign policy, including Turkey's growing engagement in the Middle East, with the hope of securing the position of the region's leader. Consequently, Turkey has adopted a new approach to the Kurdish issue: domestically, by liberalising its previously uncompromising position on the Kurdish minority, and in its foreign policy, by identifying the (Iraqi) Kurds as one of Ankara's key partners in regional politics.
- The process of the empowerment of the Kurdish people is not complete yet, and its outcome cannot be guaranteed. At this stage, Turkey's position on its own Kurdish minority leaves much to be desired, while Ankara's achievements in its Middle East policy remain debatable. Moreover, Turkey's spectacular progress in its relations with the Iraqi Kurds has been tinted by new threats, including those generated by the Kurds themselves. The Kurdish minority and the Turkish state are both subject to and the main causes of regional tensions which are dynamic, turbulent and difficult to resolve - a state of affairs which is likely to continue well into the future. In view of the scale of the challenges faced by Turkey, a solution to the Kurdish problem is not only a condition for realising Ankara's regional ambitions, but also for ensuring the country's internal stability and the nature of the transformations. And for the Kurds, good relations with Turkey are necessary if they are to maintain and strengthen their existing accomplishments. Past experience shows, however, that although this will not be a quick and easy process, a positive outcome is not impossible.

THE KURDISH PROBLEM. INTRODUCTION

The Kurdish problem – i.e., the deep and on-going tensions between Kurds and the countries in which the Kurdish minority lives (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria) – has over the last century become permanently inscribed in the political specificity of the Middle East¹. To a greater or lesser degree, the Kurds are actively seeking to expand their political powers, including calls for independence. In order to protect their territorial integrity and internal cohesion, the countries in the region have treated Kurdish aspirations as a threat, and have therefore actively opposed them.

Box 1. Kurdistan

A geo-cultural region inhabited, now or in the past, by the Kurdish people, who constitute the region's dominant ethnic group. It includes the eastern areas of Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran and northern parts of Syria. Depending on the methodology, Kurdistan's area has been estimated at between 200,000 km² and 530,000 km². Despite the Kurds' rich history and cultural identity, 'Kurdistan' has never existed as a separate state; until the twentieth century, one could speak of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities located within the Ottoman and Persian empires, and later the Kurdish autonomies within Iraq. Provinces named Kurdistan currently exist in both Iraq and Iran, although these do not cover all the areas inhabited by the Kurds. In Turkey, meanwhile, the use of the name Kurdistan, with reference to the country's eastern and southern provinces inhabited by Kurds, has been consistently opposed in order to maintain the unitary nature of the Turkish Republic. In the present article, the term Kurdistan is used in its broad sense, and does not imply the region's political autonomy or powers of governance.

¹ Following the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I (1918), the division of its land (including the allocation of areas to the Kurds) was sealed by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

The so-called Kurdish problem is particularly visible in Turkey. This is due to the fact that Turkey is home to about half of the entire Kurdish population (between a fifth and a quarter of all Turkish citizens are of Kurdish origin²). The traditionally nationalistic and centralised nature of the Turkish Republic makes this conflict particularly pronounced, and the possibility of a political solution to the problem remains small. Since 1984, nearly 40,000 people have been killed in the tensions between the Turkish state and the Kurdish minority, while the cost of the unrest has been estimated at no less than \$300 billion.

Until recently, the Kurdish problem had been quite successfully contained by all countries across the region (including Turkey). This was possible due to the countries' power and consistency in their national policies towards the Kurds, as well as thanks to effective cooperation between various regional actors in the fight against Kurdish separatism. Over the last decade, however, and especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (early 2011), there has been a significant change in the approach to the Kurdish problem across the Middle East. This change has been fuelled primarily by a series of crises and re-evaluations in the respective countries of the region. These are as follows: the overthrow of the Iraqi regime following US military intervention, which sparked the turbulent disintegration of Iraq (since 2003); an civil war in Syria, ongoing since 2011; a mounting crisis in Iran (caused by Iran's nuclear programme and Tehran's attempts to protect and extend its influence across the Middle East); and finally, a deep re-evaluation of goals in Turkey's domestic and regional policies following the takeover of power by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. All this signals an ongoing and long-term shift in the regional order, which at this stage makes the Kurds not only the key object of these changes, but is increasingly encouraging

² Estimates range between 11 and 25 million Kurds, with a total population of Turkey at nearly 75 million; moderate estimates suggest 13-19 million. For more, see Box 2.

them and transforming them into a political player, especially in Iraq and Syria, where Kurds exercise real control over densely populated areas.

Over the past decade, the Kurdish issue has also become a centre point in Turkish politics. The AKP's policy of reforming the country's political system (including a shift from a nationalist ideology centred on the army to an ideology developed around citizenship and culture, particularly Islamic culture) and a rise in independent governance in the Middle East has effectively turned the Kurdish people into a significant political partner for Ankara. The complications linked to the implementation of this policy (the lack of political consistency within Turkey and an escalation of the crisis in Syria) have led to an unexpected exacerbation of the Kurdish issue in Turkey and made it a key problem in Ankara's Middle East policy. Currently, it appears that both Turkey's internal stability and the direction of its domestic reforms, as well as Turkey's future position in the Middle East, will depend to a great extent on a solution to the Kurdish problem.

