



Turkey's Dual Challenge: The Kurdish Question and Syria

Cengiz Çandar





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Foreword

DPI aims to foster an environment in which different parties share information, ideas, knowledge and concerns connected to the development of democratic solutions and outcomes. Our work supports the development of a pluralistic political arena capable of generating consensus and ownership over work on key issues surrounding democratic solutions at political and local levels.

We focus on providing expertise and practical frameworks to encourage stronger public debates and involvements in promoting peace and democracy building internationally. Within this context DPI aims to contribute to the establishment of a structured public dialogue on peace and democratic advancement, as well as to create new and widen existing platforms for discussions on peace and democracy building. In order to achieve this we seek to encourage an environment of inclusive, frank, structured discussions whereby different parties are in the position to openly share knowledge, concerns and suggestions for democracy building and strengthening across multiple levels. DPI's objective throughout this process is to identify common priorities and develop innovative approaches to participate in and influence the process of finding democratic solutions. DPI also aims to support and strengthen collaboration between academics, civil society and policy-makers through its projects and output. Comparative studies of relevant situations are seen as an effective tool for ensuring that the mistakes of others are

not repeated or perpetuated. Therefore we see comparative analysis of models of peace and democracy building to be central to the achievement of our aims and objectives.

This paper considers two major issues currently faced by Turkey: that of the Kurdish Question and that of the Syrian predicament. With thanks to Cengiz Çandar,¹ the author of this paper.

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Introduction

Two major issues seem to be shaping Turkey's foreseeable future and determining the political calculations of its major protagonists. One concerns domestic politics: the Kurdish Question. The other concerns foreign relations: the Syrian predicament. By way of the Arab Awakening, which began at the end of 2010 and had gained momentum by the year 2011, these two issues have become intertwined, particularly due to the fact that the flames of the Arab uprisings have reached Syria, Turkey's next door neighbour.

The Turkish government's 'Kurdish Opening', as declared at the end of Summer 2009 by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, quickly became known within a fortnight as the 'Democratic Opening'. This was followed by 'The Project of National Unity and Brotherhood', which came about as a result of the escalation of violence in the aftermath of parliamentary elections in June 2011.

Since this time, the death toll on both sides of Turkey's conflict, both of the Kurdish insurgents of the PKK and of the security forces, has soared to numbers that could even defy the unfortunate human losses experiences in the 1990s. The Summer of 2012 is considered to be the bloodiest period yet, according to the figures given by the latest report of International Crisis Group (ICG), entitled 'Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement' (dated September 11, 2012). ICG's Europe Report No. 199 claims that 'Turkey's Kurdish conflict is becoming more violent, with more than 700 dead in

fourteen months, the highest casualties in thirteen years.’

The ongoing Syrian crisis with its crucial Kurdish dimension has become another security concern for Turkey. It also contests Turkey’s regional power role. While a war between Turkey and Syria seems only a remote possibility at this stage, the dangers for confrontation are rising, to the extent that to drag Turkey into a protracted conflict with Syria, may eventually take the shape of a war of attrition.

Nonetheless, overcoming all of these challenges are possible for Turkey.

1. THE KURDISH QUESTION – FAR FROM RESOLUTION

1.1 STATE OF AFFAIRS: JUNE 2011 – NOVEMBER 2012

Since large-scale hostilities with the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) resumed in the Summer of 2011, a month after the general elections that saw the ruling AK Party (Justice and Development Party) of Tayyip Erdoğan take power with an impressive 50 per cent electoral victory, Turkey has experienced the worst fighting since PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was handed over to the State and jailed in 1999. The informal 'minimum tally' of official statistics as maintained by the ICG places the death toll for 2012 at 711 by mid-August 2012. The figure includes 222 soldiers, police and village guard militia, 405 PKK fighters and 84 civilians. This is four times the number of deaths than in 2009 and far more than the annual figures during 2000-2004, the period in which the PKK implemented a unilateral ceasefire.

ICG emphasises that 'hopes have been dashed of ending a conflict of that has already cost the economy 300 billion-450 billion US dollars and killed 30,000-40,000 people since 1984.' Since the summer of 2001 that witnessed the surge in violence, serious tensions have returned to the southeast of Turkey (for the PKK and its supporters, this area is referred to as Northern Kurdistan; Iraqi Kurdistan or Northern Iraq is referred to as Southern Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdish-inhabited territories are referred to as Western Kurdistan in Kurdish nationalist lexicon), reversing a decade-long trend toward more normal daily life. In the month of July 2012,

at the most southeastern tip of Turkey in Hakkari, the university stopped night classes because students commuting from the countryside were too fearful to attend. Hakkari is the only province of Turkey that borders both Iran and Iraq.

Over a year, the PKK kidnapped around 50 people, including a member of parliament, along with a number of civil servants and ruling party officials. The most deadly attack was on 20 August 2012, when a remotely-controlled car bomb exploded near a police station in Gaziantep province, bordering Syria, and hosting tens of thousands of Syrian nationals as refugees that fled the carnage in their country. The attack killed a policeman and eight civilians, four of which were children and babies, and wounding over 60 people. Although the PKK denied any responsibility, they failed to convince the public and instead gave way to speculations on allegedly close links between the Syrian intelligence and security apparatus and the Kurdish insurgent organisation. The Gaziantep incident fed the convictions that the PKK had attained a regional significance, putting its eggs in the same basket as those of Iran and Syria against Turkey, and that it is aiding the embattled Syrian regime in exporting and expanding its own troubles to its neighborhood.

The PKK's resurrected campaign of violence was directed mainly at isolated gendarmerie outposts on the rugged frontier with Iraq, which are usually manned by ill-trained conscripts and off-duty soldiers that are executed on city streets. Even in Western-Aegean

coastal towns such as Foça near Izmir have been targeted. On August 9, 2012, a military vehicle was ambushed by the PKK, leading to the death of two soldiers. The PKK's campaign assumed, in the şemdinli region of the Hakkari province on the Iran-Iraq border, unprecedented magnitudes between 23 July and 12 August. The PKK allegedly attempted to put a town under siege, and challenged the government to a conventional battle. The PKK said it was implementing a new tactic of holding territory inside the country. It fought with heavy weapons in the battle, considered to be one of the bloodiest and most sustained confrontations since the conflict started in 1984. It continued for weeks against the 2,000 soldiers sent to the area.

Since June 2011, the number of military clashes between the armed elements of the PKK and the security forces are estimated at around 200. In August 2012 alone, the PKK claimed 400 incidents of shelling, air bombardment, clashes and a variety of armed actions.

All of these have presumably reached higher figures at the time of writing. Dozens of civilian deaths have already resulted from Turkish armed action. Though some may be unintentional, they are seen by many of Turkey's Kurds as being demonstrative of the State's bad faith. The worst and most striking incident occurred in December 2011, when the air force, on an allegedly false intelligence report, bombed and killed 34 Kurdish villagers on the Iraqi side of the frontier near the town of Uludere in şırnak province, as they were smuggling oil products on mules and horses. Prime Minister

Tayyip Erdoğan voiced regret and offered compensation. However, he resisted the public demand for an official apology. The Interior Minister Idris Naim şahin went as far saying 'there is nothing to be sorry about' implying that the teenaged smugglers might be connected to PKK's activities.

1.2 SUPPRESSION AND PERSECUTION IN THE NON-MILITARY FIELD

Aside from the surge in violence, waves of arrests of Kurdish activists have exacerbated the already complicated Kurdish issue. Several thousands of activists, most of whom are affiliated with the main legal Kurdish movement, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), including elected members of parliament, mayors, provincial councilors and party activists, are accused of membership of a terrorist organisation, meaning the PKK, in Turkish official jargon. The basis for the charge is usually the connection to the KCK (Union of Kurdish Communities), the umbrella organization of the PKK established in the mid-2000s under the instructions of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. The KCK is considered to be the PKK's parallel state structure, according to Turkish authorities. Consequently, thousands of Kurdish activists, allegedly related to the KCK, remain in pre-trial detention. Their exact number is disputed. BDP leaders claim that the number reached 11,000 by the end of October 2012.

