



# Authoritarianism and Escalation:

Preparing for the Worst in Turkey's  
Resurgent Kurdish Conflict

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# Executive Summary



The once strong and vital partnership between the United States and Turkey has been steadily deteriorating, to the point that the countries appear no longer to share many, if any, interests or values in common. Yet, of the myriad concerns that U.S. policymakers can rightfully raise about the behavior of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government—from its relationship with Islamist extremist factions in Syria to its erosion of democracy at home—the one that should concern them most is seemingly the least discussed in Washington: the renewed conflict between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

For at least the last five years—since Ankara and Washington first clashed in 2011 over what elements of the Syrian opposition to support in their fight against Bashar al-Assad—a growing gulf has emerged in the foreign policies of these once staunch allies.<sup>1</sup>

And two years after that, when in 2013 then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan authorized the brutal suppression of peaceful protests in Istanbul's Gezi Park, policymakers in Washington began growing increasingly concerned about the erosion of Turkish democracy and the rise of strongman authoritarianism, with Erdoğan at its helm.<sup>2</sup>

As these concerns mount, one relative bright spot remained in Turkey: negotiations between the AKP and PKK in pursuit of a final, peaceful settlement to a decades-long insurgency. Hopes were first raised when the AKP held itself out as a liberal democratic political force, promising to curb the power of the Turkish military and bring Turkey into the European Union. But when the AKP's behavior became increasingly authoritarian, the deal Erdoğan offered to the Kurds proved to be a Faustian bargain: help him amass absolute power in return for securing a degree of political and cultural liberty

for themselves. Instead, Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtaş and his Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) ultimately choose to fuse the fight for Kurdish rights with the nation's larger battle for democracy, leading a liberal campaign against Erdoğan's presidential ambitions in the spring of 2015. The HDP's strong showing in June 2015 parliamentary elections denied the AKP, temporarily as it would turn out, a single-party government. But hope for peace was extinguished soon after with the resumption of hostilities in July 2015.

Now, after hundreds have been killed, thousands have been wounded, and hundreds of thousands displaced in the last ten months of fighting, there is little reason to believe conditions will improve. An analysis of the conditions under which past paroxysms of Turkish-Kurdish violence have waxed and waned, suggests that the dynamics at play currently in Turkey, and in its neighborhood, will only intensify this conflict, potentially driving it to the heights of bloodshed and upheaval that made the 1990s Turkey's "lost decade."

The history of conflict between the Turkish state and Kurds is a long and brutal one, predating the rise of the PKK in the 1980s and stretching back to the very inception of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923. When the conflict has abated in the past, as in the 1950s, it has done so during a moment of democratic opening in which a new political force sought to gain Kurdish electoral support against the entrenched institutions of the state, just like the AKP in 2003. And each time violence has erupted, as in the 1920s and 1980s, it has corresponded with increased authoritarianism in which dissent—whether against the Turkish state or its ethnic nationalist ideology—must be crushed and the specter of civil war is a convenient excuse for even more oppressive governance.

These dynamics are at play today. Erdoğan's autocratic ambitions militate against granting Turkey's Kurdish population the self-rule they seek while a strategy of trying to compel their obedience through force plays well with the nationalist voters

he is counting on to support him in his quest to rewrite Turkey's constitution. The continuing fragmentation of Kurdish society and the Kurdish national movement have also made accommodation between the Turkish state and some form of Kurdish leadership increasingly unlikely. Recent elections show the ideological divisions within Turkey's Kurdish community remain as pronounced as they were in the 1980s and 90s, while even within the Kurdish nationalist movement tensions have emerged between HDP's political leadership, PKK Leader Abdullah Öcalan in his island jail, PKK commanders in northern Iraq, and radicalized youths in many Kurdish cities. Moreover, a number of additional dynamics could further combine to prolong and intensify the fighting, including amplified distrust from the failure of previous negotiations and, more than anything else, the war in Syria.

The exacerbation of the Kurdish conflict would be devastating for Turkey, marking the complete reversal of the political, economic, and social gains the country had made over the last decade and a half and all but condemning it to a dark period of instability, likely marred by authoritarian oppression and political violence.

The tragedy, however, would not be Turkey's alone.

Policymakers in Washington would do well to recognize that most of the issues which concern them about Turkey's current trajectory are caught up in the Kurdish conflict. Ankara will not become a more dependable and responsible ally in the fight against ISIS nor a more democratic society if it cannot, at the very least, reach a ceasefire with the PKK, stop its persecution of Kurdish politicians, and return to the negotiating table.

Conversely, all the worrisome regional dynamics that the United States has looked to Turkey to help reverse—the metastasis of regional ethno-sectarian violence, Russian and Iranian adventurism, a destabilizing flood of refugees into Europe—will only be exacerbated if Turkey is consumed by an escalating civil war. With Washington increasingly committed to cooperating with both Turkey and the Syrian Kurds in its fight against ISIS, the continuation or escalation of Turkey's Kurdish conflict threatens

to be uniquely disruptive to U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Against the backdrop of already-strained U.S.-Turkish relations, this conflict also carries a dangerous ability to further undermine the alliance if left misunderstood and unaddressed.

Absent a change in the logic and incentives inexorably escalating the conflict—a change that is unlikely to materialize organically at this point—the divide between Turkey and the United States could soon become an unbridgeable chasm. The obstacles to renewed peace, or simply to bringing both sides of this conflict back to the negotiating table, are considerable. Yet given the stakes, and the fact that the contours of a solution, if not the path to achieve it, remain clear, it is incumbent on the United States, as well as any other actors with influence over the situation, to do everything within their power to prevent this conflict from escalating.

# *The Turkish State and the Kurds in the Twentieth Century*



The history of co-optation and conflict between Kurds and the Turkish state over the past century reveals two of the central features driving the ongoing fighting today. The first is the extent to which the state's efforts to assimilate or secure the allegiance of Kurds have always coexisted, and been consistently undermined by, its efforts to secure Kurdish obedience through military force. The second is that the state's success in winning over a substantial part of the Kurdish population has ensured that Turkey's conflict with anti-state Kurdish nationalists is also a conflict among the country's Kurds themselves.

## *Assimilation as Obedience in the Turkish Republic: 1923 - 1950*

The men who founded the modern Turkish state in 1923 recognized, privately and sometimes even publicly, that a considerable number of the people in their new country were Kurdish. Many of these men were themselves of non-Turkish origins—descendants of immigrants from the Balkans and the Caucasus—and they expected Kurds to assimilate, as they had, by learning Turkish and embracing their new Turkish identity. In a sense, “becoming” Turkish was seen as a crucial act of obedience to the new state.

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, nationalist leaders sought to define the exact formula the state would use to enforce obedience through identity. Initially, they were less interested in denying diversity than in demanding this diversity be subordinated to the interests of the nation state. Shortly before the Republic's founding, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself declared:

*The various Muslim elements living in the country . . . are genuine brothers who would respect each other's ethnic, local, and moral norms. . . . If one thing is certain, it is this: Kurds, Turks, Laz, Circassians, all these Muslim elements living within national borders have shared interests.*<sup>3</sup>

Quickly, though, an insistence on brotherhood and shared interests came to be understood as an insistence on a common identity. This was spelled out in the introduction to Turkey's 1924 constitution:

*Our state is a nation state. It is not a multi-national state. The state does not recognize any nation other than Turks. There are other peoples which came from different races [ethnic groups] and who should have equal rights within the country. Yet it is not possible to give rights to these people in accordance with their racial [ethnic] status.*<sup>4</sup>

In the nationalist ideology of the early Republic, difference became conflated with disobedience, and, by extension, assimilation became the only measure of loyalty to the state. As a result, diversity in itself was threatening to the state, particularly when it was expressed. Minorities could not, up to a point, help being different—in their language, perhaps, or religion. When they acted out, announced, or took pride in that difference, however, that created an added degree of active disobedience that was unacceptable.

In addition to demanding this form of cultural loyalty from its citizens, the new Turkish Republic also intensified the late Ottoman government's efforts to extend its central authority into eastern Anatolia, coming into conflict with tribal leaders in the region who had long enjoyed a measure of autonomy. With the Turkish

government also pursuing secularizing reforms, the stage was set for resistance to emerge on geographic, religious, and ethnic grounds.