Box 2. The Kurds

The Kurds are an Iranian people (unlike the Turks and Arabs), the vast majority of whom are Sunni Muslim (which distinguishes them from Shi'ite Persians and Azeris in Iran). Most of the Kurdish Sunnis in Iraq, Turkey and Iran belong to the Shafi'i school, which distinguishes them from Hanafi Turks and Arabs, as well as the new ultra-conservative movements inspired by Wahhabism and Salafism. Others adhere to Imami and Alevi Shi'ism, and Yazidism. The population is linguistically diverse (with Kurmanji and Sorani being two main dialects), and shows historical and cultural heterogeneity (including suggestions that Zaza Kurds and Yazidis fall outside the Kurdish ethnic group). Throughout the twentieth century (and especially in the last few decades) the Kurdish people have been undergoing a process of identity building,

shaped by dynamic migration (i.e. internal migration to large urban centres, especially in Turkey, and economic and refugee migrations to the Middle East and the Western world).

There are no reliable data on the exact number of Kurds. Estimates place the size of the Kurdish population at 30-45 million, of which 13-19 million live in Turkey (18-25% of Turkey's population), 6.5-8 million in Iran (7-10% of Iran's population), about 6.5 million in Iraq (15-23% of Iraq's population), and 1.7-2.2 million in Syria (6-9% of Syria's population). The rest of the Kurds live in other countries across the region and in Europe (including 800,000 in Germany).

I. KURDS – TOWARDS SELF-GOVERNANCE

At the end of 2012, the Kurds find themselves in the strongest position they have been in for a century, that is, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the so-called ‘Kurdish problem’. So far, despite their demographic power, a strong sense of distinctiveness and sustained resistance to the centralist actions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria (usually driven by nationalist sentiments), the Kurds have remained politically weak. This was caused by, among other things, disproportionate power relations between the Kurds and the modern states in the region, as well as regional cooperation in the fight against Kurdish separatism (despite occasional short-term tensions), and not least tensions and serious conflicts among the Kurds themselves.

Currently, the Kurds have their own state inside Iraq (an autonomous region of Kurdistan, which remains a federal entity within Iraq – see below). They also control the areas they inhabit in war-torn Syria, and for the last year and a half they have been engaged in armed struggle against Turkey, which occasionally allowed them to take full control of their territory (at the local level).

The rise in the Kurds’ political capacity and aspirations has been influenced by a series of processes taking place within the Kurdish ethnic group, namely their positive demographic trends (particularly the ethnic proportions in Turkey, which are changing in Kurds’ favour), as well as continued modernisation (including, rising levels of education), the growing aspirations of the Kurdish people, and the maturation and strengthening resolve of the Kurdish elites³. Although at times complicated, the democratic

³ The two main centres of Kurdish political activity are the elites running Iraqi Kurdistan (primarily associated with the Barzani family) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) together with its associated organisations throughout Kurdistan. The former has experience of over eighty years of struggle, and the latter nearly forty years. Both have been engaged in large-scale social, organisational, and political activity (also internationally).

and decentralising processes witnessed in the countries exercising sovereignty over Kurdistan have played an important role in encouraging the Kurdish people. In the case of Iraq, the US military interventions in 1991 and 2003 imposed federalisation and democratisation on the country; in Turkey, the democratisation of the nation was intensified under the AKP; while in Syria, the changes have been brought about by a civil war launched on the back of the so-called Arab Spring⁴ and fought under vague democratic slogans since 2011.

Kurdistan has also benefited from recent geo-political developments in the region: a substantially weakened position of Iraq and Syria, problems in Iran, and difficulties in pan-regional cooperation against Kurdish aspirations. The Kurds might also benefit from the gradual collapse of the existing regional order, especially in the area of national security. After playing an instrumental role in creating and solidifying the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq, The United States is pulling out of its role as the region's policeman, and the alliance between Turkey and Israel, seen as a pillar of US policy and a key element stabilising the region, has collapsed⁵. Dynamic changes are taking place in the relations between the countries of the region⁶, while crises in the individual states are allowing radical Islamic movements and ethnic minorities to enter the political arena as important players. In view of the growing chaos and crisis of confidence, the Kurds are increasingly being treated as a valuable tool in the political games played by Syria, Iran and Turkey, among others. For example, the

⁴ The mass-scale and turbulent political and social protests that swept through all the Arab states in 2010-2011, initiating the on-going process of redefining deep ideological, geopolitical and political developments in the Arab world (lasting achievements include the overthrow of the ruling regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya).

⁵ Fighting for a stronger position in the Arab world, the AKP turned Turkey into a champion of the Palestinian cause and a sharp critic of Israel's policies.