For the ICG, all this adds up to 'dangerous backsliding, undermining

one of the most productive attempts to end the 28-year old conflict. The AK Party has arguably done more than any previous government to address the grievances of Turkey's long suppressed Kurds... This includes providing Kurdish-language state television, a fairer share of investment in roads and infrastructure in the south-eastern Kurdish speaking provinces, greater freedom for the use of Kurdish in society and a sharp reduction of torture in jails.'

The most productive of those attempts to end the 28-year old conflict has been the participation by the government in secret talks with the PKK after 2006, on ending the insurgency. Some of those talks mediated by third parties, took place in Oslo, and are therefore referred to as the Oslo Process. A leaked tape of one session revealed the existence of such talks and their venue.

Looking in retrospect, it is well understood that the Oslo Process led to the Kurdish (or Democratic) Opening of 2009. In October 2009, the two sides agreed on an initial return of 34 PKK fighters and refugees through the Habur post on the Iraq border. The occasion proved to be a test case of mismanagement. Neither side prepared properly. The Kurdish movement turned the event into a victorious jubilation. The government, under the pressure of a Turkish nationalist climate and a desire to maintain its electoral basis, responded very angrily. The returnees were charged in court, some managed to flee back to Iraqi Kurdistan and a planned return of exiles in Europe was cancelled; the Democratic Opening came to a halt and began to unravel.

Nevertheless, secret contact between the government and the PKK has continued. Talks continued for about a dozen rounds and leaked tapes and records demonstrate that both sides engaged and conversed reasonably, mutually acknowledging that there could be no military solution. Thus, the abrupt breaking off of discussions in July 2011 proved unfortunate, as demonstrated by the huge human loss and the erosion of confidence between the two sides that now needs to be repaired.

Despite the obstacles, the Oslo Process or secret talks, still serve as a credible precedent for all those weary of the situation and looking forward towards a negotiated resolution of the Kurdish issue.

Yet, among the close observers of the Kurdish issue, there is a quasi-consensus that ending the PKK-led Kurdish insurgency is far more difficult today than it was a year ago or before.

The reason for such an assessment is that the Kurdish insurgency is no longer a domestic matter for Turkey, as the trajectory of the developments in Syria demonstrates.

2. SYRIA: TURKEY'S BIG DILEMMA

2.1 BACKGROUND: PERIOD OF RAPPROCHMENT AND FRATERNITY

Turkey, within a year, evolved from being a strong friend of Syria to a hostile neighbour that even risks a military confrontation with it. Apart from the fact that Syria is serving as a proxy and undeclared battleground between Turkey and Iran, the potential emancipation of Syrian Kurds and the role played in this respect by PKK's sister party in Syria, the PYD (Democratic Unity Party) worries the Turkish government, which has given signals that it will not permit the emergence of an autonomous or federal Syrian Kurdish entity under PYD control on the other side of the long Turkish-Syrian frontier.

Syria has become the pivotal country in Turkey's new opening to the Middle East, dubbed by some Western and regional circles as 'Neo-Ottomanism', implying the revival of Turkey's supremacy in Levant and Mesopotamia, former territories of the Ottoman Empire. Notwithstanding such a resentment, the motto formulated by the main architect of Turkey's post-Cold War opening to the Middle East by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (a former academic): 'zero problems with neighbours' has been the lynchpin and the guiding principle of its regional policy.

The two countries remained far apart during the decades of the Cold War period. Turkey, as a NATO-member country, felt

sandwiched between the Soviet Union to its north, and Soviet client Syria, which were ruled by Arab nationalist regimes with irredentist claims on Turkey's southern province of Hatay (for Syria, the former Ottoman Sanjak or Liwa of Alexandretta, a Syrian territory that was ceded to Turkey by France in the late 1930s.) Syrian maps never acknowledged the province as Turkish territory and always included it as part of Syria.

Despite the cold peace, a feature of the Cold War years, the chilly relations between the two neighbors were further exacerbated due to the Syrian regime's harboring of the Kurdish insurgent organisation, the PKK, providing shelter to its leader as well as military training facilities.

The tension between Turkey and Syria reached a dramatic turning point in October 1998, when under Turkish pressure and the threat of military intervention, the Syrian regime of Hafez Assad decided to oust PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. The move ironically paved the way for an incremental amelioration of the relationship, beginning with the signing of a security agreement in the city of Adana in Turkey, near to the Turkish-Syrian frontier, known as the Adana Accord.

Hafez Asad's death and succession by his son Bashar Assad in June 2000 created fertile ground for shifting relations to the point of being a quasi-alliance. The two governments cooperated on the issue of the PKK, while Bashar Assad's regime, dropping the

Hatay issue, remained the main obstacle for the Turkish side for the rapprochement with Syria. Syria, in turn, benefited from the benevolence of Turkey at a time when the U.S. Administration were considering it as a part of the 'Axis of Evil', in the aftermath of the War on Iraq. During a period when Syria was targeted by the United States alongside Iran in the region, warm relations with Turkey maintained the long-sought Western legitimacy to the Baath regime of Damascus. This was all at a time when its twin in Iraq, the one-party regime of Baath under Saddam Hussein, was overthrown and delegitimised.

The ever-developing fraternity was not affected, even by the assassination (on February 14, 2005) of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, that led to massive anti-Syrian turbulence in Lebanon and ended the decades-old Syrian military presence in there, as had already been stipulated as necessary by the UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004).

Hariri's assassination also put the Syrian regime under the pressure of the international community through the International Tribunal formed by the United Nations. The initial findings of the International Tribunal raised doubts with regards to Syrian involvement concerning the assassination. The Syrian regime was confronted with further international isolation.

Apart from Turkey providing Syria and Bashar Assad the vital oxygen valve internationally, in the eyes of the Arabs, the latter

benefited from a formidable ‘Sunni cover’. On the contrary, the Alawite-Nusayri minority regime lost it, by alienating and earning the hostility of Saudi Arabia, following the assassination of Hariri, a very close ally of the Saudi royal family.

Arab public opinion never ceased to perceive republican Turkey through non-sectarian eyes despite its avowed secular character. For Arab public opinion, Turkey always constituted the ‘Sunni bastion’. Thus for the Sunni Arab world, Turkey is the current, as well as the historical counter-balance against Shiite Iran in the region, particularly following the demise of Saddam’s Iraq (which was seen as the bulwark against Iran’s expansion in terms of sphere of influence). Therefore, the warming of relations between Turkey, possessing such unique traits, and Syria, was seen as presenting the latter with an invaluable cover for security and legitimacy in the region itself.

For Turkey, Syria provided the geopolitical space for Turkey’s ever-growing influence in the Near East, attesting the validity of the newly formulated ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy. Close relations with Syria extended Turkish influence to Lebanon and let it to play a mediation role between its immediate southern neighbor and Israel. Because of Syria’s peculiar place in regional and international politics, exemplary Turkey-Syria relations helped Turkey to project ‘soft power’ in its re-entry to the Middle East, in contrast to Iranian revisionism.

To Turkey, Syria was also pivotal in that it constituted a functional mode of access for Turkish foreign policy and its growing economy, in a period when Turkey's EU accession process had met with seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Bilateral Turkey-Syria relations developed to the extent of lifting visa requirements there, followed by those in Jordan and Lebanon, paving the road to the establishment a free trade zone among Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

Establishment of the Turkey-Syria-Lebanon-Jordan free trade zone was reminiscent of The European Coal and Steel Community, which was a six-nation international organisation that set the ground for the future European Union.