That resistance took the form of a series of rebellions in southeastern Turkey throughout the 1920s and 1930s, largely led by Kurdish tribal leaders. None, however, had much hope of success in the face of the Turkish government's superior military power, which by 1938 allegedly even included the use of poison gas. Despite this advantage, however, when Kurdish tribes revolted, the Turkish state routinely turned to other Kurdish tribes to help put down the uprising and restore order, as demonstrated in the notorious Sheik Said rebellion. This approach would prove ultimately counter-productive to its stated objective of assimilating the Kurds into the political identity and social structure of the Republic, instead generating increased resistance and perpetuating the tribal structure that sustained it.

In 1925, Sheik Said, a leader in the Naqshbandi religious order with a large following around the city of Diyarbakır, led a rebellion against the Turkish state that brought together a number of local tribes into a movement comprising as many as 10,000 men. After the army finally defeated and executed Said—in part also relying on the support of other local tribes—it used the occasion to launch a violent and systematic effort aimed at institutionalizing its authority in the region. Villages were subject to reprisal raids in which villagers were reportedly executed en masse. Kurdish tribal, religious, and intellectual leaders were arrested and then executed or deported to western Turkey. Yet while the government initially targeted leaders who had supported the rebellion, it soon expanded the scope of its crackdown to include a broad range of prominent individuals. Alongside deporting Kurds out of the region, the government also embarked on an active effort to encourage the immigration of ethnic Turks to replace them. As described by historian Uğur Ümit Üngör, these were two “complementary and mutually reinforcing” forms of “social engineering.” The state would “decapitate the nation (i.e., deport their elites) and leave

the population (seen as ethnic ‘raw material’) for mass forced assimilation,” which would be secured with the influx of Turkish settlers.<sup>5</sup>

The government hoped that through this process, the region’s tribally organized Kurdish society would be “dissolved, abolished, and ‘melted’ into the mainstream Turkish population.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite deporting as many as 25,000 people during the course of the 1920s and 1930s, this goal proved elusive. Üngör notes how, in the 1930s, the Diyarbakır chief of police organized deportations with the assistance of members of the Pirincizade tribe, who “lobbied the government to deport Kurdish families they saw as their rivals in the Diyarbekir area.” Not surprisingly, the Pirincizades capitalized on the deportations to take power and property from their competitors, as other tribes almost certainly did on a smaller scale elsewhere. Thus instead of destroying the region’s tribal structure, the government inadvertently reinforced it.

Indeed, Turkish sources emphasize the extent to which the government still saw this tribal structure as part of the region’s strategic landscape after two decades of trying to suppress it. In 1946, for example, the Turkish military prepared a report on “Rebellions that Have Taken Place in the Eastern Region and Their Lessons.”<sup>8</sup> Alongside “lessons” such as “villages firing on soldiers should be destroyed with the artillery,” the booklet included a map (below) showing the Kurdish tribes of southeastern Anatolia; it was divided between those who had “been involved in rebellions up until the present” and those who had not. In short, even after the government launched a concerted assault on the region’s tribal

structure, coupled with a systematic program of demographic engineering, its efforts could not break, and even reinforced, the tribal order that existed. In this manner, the best the state could do was buy or coerce obedience.

## *Imperfect Integration in a Democratic Era: The 1950s*

Immediately after World War II, the Turkish government began a transition from one-party rule to multi-party democracy that would also transform the question of tribal loyalty and state policy toward the Kurds.

Turkish democratization during this period quickly opened the way for an unprecedented power struggle between rival factions of the Turkish government — one embodied by the established Republican People’s Party, the other by those who had broken off from it to form the new Democratic Party. Where a unified elite had largely relied on repression to quell Kurdish demands, new divisions made the prospect of coopting Kurds as allies seem more plausible.

Thus, with Turkey’s first fully free election in 1950, a new system emerged, one in which both parties competed for the support of Kurdish tribal leaders who would then deliver their followers’ votes. Though this system won loyalty with carrots instead of sticks, like the state’s previous repressive approach it also consolidated the influence of tribal leaders within the region. Once again, as the actors through which the state exercised its power, these leaders retained their own power as well.

Looking back from the present at the origins and endurance of this form of parliamentary co-optation, analyst Svante Cornell writes:

*Among the numerous members of parliament from the predominantly Kurdish southeast, many if not most belong to families of feudal lords or are endorsed by them. This is especially the case for the rightist parties with an origin in the now-defunct Democratic Party (Demokrat Partisi—DP). In the southeast, where it is not uncommon to find up to 80 percent electoral support for a given political party in one*



*province and equally strong backing for a different party in a neighboring province, such curious parliamentary election results should be interpreted with that history in mind. A tribal leader's endorsement of one party is likely to ensure the votes of an overwhelming majority of tribal members. It is small wonder, then, that the political leaders in Ankara have resorted to the policy of co-optation, which not only is much safer than trying forcibly to break down tribal structures, but also carries the distinct advantage of winning large numbers of votes without significant campaigning.<sup>9</sup>*

Coopting Kurdish leaders through party politics proved an effective short-term solution to Turkey's Kurdish question in the 1950s. Following the transition to democratic rule, some Kurds in the southeast may have associated their suffering over the previous decades not with the Turkish state but with the recently defeated ruling party. Other Kurds may have been placated by the new ruling party's more tolerant approach to public religiosity. But Turkey's 1950 democratic transition preserved the Republic's founding assumption, that loyalty to the state could only be displayed by speaking Turkish and adopting a Turkish national identity. The prevalence of this nationalist ideology across Turkey's political spectrum continued to make a more inclusive assimilation of the country's Kurdish population impossible. By coopting Kurdish leaders without making the compromises necessary to win the allegiance of a broader segment of the Kurdish population, the state set the stage for a return to violence—between the state and its Kurdish citizens and within the Kurdish population—during subsequent decades.

## ***Return to Repression: The 1980s and 1990s***

The modus vivendi between Kurdish leaders and the state that emerged during the 1950s was followed by a harsh backlash. Kurdish dissatisfaction with the concentration of political power in the hands of a few tribal leaders coopted by the Turkish state—with few of the benefits trickling down to the lower strata

of Kurdish society—was shaped by and emerged against the backdrop of the increasing social and political tensions that divided the country during this period.

Turkey spent much of the 1970s in the throes of violence between left-wing and right-wing groups, which included assassinations and street-corner firefights. Thus, once a new Kurdish nationalist sentiment began to surface in the 1970s, it largely expressed itself as part of the larger left-wing political movement. However, it was only once the Turkish army seized power in 1980, curbing unrest through the use of widespread arrests and torture, that this sentiment metastasized into an explicitly nationalist Kurdish guerilla movement.

Crucially, it was out of this newly repressive environment following the 1980 coup that the PKK and its ideology emerged. The group's core drew on a number of people jailed in Diyarbakır in the coup's aftermath and who were radicalized there. Similarly, the PKK's willingness to embrace revolutionary violence was fueled by the military oppression of the day. In light of the state's efforts to draft Kurdish tribal leaders, the PKK declared war against not just the Turkish state but also, by necessity, against the prevailing power structure in the predominantly Kurdish part of Turkey. In blending nationalist rhetoric with Marxism, the PKK's Öcalan defined his struggle as one of securing independence for Turkey's Kurds but also enacting a social revolution within "Kurdistan." As the PKK saw it, they were fighting not just against the central government but also against the tribal leaders who had cooperated with the government in order to enhance their own power over the people. PKK ideology even claimed that "parliamentary representation" was one of the processes "by which Kurdistan is integrated into the colonizing state."<sup>10</sup>

By incorporating and empowering traditional Kurdish leaders into government without doing more to facilitate the direct integration of everyday Kurdish citizens into Turkish society, the political opening of the 1950s helped prefigure the specific form of intra-Kurdish conflict that was to come. One of the PKK's first public acts in

1979 was the attempted assassination of a powerful Kurdish landlord, prefiguring a particularly brutal intra-Kurdish aspect to the PKK's struggle. Furthermore, if the PKK's embrace of Marxist ideology was a natural choice for leading a guerilla struggle against a NATO ally in the Cold War era, it also fit nicely with the group's desire to overthrow what it saw as the traditional "feudal" structure that still prevailed in the region. As anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen wrote, the PKK emerged as the only Kurdish organization "whose members were drawn almost exclusively from the lowest social classes – the uprooted, half-educated village and small-town youth who knew what it felt like to be oppressed."<sup>11</sup> By extension, the PKK's emphasis on women's rights bolstered its claim to be rebelling against the intertwined system of tribal, patriarchal, and religious values on which this power structure was based. Even today, the movement's emphasis on local councils and devolved government, most evident in the political system it has tried to implement in Syria, can also be read as an extension of this reaction against tribal hierarchy.