⁶ Examples include the so-called Sunni-Shiite conflict, i.e., between the Gulf States and their allies, and Iran, Syria and Iraq; and Syria and Turkey's transition from close co-operation to bitter conflict.

chaotic state of affairs present in Iraq since 2003 has contributed to the dynamic development of relations between Ankara and Erbil (the administrative capitol of Iraq's Kurdish region) at the expense of previously good relations with Baghdad. Following the outbreak of a civil war in Syria in 2011, Turkey became a vocal opponent of the regime in Damascus, which ended the countries' cooperation in their fight against the Kurds (the so-called Adana agreement of 1998), and drove a wedge between Turkey and Iran, which has actively supported Damascus. This has also increased the attractiveness of the Kurds (especially in the case of the Iraqi Kurds) to other countries interested in influencing geopolitical developments in the region (including the US, Israel, Russia, EU member states, and Persian Gulf states). The increased interest in establishing dialogue and cooperation with the Kurds has been exemplified by a series of state visits, including official visits by the head of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, to Washington, Moscow, Doha and several European capitals, as well as the mushrooming of foreign consulates in Erbil⁷.

⁷ The wider context for today's contacts had been created through several decades of repeated involvement by Russia (or rather the former Soviet Union), Israel and the US, leading to speculation about arms supplies to the Kurds, especially by Israel.

II. THE MAIN ACTORS ON THE KURDISH POLITICAL SCENE

Currently, the Kurds have two main political centres: the Iraqi region of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The former is a real Kurdish autonomous region within Iraq, which was created after the first Gulf War (1991), bolstered by the 2003 American military intervention in Iraq, and enshrined in the Iraqi constitution of 2005 (Kurdistan is *de jure* a part of the Iraqi federation; however, it is *de facto* a virtually independent state). The area was separated politically from Iraq, and in contrast to Iraq proper, the situation in Kurdistan remains stable. The region boasts a well-developed and functioning administration, its own armed forces (at least 100,000 troops, *de facto* independent from Baghdad); it also pursues an independent foreign policy and economic policy⁸, which is perceived as responsible and credible by other states (including Turkey) and by energy companies. Despite objections from Baghdad, Kurdistan has welcomed foreign investors such as Chevron, Total, ExxonMobil, and GazpromNeft', which confirms Erbil's credibility and can also be seen as an expression of support for Kurdistan from countries such as the US. In addition, foreign investment provides long-term prospects for the development of an Iraqi Kurdistan independent from Baghdad. The dominant position in Iraqi Kurdistan has been traditionally held by the Barzani family⁹; the president of the autonomous region, Masoud Barzani, hopes to position himself as the leader of the Kurdish cause outside Iraq¹⁰ and in the wider world.

⁸ One particular manifestation of this was the development of the energy sector.

⁹ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, they have led rebellions against the Ottomans, the British, and Iraq. The Barzani fighters were the army of an ephemeral and pro-Soviet Kurdish Republic of Mahabad based in Iran (1945-1946); after the fall of the Republic, Barzani was offered asylum in the Soviet Union. After returning to Iraq in 1958, Barzani once again headed the political and armed struggle for the independence of Kurdistan.

¹⁰ In 2011-2012 Barzani led to the unification of most Kurdish parties in Syria (resulting, in 2011, in the establishment of the Kurdish National Council

Box 3. (Autonomous) Region of (Iraqi) Kurdistan - Kurdish Regional Government

Area: 40 643 km² [the Kurdish autonomous region and Baghdad have so far failed to reach agreement on the status of Kirkuk province and parts of Nineveh and Diyala districts, all of which remain under Baghdad's control].

Population: 5.2 million [lack of data on the ethnic make-up of the region; alongside the strongly dominant Kurds, Kurdistan is inhabited by Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, Yazidis and others]¹¹.

Capital: Erbil (Kurdish: Hevler).

Armed Forces: officially 100,000 Peshmerga troops (former guerrilla fighters, now characterised as a type of national defence force or interior troops; reduced from 300-400,000 around 2005); the figure does not include the Zerevani (the militarised troops controlled by Kurdistan's main political parties), nor the Asayesh (the party-controlled intelligence agency).

The main political forces in the KRG are the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), headed by Masoud Barzani (also the region's president) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani (the president of Iraq). The PUK was formed following a split within KDP; for many years the two parties were political rivals, but now they form the pillars of the ruling Kurdistan List coalition). Kurdish Islamic groups are seen as potential rivals to/by the current political establishment.

made up of 15 parties) and in Iran (the 2012 alliance of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and Komala). Erbil has been training and arming groups of Syrian Kurds linked to Kurdish National Council.

¹¹ Source: Kurdistan Regional Government website <http://www.krg.org/?l=12>

Selected consular offices and chambers of commerce are located in Erbil: Egypt, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, Russia, Turkey, the USA, Italy, Korea, Romania, Sweden, Greece, and the UAE.