As-Sham is the Arabic name for Damascus, and Damascus in Turkish is şam ('ş' is pronounced 'sh' in English) as derived from Sham. During Ottoman times, while there were no separate sovereign entities as Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, a huge chunk of territory comprising today's Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian and Palestinian lands, were part of an administrative unit called the Province of şam. When agreements to lift visas that would enable the free circulation of people and goods in the region was achieved, it was reported that Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan remarked sarcastically, alluding to the European Union's Schengen system, 'if they have their Schengen, we have our şamgen now!'

Turkey and Syria formed the backbone of the Levantine free trade zone, and bilateral relations developed to such an extent that the two councils of ministers began to have joint meetings in Syria's largest city Aleppo, very close to Turkey, to be continued in Gaziantep, an industrially developed city of Turkey in the proximity of the Syrian border.

True to the development of economic and political relations between the two neighboring countries, the personal rapport between the leaders of each country looked perfect. President of Syria, Bashar Assad and the first lady usually spent their holidays in Turkey's resorts, hosted by the Erdoğan's. In turn, pictures of Syrian president and his wife escorting the Erdoğan's, and similarly President Abdullah Gül and Turkey's first lady, in the souks of Aleppo or Damascus had become familiar sights for the Turkish and Syrian publics.

The trust among the two leaders was such that Bashar Assad turned down French president Nicolas Sarkozy's proposal for French mediation between Syria and Israel on the grounds of not wanting to alienate his Turkish ally. Turkish mediation between Syria and Israel to resume direct negotiations on the Golan Heights issue was on the brink of success, but had collapsed in December 2008 when Israel had undertaken a military campaign against Gaza. Turkish-Israeli relations had started to deteriorate since January 2009 when Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres had engaged in a bitter diatribe at a panel

in Davos, Switzerland. When a flotilla of Turkish vessels carrying aid to besieged Gaza was attacked in the international waters of East Mediterranean by Israeli naval commandos, the deterioration of Turkey-Israel relations reached its zenith. Nine Turkish nationals lost their lives in the event.

Turkey's ever worsening relationship with Israel stripped it of its capacity to play a mediation role between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbors. Nevertheless, Syria was keen to preserve its special relationship with Turkey and to not to let any Western power fill the void created by frictions between Turkey and Israel.

2.2 ARAB AWAKENING – THE GAME CHANGER

It would seem that the only 'game changer' concerning Turkish-Syrian relations, would be a development of historical magnitude. That is exactly what happened with the 'Arab Awakening' (in Arab lexicon, known as the Arab Revolution, while the Western media prefer to refer to it, later to its dismay, the Arab Spring).

The sweeping wave of change for the Arab world, stretching from the Gulf to the shores of Atlantic, crossing North Africa began in December 2010 in Tunisia. The small Mediterranean-North African country was one of the unlikeliest places that would herald the beginning of a historical epoch. Yet, when the flames of change in Tunisia moved to Egypt, the largest and more importantly, trend-setting country of the Arab world and geopolitically linking

Africa to the Middle East, the depth and magnitude of what was already and what might continue to sweep a vast geography could be assessed.

The Arab world and its heartland the Middle East was at the threshold of a new historical epoch. The downfall of the autocratic regime in Egypt sent its tremors to every corner of the Middle East. Tunisia alone would not suffice to trigger change in Syria but it could not resist change after the Mubarak regime that was in power in Cairo is overthrown by mass upheavals. The Assad dynasty in Syria has been reigning in a 'Republic of Fear' and as Egypt demonstrated, if and when the masses defy fear, the days of autocracy are numbered.

In the aftermath of Tunisia and Egypt and after Libya, which is in between Tunisia and Egypt, and Yemen at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, and Bahrain in the Gulf, across Saudi Arabia, the waves of change struck Syria. March 15, 2011 will be registered in history as the beginning of the 'events' which would transform into a bloody civil war.

Turkey was fairly quick in endorsing the change in the Arab world. From the very beginning, it saluted the overthrow of the Zainal Abidin Bin Ali rule in Tunisia. The remarkable Turkish pro-change move came in Egypt. While the U.S. Administration of Barack Obama was wavering on supporting the tens of thousands of anti-Mubarak demonstrators in Tahrir Square, Egypt, and Israel and

Saudi Arabia were clearly not in favour, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdoğan stepped in and called Mubarak to leave office. His speech was broadcast live on giant screens in Tahrir Square. Only a week later, Mubarak was removed from power, with Turkey leaving a very strong positive mark in the memory of the Egyptians and Arabs.

At the outset, the Syrian regime seemed sympathetic towards the change occurring in Tunisia and Egypt. These countries were relatively far away from Syria and Syrians would not consider themselves as particularly friendly to their regimes. Most importantly, Bashar Assad did not predict that the change unleashed in North African Arab countries would be the inauguration of a new era in Arab politics, and saw them as isolated developments separate from the entirety of the Arab world.

The moment of truth came in Syria in March 2011, and from that point onwards, Turkish-Syrian relations could not remain unaffected. At the time, Turkey had already moved from endorsing change in Arab world to sponsoring it. The new political actors that had entered the political scene in Tunisia and Egypt and also in Libya were by now referring to Turkey as their 'source of emulation'. The leader of the Nahda (Renaissance) Party, renowned Islamic thinker Rachid Gannouchi defined Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) as their inspiration. Egypt's strong Muslim Brotherhood, the likelier new power in the country, despite Turkey's secular credentials, saw the AK Party as its kin and felt assisted by it. The United States in particular and the Western

world in general, emphasised Turkey's status in the Arab Awakening as a 'role model'. Only a year prior to this, had certain influential elements in the West worried of Turkey's 'axis shift'; that it was drifting its anchor from Europe and navigating towards the Arab-Muslim world.

The Arab Awakening spelled the end of Turkey's ingenious policy of 'zero problem with neighbors'. That policy was designed to deal with neighbors in the existing regional status-quo. When the neighbouring regimes were challenged, and Turkey began sponsoring and endorsing the change that took place, Syria could not remain an exception. With the consistency and the prestige of Turkey at stake, the Erdoğan government had to act in Syria.

With the 'Syria crisis', Turkey, that had gained significant leverage in the Middle East following the Arab Awakening, found itself testing the limits of its regional power and its capacity to lead the demand for revolution in the region. Consequently, it needed to review its relations with regional actors, above all with Iran, the partner of Syria and constituting a political axis.

2.3 TURKISH POLICY VIS-A-VIS THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Turkey's overall Syria policy can be viewed by way of three distinct periods:

1. Pressure on Bashar Assad government for constitutional reform;
2. Attempts at organising and unifying dissident groups under a single roof and achieving to form the umbrella organisation, the Syrian National Council, recognised by the international community as 'a representative of Syrian people';
3. Promoting a regime change through UN-based solutions (the Annan Plan) or with the endorsement and participation of the Arab League or through the efforts of the international body named 'Friends of Syria'

The first of these periods lasted from March 2011 to August 2011. In that time, Turkey acted on its own and depending on its exclusive relationship with the Syrian regime, tried to persuade the Damascus regime to introduce reforms that would ensure its survival. The Turkish Foreign Minister, architect of Turkish-Syrian rapprochement, visited Damascus twice, in April and August. He offered Turkey's good offices in resolving the crisis during hours of conversation with Bashar Assad. Erdoğan also sent the head of Turkish intelligence as his personal emissary to the Head of State of Syria in order to overcome the crisis. In that period, Turkey had no perspective of a regime change in Syria.

In fact, the Turkish government had begun to distance itself from the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad. On 31 May 2011, it allowed a loose coalition of Syrian opposition groups to hold a conference in the Turkish Mediterranean resort city of Antalya. That was the first signal of Turkey's increasing support for Syrian opposition

groups. The Turkish support became more explicit as the death toll increased in Syrian regime's brutal response to the unarmed and mainly Sunni demonstrators. Turkish leaders began to lose hope in the Syrian leadership and its ability to survive the uprising.