With the rise of the PKK and its willingness to use violence, the 1980s saw a brutal counter-insurgency coupled with the imposition of a heavy-handed form of Turkish nationalism that would last well into the 1990s. Though Turkey gradually transitioned back to civilian rule during the 1980s, the growing conflict with the PKK helped keep the military involved in politics. Specifically, the military maintained control of the government's policy toward the country's Kurdish question. Indeed, it used this authority to pursue a draconian approach in which even referring to the "Kurdish question" rather than its "terror problem" could be grounds for arrest. During this period, for example, the Turkish government famously banned all use of the Kurdish language, even in private, along with any acknowledgement that the Kurds as a people existed.

Not surprisingly, the military's approach only fueled Kurdish nationalist feeling, and as the decade progressed, Turkey's civil war became increasingly violent on both sides. The government

began to organize members of loyal villages into anti-PKK militias called "Village Guards," and the PKK sometimes responded by massacring members of villages that supported the state. While the PKK regularly compelled unwilling villagers into providing them material support, the state, with its superior firepower, responded by systematically destroying villages that did so. The military also committed extra-judicial killings against those accused of aiding the PKK; for its part, the PKK targeted schoolteachers and other civilian government officials.

As a result of this escalating conflict, both sides can readily recite a long list of the others' atrocities. Newspaper articles and human-rights reports from the period recount stories of individual and collective suffering, including those of individuals kidnapped, tortured, and killed by militants on both sides of the conflict. In 1992 alone, for example, Helsinki Watch reported more than 450 people "killed by assailants using death squad tactics" and at least 100 peaceful protesters killed by Turkish police.<sup>12</sup> The same report details at least 85 people reportedly killed by the PKK as well, including a teacher and his wife, ten worshippers in a Diyarbakır mosque, and a number of suspected informants. Over the course of two decades, the toll of this consistent violence mounted. It is estimated that at least 1,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed during the 1980s and 1990s and that the conflict cost the Turkish government as much as \$120 billion.<sup>13</sup> Some Turkish sources accuse the PKK of having killed more than 6,000 noncombatants, while Kurdish sources accuse the Turkish state of being responsible for as many as 20,000 civilian deaths.<sup>14</sup>

Among other consequences of the dirty war that consumed Turkey during this period was the state's criminalization of Kurdish politics. This, in turn facilitated the PKK's dominance over the limited political sphere that remained. From the outset, the PKK sought to enforce its control over all aspects of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, including Kurdish political parties, publications, and popular protests.<sup>15</sup> In addition to using executions to maintain his unchallenged position in the PKK's internal hierarchy, Öcalan sought

to control public expressions of Kurdish nationalism as well. Thus, he discouraged widespread uprisings, for example, and sought to channel public anger into PKK-sponsored events, like funerals for fallen guerilla fighters. His dominance over Kurdish popular opinion, meanwhile, helped him shape Kurdish politics, as only parties with his support could be assured of winning votes. And as Kurdish political parties kept being banned and Kurdish politicians kept being arrested, it became harder for any of them to establish a constituency of their own independent from the PKK's. Similarly, with Kurdish-language newspapers and TV stations banned, PKK-sponsored outlets earned, through their very existence, a widespread audience among Kurds of all political backgrounds.

As the conflict persisted, both the Turkish government and the PKK continued to consolidate their support among their constituencies within the Kurdish community. While in retrospect it appears obvious that continued conflict fatally undermined the government's ability to assimilate the majority of the Kurdish community, the real support the government enjoyed from many Kurds helped sustain the illusion that it was still possible to defeat the PKK. In the late 1980s, for example, Bruinessen reported on a "long series of reports in the Turkish press on brutalities committed by the PKK against innocent civilians," that were "partly aimed at undermining popular sympathies for the guerrilla fighters."<sup>16</sup> Other accounts from the same period emphasize just how confident Turkish politicians were that this approach was working. Süleyman Demirel, who had previously been prime minister and would go on to become president, told Helsinki Watch "There is no local support for the terrorists—that's why people are being killed by the separatists. People are afraid of the terrorists." Bülent Ecevit, Demirel's political rival on the left, used almost the same words, claiming, "There is no widespread popular support for the terrorists." A source at the Foreign Ministry also insisted that "most of the people in the southeast don't support them, because they attack civilians—women and children—and try to intimidate the local population."<sup>17</sup>

The illusion that victory was possible became even more

pronounced with many of the tactical victories the government achieved. During the mid-1990s, for example, journalist Aliza Marcus argued that the Turkish military's strategy of evacuating and destroying villages along the Turkish-Iraqi border—one of the most notorious aspects of a brutal war—actually proved effective in reducing the PKK's ability to operate.<sup>18</sup> The Turkish military also became more successful in using air power, particularly Cobra attack helicopters, to target PKK guerrillas.

In a dynamic that appears relevant today, during the 1990s, the PKK was also confined by the limits of its foreign backers' support. The Syrian government, for example, refused to provide the PKK with shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles that could have neutralized Turkish air power or even allow the group to bring the missiles they acquired across the border into Turkey. And when faced with the threat of a Turkish invasion, the Syrian government, which had allowed Öcalan to reside in Damascus for over two decades, simply told him to leave. Subsequently, even the sympathetic governments of Italy and Greece refused to give Öcalan refuge, resulting in his capture by Turkish forces with U.S. assistance.

When, at the end of the 1990s, the Turkish military had gradually gained the upper hand against the PKK, it raised the question of how the government would seek to use this victory. Öcalan's 1999 capture provided a unique opportunity for the government to offer long-overdue concessions from a position of power but also, potentially, a vindication of its search for a military solution. With a militarized state lacking strong democratic institutions and a nationalist society brutalized by years of conflict, the challenges for those seeking compromise appeared substantial.

# *The Kurdish Conflict in the AKP Era: Promise and Perils of Popular Politics*



When the AKP first came to power in 2003, its leaders believed that making peace and winning elections would go together. They hoped that pro-peace policies could create a loyal constituency among grateful Kurdish voters that would bring the AKP victory at the ballot box. At the same time, the AKP found itself confronting a powerful military and bureaucratic establishment against which it felt the Kurds could be an ally. As in the 1950s, structural factors combined with democratization inspired the AKP to seek Kurdish support in a confrontation over control of the state. And as in the 1950s, the AKP, after consolidating its hold on the country, set aside its efforts to compromise with and potentially co-opt its Kurdish opposition.

Yet, the history of the past decade also shows how the AKP's efforts at outreach consistently failed to win Kurdish votes, while still succeeding in alienating Turkish nationalist voters. The gulf separating Turkey's rival Turkish and Kurdish constituencies proved too great, and Erdoğan's desire for power proved too strong. After ten years in power, the AKP finally concluded that in a deeply divided country, peace was bad politics. As Erdoğan sidelined his other rivals, he fell back on the nationalistic rhetoric and uncompromising policies of previous Turkish governments. Ultimately, the AKP, after consolidating its hold on the country, again appears to have created a situation in which the state is compelled to use military force in order to ensure

the obedience of Kurdish citizens whose loyalty it has failed to win by more peaceful means.

