



# DESECURITIZING THE KURDISH QUESTION AND EMERGING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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*Desecuritizing the Kurdish question has become a priority for Turkey's AKP government as it seeks to enter into a domestic "solution process" with the PKK. However, emerging dynamics in Iraq and Syria also necessitate that the Turkish government adopts a more regional strategy in cooperating with other Kurdish groups. Energy and trade interests as well as the future of Syria represent powerful drivers in this regard. While this brings with it important new opportunities, it may also incur concerns on the part of the PKK that seeks to be the main interlocutor on Kurdish interests.*

Since coming to power, the AKP government's ultimate objective has been to desecuritize the Kurdish question through non-military means. In this regard various reforms have been undertaken, including granting greater cultural and linguistic freedom for Turkey's Kurdish population. The most crucial step, however, has been the AKP's acceptance to hold negotiations (if not yet taken place) with the PKK or Turkish Workers' Party and its jailed leader Öcalan, an important compromise that has ensured the existence of a ceasefire—albeit still tentative—between the PKK and Turkish military forces since March 2013.

While these efforts have not brought a definitive solution to the Kurdish question, the AKP's efforts and the cessation of hostilities have led to a certain shift in the dominant attitudes of Turkish society and political elites regarding the perception of the Kurds and their sensibilities. The shift is also confirmed by Turkish President Abdullah Gül, who recently underlined that the PKK "does not constitute a major threat any longer." The PKK, for its part, however, has not fully renounced violence, and is pressuring the Turkish government to carry out its commitment to sit at the negotiation table and deliver on its demands. Despite the continued risk of violence, neither the PKK nor the AKP are willing to see the peace process become derailed.

Notwithstanding the above, changing dynamics to the south of Turkey's borders in Iraq and Syria with the emergence of Syria's Kurds as "international actors" amidst the civil war there, and the exploitation of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq's energy resources, is pushing both the AKP and the PKK to increasingly deal with non-domestic

stakeholders of the Kurdish question. This brings with it both new opportunities as well as challenges.

## Regional Game Changers?

The Syrian context is influenced by the Kurdish PYD's (Democratic Union Party) increasingly prominent standing after its victory over the Al Qaida-linked "Al-Nusra" fighters in the Kurdish region of Rojova in northern Syria, a region for which its presses demands for autonomy over. After its victory over Al Nusra, the PYD has sought to distance itself from the Syrian opposition and insisted on participating at the Syrian peace talks in Geneva as a separate entity, a request subsequently rejected (with the exception of Russia) including by Turkey. While the PYD is closely affiliated with the PKK, the former does not adopt Öcalan's or Cemil Bayık's more aggressive tone and declares it is open to cooperation with Turkey: any resumption of violence by the PKK would have a negative impact on Kurdish assertions in Syria putting the PYD in a difficult situation. Therefore, the PYD would prefer regional cooperation and good relations with Turkey as well as trying to garner greater international support. Turkey's interest would be to see a buffer zone on its border free of armed violence. However, the two sides would need efforts first to establish trust and dialogue, which mainly depends on whether PYD will adopt a position closer to the AKP regarding Syria's future.

Across the border in northern Iraq, meanwhile, Turkey's economic interests allied with the AKP's desire to become an international energy actor coincide with the interests of



the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the local Kurdish administration. In November 2013, the two sides signed an oil and natural gas agreement stipulating the transportation of two million barrels of oil and, starting from 2015, the export of 10 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year, a move which increases the local government's energy revenues by five billion dollars a year. Nevertheless, Baghdad must first approve the deal with the KDP—the two sides are currently negotiating the details of the agreement—and the AKP-KDP rapprochement has been viewed somewhat critically by the PKK, which accuses both of pursuing narrow economic interests over the genuine needs of the Kurdish people. Indeed, the trend is a double-edged sword for the PKK, as on the one hand it does not want to lose control as the main representative and interlocutor on Kurdish interests; on the other hand, a Turkish-Kurdish alignment driven by trade and economy could do much for the region as a whole.

These developments add certain complexities to the Kurdish question, yet they also contain valuable opportunities for its desecuritization by a focus on trade, economy, and diplomacy—and, therefore, their handling within civilian public policy frames. This strategy is particularly crucial when AKP needs to restore its political power during the 2014 and 2015 municipal, presidential, and legislative elections: any resumption of violence would inflict a toll on Prime Minister Erdogan's popularity, whose Kurdish "rapprochement" is still under question by a significant part of Turkish society. During the next two years, in order to exploit the opportunities of desecuritization, the main challenge for the AKP government is to promote its position as a "game setter" allocating the regional stakes between the region's actors and therefore increasing the legitimacy of its unilateral initiatives. The government's agreement with the KDP is in this regard a key step which could contribute to such a promotion. Nevertheless, the PKK-PYD axis could try to prevent Turkey's rise as a regional power in this regard unless they come to an agreement with the AKP.

## Conclusion

At this stage, there are two possible scenarios: the worst-case scenario is that the main actors involved fail to overcome the traditional paradigm of violence and thus not find a solution to the three decade-long impasse that has cost irretrievable losses. A relatively more optimistic—and prob-

able—scenario is the greater involvement of the PYD and KDP in Turkey's domestic Kurdish question, which will force both the AKP and the PKK to adopt new attitudes. Indeed, as explored above, the trend toward the regional desecuritization of the Kurdish question injects new dynamics into the peace process through a focus on dividends for both sides such as energy and/or new regional blocs. Through its partnership with the KDP and engagement, the AKP has proven its flexibility in this regard. Indeed, the Turkish government may seek to present itself as the "genuine" lookout for all the Kurds of the region, especially as an actor stimulating economic wealth. The PKK, on the other hand, is likely to seek to bolster its own standing through further engagement in Syria and reinforcing its partnership with the PYD, in thus doing containing and discrediting the AKP-KDP axis. Both the AKP and PKK are now willing to sit at the negotiation table as strong regional actors, and their individual actions and successes in carving out their own axes in the wider region during the next two years will determine how and if they will share the stakes of the Kurdish question.

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