The second stage of Turkey's Syria policy started in the Autumn of 2011. Turkey positioned itself as hosts to the Syrian opposition and provided shelter to a swelling number of Syrian refugees pouring across the 911 kilometer-long frontier. Having learned the lesson from Iraq where Turkey, for a long period had no relations with the Iraqi opposition against Saddam Hussein's regime, Turkey was determined not to repeat the mistakes of a decade ago. It undertook the initiative to create an umbrella organisation for dissidents, whose backbone was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, who had already assembled in Istanbul over the last few years, unnoticed. The Syrian National Council came into being under Turkey's aegis. In the international fora, it is acknowledged as 'a representative of the Syrian people', which falls short of recognising it as 'the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people', a status that the Palestine Liberation Organisation enjoyed in the mid-1970s.

Parallel to the formation of the Syrian National Council as an umbrella organisation to Syrian opposition groups, some officers of the Syrian army took refuge in Turkey and declared the foundation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Elements of the Free Syrian Army began to operate openly in the refugee camps that had been established inside Turkey to accommodate those fleeing the

rampant violence in Syria. The border regions of Turkey became a conduit for weapons (destined for the FSA) purchased on the international market with funds mainly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and channeled through Turkey to the rebels.

By Autumn 2011, Turkey, determined to balance its global expectations and regional objectives, envisaged the downfall of the Assad regime, relying on its strength in the Arab street to ensure a rapid outcome, and encouraged by Tunisian and Egyptian examples. The critics of Turkey's new stand vis-à-vis Syria, in retrospect observed that Ankara was not prepared for the Syrian regime's resilience and had not accounted for its experience in countering dissident activities and even armed resistance. In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan, who even in the fourth month of the turmoil still anticipated that 'Assad would fall in a few months', had revised his estimation to half-a-year to two years by the end of the first year of anti-regime demonstrations. Furthermore, Ankara's call on Damascus to 'put down all its weapons, meet people's demands and resign' turned into a simple call for early elections. However, in November 2011, Turkey's prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan publicly called for Bashar Assad to step down.

From Autumn 2011, Turkey, thus, positioned itself for a regime change in Syria. The quick collapse of the autocratic regime in Tunisia and Egypt and also the relatively rapid downfall of the Kaddafi regime in Libya led Turkey's leaders to predict a similar end for Bashar Assad in Syria and to become instrumental in Turkey's

unexpectedly early commitment to a regime change.

As Bashar Assad proved more recalcitrant and resilient than expected, the criticism started to mount against Turkey's Syria policy. Some, highlighting Turkish government's disenchantment with Assad and seeing its cultivating of contacts with the Syrian opposition as an investment in the future, criticised Turkey for ignoring the deep divisions between groups fighting against Assad.

Turkey's calculations on the imminent collapse of the Syrian regime were further thwarted by a non-cooperative Russia and to a lesser extent by China, both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council that blocked any move by the international body to weaken Bashar Assad.

2.4 TURKEY'S SYRIAN CHILD: THE SNC

As much the UN Security Council proved itself to be dysfunctional in terms of Syria, Turkey, along with the United States, United Kingdom and France initiated the 'Friends of Syria' alignment, subscribing the support of scores of UN member countries. The first meeting of the 'Friends of Syria' took place in Tunisia on 24 February 2012, to be followed by another meeting in Istanbul. In the Istanbul meeting, Turkey pushed for granting greater recognition to the Syrian National Council, the umbrella organisation of the opposition, which was primarily of its own making. Turkey's endeavors remained short of recognising the SNC as the 'sole

legitimate representative of the Syrian people'; nevertheless it is acknowledged as 'a legitimate representative of all Syrians.'

In its first meeting in Tunisia, the 'Friends' Group' had declared its full support for the initiative of the League of Arab States 'to facilitate a Syrian-led political transition leading to a civil, democratic, pluralistic, independent and free state.' In its second meeting in Istanbul on 1 April 2012, the 'Group' issued 'Chairman's Conclusions' with 27 articles. Article 8 reads as follows:

'The Friends' Group very much welcomed, the National Covenant announced during the Opposition Conference in Istanbul held on 26-27 March 2012 in coordination with Arab League as articulated in the Chairman's Conclusions of the Tunisia Meeting. The Covenant laid out for the first time the foundations of the new Syria. The Group expressed full support to the opposition's common vision in the Covenant of a free and democratic Syria which clearly states that all citizens of Syria will enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms irrespective of their affiliations, ethnicity, belief and gender. The Group welcomes the commitment of Syrian opposition, as articulated in the National Covenant, to a political and economic transition that is peaceful, orderly and stable; a process reflecting the initiative of the League of Arab States. During the political transition, it is essential that Syrian institutions be preserved and reformed. The new Syria will be a constitutional democracy where the rule of law is upheld and all citizens are equal before the law.'

Prior to the Istanbul meeting of 'Friends of Syria', Turkey worked diligently behind the scenes to write and issue a 'National Covenant' for the SNC, to serve as a blueprint during the transitional period for constructing a new Syria following the ultimate overthrow of the one party dictatorship of Bashar Assad.

2.5 THE SYRIAN KURDS – THE UNSATISFIED DISSIDENTS

The 'National Covenant' fell short of meeting the aspirations of the Syrian Kurds that make up roughly ten per cent of the Syrian population and inhabiting mostly the Syrian side of the shared long frontier with Turkey, adjacently inhabited predominantly by its own Kurdish people. In the two major cities of Damascus and Aleppo, there are also sizeable Kurdish communities.

The National Covenant issued on 27 March 2012, in two different paragraphs ambiguously touched upon Kurdish rights. Defining 'new Syria' as a democratic country, adhering to the 'constitutional tradition' where all its citizens irrespective of their religious, ethnic and ideological background are equal, it mentioned the Kurds once in the following phrase:

'The Constitution will guarantee non-discrimination of all religious, ethnic and national element of Syrian society (Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turcomans and others) and recognize the equal rights of all within the framework of Syria's territorial and demographic unity and integrity.'

Such a wording was too far from what Syrian Kurdish organisations were asking for. A number of Kurdish political parties had already gathered under an umbrella named the 'Syrian Kurdish National Council', similar to the SNC. The efforts to integrate the SKNC and the SNC, prior to the 'Friends' Group' meeting in Istanbul proved to be futile. The Kurdish group accused Turkey and walked out from the unity talks of the Syrian opposition.

The Lebanese newspaper Daily Star in its April 6, 2012 issue published harsh remarks on a Kurdish political figure who participated in the negotiations with the SNC. Accusing Turkey, he said 'Our goal was to unify with the opposition and come up with a patriotic agreement that makes an umbrella for the whole opposition, but unfortunately the Turkish sponsor was very sensitive toward the Kurdish issue. We accuse the Turkish government of putting pressure on the Council.' He added that negotiations ahead of the conference had outlined recognition of the Kurds, but claimed that those points had been removed in the final covenant, saying, 'There was nothing clear about our nationalistic issues. It's clear that the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood are the majority of the council so they play a main role in the council. The Muslim Brotherhood has an old relationship with Turkey. They are allies of the Turkish government. Of course, we welcome the Brotherhood's effective contribution to the revolution and support of individual freedoms and pluralism in Syria. But their attitude is highly influenced by the Turks and that's what we saw clearly displayed in the national charter.'

The Kurdish representatives of the Kurdish National Council, in the absence of adequate representation from the SNC, indicated their intention to negotiate with the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, the PYD (Democratic Change Party).

The SNC, through back channel efforts by Turkey, adopted an annex to its 'National Covenant' under the title 'The National Covenant concerning the Kurdish Question in Syria' in order to alleviate the resentment of the Kurdish parties. However, in its nine articles, it stopped short of any mention of autonomy or a federal status for the Kurds, not even implicitly mentioning a distinct national identity. The annex to the 'National Covenant' adopted to include Kurdish organisations could not achieve its purpose.