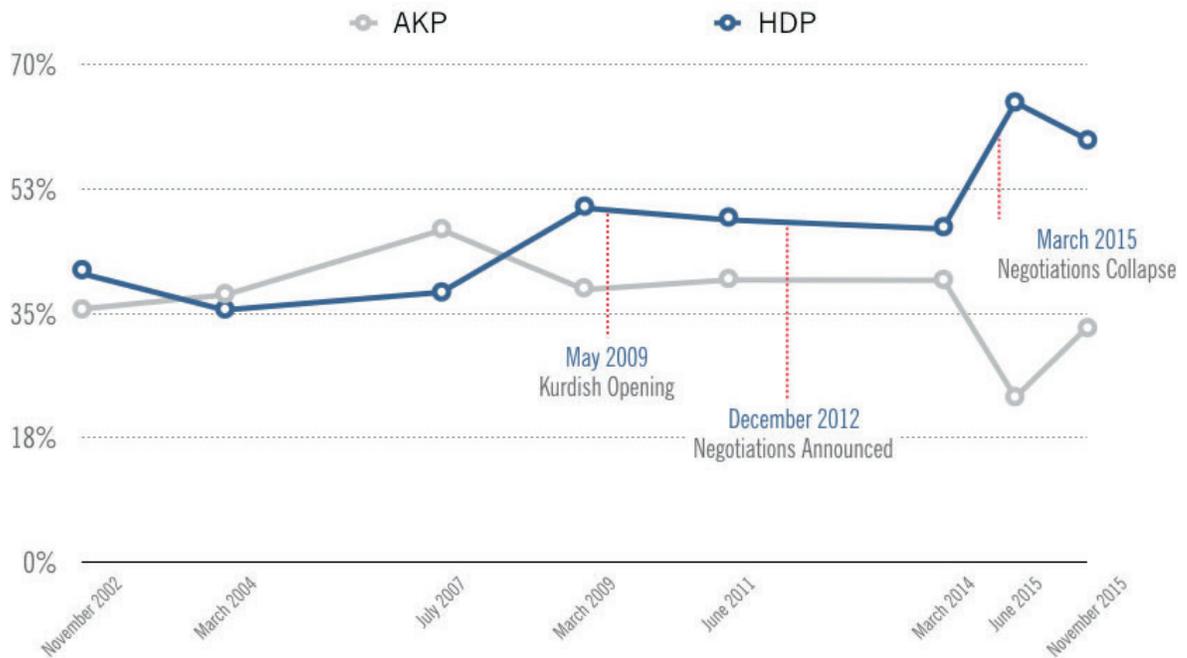
### Early Hopes: 2003 - 2009

Initially, the AKP assumed that by curbing the power of the Turkish military, bringing good government and economic prosperity to southeastern Turkey, and using a renewed Islamic identity to overcome national differences, it could win over Kurdish voters. Among many in the AKP, there was a genuine belief that Islam could serve as a “cement” to bind Turks and Kurds together and that Kurdish nationalist demands would dissipate when they were no longer inflamed by the heavy hand of the Turkish army.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the capture of PKK leader Öcalan had created a situation of relative quiet in the southeast, even leading the PKK to declare a unilateral

ceasefire that lasted until 2004. Sporadic fighting continued, but at a level well below that of the 1990s. Öcalan, in prison, sought to transform himself into something of a senior statesman, renouncing Kurdish independence and putting forward new philosophical approaches for how the Kurds could be integrated into a democratized Turkey. In short, it was the beginning of a decade that would test the proposition of whether a more democratic Turkey could replace a policy of coercion with one of integration, finding a place in Turkish society for its Kurdish community on less oppressive terms.

The challenge for the AKP in the early years of its rule was to offer meaningful concessions to Kurdish rights that would not run afoul of the longstanding red lines enforced by the still-powerful Turkish military. As the chart suggests, the AKP initially won the

**Figure I. Electoral Performance of AKP vs. HDP: 2002-2015**



**Caption:** The chart above compares the AKP’s vote share with that of its main Kurdish political rival, the HDP, in ten predominantly Kurdish provinces in southeastern Turkey over the past 14 years.<sup>20</sup>

support of many Kurdish voters who believed it could in fact deliver meaningful concessions.<sup>21</sup> In the 2002 election that first brought the AKP to power, it split the pro-government Kurdish vote with other conservative parties, such as the Motherland Party, that had traditionally dominated this demographic. By the next election, though, the AKP had not only succeeded in consolidating the conservative Kurdish vote but also, it seems, expanding its reach beyond the base that had previously voted for the AKP's center-right predecessors. At the same time, under the aegis of Turkey's EU accession process, an unofficial but nonetheless unprecedented expansion of permissible Kurdish cultural activities was taking place in southeastern Turkey. During the AKP's first years in power, prosecutions of Kurdish publishers decreased alongside a corresponding increase in the number of Kurdish-language books published. Kurdish music was played widely on the streets and, more importantly, extrajudicial killings and other forms of political violence dropped dramatically as well.

But despite these improvements and some notable symbolic gestures, the AKP struggled to give concrete form to Kurdish hopes. The threat of a military coup hung heavy over the party in those years, especially as the AKP risked the generals' wrath by supporting a U.N.-sponsored peace proposal to reunite Cyprus. At the same time, the PKK, worried about preserving its own internal coherence and political relevance after Öcalan's capture, ended its ceasefire in 2004. Though fighting did not resume with the intensity of the late 1990s, the PKK's renewed insurgency revealed, or from the group's perspective ensured, that the Kurdish issue would need to be addressed directly rather than, as the AKP seemingly hoped, gradually resolved through a broader democratization effort.

By 2009, the AKP was on more solid footing. It had survived a closure case in the constitutional court, secured the election of Abdullah Gül as president despite the military's concerns, and handily won parliamentary elections with an increased share of the popular vote. The stage was set for the party's first systematic effort to transform its rhetoric on the Kurdish question into reality.

## *Concrete Challenges: 2009 - 2015*

In 2009, the AKP sought to give concrete form to Kurdish aspirations with a self-proclaimed "Kurdish opening"—the failure of which subsequently offered a perfect example of how easily peacemaking efforts could lose Turkish votes without satisfying the Kurds. In promoting this new initiative, Erdoğan drew on the language of shared religious identity: he famously brought a number of parliamentarians to tears by saying that something is terribly wrong when the mothers of Turkish soldiers and the mothers of PKK fighters are reciting the same prayers over their sons' bodies.

But before the details of the government's program were even laid out, it had already produced considerable criticism from Turkey's opposition parties, who accused the AKP of putting Turkey's national identity and territorial integrity at risk. And as the AKP's proposals became more specific, opposition mounted. Initiating Turkey's first official Kurdish-language radio and television stations, for example, generated critical headlines despite the carefully monitored nature of the programming. And when President Gül suggested the government would begin referring to Kurdish cities by their original Kurdish names, the head of Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party suggested this was merely the first step to renaming Istanbul "Constantinople."

While the government's real, if limited, steps to expand cultural rights were greeted with hostility by Turkish nationalists, for many Kurds, they still seemed woefully inadequate. And Kurdish politicians also had their own constituencies to appease. In what was to mark a key moment of progress in the Kurdish opening, a number of PKK fighters took advantage of an AKP government amnesty to return from Iraq in late 2009. But the HDP's predecessor party turned their welcome ceremony into a victory celebration, complete with pictures of Öcalan and PKK flags. It was, according to the sociologist Akin Ünver, the Kurdish leadership's way of ensuring that they got credit for the peace process from their supporters, credit that might have otherwise gone to the AKP.<sup>22</sup> Yet making the fighters' return seem like a victory for the PKK created a massive backlash in the Turkish press and among Turkish opposition parties. Faced with widespread national opposition, the AKP abandoned efforts to expand Kurdish rights.

Following the collapse of the Kurdish opening, the government's strategy shifted from a policy of co-optation to one of outright collusion. Rather than trying to win votes away from the HDP, it began exploring the possibility of negotiating an arrangement with Öcalan that could empower both sides at the same time. These negotiations were controversial from the outset, and they initially took place in secret to avoid a popular backlash. Throughout the talks, the AKP was acutely aware of the need to reach an agreement that would be acceptable to nationalist voters. This meant they were eager to see the PKK unilaterally lay down its arms but only grudgingly willing to grant the cultural rights, symbolic recognition of Kurdish identity, and increased local autonomy that were crucial to many Kurdish voters. In retrospect, what seems clear is that the AKP approached negotiations within the same ideological confines it approached the Kurdish opening. Moreover, it never completely abandoned certain heavy-handed elements of the state's traditional approach. In 2009, for example, Turkey's top court shut down the HDP's predecessor, citing its relationship to the PKK. And between 2009 and 2012, a number of HDP local leaders were arrested for their supposed membership in the PKK political hierarchy.