The second political centre is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a radical nationalist party espousing Marxist ideology. For more than 30 years the PKK has been engaged in terrorist/guerrilla warfare throughout the region now known as Kurdistan. Its strength lies in the level of support they receive from the Kurdish people and in its organisational skills, as evidenced by, for example, a network of local party offices in different countries, and a network of organisations throughout the Kurdish diaspora, especially in the EU. The PKK also has a very efficient army stationed in Iraq's Qandil Mountains (moderate estimates suggest 3000-10,000 militants and 40,000 family members and logistics support), which is ready for action in Turkey, Syria and Iran. Although the PKK is regarded as a terrorist organisation (for example by Turkey, the EU and the USA), in reality it has been viewed as a partner in political negotiations (including the Turkey-PKK negotiations held in Oslo between 2005 and 2011). At the moment, the PKK is carrying out a large-scale guerrilla war in Turkey, and has seized political control over Syrian Kurdistan through the Democratic Union Party (PYD). This reaffirms the power of the PKK, as well as its attractiveness as a potential ally or political tool for Syria and Iran.

Box 4. PKK - Kurdistan Workers' Party

Strictly speaking, the PKK was an illegal Kurdish nationalist and Marxist party founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan (aka Apo), which was engaged in terrorism and guerrilla warfare, predominantly against Turkey (significantly increasing the scale of its activity after 1984), but which also operated in other areas of Kurdistan. In 2002, the party became the Congress for Freedom and Democracy in Kurdistan (KADEK).

In a broader sense – as used in the present article – the Kurdistan Workers’ Party is a complex and dynamic network of organisations operating as emanations of the PKK, evolved to reflect the changing context. Formal authority over the network lies in the hands of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK; founded around 2005), which was conceived as a platform for civil and urban activity and an umbrella organisation for the legislature (Kongra Gel), the People’s Defence Forces (HPG), and the judiciary. The PKK has been dominated by Turkish Kurds, with the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) and the Democratic Union Party of Syria (PYD) as its local branches. Kurdish emigrant organisations – especially in the EU (e.g. the Kurdish National Congress [KNK]), as well as activists of the legal Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), operating in Turkey – have been suspected of close links with the PKK.

Despite its complicated structure, the substantial autonomy of the individual organisations and occasional tensions and conflicts, the PKK remains a coherent and effective force, capable of organising and coordinating activities in various areas. The PKK is currently headed by Murat Karayilan; Öcalan’s authority, however, is still visible despite the fact that the former leader is being held in a Turkish prison and his contact with the outside world is limited to messages sent through his lawyers, family members and visitors.

The PKK’s strong position in Kurdistan results from the party’s sizeable, professional, highly ideological and motivated militia, recently estimated at anything between 3000 and 10,000 fighters. The troops are based in the Qandil Mountains, northern Iraq, at the intersection of the national borders of Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Numerous attempts at destroying their Qandil stronghold (especially by Turkish forces) have proved ineffective. PKK military personnel are seen as the core of both the military operations carried out by the PKK against Turkey, as well as the base of the armed forces of Syria’s PYD.

The PKK has been designated a terrorist organisation by a number of governments, including the EU and the US (however, the PKK was removed from Australia's list of terrorist organisations in 2012 – a move seen as a reaction both to efforts to improve the image of the PKK, as well as a recognition of the PKK's importance in the region).

Both political centres are competing for influence, but without overlooking the pragmatic importance of resolving the current tensions, and both hope to develop ways of working together, especially in Syria¹². It must be noted, however, that neither the autonomous Kurdish government in Iraq nor the PKK have decided to keep up the now controversial calls for Kurdistan's independence: In Iraq, the political struggle between Erbil and Baghdad centres around the issue of respect for the constitutional rights of the Kurdish minority, while in Turkey and Syria the PKK has been officially demanding extensive autonomy. Nonetheless, the PKK's long-term goal (often omitted for tactical reasons) still seems to be an independent Kurdish state.

¹² In Erbil, on 11 July 2012, Barzani oversaw the formal merger of the Kurdish National Council and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the PKK, into the Kurdish Supreme Council. Although the new body has not been particularly effective, the merger of the parties significantly reduced tensions among Syrian Kurds.

III. THE KURDS – CHALLENGES AND THREATS

Despite the impressive political achievements of the Kurdish people, and favourable prospects for gaining further powers, it is unlikely that the current state of affairs will remain unaltered for long. Kurdistan's problems are linked to the dynamics and the scale of the events taking place in the region. In Iraq, the brewing conflict between the political leaders in Erbil and the central government in Baghdad has become more pronounced; this is heightening the prospect of a military confrontation¹³, which could potentially ruin the current achievements of the Kurdish leaders. In Syria, a victory for the opposition (made up of radical Muslims and Arabs) would doubtless start a fight for the restoration of full control over the areas currently in Kurdish hands; meanwhile, a victory for the current regime would increase tensions with Turkey, depriving the Kurds of room for political manoeuvre. In Turkey, the spectacular demonstration of the PKK's strength and determination is unlikely to translate into lasting political gains in the near future. Despite significant progress towards the consolidation of the Kurdish people, divisions and tensions between the various Kurdish ethnic groups – which other countries of the region have traditionally capitalised on – remain a major problem¹⁴. Although none of the scenarios described earlier offers security to the Kurdish minority, it should be stressed

¹³ 2012 saw a number of serious disputes between Erbil and Baghdad over the extent of their autonomy (regarding political and energy issues) and over disputed areas around Kirkuk. Statements by President Barzani suggested secession. There were also several serious incidents between Kurdish forces and the Iraqi army at the region's borders.