Hence, despite the subsequent Istanbul conferences of both the SNC, that saw the declaration of new Syria's 'National Covenant' and the 'Friends' Meeting', constituting the zenith of Turkish diplomatic achievements on the Syria issue, it was not able to integrate the Kurdish component of the Syrian opposition. The absence of the Kurdish component in the Syrian opposition under Turkey's influence has become Turkey's major shortcoming in maintaining a national reconciliation of all the anti-regime Syrians and thus, has undermined Turkey's unifying role vis-à-vis Syria.

2.6 KURDISH CONTROL ON THE FRONTIER

By July 2012, Syrian Kurdish organisations, and mainly the PKK's Syrian twin PYD, gained control over a number of Kurdish towns adjacent to Turkey's long common frontier with Syria. The development rang alarm bells in Turkey, which declared that it would not permit a Kurdish entity next to its border under the control of PYD. Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu rushed to Erbil for talks with Massoud Barzani on the situation, which evolved in the northern part of Syria that the Kurds began to call as 'Syrian Kurdistan' or 'Western Kurdistan'.

The takeover of Kurdish towns by new Kurdish masters came only a week after the Erbil Accord, signed by two conflicting blocs of Syrian Kurdish organisations under the auspices of Massoud Barzani in 12 July 2012.

The Erbil Accord had been signed between the Kurdish National Council, presumably the pro-Barzani gathering of some 15 Kurdish parties and the PYD. The Accord proposed the formation of a Supreme Kurdish Council made up of five KNC members and five PYD members to take over any Kurdish city and town evacuated by the Syrian regime's forces.

The Kurdish bloc and other Kurdish opposition movements were slow to react after the outbreak of the uprising in March 2011. By mid-April, the Kurdish political parties had not taken a clear

position with regard to the uprising. The Syrian Kurdish National Council was formed on 26 October 2011, during the same period that the Syrian National Council came into existence in Turkey.

Before the formation of the SKNC, the Kurds were involved in attempts to unify the opposition, to form what eventually became the SNC, as mentioned earlier. There were always problems. A different group of leftist Kurdish parties, with the PYD had formed the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties in the latter half of April 2011, and it boycotted many meetings of the Syrian opposition in protest of the alleged Turkish interference in the Kurdish issue.

They walked out of the Istanbul Conference of the Syrian opposition on 16 July 2011 that followed the Antalya Conference, on the grounds that the Arab opposition members insisted on maintaining the name 'Syrian Arab Republic.' Such a name was unacceptable even to those Kurds who were closest to the Arab opposition and seemingly ready to cooperate.

They also directed a criticism towards Turkey, stating that: 'The demands and the legitimate rights of the Kurds are still ignored and, this clearly shows the Turkish influence and impact over the Syrian opposition. In the beginning of the revolution against the Syrian regime, persecution and humiliation of the people, Turkey has interfered as a mediator in the Syrian crisis and tried to play the role of supporting the opposition.'

The stance Turkey is taking is not to spread democracy in the region, however it is to strengthen its influence and its regional role. Turkey fears that the Kurds will be key players in the new Syria, which is supposed to be a democratic state, and its further concerns that the role played by Kurds in Syria would reflect on Turkey's Kurds, too. Therefore, the Syrian Kurdish opposition views the growing role and influence of the Turkish government over the Syria National Council with suspicion.'

In return, however, Syrian Kurds have been consistently accused by Arab and other opposition groups, of not adequately supporting the uprising against the Baath regime of Bashar Assad which began in March 2011.

3. SYRIAN KURDISH OPPOSITION

3.1 THREE MAJOR GROUPINGS

The Syrian Kurdish opposition is divided into three main groupings of which the third is the weakest. All three groupings formed in their present composition in October 2011.

They are as follows:

The Syrian Kurdish National Council supported by Iraqi Kurdistan and considered close to the KRG's (Kurdistan Regional Government) President Massoud Barzani. Some elements of the SKNC also have connections with Turkey.

The Kurdish personalities in the SNC. These are supported by Turkey, to the extent that, one of them, Abdulbaset Seida, replaced the first Chairman of the SNC, Burhan Galioun and remained as SNC Chairman until the SNC Conference in Doha, Qatar in November 2012. Kurdish Seida, who had the support of Turkey, left his seat to a Christian, George Sabra, in Doha. But, a few days after its conference, the SNC integrated into and became part of a new opposition umbrella, under the name of 'Coalition of Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition'.

The third grouping constituted primarily the PYD, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, which proved strongest of all Syrian Kurdish groups.

At the moment of the Erbil Accord of July 2012, when KRG President Barzani had achieved the national unity agreement between the PYD and the KNC, the latter, that is, the Kurdish National Council, consisted of 15 parties. Much of their credibility in terms of representation is questionable, as they were formed by a group of individuals who have left their parent organisation because of squabbles and factionalism. Even the legitimacy of their parent organisations' representation are questionable, since they do not seem to have formidable mass support.

3.2 THE KNC

Among the 15 political parties that constitute the KNC, only three or four have any relative credibility as representatives of the Syrian Kurdish public.

Nonetheless, the Council has noted that it supports the Syrian revolution and has refused all negotiations with the regime in Damascus. The KNC formulated mainly four demands:

1. The constitutional recognition of the Kurdish People and their Kurdish national identity. It insisted on the word 'people' living in their historical homeland. This demand, interestingly, coincides with the very similar insistence of pro-PKK Kurdish elements in Turkey.
2. Recognition of the Kurdish question in Syria as the main aspect of general national issues of the country.
3. Abandoning all discriminatory laws applied to the Kurdish People.
4. Recognition of the 'national rights of the Kurdish People according to the international conventions and agreements in a politically decentralised government within the territorial unity of Syria.'

Although the fourth demand, formulated as the 'politically decentralised government of Syria' is not articulated in the statements of or interviews conducted by major KNC figures, it

indicates that they mostly imply a 'federal Syria', similar to Iraq next door in the post-2003 War. For KNC leaders and for Syrian Kurds in general, there is no doubt that the Iraqi KRG presented itself as a precedent and inspired the Syrian Kurds as a model to be emulated.

3.3 THE KNC AND THE SNC – ALWAYS APART

Contact between the KNC and the SNC started since the birth dates of both, that are very close. However, those continuous contacts did not bear fruit in terms of Kurdish integration to the SNC or for the overall unification the Syrian opposition by its Arab and Kurdish components.

The most serious contacts took place in Erbil in January 2012. The talks reportedly faltered when the SNC refused to accept written guarantees for political decentralisation or the right to self-determination for Kurds within Syria's territorial integrity. The SNC's leading figures stated that they could not accept federalism. The strongest component of the SNC, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also declared through its spokesman that it rejects federalism and opposes reverting the name of the country to the 'Syrian Republic' instead of the 'Syrian Arab Republic'.

The KNC viewed the SNC very cautiously and did not dispel its suspicions that the SNC is another version of Arab nationalism in regards to Kurdish rights. That was the reason for the KNC's

insistence to get written guarantees for Kurdish rights at the very initial stage of forming a Syrian opposition, aiming to replace the regime and take over the political power in the near future.

The SNC, despite its disagreement on the definition of the rights of the Syrian Kurds with the Kurdish National Council, attracted a number of Kurds. Out of 310 seats of the Syrian National Council, 25 were held by Kurds. One of them, a longtime Kurdish exile in Sweden, Abdulbaset Seida, perhaps as a result of strong Turkish support, elected as the Chairman of the SNC, replaced Burhan Galioun and managed to be at the helm of the main Syrian opposition organisation until November 2012, the date that the SNC gave way to the U.S.-Qatar engineered new opposition bloc called 'Coalition of the Revolutionary Forces and Syrian Opposition'.

Abdulbaset Seida, however, has said that full-fledged federalism is unlikely to be supported by the SNC and has advocated 'the adoption of decentralisation in Syria as an acceptable solution for the Kurds and other Syrians.' The Kurds outside of the SNC have claimed that Abdulbaset Seida has no mass following among the Syrian Kurds, therefore does not represent anybody other than himself. In fact, the Kurdish personality in the SNC with considerable standing among the Syrian Kurds was the Qamisli-based leader of the Kurdish Future Organisation, Meshaal Temo, who was assassinated on his return to Qamisli after having participated in the Istanbul Conference of the Syrian opposition in July 2012.