At the same time, mutual suspicion posed a serious obstacle to the military side of the negotiations, and Öcalan's inflated sense of the PKK's power was only compounded by Kurdish successes in Syria. The powerful legacy of suspicion and hostility hung over all discussions from the outset. Though the PKK largely observed a unilateral ceasefire during the course of these negotiations, sporadic armed clashes continued throughout. Both sides also feared, not unjustifiably, that the other was taking advantage of the talks to improve its position for the next round of fighting. The PKK worried the government was using the group's partial withdrawal to build new military bases, and the government accused the PKK of stockpiling weapons and planting explosives on roads around the region. Illustrative of the difficulties this process faced from the outset, the government's critics, including many in the Turkish military, grew increasingly angry that, during the course of negotiations, the government restricted military operations against the PKK.

## *Collapse into Combat: 2015*

The success of the peace talks first began to seem elusive in the summer of 2014, as Erdoğan took an increasingly nationalistic tone during the campaign for his own presidential election; he particularly angered Kurdish voters when he appeared to welcome the city of Kobani's fall to ISIS. When the AKP and HDP representatives nonetheless came together for a joint press conference in front of Dolmabahçe Palace in February 2015, it appeared to herald a major breakthrough, even though the ten points of the resulting "Dolmabahçe Agreement" were vague. But the moment's promise proved short-lived. A month later, Erdoğan publicly distanced himself from the agreement, leading many to fear violence would soon return.<sup>23</sup>

Central to the government's negotiations, and their collapse, was the question of how Kurdish autonomy would coexist with Erdoğan's desire to maximize his own power. Indeed, Erdoğan's response to the Dolmabahçe Agreement was likely prompted by HDP co-chair Demirtaş's declaration that the party would oppose Erdoğan's plans for an enhanced presidency. Much as Erdoğan had hoped that the peace process could win him Kurdish votes, he had also hoped that negotiations could win him the HDP's parliamentary support in his effort to rewrite the constitution to further empower himself as president.

Initially, at least, Öcalan and the HDP were open to an agreement on these terms, seeming to believe that an arrangement could be reached that would allow both sides to enhance their power in different domains. The HDP's controversial refusal to embrace the 2013 Gezi Park protests, for example, reflected its commitment to reaching an arrangement with Erdoğan, even if that put it at odds with potential liberal allies. Conversely, only by abandoning this arrangement—possibly after concluding that Erdoğan's growing ambitions and its own were fundamentally incompatible—could the HDP reinvent itself as a liberal democratic alternative to the AKP's authoritarianism.

In June 2015, the HDP performed unexpectedly well in Turkey's parliamentary elections after doing just that. It managed to win a small but unprecedented share of liberal Turkish voters in the west while also increasing its support among conservative Kurdish voters in the east who were alienated by Erdoğan's hostile rhetoric. Crucially, the party's success helped prevent the AKP from amassing enough votes for a single-party government. Within two months, however, the Turkish government and the PKK had returned to war.

What happened? On July 20, 2015, a group of predominantly Kurdish youth were targeted by a suicide attack while on their way to help rebuild Kobani. ISIS ultimately proved responsible, but many Kurds quickly blamed the AKP for being either directly implicated in the city's destruction or at the very least allowing the bombing to happen. Subsequently, two Turkish policemen were murdered in their homes by Kurdish militants who claimed to be avenging the suicide attack. Though the killers were not PKK members, the group refused to condemn or distance itself from the murders. The Turkish government then responded by launching a heavy round of retaliatory strikes against PKK targets in Turkey and Iraq. As the situation escalated, both parties appeared perfectly content to let it and, rhetorically at least, welcomed the return to war.

Despite considerable controversy over how and why fighting resumed in 2015, it is easy to see how the actions and interests of both sides made conflict more likely. For the AKP, the decision to escalate the fight reflected the logical culmination of the party's increasingly nationalist rhetoric. Not surprisingly, a number of observers presented the party's decision to go back to war as a ploy by Erdoğan to reverse the AKP's losses in that November's election, an impression that was only cemented when the conflict did indeed help the AKP win nationalist supporters back from the Nationalist Movement Party. For the AKP, returning to war also offered an opportunity to reconcile with its erstwhile rival, the Turkish military, which chafed at what it viewed as the concessions required by the peace process. After negotiations collapsed and peace failed to secure any tangible benefits to the party, conflict promised the AKP a chance to consolidate its newly

won hegemonic position within the state, winning support from popular nationalist sentiment and the military establishment alike.

On the PKK side, there were also factors that made the group predisposed toward conflict. Even before the June elections, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), an organization of radical young PKK loyalists, had become well established in Kurdish cities, representing a constituency eager to adopt a more confrontational strategy. At the same time, many observers believed that the PKK leadership in Iraq was worried that their influence would be supplanted by that of the newly successful HDP and its commitment to the political process.<sup>24</sup> Other quotes from the PKK's leadership suggest that the group worried it would appear weak in the eyes of its Kurdish constituents if it refused to match the government's escalation.<sup>25</sup>

In retrospect, the AKP was never more successful in its competition for Kurdish votes than when it first came to power and its promises for reform were at their vaguest. Rather than fulfill those promises as part of the broader democratization the AKP campaigned on, Erdoğan demanded that the price of giving the Kurds increased rights was their support for his plan for enhanced presidential powers. But as geopolitical trends seemed to shift in the Kurds' favor and as Erdoğan began using ever more nationalistic rhetoric to expand his personal power, such a Faustian bargain became unworkable. As a result, both sides, having failed to make peace through political means on the terms they sought, fell back on military force.

The question facing Turkey now is whether this conflict—like the peace process that preceded it—is merely a political tactic deployed by Erdoğan in his drive for absolute power, and therefore likely to be abandoned by him when it no longer serves his purpose, or whether it has taken on a life of its own, driven inexorably by dynamics neither side can fully control.

# *The Kurdish Conflict Today: Fighting Toward the Future*



Ultimately, in deciding to return to hostilities, both sides were motivated by their desire to maintain and consolidate power over specific constituencies. As will be seen, both the completeness of the AKP's control and the incompleteness of the PKK's have the potential to contribute to continued escalation.

## *State of the Conflict*

Shortly after fighting began in July, the PKK adopted an aggressive campaign of urban warfare, organizing young men to declare autonomous zones in the centers of predominantly Kurdish cities. The Turkish military responded by forcibly clearing these areas,

resulting in the death of hundreds of civilians, the destruction of thousands of homes, and the creation of hundreds of thousands of internal refugees. During the course of this urban warfare, the government imposed 24-hour curfews, sometimes for weeks at a time, which prevented citizens from leaving their homes to receive medical care or—often as a result—to bury their dead. Months of fighting, involving tanks and improvised explosives, have left cities like Cizre, Diyarbakır, and Nusaybin looking eerily reminiscent of Syria. Now, many families remain displaced, while others have returned to find their houses completely destroyed or deliberately vandalized by Turkish forces.

Numbers—several hundred civilians killed, as many as half a million driven from their homes—tell part of the story. In an age of social media, graphic images capture the suffering and cruelty of the conflict on both sides. In October 2015, for example, shortly after fighting resumed, Turkish soldiers took a video showing a military vehicle dragging a corpse through the street by a rope tied around its neck. The body belonged to the brother-in-law of the HDP deputy from the town of Şırnak who had been killed in clashes the day before; he was shot in the head after being wounded, according to witnesses. The image became famous after HDP co-chair Demirtaş posted a still from the video online, saying, “Nobody should forget about this photo, because we will not.” More recently, 16 Kurdish villagers were killed when the PKK exploded a truck, already packed with explosives, in a community outside Diyarbakır, apparently following a conflict with several community members. The Turkish press was quick to report on the incidents, often including a close-up photograph of human flesh packed in a biohazard bag awaiting identification.