¹⁴ Including tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan between Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan coalition led by Iraq's current president, Jalal Talabani. The latter is intent on preserving Iraq's integrity and is a staunch ally of Iran, which continues to support Iraq's Shiite rulers; radical Muslim parties and political societies have been operating on the fringes of the country's political scene. In recent months, Syria has seen a number of violent outbreaks between the PYD and the KNC. Tensions and conflicts are also visible in the Turkish and Iranian PKK (the Turkish PKK is believed to be benefiting from Iran's support, but its local offshoot, PJAK, has been strongly opposed by the Iranians).

that potential attempts to break up any of the Kurdish ‘bastions’ (i.e. their autonomous region within Iraq, the PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains, or the PYD-controlled areas in Syria) would certainly prove very challenging for any of the regional states, and would significantly contribute to a further, radical destabilisation across the entire region.

IV. TURKEY'S ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE THE KURDISH PROBLEM

When the AKP formed a government in 2002¹⁵, Turkey entered a period of evolutionary but radical restructuring of the state and a revision of its foreign policy. Consequently, the Kurds living both in Turkey and the neighbouring countries have become important players in this process.

The AKP started by effectively dismantling the basis of the Kemalist republic, and has focused particularly on the political standing of the armed forces – seen as a pillar of the republic, a guardian of the country's secular and nationalist character – which until then had remained exempt from the democratic principles of the Turkish political scene¹⁶. The AKP also substantially departed from the ideology of a nationalist republic, in favour of Islam and the concept of fundamental democratic values and the liberalisation of the economy. The shift in Turkey's domestic policy directly benefited the Kurdish minority, among others.

Democratic changes in the country put an end to the domestic policies which had ignored the existence of the Kurdish minority, led to a gradual removal of anti-Kurdish laws, and saw unprecedented moves to condemn Ankara's policy towards the Kurds in previous decades. The liberalisation of policies also permitted public use of the Kurdish language, the launch of Kurdish-language media, private or elective Kurdish language classes, the use of Kurdish in prisons, and even plans to permit the use of the Kurdish language

¹⁵ In subsequent elections in 2007 and 2011, the AKP successfully expanded its electorate, further strengthening its position as Turkey's political hegemon.

¹⁶ Over a 10-year period, the AKP managed to neutralise institutional influence on policy-making (with the help of the Security Council); it also eliminated its main political opponents, and gained influence over military appointments. Finally, it succeeded in discrediting the army's political ambitions by revealing flagrant abuses of power, including provoked and staged acts of terrorism (the Ergenekon trial), and attempts to escalate tensions with Greece in order to carry out a *coup d'état* (the Balyoz trial).

by local government officials in provinces inhabited by Kurds. The new policy towards the Kurdish minority reached its pinnacle with the announcement of the so-called Democratic Opening (2009), and earlier (2005) by launching informal negotiations with the PKK¹⁷ on a possible amnesty for the militants, among other questions. One of the consequences of this new approach was a high level of support for the AKP among Kurdish voters.

Alongside the changes to Turkey's domestic policies, the AKP government also significantly revised the country's foreign policy, especially with regard to its relations with the Middle East – a region which the Turkish Republic had tended not to engage with too closely. Under the AKP, Turkey opted for a policy which would lead to a more active and independent role in the region, with clear ambitions to become a political leader in the Middle East, and in the longer term, to raise its status in relations with the US, NATO and the EU¹⁸. The new approach was to be implemented through greater openness to political and economic ties with the countries and peoples of the region. Domestically, the AKP harnessed discourses of civilisational ties (with the Islamic world) and historical links (dating back to the Ottoman Empire), which has led political analysts to refer to AKP's policies as 'neo-Ottoman'. On a regional scale (both for national governments and the Arab public), Turkey has aspired to become a role model for modernisation and domestic transformation, as well as a mediator in relations with the West (especially with regard to tensions with Iran) and an arbitrator in regional disputes (especially, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict).

¹⁷ The expressions 'PKK' and 'KCK' are used interchangeably by both the Turkish media and in Kurdish-published materials.

¹⁸ This includes efforts to take over as a representative of Western political interests in the region, and the rather successful attempts to be seen as a strategic partner, rather than a passive actor, in the EU's Southern Gas Corridor from the Caspian Sea and the Middle East to Europe.

Turkey's new policy towards the region accelerated the dismantling of the current system, which had guaranteed the region's precarious stability. By doing so, Ankara distanced itself from the US and effectively ended its alliance with Israel (following a serious crisis of confidence between the parties and persistent political tensions in bilateral relations, leading to a breakdown in military cooperation). On the other hand, Turkey established closer ties with Syria and Iran, and began to work closely with non-state actors, such as the Kurds, Hamas, and later also with Syria's armed opposition forces¹⁹. The Arab Spring, and especially the outbreak of civil war in Syria (2011), led to a further destabilisation of the region and altered Ankara's relations with states across the Middle East (for example, open hostility towards the authorities in Damascus, and deep crisis in relations with Tehran and Baghdad).