His assassination is likely to have removed the Syrian Kurd with most leadership qualities and a most brilliant member of the new generation of Kurdish political activists.

Anti-PKK elements accused the PYD-PKK of being behind the assassination; yet while some Kurdish circles circulated the rumour that it was Assad regime's undertaking, the pro-PKK elements pointed to the Turkish intelligence and security apparatus. A large amount of blame, despite nothing being clear, was placed on the PKK.

3.4 THE PYD OR 'SYRIAN PKK'

PKK's Syrian offshoot, the PYD was formed in September 2003 and within a decade had surpassed every single Kurdish organisation in terms of strength and grassroots support.

The PYD's leader is Müslim Salih, whose allegiance is to the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. Because of its designation as a terrorist organisation of the PKK by Turkey and also the US and the EU, the PYD's legitimacy is in question both internationally and regionally; an obstacle that other Syrian Kurdish organisations and parties do not confront. Since ties were cut between Turkey and the Bachar Assad regime in August 2011, it has been widely speculated that the regime would use 'the PKK card' against Turkey, in the same way as Bachar's father Hafez Assad did for two decades until his death in June 2000.

In fact, there were signs, since August 2011 that the PKK had reached a compromise with Iran and Syria, and the PYD leader Müslim Salih refrained from aggressive language directed against the Syrian regime. Such signs also fed speculations in Turkey's official circles that Bashar Assad's regime in Damascus was using the PYD/PKK as a tool against Turkey.

Turkish conventional reasoning concluded that whenever the regime in Syria collapses, ultimately, 'the PKK problem' of Turkey would also be done with. 'The PKK has placed itself in the wrong side of history' became a motto frequently employed by Turkey officials claiming the alliance between the organisation and its Syrian affiliate with the Baath regime of Syria, so that, in the eyes of Turkish leaders, it was doomed to be overthrown.

The PKK and the PYD both took pains to refuse such allegations and have attempted to show some distance between themselves and the regime. The PYD created a platform dealing with the Syrian uprising as early as 30 March 2010, entitled 'The Declaration of Political Resolution by the PYD', calling for the abolition of the security apparatus of the regime and adopting a new constitution for Syria, to establish a pluralistic democratic Syria, in which the Kurdish issue would be resolved through the autonomy of Kurdish inhabited regions. The PYD spokespersons reiterated on several occasions that Kurdish autonomy in Syria has to be safeguarded by a democratic state for the entire country.

The PYD's vision of Syria with regards to Kurdish autonomous regions within a similarly administered democratic Syria is the precise implementation of Abdullah Öcalan's hypotheses for the resolution of the Kurdish question in all four parts of Kurdistan as he describes it, that is: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The PKK officials and the pro-PKK BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) in Turkey have repeatedly advocated the same proposition, using the same wording to suggest autonomy as a panacea for resolving Turkey's Kurdish question.

On the practical plane, the PYD has fluctuated between the regime and its opposition, providing ammunition to its opponents from Turkey to Syrian Arab (predominantly Islamist) groups and even to most of the Syrian Kurdish political groups.

The PYD has harshly criticised the SNC, calling those Kurds joined to that opposition organisation as 'collaborators'; a word which in Kurdish political lexicon is used for those who have committed high treason. The PYD has also alleged that the primary purpose of the SNC has been to provide Turkey with the pretext of military intervention to Syria to put up 'buffer zones' in the Kurdish populated regions, in order to prevent Kurdish self-rule.

The PYD also had a hostile and tense relationship with the KNC, with whom it was vying for control over the Syrian Kurdish population. Several analysts have suggested that the PYD's violent stance against other Kurdish factions and its 'tactical cooperation' with the regime is a major factor contributing to the fracture of

the Syrian Kurds, and that the fragmented Kurdish opposition is hurting the Syrian uprising as a whole.

3.5 THE ERBIL ACCORD AND ITS AFTERMATH

The signing on 11 July 2012 in Erbil of the Accord in the presence of KRG President Massoud Barzani, the PYD and the KNC, committed them to preventing Kurdish infighting and to jointly administer the Kurdish areas of Syria with the newly-created Supreme Kurdish Council. The KNC was at a disadvantageous position throughout the negotiations that led to the Erbil Accord. A newer and weaker alliance of Kurdish political parties compared to the better organised, ten year old and armed PYD, the Kurdish National Council lacked the grassroots support that the PYD enjoyed. The paramilitary apparatus it had, made the PYD the most formidable Kurdish political actor in Syria in the wake of the events shaking the foundations of the Baath regime and the republic.

It can be said that the KNC owed its *raison d'être* primarily to a dual fear:

1. That the PYD was becoming an all-powerful player in terms of having to represent and therefore speak on behalf of the Syrian Kurds;
2. That the SNC (Syrian National Council), established in Istanbul in August 2011, the backbone of which is the Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood and thus is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, was a Turkish-created and a Turkish-sponsored vehicle for advancing an Arab-Islamist agenda.

Another incentive for unifying Kurdish parties in Syria, particularly on the part of the KNC, was to create a joint security force for the so-called 'West Kurdistan' or 'Syrian Kurdistan', tantamount to Iraqi Kurdistan's peshmerga forces. In late July, the architect of the Erbil Accord, Barzani, confirmed that his military policy had trained over 1,000 Syrian Kurds who form part of the 15,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees in Iraq. He added that those fighters would be amenable for the higher council for security that was being created in accordance with the Erbil Accord. Whether the existing PYD fighters already inside Syria are to be responsible for such a task, was left aside and not made conditional.

Only a few days after the signing of the Erbil Accord, the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Kurdish territories began. On 19 July 2012, the PYD fighters overran border checkpoints in the city of Kobani (in Arabic Ayn al-Arab) right across the Turkish-Kurdish town of Suruç in the şanlıurfa province. Two days later, by 21 July, the regime had withdrawn from Afrin, Amude, Derik and parts of the largest Syrian Kurdish town, Qamishli. The PYD claimed control of all those that the Syrian regime had withdrawn.

The relatively smooth takeover of the Kurdish towns by the PYD adjacent to Turkish border raised suspicions and further justified

allegations that the PYD was allying itself to the Syrian regime or given a free hand by it to be employed against Turkey.

No matter what, Kobani at the north, Afrin (at the northwest) between Aleppo and Syrian frontier with the province of Hatay of Turkey), Derbesiye, Amude and Derik, all in the northeast, across Turkey's Mardin and şırnak province's frontier with Syria had effectively come under the PYD's control.

4. A NEW PERIOD AND FORECASTS FOR THE FUTURE

4.1 FLASHPOINTS ON TURKEY'S FRONTIERS

In mid-November 2012, the town of Ras al-Ayn (in Kurdish Serekaniye) across the Turkish-Kurdish town of Ceylanpınar of Urfa province became a flashpoint between the Kurds affiliated to the PYD and Arab fighters of the Free Syrian Army supported by Turkey. The bloody battles fought between the PYD and the FSA to wrest control of the town brought scores of wounded people to Turkish hospitals in the adjacent Turkish-Kurdish town of Ceylanpınar, where allegedly the hospitals, while treating the victims from the FSA, did not accept those of the PYD.

The flashpoint of Ras al, between the PYD and the FSA, is seen as heralding a similar future for the rest of the PYD-controlled Syrian Kurdish towns along the Turkish-Syrian shared frontier.

The largest Kurdish town of Qamishli, which is considered to be the political centre of the Syrian Kurds, adjacent to Turkey's Kurdish town of Nusaybin, is the only place in which the decisions of the Erbil Accord have been abided by and implemented. The Supreme Kurdish Council is functional only in Qamishli.