As brutal as it has been to date, fighting between the government and the PKK has the potential to develop in new, increasingly dangerous directions. In the urban warfare that took place over the past year, the Turkish state proved its ability to inflict suffering on Kurdish communities—and the PKK proved willing to adopt tactics that would put these communities at risk. Now, with this phase of the conflict ending as the military seemingly reasserts its physical control in southeastern urban centers, the PKK could continue to wage a more traditional guerilla war in the southeast, as evidenced by its recent success in shooting down a Turkish helicopter with a MANPAD missile, or, as it has repeatedly threatened, try to take the fight to western Turkish cities. The PKK’s affiliate, the Kurdish Freedom Falcons, has already launched two high-profile suicide attacks in Ankara using tactics that Kurdish fighters appear to have encountered in their war with ISIS in Syria. The first attack used an explosive-laden vehicle to target Turkish military vehicles in the heart of Turkey’s capital, the second targeted commuters in a central transportation hub. In both cases, the PKK expressed support for the attacks despite the civilian deaths they caused.

After declaring that it will no longer negotiate with the PKK or the HDP, the AKP subsequently announced a new peace plan in February that struck many as futile precisely because it only addressed those Kurds who already support the AKP. The government claimed its new interlocutors would include Kurdish religious figures and leaders of pro-government Kurdish militias that have fought against the PKK for decades, an approach that columnist Cengiz Çandar likened to talking to a mirror and calling it dialogue.<sup>26</sup> After revealing this new plan, the government has done little to act on it. Even nominal reforms floated by pro-AKP columnists, like allowing Kurdish in-flight announcements on airplanes flying to the southeast, were quietly abandoned. Instead, the government intensified its prosecution of HDP lawmakers as well as journalists and academics who question the abuses of the state’s anti-terror strategy.

To date, it appears that the PKK still cannot hold ground against the Turkish military, while the Turkish military cannot prevent the group from carrying out terrorist attacks against soft targets throughout the country. This dynamic suggests that if the conflict continues, both sides will maintain the ability to inflict continued suffering without achieving any concrete strategic victories. Repeated mass-casualty attacks against innocent Turkish citizens coupled with increasingly aggressive military operations in Kurdish parts of the country would have a unique ability to not only devastate Turkey’s economy but also to tear apart the country’s social fabric, turning Turkish and Kurdish citizens against one another in ways that will be difficult to repair.

## ***What Next? The Potential for Escalation***

After more than three decades of fighting, both the Turkish government and the PKK have been forced to accept the fact that neither side will win a purely military victory. But despite recognizing that any conceivable endgame requires a negotiated settlement, both parties are now committed to the idea that military success is crucial to pursuing negotiations on their own terms. Nothing in the last ten months of fighting suggests that either side is on the verge of this kind of victory, however, raising the question of what, if anything, can bring the current conflict to a close.

In fact, there are a number of additional dynamics that could now prolong and intensify the fighting, including amplified distrust from the failure of previous negotiations, Erdoğan's political ambitions, an increasingly fragmented Kurdish movement, and, more than anything else, the war in Syria. Here, the historical dynamics observed over the past century provide additional cause for concern. The Turkish government is once again refusing to make compromises that could facilitate the full and voluntary assimilation of Turkey's Kurdish population, opting instead to try to compel obedience through force. And on the other side, the continuing fragmentation of Kurdish society and the Kurdish national movement appears again to make accommodation between the Turkish state and some form of Kurdish leadership increasingly unlikely.

### **Erdogan's Authoritarian Ambition**

The AKP's approach to the conflict will be dominated by the fact that, as many observers have noted, Erdoğan remains committed to changing the constitution to enhance his powers as president. There are a number of paths through which Erdoğan could seek to change the constitution, but the most obvious involve either winning votes from the Nationalist Movement Party or perhaps forcing the HDP below the 10 percent threshold for parliamentary representation in a future election. Either strategy would benefit from the continuation of the conflict, either to maintain Erdoğan's nationalist credentials or to discredit the HDP (and justify the arrest of its members) by linking it with the PKK. Furthermore, if Erdoğan ultimately hopes to confirm his presidential powers through a popular referendum, then peace would be unlikely to bolster his popularity among nationalist voters.

The more complicated question concerns what might happen after Erdoğan has achieved an executive presidency and further consolidated his one-man rule. Here, historical and structural arguments suggest that Erdoğan's longer-term strategy, such as it is, could be fraught as well. Erdoğan may well imagine that, after dealing the PKK a significant military defeat, he can compel Öcalan to return to the table and accept a deal on terms that would

be more acceptable to Erdoğan's nationalist constituency. Such an arrangement, similar to the one discussed before the spring of 2015, would presumably empower Erdoğan and Öcalan, while also depending, for its success, on Öcalan's ability to secure PKK and Kurdish support. In another potential parallel to the 1950s, the AKP would be trying to solve the Kurdish question by co-opting a Kurdish leader with unquestioned power but little democratic legitimacy. The risk would be that if Öcalan, despite his undeniable authority over the Kurdish movement, accepted an arrangement—especially under some degree of duress—that ultimately proved unappealing to other Kurdish factions, the stage would once again be set for a new round of intra-Kurdish conflict combined with anti-state rebellion.

### **Splintered Kurdish Community**

Ironically, while Erdoğan's attempt to centralize authority will make successful negotiations all the more difficult, so will the breakdown of centralized authority within the Kurdish movement. In recent years, analysts have raised concerns over the implications of fissures among Öcalan, the PKK hierarchy based in Iraq, splinter groups like the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, Kurdish youth in southeastern Turkey, and the HDP political leadership. As the relationships between these actors become strained, those who might support a negotiated peace risk losing the leverage to bring the rest of the movement on board. Already, over the summer, Demirtaş's ineffectual response to the mounting violence revealed once again just how little influence the HDP had over the PKK's military leaders. And if Öcalan, who despite being in prison has maintained his control over the PKK and much of Kurdish public opinion, were to lose this authority, negotiations would become infinitely more complicated. In 2014, for example, a message from Öcalan proved sufficient to end anti-government rioting in southeastern Turkey. Now, many worry that a similar call would not be heeded. The growing role of urban youth militias, meanwhile, has intensified the concern that mounting anger might radicalize a segment of the Kurdish youth to the point where they were no longer under the direction of the PKK.

The current conflict has also made clear the potential role of splinter groups like the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, whose exact relationship to the PKK is unknown. Indeed, the current round of fighting began with an attack from militants proclaiming their devotion to Öcalan but seemingly acting on their own initiative. More recently, the Freedom Falcons have shown their ability to organize high-profile attacks, launching mortar rounds at one of Turkey's main airports and killing civilians with car bombs in the center of Ankara. Taken together, these developments serve as a reminder of the ease with which even an agreement reached with Öcalan, the HDP, or even the PKK hierarchy could be derailed by others with a greater commitment to violence.

### **The Syrian Conflict**

Alongside these already formidable obstacles to peace, the Syrian civil war has emerged as yet one more. Taking advantage of the uprising against Bashar al-Assad, Syrian Kurds have established their own semi-autonomous political entity, Rojava, along much of the Turkish-Syrian border. This region is controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which, along with its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), represents the Syrian branch of the PKK. The PYD/YPG shares a leadership structure, ideology, and quite frequently individual soldiers with the PKK, but the group has also won U.S. support for its role in successfully driving back ISIS. In time, northern Syria became another front in Turkey's Kurdish conflict—one that maintains the potential to be uniquely destabilizing.