The radical nature of the changes and the strength of Turkey's influence in the Middle East can be seen most clearly in Ankara's relations with Iraqi Kurdistan. After decades of consistent opposition to even the slightest signs of separatist ambitions among the Kurds, in 2007 – that is, after officially freezing all relations between Erbil and the PKK forces based in the Qandil Mountains²⁰ – Turkey established close political and economic cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdistan (subsumed under Iraq in trade statistics) has become the leading market for Turkish goods (a sharp rise from \$2.8 billion in 2007 to \$8.2 billion in 2011 made Iraq the second biggest importer of Turkish goods, after Germany). The same was true for services and investment, especially in infrastructure projects and the oil and gas sector. Energy cooperation

¹⁹ After unsuccessful attempts to mediate between the government in Damascus and the opposition in the first months of protests in 2011. Turkey offered refuge and support to the political and armed Syrian opposition, and remained its main benefactor at least until the summer of 2012.

²⁰ Until 2006, Turkey had no political relations with the Kurdish autonomous region. The dynamic cooperation between Kurdistan and Turkey coincided with the 2007 appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as Foreign Affairs Minister (the architect of the neo-Ottoman politics).

with Kurdistan will, in principle at least, allow Ankara to diversify its oil imports (and in future, also its natural gas imports). It also bolsters Turkey's ambitions to become a strategic intermediary for energy imports to the EU. At the same time, Kurdistan's cooperation with Turkey significantly strengthens its position in the brewing conflict between Erbil and Baghdad. This is due to two factors: first, the region's growing economic independence and the possibility of economic development without Baghdad's help, and second, the possibility that Ankara might become Erbil's political protector (an unprecedented development). The benefits of establishing close ties with Kurdistan have cost Turkey its previously good relations with Baghdad, and with the growing threat of an armed conflict between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq's central government, Ankara has implied that it may have no choice but to side with Kurdistan in the event of hostilities. It therefore follows that Iraqi Kurdistan has become the most spectacular and tangible embodiment of Turkey's new domestic and foreign policies: that is, a clear break with its previous policy paradigm towards the Kurds and the neighbouring states; the projection of economic interests, resulting in a significant expansion of political influence; and a tangible attempt to revise the existing regional order with a view to increasing Turkey's influence.

V. THE CRISIS OF TURKEY'S POLICY TOWARDS THE KURDS - NEW CHALLENGES

Problems with the implementation of Ankara's new policy towards the Kurds began to appear as early as 2009, and became fully visible in 2011 and 2012. The liberalisation policy towards the Kurds, and especially the launch of the Democratic Opening programme in 2009, encouraged further demands by the Kurds and led to a rather triumphalist mood²¹, which precipitated a return to a carrot-and-stick policy by Ankara. This sparked a wave of arrests of Kurdish activists suspected of having ties to the PKK/KCK; around 8,000 people were arrested. (At the same time, however, the government continued its efforts to increase the presence of the Kurdish language in the public sphere, including the media and the education sector). The tensions were exacerbated by parliamentary elections in June 2011, seen by both sides as a test of their real intentions. There was clear frustration among the Kurds when the main Kurdish party and the AKP's main political rival in south-east Turkey - the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) - was forced to run in the elections after having been significantly weakened by earlier arrests. Some BDP MPs who won their ballots were unable to claim their seats and were subsequently arrested. All this has translated into growing support for PKK's armed activity (which had been increasing since the spring of 2011).

Contrary to Ankara's hopes for a complete disintegration of the PKK - signs of which had been noticed in the previous decade²² - the organisation has once again shown that it continues to wield serious military power (including increasingly modern weapons,

²¹ Exemplified by large-scale celebrations held on 24 October 2009 in honour of PKK militants returning to Turkey, which caused extreme irritation in Ankara.

²² Exemplified by the arrest of PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, his subsequent commitment to a political solution to the Kurdish problem, and the strong support of the Kurdish people for the AKP (back in 2011, up to half the Kurdish electorate had voted for the ruling party).

training methods and combat tactics) coupled with broad public support. For over a year, the PKK has not only survived repeated attacks by Turkish forces, but has effectively mounted offensives against government troops, periodically taking control of areas and roads in south-east Turkey. It has also carried out bombings outside the areas traditionally inhabited by Kurds. Since the summer of 2011, nearly a thousand people (soldiers, civilians and PKK fighters) have been killed in the hostilities.

The government in Ankara has also been surprised by unexpectedly high public support for the PKK, and by the party's ability to capitalise on this development. These anti-government sentiments have been fuelled particularly by the arrests of local activists with ties to the PKK, and the violent consequences of a large-scale military operation against PKK insurgents. This in turn has helped swell the ranks of the PKK fighters based in the mountains, and cemented social resentment against the state apparatus. On the other hand, the scale of the crisis suggests penetration, or at least great mutual affinity, between BDP and PKK/KCK activists – it can be safely assumed that much of the charges brought against BDP activists had been based on solid evidence; after all, BDP members had often publicly voiced their support for the PKK/KCK. The chances that the government will see the BDP as a potential political partner have therefore fallen sharply, while the likelihood of the BDP being used by the PKK have markedly increased. One of the most spectacular manifestations of the PKK's ability to mobilise the Kurds was a hunger strike staged in October and November 2012 by groups of Kurds held in Turkish prisons (involving several hundred people altogether): the inmates demanded the right to speak Kurdish during court proceedings and called on the government to allow Öcalan access to his lawyers (he had been denied this right since 2011). The incident was widely publicised in the Western media, which led to an intervention by the European Commission, and consequently to concessions by the state (although the government announced both changes regardless of the strike, the final outcome was interpreted as a clear win for

the Kurds). The military and political power of the PKK, as demonstrated last year, has seriously complicated the implementation of Ankara's liberalised approach towards the Kurds – it opens up the government to allegations that their policies have been ineffective, it stalls them, and takes away the government's initiative in implementing them.