As of November 2012, there has been a lot of resentment from the KNC towards the PYD, which has escalated the tension between the two main components of Syria's Kurdish politics. This may invite further intervention by Massoud Barzani as the ultimate broker or a mediator, which could further enhance the profile of him as the Kurdish national icon. The Erbil Accord of July 2012 has already increased the geopolitical profile of Massoud Barzani.

Due to the failure in the implementation of the Erbil Accord, in September 2012, the parties involved met in Erbil once again and sought KRG mediation. The parties reached an understanding and agreed on implementing five-point regulation until the decided deadline of 15 October 2012. The deadline has since passed and despite the conciliatory rhetoric of the Erbil meeting in September, many KNC members have continued to insist that the Erbil Accord of July 2012 is a dead-end. However, they acknowledge that the KNC cannot confront the PYD by force and that both sides must prevent a Kurdish civil war, a Brakuji (the Kurdish word for fratricide) as witnessed in Iraqi Kurdistan with devastating consequences.

All indicators suggest the need for a decisive new role and mediation by Massoud Barzani, president of the KRG.

The dramatic developments which unfolded in Syria's Kurdish areas in July 2012 rang alarm bells in Turkey, while it grappled with its own Kurdish problem and faced intense confrontation with the PKK. This exacerbated the bad blood already existing between the PYD and the KNC in Syria. This may be one of the primary reasons for which the Erbil Accord of July 2012 mainly remained 'on paper' and was not implemented fully in practice.

4.2 THE PERCEPTION OF A THREAT AND TURKEY'S INSTRUMENTS

Turkey, in dealing with the alleged 'security threat' that has emanated from the control of its Syrian frontier by the PKK/PYD, can employ four different instruments:

1. By way of the KRG: relying on the ever warming relationship and political and economic interdependence between Ankara and Erbil, mutually facing negative attitudes from the Baghdad government of Nuri al-Maliki and lavish deals on the exploration, production and the transportation of oil and natural gas of the KRG, Turkey would like to boost Massoud Barzani's status as the Kurdish national figure in the region. It is also interested in seeing Barzani exercise its influence and power over the Syrian Kurds and not let the PYD take over the administration of the Syrian Kurdish

region.

2. By way of the FSA: Turkey is supplying the FSA with logistical support and apparently, there are converging interests between them, apart from the close ideological relationship on some aspects. Turkey would prefer to see FSA control over border towns rather than that of the PYD.

3. Military intervention. Either through establishing 'buffer zones' with the consent and cooperation of the international community and the Arab League in particular, Turkey holds the option of moving its military into a limited Syrian territory in order to provide 'security' for its adjacent regions to the long Syrian frontier. Such a move, although not warranted and not holding a high position in the hierarchy of options, cannot be totally discarded as an option, if Turkey sees the PYD-control of Syrian Kurdish towns as a major security threat.

4. A deal reached by the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan or by the PKK itself. This is not a foreseeable option. However, it cannot be ruled altogether. Any deal to be reached with Öcalan and/or with its organisation, will, necessarily, have a backlash with regards to the situation involving Turkey and Syrian Kurds, primarily, the PYD as an affiliate of the PKK.

4.3 TWO CONTRASTING SCENARIOS

Among all of the options listed above, the last two are more feasible in comparison to the first two. The Turkish army's presence had already increased after the downing of the Turkish warplane F4E

by Syrians in June 2012. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, in the wake of the incident declared that the rules of engagement with Syrian forces had changed and that any Syrian military activity in proximity of Turkish borders would be considered as a hostile act and be responded to accordingly. Mobile anti-aircraft systems were deployed, as well as additional artillery and armoured units. On October 3, 2012, when a shell struck the Turkish border town of Akçakale, which is adjacent to the Syrian town Tel Abyad where fighting raged between the FSA and the regular Syrian army, there was similar activity. The following day, on 4 October 2012, the Turkish parliament approved the government's motion, allowing the military to stage air and ground operations, if need be, across the border in the Syrian territory. On 8 October, 25 F-16s were deployed in Diyarbakır, and moved from their air bases in Western Turkey, near to the Syrian border.

On October 10, 2012, the escalation reached dramatic levels, when Turkey forced a Syrian civilian aircraft to down, claiming that it was carrying illegal military cargo on its way from Moscow to Damascus. All Turkish aircraft is forbidden from using Syrian airspace. On October 14, Turkey ultimately closed its airspace to Syrian aircraft.

Turkey also received a pledge from NATO, as the latter announced that the Alliance would come to Turkey's defence if it is attacked by Syria.

All of the above developments suggest that Turkey, by the Autumn of 2012, has entered a new and more aggressive phase against Syria. Ankara has indicated that it is determined to increase the pressure on the Syrian regime by providing artillery support to the FSA, operating in the northern part of Syria.

Despite the apparent tensions and the growing confrontational mood between the two countries, the likelihood of war between Turkey and Syria remains remote, given Turkey's determination not to transform the Syrian crisis into bilateral conflict.

Nonetheless, as the Turkish army is already deployed along the Syrian border, it is well placed to intervene, if the perception of a security threat remains in place, in the case that a PYD-administered Kurdish region in Syria comes into effect.



Map of the Turkey – Syria border²

2 T.C. BAŞBAKANLIK GÜMRÜK MÜSTEŞARLIĞI TAŞRA TEŞKİLÂTI, SINIR KOMŞUSU ÜLKELER VE ULAŞIM AĞLARI: <http://www.haritadunyasi.com/images/turkiye-haritalari/sinir-komsusu-ulkeler-ulasim-aglari-gumruk-kapilari.jpg> accessed 5.12.12

That being a 'worst case scenario', a benign scenario is equally plausible in terms of a future state of relations between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds.

Hunger strikes started on 12 September 2012 by a group of PKK prisoners in different prisons. The number of hunger strikers increased in a short period of time to 700 in over 60 prisons. After a month, the number swelled to nearly 10,000 people imprisoned allegedly as PKK members or supporters. A number of members of parliament belonging to the BDP, including the mayor of Diyarbakır and Sakharov Peace Prize laureate Leyla Zana followed suit.

The demands of the hunger strikers were purely political and unprecedented in the history of the hunger strikes. They were as follows:

1. Ending the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader who is in the island prison of İmralı, condemned to life imprisonment. Since early July 2011, all communication with Öcalan has been cut.
2. Recognition of the right of defence in the mother tongue in trials for Kurdish prisoners.
3. Recognition of the right to education in mother tongue language.

The third demand necessitates an amendment of the constitution.

The second has more or less been met by the government, which presented a motion to the parliament on the second month of the hunger strikes.

The most pressing demand was the first, and it became clear that only Abdullah Öcalan could yield power, by a call to end the hunger strikes at a time they reached a dangerous threshold that could produce scores of deaths.

The issue dominated Turkey's political agenda, from the second half of October 2012 until 18 November, so much so that Abdullah Öcalan's brother was allowed to go to the island and brought a written instruction from the PKK leader to end the strikes. His call was implemented by all of the hunger strikers, to the relief of the Turkish public.

The dramatic finale in ending the hunger strikes signaled the possibility of a new phase in the endeavors to seek a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish question, by bringing to the fore the influence of Abdullah Öcalan over the Kurdish insurgents and their supporters.

5. UNCERTAINTY AND POSSIBILITIES

In the event of a renewed process of negotiations with Öcalan starting, this would certainly have an impact on the prospects of Turkey with regards to issues pertaining to the Syrian Kurds.

Consequently, relying on the new and positive climate, the Co-Chairman of the BDP, Selahattin Demirtaş has offered his party's assistance in bringing the Turkish government and the Syrian Kurdish PYD into contact with one another.

Another dramatic development that might be decisive for Turkey's Syria challenge occurred on 11 November 2012 in Doha, Qatar, in the reorganisation of the Syrian opposition under a new umbrella, which is more inclusive than the Turkish creation: the SNC. Only a few days ago, the SNC had its congress, and its leadership once again had changed hands.