Even before the outbreak of violence in Turkey in the summer of 2015, the situation in Syria was already poisoning relations between the government and the PKK. The Turkish government feared that if the PYD consolidated its position in Syria that would serve as a base to sustain a stepped-up guerilla war against Turkey. The PKK, meanwhile, seems to have been emboldened by their success in Syria, as well as by the international support they won through their fight against ISIS. At the same time, many Kurds became convinced that the Turkish government was deliberately supporting ISIS as a counterweight to the PYD. Even if there was no concrete proof of

this charge, when Erdoğan appeared to openly welcome the fall of Kobani to ISIS forces in the fall of 2014 after seeming to turn a blind eye toward ISIS in the preceding years, it fueled a degree of anger and suspicion in the Kurdish community that further undermined negotiations. For a time though, Turkey, under U.S. pressure, nonetheless refrained from specifically targeting the PYD forces in Syria, even as it bombed the PKK bases in northern Iraq. Then, as Turkey's domestic conflict intensified in early 2016, the PYD began to expand its territory along the Turkish border at the expense of Turkish-backed rebels, and Turkey began shelling the PYD positions while once again discussing the possibility of a military operation in Syria. Yet the difficulty of such an intervention, combined with continued U.S. support for the PYD, not to mention the rapidly changing nature of the Syrian conflict, has created a situation in which the fate of Turkey's domestic conflict is now inextricably wrapped up in Syria's own unpredictable endgame.

If, as appears likely, the PYD ultimately gains recognition for some sort of semi-autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, this could reverberate in many potentially contradictory ways, depending on the responses of the Assad regime, other rebel groups, Russia, and the United States. If Rojava emerges as an ally of Russia and a consolidated Assad regime, this will only amplify Ankara's fears and perpetuate its policy of confrontation with the PKK. If, by contrast, Assad's victory shatters the tenuous truce his regime has worked out with the PYD, or if it pushes the group to improve ties with other rebels, Turkish politicians would have a new incentive to make peace with the Syrian Kurdish leadership. Similarly, the PYD's current success belies the long-term strategic challenges it faces sandwiched between a number of potentially hostile neighbors. Especially if the PYD lost the backing it currently enjoys from Russia and the United States, making peace with Turkey would be one way to help protect its newfound autonomy.

# Conclusion



The dynamics of the current conflict, and the factors predisposing it to escalation, carry risks for Turkey, for the region, for the European Union, and for the United States that should not be underestimated. That is both because the Kurdish issue has the potential to violently rip apart Turkish society, as it did in the 1990s, and because this time it will be happening at a moment when its Western partners are looking to Turkey to be a buttress against the instability consuming the region.

## *Turkish Authoritarianism*

Continued conflict will almost certainly lock Turkey into the authoritarian trajectory it is already on. The crisis of Turkish democracy extends well beyond the Kurdish issue, but prolonged

fighting is likely to make the government more repressive and further postpone any possibility of a return to democratic rule. Already, the anger and fear created by this conflict has helped justify some of the AKP's most serious crackdowns on freedom of speech and, more troublingly, helped these crackdowns achieve legitimacy in the eyes of many voters. If fighting worsens, it will provide new opportunities and rationales for Erdoğan to expand his power, and for the state to destroy whatever political space has been opened in Kurdish society.

The history and potential future of Turkey's Kurdish problem reveal both the necessity and limits of democratization in its solution. The PKK has never been a democratic organization and Erdoğan appears less and less like a democratic ruler. For both sides to make peace

will not necessarily secure the immediate democratization of Turkish or Kurdish politics, but at least it will help keep this possibility alive. Amid the erosion of all other elements of Turkish democracy—judiciary, media, rule of law—ending the conflict might be the last best hope for Turkish society to preserve some measure of hope for future democratization.

## ***Polarization and Instability***

The gulf between Turkish and Kurdish opinion is already vast, but there is still considerable room for it to widen. Over the past year, when mobs set fire to a number of HDP offices across Turkey, or more recently when opposition parties joined the government in calling for the prosecution of Kurdish lawmakers, it helped confirm the impression, among many Kurds, that politics, indeed coexistence, within Turkey has become impossible. In a recent op-ed, HDP politician Abdullah Demirbaş offered a personal warning of what was at stake:

*As I was rounded up along with hundreds of Kurdish activists and elected politicians, my teenage son left our house to join the PKK. “You are wasting time with your politics and dialogue,” he told me. I dedicated my life to trying to prove him wrong and bring him home in peace. I have been discouraged before, but never lost hope. Today, I struggle to keep that hope alive.<sup>28</sup>*

The longer the conflict goes on, the less likely those affected by it are likely to accept what, under previous conditions, would have been a reasonable solution. Kurds exposed to the violence wrought on their communities by the Turkish military, and watching their co-nationalists pursue independence in Iraq and Syria, might no longer be willing to settle for anything less than far-reaching autonomy. Indeed, Turkey’s Kurdish population has already come to include a number of individuals who have fought in Syria themselves. The youth radicalization already seen among the YDG-H, and discussed in the previous section, provides an indication of why this could be so dangerous. A new generation that violently rejected cooperation

with the state and with more politically-oriented parts of the Kurdish movement itself would be a profoundly destabilizing factor. Moreover, as happened in the urban warfare over the past ten months, the actions of these radicalized youth would likely provoke violent over-reactions from the Turkish state. Seeing Kurdish youth who have not only been inspired by events next door in Syria but also learned fighting techniques there as well will only heighten Turkish fears and reduce the space for pragmatic decision-making.

Just as worryingly, the polarization between the state and Kurds threatens to affect the many other cleavages that divide Turkish society—cleavages that have already been inflamed by the AKP’s divisive rule. Over the past decade Turkey’s secularists, Alevis, and many women, have come to feel increasingly alienated by the AKP government. Witnessing the AKP’s rapid reversal of its attitudes toward the Kurds—from negotiating partner to enemy—and attempts to delegitimize the HDP altogether, opponents of Erdoğan’s rule might easily conclude that their own position within Turkey is all the more perilous. Erdoğan has already used the conflict with the PKK as an excuse to curtail opportunities for peaceful political opposition, not only for Kurds but for academics and journalists working in other areas as well. If this process continues, it risks militarizing other fractures within Turkish society, a worrying trend that some have already identified within the Alevi community. In this manner, rather than Kurdish nationalism feeding off general political polarization and violence, as it did in the 1970s and 1980s, today it might be the Kurdish conflict that sets up a broader breakdown of political order across all major divisions in Turkish society.

Such a breakdown could be hastened by the potential for an economic downturn as a result of continued fighting. The economic toll that the Kurdish conflict took on Turkey in the 1990s has led many to label it Turkey’s “lost decade.” Turkey now risks losing the considerable economic gains it made during the previous decades, many of which were driven by foreign direct investment that could

quickly evaporate in the face of a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign. If foreign investors have not been particularly alarmed by Erdogan's authoritarianism in itself, violence and the threat of violence, particularly if it spreads to Western Turkey, will prove far more alarming.

## ***Regional Conflict***

The indefinite continuation of Turkey's war with the PKK would not happen in a vacuum. Instead, occurring at the same time as the United States and other Western powers are looking to Turkey as a critical partner in the attempt to defeat ISIS and return some semblance of order to Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish conflict has the potential to turn Turkey into an accelerator of, not a check on, regional turmoil.

First, further Turkish fighting with the Kurds could drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO partners. While the United States seeks to support the PYD in its fight against ISIS, and sees the group as a necessary participant in any eventual solution to the Syrian civil war, Turkey will continue to treat the PYD as a threat so long as it is at war with the PKK. Most directly, this will impede Washington's campaign against ISIS, which right now involves U.S. special forces fighting alongside PYD fighters on the ground in Syria while air support is secured from an airfield in southern Turkey. Trying to maintain this delicate balance has already strained ties with Turkey and limited the ability of Kurdish forces to take the fight more aggressively to ISIS. In the long term, though, so long as Turkey believes that a vital U.S. partner is implicated in the killing of Turkish soldiers and civilians, anger toward the United States, among both Turkish policymakers and the broader population, will continue to grow, putting incredible pressure on bilateral ties.

More broadly, though, a Turkish state that is at war with itself can never be an effective ally for the United States in a region where effective allies are necessary. If the Turkish military is absorbed by a war within its own borders, it will not be available to support NATO and U.N. missions as it previously has everywhere from Kosovo to Afghanistan.