However, the circumstance which poses the most serious threat to Ankara's new approach towards the Kurdish problem (and more broadly, to its entire Middle East policy) is the ongoing civil war in Syria, which began in the spring of 2011 and appears far from over. The war is particularly significant for Ankara because Turkey had (indirectly) sided with the Syrian opposition²³; this resulted in a political conflict between the Turkish government and the regime in Damascus, and by extension the regime's supporters in Tehran. From Ankara's perspective, the negative influence the Syrian conflict has had on the Turkish Kurds is not so much an intensification of Turkey's pre-existing internal problem as it is the main cause of the problem, and therefore a strategic challenge for the government. Turkey believes – not without good reason – that the renewed PKK activity in Turkey is directly linked to the Syrian crisis. It also suspects that the actions between the Syrian and Turkish PKK fighters are coordinated, and the escalation of tensions has been fuelled by the support the PKK has received from Syria and Iran. The assumption that the actions of the PKK and PYD are being coordinated is supported by the fact that both organisations operate under a de facto single group of leaders, as well as the fact that the sizeable armed forces of the Turkish and Syrian Kurds are partly made up of professional troops permanently located in Iraq's Qandil Mountains (for example, the bulk of the PYD forces is made up of a 2,000-strong contingent sent from the Qandils to Syria in the spring of 2012). In addition,

²³ In spring 2011, Turkey offered refuge and support to the Syrian political opposition (a political base for the future Syrian National Council); since the summer of 2011 Turkey has protected and supported groups of the armed opposition (Free Syrian Army).

Turkish analyses have shown that about 30% of the PKK militants killed in Turkey were of Syrian origin²⁴. There is also some evidence that the PKK has been receiving support from Syria and Iran: for instance, the obvious and acute conflict of interests²⁵; an amnesty for PKK militants granted by Syria at the beginning of the conflict (for example, PYD leader Salih Muslim Muhammad had already returned to Syria from the Qandils in 2011); the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the areas inhabited by the Kurds (by July 2012); reports about Iran's decision to make its bases on the Iranian-Turkish border available to the PKK²⁶; and finally, the reports about the expansion and increased activity of the Iranian spy network in the Turkish Kurdistan (one of the spy rings was uncovered in late August/early September 2012). Viewed from this perspective, the rise of PKK activity in Turkey in 2011 would betray the PKK's real intentions towards the allies, and the effective 'autonomy' for the Syrian Kurds, granted in the summer of 2012, could be seen as a reward for their cooperation.

With all the ambiguities associated with the anti-Turkish activities of the PKK, the fact remains that the PKK/KCK holds sufficient political, social and military influence inside Turkey to be recognised as a serious, endemic power. At the same time, the key factors which increase the PKK's political and military capacity and provides it with strong support are its base in the Qandil Mountains, and especially the new political achievements in Syria and the alleged backing from Syria and Iran. The Syrian Kurds' informal autonomy has been getting stronger, the PKK's freedom to act

²⁴ In part this may be due to the fact that a large group of Syrian Kurds is made up of Kurdish refugees and their children from Turkey, who relocated to Turkey in the 1980s.

²⁵ Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition has inevitably led to a conflict of interests between Ankara, Damascus and Tehran. Evidence for this argument can be found in the quite open threats made against Turkey by Iran's chief of staff, referring to the consequences of Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition.

²⁶ In contrast to the bases in the Qandil Mountains, these bases cannot be bombed with impunity by the Turkish air force.

continues to increase, and the elimination of autonomy appears to be currently out of reach either for the Syrian opposition or the government in Damascus (nor does it appear to be among their immediate priorities). Nor is it likely that Turkey would be able to contain the Syrian Kurds by military means. Due to the currently strained relations between Turkey & the PKK, and Damascus & Tehran, the only actors capable of somewhat limiting PKK operations in Syria are either the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq (specifically, the Kurdish National Congress in Syria backed by Barzani, which nonetheless remains unable to offset the PYD's influence) or the Syrian opposition²⁷. Currently, the PKK's unmistakable sense of power, Ankara's rejection of this fact, and the mutual distrust and the dynamics of the recent developments render the chances for a resumption of a political dialogue between Turkey and the PKK rather remote (in both the Turkish and the Syrian contexts).

²⁷ Syrian opposition forces strongly oppose the Kurdish calls for autonomy or federalism; Turkey's direct influence over the opposition has also diminished (at a meeting in Doha in November, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Council was replaced by the Syrian National Coalition, whose origin and composition more closely reflects both the real balance of forces in Syria and the interests of the Gulf states).