Perhaps even more worrying than further strains imposed on the once robust U.S.-Turkish relationship is the opening that the Kurdish conflict, coupled with tension between Ankara and Washington, could give to anti-Western powers. A long-term fight against the Turkish state could easily push the PKK to turn toward Russia and Iran as partners, giving both countries a dangerous strategic opportunity to meddle within the borders of NATO. Already, as tensions within Turkey, and between Turkey and its other NATO allies, have intensified, Russia has been eager to find ways to exploit and deepen them. It has provided military and diplomatic support for the PYD in Syria, for example, and welcomed representatives of the HDP when they travelled to Moscow. Most recently, President Erdoğan directly accused Russia of arming the PKK. While there is no direct evidence that it has, the possibility is a very real one.

While some might imagine that Russian support for the PKK would, if nothing else, bring Turkey and the rest of NATO into closer alignment, the result could easily be the opposite because of the very different ways Turkey and its allies would respond to the threat. Turkey could readily interpret Russian actions as a direct attack on its territorial integrity, and even seek to invoke NATO's Article 5, which would commit all NATO members to come to Turkey's defense. In Washington and many European capitals, though, policymakers might prove unsympathetic to Turkey's position, and only grudgingly support the Turkish government in responding to a danger that they viewed as in large part self-inflicted.

Iran, too, has also already been able to use this conflict to enhance its regional power and prestige. When Turkey seemed content to let ISIS expand as a counterweight to the PYD, Iran proved eager to offer its support to Kurds in Iraq and Syria, presenting itself as a reliable and crucial ally in their time of need. As early as 2012, then Turkish Minister of the Interior Idris Naim Sahin warned, "The terror organization [PKK] is using Iran for accommodation, transit, training, medical care, recruiting, financing and propaganda.

Moreover, some weapon transfers are conducted from there. Iran is not paying much attention to security measures in border regions.”<sup>29</sup> Further fighting could let Iran strengthen its position as a patron of the PKK. Much as conflicts in Iraq and Syria are prolonged in part by foreign powers meddling to secure geopolitical advantages, in this way a weak or unstable Turkey could encourage the expansion of the regional conflict into Anatolia as well.

Ironically, as America’s adversaries fueled conflict within Turkey, it is entirely likely many in Turkey would blame America instead. Washington’s supposed support for PKK terror has long been a staple of Turkey’s widespread conspiracy theories. The last two decades have proved that when terrorism and human-rights abuses erode Turkish citizens’ ability to trust their government and the government’s ability to trust its citizens, it becomes impossible for either to trust their international allies. So long as Turkey has fears about its territorial integrity, or perceives the United States and Europe, however implausibly, as threats, Turkey will not be able to help Washington secure peace and stability in the region.

## *Europe’s Future*

Similarly, while the prospect of Turkey’s EU accession has been off the table for some time, the continuation of this conflict will further poison relations between Turkey and Europe, fueling hostility and prejudice on both sides and preventing pragmatic cooperation on other crucial issues. Both historically and in recent months, Turkish violations of Kurdish rights have elicited particularly pointed criticism from Europe, which in turn has regularly inspired angry Turkish attacks on European hypocrisy. Most recently, the presence of Kurdish protesters with PKK flags outside a building where Turkey’s prime minister was meeting with EU officials prompted Erdoğan to claim that the European Union’s talk of freedom and democracy no longer carried any meaning for Turkey. In other circumstances, Erdoğan has gone as far as to accuse European countries of working together with Kurdish terrorists to divide Turkey. Needless to say, in such an environment, it will be increasingly difficult for Ankara and Brussels to cooperate on a

range of crucial issues that affect the continent, from supporting refugees to interdicting members of ISIS.

Perhaps more dramatically, if Turkey’s stability is seriously weakened, then the state would struggle to manage the substantial Syrian refugee population currently living in Turkey. This could unleash a wave of refugees seeking shelter in Europe which, when added to a wave of refugees fleeing conflict in Turkey itself, could create a crisis far larger than the one seen in 2015. In this way, continued conflict in Turkey could even threaten the stability of Europe as a whole.

There is always hope that both sides in this conflict will step back from the brink, perhaps declaring a ceasefire even without returning to formal talks. But as the situation stands now, it appears all too likely that the conflict will escalate, potentially approaching the level of violence Turkey experienced in the early 1990s.

During that time, the government’s fight against the PKK turned into a full-fledged guerilla war that consumed southeastern Turkey. In addition to its humanitarian toll, this conflict compromised Turkey’s democratization, economic development, and international image, in many ways setting the country back a decade. The government’s use of collective punishment and extrajudicial killing eroded the rule of law, created deep hostility within the Kurdish community, and drove a wave of migration from war-torn parts of the country to Turkey’s western cities. For young men conscripted from across Turkey, as well as their families, the conflict often took a deadly toll as well. And even for those on the Turkish side who were not personally affected, the fighting helped instill in them the conviction that the country was under constant threat, resulting in a level of nationalist paranoia that has remained a pervasive force in Turkish politics today. Now, this paranoia is fueling a resurgence in violence that, due to the confluence of escalatory dynamics, could continue to worsen - with grave consequences for all involved.

As explored in this report, the obstacles to renewed peace, or simply to bringing both sides of this conflict back to the negotiating table, are considerable. Yet given the stakes, and the fact that the contours of a solution, if not the path to achieve it, remain clear, it is incumbent on the United States, as well as any other actors with influence over the situation, to do everything within their power to prevent this conflict from escalating.

# Appendix: Kurdish Groups

**Abdullah Öcalan:** The founder and leader of the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK) who was arrested in 1999 by Turkish authorities and has since been incarcerated in on the prison-island of İmralı. From there, he still exerts influence over the PKK and writes frequently on matters of Kurdish independence and nationalism.

**Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK):** The PKK was founded as a Marxist-nationalist movement by leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1978. After launching a bloody conflict with the Turkish government which killed more than 40,000 people since the 1980s, the PKK was labeled a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and NATO.

**Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP):** The HDP was founded in 2012 after Turkey's previous Kurdish party was closed by the Turkish courts. In June of 2015, the HDP became the first Kurdish party to surpass Turkey's 10 percent electoral threshold and secure representation in parliament. However, the HDP has been targeted by the Turkish government, with the AKP seeking to prosecute HDP members on account of their supposed support for the PKK.

**Democratic Union Party (PYD):** In 2003, the PYD was formed as the political offshoot of the PKK in Syria. In 2012, following the uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime, the PYD took control of a swath of predominantly Kurdish territory in northern Syria which it refers to as Rojava. Despite the group's known connection to the PKK, the United States has stated that it does not consider it to be a terrorist organization and cooperates with the PYD in fighting ISIS.

**People's Protection Units (YPG):** The YPG is a Kurdish militia in Syria operating as the armed force of the PYD. Recently, the YPG has garnered increasing importance due to its instrumental role in protecting Kurdish areas from opposing forces in Syria. The YPG is not considered a terrorist organization by the United States and helps to combat ISIS on the ground.

**Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK):** The TAK emerged in 2004, when it split from the PKK, alleging that the group's methods were too "feeble." Since then, the TAK has carried out attacks within Turkey against both government and civilian targets, including two car bombings in Ankara during 2016. Its autonomy is a subject of debate: some view TAK as a splinter group or even an alias of the PKK, while some view TAK as an independent group.

**Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H):** The YDG-H was established in 2013, and consists of youth who sympathize with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It gained increased prominence during the past year for its role in the urban fighting which has taken place in southeastern Turkey. While the group acts in the name of the PKK, it is not necessarily under the PKK's command, heralding a potential fracturing of the radical Kurdish movement in Turkey.

# Endnotes

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- 21 This chart reflects average vote totals from the provinces of Bingöl, Batman, Diyarbakir, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Siirt, Şırnak, Tunceli, and Van, weighted according to each province's population in Turkey's 2000 census. The number for the AKP in 2002 and 2004 include votes for the True Path Party, Motherland Party, and Felicity Party, which subsequently appear to have been consolidated under the AKP. The HDP's numbers reflect the party's previous iterations, as well as votes for independents in 2007 and 2011, and for the Social Democratic People's Party in 2004. The data was taken from <http://secim.haberler.com> and <http://secim.iha.com.tr>.
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- 24 Though in November, there were also some Kurdish voters who appear to have deserted the HDP because they blamed the PKK for having reignited the conflict.
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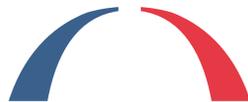
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