VI. THE KURDISH ISSUE – THE OUTLOOK FOR TURKEY

Turkey's policy towards the Kurdish minority has reached an impasse. The Kurds are becoming an ever more powerful and independent political player against the background of the deepening political crisis in the Middle East (in Syria, Iraq, and potentially in Iran). If the dynamics of the recent developments in the region continue, the formation of a Kurdish state in the coming years is no longer just a pipe dream, particularly as the capacity to stop this process by force is diminishing.

For Turkey, the key objectives at the moment are the pacification of the PKK within its borders, followed by a political solution to the problem. Considering the armed offensive launched by the PKK and Ankara's military response, the chances for a political dialogue have greatly diminished – partly because any concessions made by the government at this stage would be seen as loss of prestige and a political defeat. The chances for a compromise are also not helped by regional dynamics (especially in Syria). The matter is further complicated by the political calendar shaping AKP's priorities: the AKP is seeking speedy changes to the constitution, and is getting ready for local government and presidential elections in 2014. This is forcing the AKP to seek allies on the Turkish political scene (although in practice the AKP is interested in the extreme nationalist and anti-Kurdish Nationalist Movement Party [MHP]), as well as the votes of the conservative parts of the electorate – the Kurds' main political forces, the BDP and PKK/KCK, are opposed to the AKP. In the current political context, a repeat of the Democratic Opening to the Kurds is rather unlikely, although it is clear that such a policy could distract the Kurdish minority away from the PKK. This approach could also be reintroduced during future work on the constitution. It can be assumed that Ankara could obtain more room for manoeuvre on the Kurdish issue if the position of the AKP were to be strengthened further following future elections and changes to the country's constitution.

Turkey's policy on Iraq and the local Kurds has also reached a difficult point. On the one hand, the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq has come under Turkey's political and economic influence, and elevated Ankara to the position of Erbil's protector against Baghdad. On the other hand, Turkey is becoming hostage to Erbil's policy towards Iraq and its policy towards the Syrian Kurds and the PKK; in effect, the region currently offers the only solution to counterbalance PKK's influence and the only way to influence the Kurdish minority from within. In Iraq, the conflict between the Kurdish autonomous region and Baghdad has been becoming increasingly serious for at least a year, and could escalate to civil war. This, however, would mean a more or less open confrontation between Turkey and Iraq (and indirectly also with Iran) in the not too distant future. Consequently, the fate of the Kurdish autonomous region will be a significant determinant of Turkey's future position in the Middle East and in relation to the local Kurds.

A serious and long-term threat to the stability of the region will continue to come from Syria and the local Kurdish minority, who are currently enjoying real political independence. This fact cannot be ignored regardless of which side wins the current conflict. If, following the civil war, Syria remains in the hands of the old regime, and if the regime accepts and formalises the Kurdish autonomous region, that region will likely have an explicitly anti-Turkish character. If, on the other hand, the conflict is won by the opposition, formal autonomy for the Syrian Kurds seems rather unlikely (with the exception of perhaps a temporary agreement). Such a scenario would lead to a military confrontation in Syria, resulting in a serious armed conflict on Turkey's border, with all the consequences of such a development (at least in the area of soft security, such as a mass influx of refugees); alternatively, it would lead to the strengthening of the independence of PKK's pseudo-state. So far, the instruments Ankara has used to influence the situation in Syria have failed to reflect the seriousness of the risks the conflict could pose to Turkey. Ankara's involvement through either the Syrian opposition or the Iraqi Kurds would have at most

an indirect effect on the war, and would not help it resolve the conflict in a way that the Turkish government would desire. In the long run, an Iraq-style solution in Syria would be more favourable to Turkey: namely, the overthrow of the regime and a long-term, but not necessarily formal, division of the country. As in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, this outcome would force the Kurds to seek a solution by engaging with Turkey, and give Turkey far more bargaining power. However, this is just one of many equally plausible scenarios.

Taking the above into account, one could speak of a serious crisis in AKP's 'neo-Ottoman' policies towards the Kurds: the problem has been exacerbated by both domestic and international developments, and opened new areas of potential conflict for Turkey – contrary to its intentions and capabilities.

On the other hand – unlike in past decades – the situation in the region has been very dynamic, and the power struggles and crises occurring in the respective countries have been widespread and long-lasting, affecting the region's geopolitical order. It is unlikely that the situation will stabilise in the short term; it is also impossible to expect a return to the state of affairs of 2010, let alone 2002. Compared to the rest of the region, Turkey is not only the strongest and most stable state, but is also a nation that has started its own internal reforms and initiated a shift in the region's geopolitical order. This gives reason to believe that the current crisis is likely to leave it even stronger. Without a doubt, the Kurdish issue remains a fundamental pillar of Turkey's Middle East policy, and an important element of its domestic policy; in this case, however, there are no fast or easy solutions.

KRZYSZTOF STRACHOTA

THE KURDS

Approximate area traditionally densely inhabited by Kurds, and the political situation in 2012