An Orthodox Christian and a former communist, George Sabra has been elected the SNC's new president. Abdelbaset Seida, a Kurd, had taken over the post only a few months ago, on June 10, 2012, from Burhan Galioun, Paris-based first president of the organisation.

The US, which had distanced itself from the SNC and Qatar, pressed for the reorganisation of the Syrian opposition, not reconciling itself with the change of guard in the presidency of the SNC.

After marathon negotiations in Doha, a new body came into existence with a new name; the 'Coalition of Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition.' The new umbrella organisation made a moderate Sunni cleric, Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib (who has strong

credentials within Syria) its president, and elected Ms Suhair Attasi and Riad Seif, two popular and secularist figures of the opposition, as vice-presidents. The SNC is incorporated in the new body to be represented by 20 among 60.

The foundation of the 'Coalition of Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition' has been hailed by a group of 'Friends of Syria' including Turkey. France recognised the new organisation as 'the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people' almost immediately. The United Kingdom followed on 19 November 2012 in the same way.

The SNC will no longer be able to be the sole representative of the Syrian people. Despite being its creator, Turkey is relieved from carrying the burden solely in terms of supporting the Syrian opposition, and has now become a major player in a wider and joint effort including the regional forces and the main Western allies.

The outcomes of the 'Coalition of Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian Opposition' will be influential in Turkey's prospects with Syria.

Forging an effective, unified Syrian opposition that can overthrow the Assad dictatorship in Syria is a formidable task that needs multi-faceted efforts and time. Events are moving so quickly in and around Syria that if the opposition does not gain traction, it

will rapidly be overtaken by other groups, active on the ground in Syria, namely Salafist, fundamentalist, nationalist or ethnic and tribal, each acting as proxies of the regional and international actors involved in the Syrian crisis.

A sound observation is that Syria comprises a land and a political dynamic that naturally lends itself to fragmentation.

Turkey is and will remain at the forefront in terms of those influencing the trajectory of the developments in Syria and those concerning the Kurdish issue, and will interactively be influenced by them.

Appendix:

DPI Board and Council of Experts

Director:

Kerim Yildiz

Kerim Yildiz is Director of DPI. He is an expert in international human rights law and minority rights, and is the recipient of a number of awards, including from the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights for his services to protect human rights and promote the rule of law in 1996, the Sigrid Rausing Trust's Human Rights award for Leadership in Indigenous and Minority Rights in 2005, and the Gruber Prize for Justice in 2011. Kerim has written extensively on human rights and international law, and his work has been published internationally.

DPI Board Members:

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Barrister and Deputy High Court Judge (Chancery and Queen's Bench Divisions), United Kingdom . Former Chair of the Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales and Former President of Union Internationale des Avocats.

Professor Penny Green (Secretary)

Head of Research and Director of the School of Law's Research Programme at King's College London and Director of the International State Crime Initiative (ICSI), United Kingdom (a

collaborative enterprise with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the University of Hull, led by King's College London).

Priscilla Hayner

Co-founder of the International Center for Transitional Justice, global expert and author on truth commissions and transitional justice initiatives, consultant to the Ford Foundation, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and numerous other organisations.

Arild Humlen

Lawyer and Director of the Norwegian Bar Association's Legal Committee. Widely published within a number of jurisdictions, with emphasis on international civil law and human rights. Has lectured at law faculties of several universities in Norway. Awarded the Honor Prize of the Bar Association for Oslo for his work as Chairman of the Bar Association's Litigation Group for Asylum and Immigration law.

Jacki Muirhead

Practice Director, Cleveland Law Firm. Previously Barristers' Clerk at Counsels' Chambers Limited and Marketing Manager at the Faculty of Advocates. Undertook an International Secondment at New South Wales Bar Association.

Professor David Petrasek

Professor of International Political Affairs at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Expert and author on human rights, humanitarian law and conflict resolution issues, former Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of Amnesty International, consultant to United Nations.

Antonia Potter Prentice

Expert in humanitarian, development, peacemaking and peacebuilding issues. Consultant on women, peace and security; and strategic issues to clients including the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, the Global Network of Women Peacemakers, Mediator, and Terre des Hommes.

DPI Council of Experts

Dr Mehmet Asutay

Reader in Middle Eastern and Islamic Political Economy and Finance at the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University. Researches, teaches and supervises research on Middle Eastern economic development, the political economy of Middle East including Turkish and Kurdish political economies, and Islamic political economy. Honorary Treasurer of the British Society for Middle East Studies and of the International Association for Islamic Economics. His research has been published in various journals, magazines and also in book format.

Christine Bell

Legal expert based in Northern Ireland; expert on transitional justice, peace negotiations, constitutional law and human rights law advice. Trainer for diplomats, mediators and lawyers.

Cengiz Çandar

Senior Journalist and columnist specializing in areas such as The Kurdish Question, former war correspondent. Served as special adviser to Turkish president Turgut Ozal.

Yilmaz Ensarođlu

SETA Politics Economic and Social Research Foundation. Member of the Executive Board of the Joint Platform for Human Rights, the Human Rights Agenda Association (İHAD) and Human Rights

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Salomón Lerner Febres

Former President of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Perú; Executive President of the Center for Democracy and Human Rights of the Pontifical Catholic University of Perú.

Professor Mervyn Frost

Head of the Department of War Studies, King's College London. Previously served as Chair of Politics and Head of Department at the University of Natal in Durban. Former President of the South African Political Studies Association; expert on human rights in international relations, humanitarian intervention, justice in world politics, democratising global governance, just war tradition in an Era of New Wars and ethics in a globalising world.

Martin Griffiths

Founding member and first Executive Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Served in the British Diplomatic Service, and in British NGOs, Ex -Chief Executive of Action Aid. Held posts as United Nations (UN) Director of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, Geneva and Deputy to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, New York. Served as UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Great Lakes, UN Regional Coordinator in the Balkans and UN Assistant Secretary-General.

Dr. Edel Hughes

Senior Lecturer, University of East London. Expert on international human rights and humanitarian law, with special interest in civil liberties in Ireland, emergency/anti-terrorism law, international criminal law and human rights in Turkey and Turkey's accession to European Union. Previous lecturer with Amnesty International and a founding member of Human Rights for Change.

Professor Ram Manikkalingam

Visiting Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, served as Senior Advisor on the Peace Process to President of Sri Lanka, expert and author on conflict, multiculturalism and democracy, founding board member of the Laksham Kadirgamar Institute for Strategic Studies and International Relations.

Bejan Matur

Renowned Turkey based Author and Poet. Columnist, focusing mainly on Kurdish politics, the Armenian issue, daily politics, minority problems, prison literature, and women's issues. Has won several literary prizes and her work has been translated into 17 languages. Former Director of the Diyarbakır Cultural Art Foundation (DKSV).

Jonathan Powell

British diplomat, Downing Street Chief of Staff under Prime Minister Tony Blair between 1997- 2007. Chief negotiator in Northern Ireland peace talks, leading to the Good Friday

Agreement in 1998. Currently CEO of Inter Mediate, a United Kingdom -based non-state mediation organization.

Sir Kieran Prendergast

Served in the British Foreign Office, including in Cyprus, Turkey, Israel, the Netherlands, Kenya and New York; later head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office dealing with Apartheid and Namibia; former UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. Convenor of the SG's Executive Committee on Peace and Security and engaged in peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan, Burundi, Cyprus, the DRC, East Timor, Guatemala, Iraq, the Middle East, Somalia and Sudan.

Rajesh Rai

Rajesh was called to the Bar in 1993. His areas of expertise include Human Rights Law, Immigration and Asylum Law, and Public Law. Rajesh has extensive hands-on experience in humanitarian and environmental issues in his work with NGOs, cooperatives and companies based in the UK and overseas. He also lectures on a wide variety of legal issues, both for the Bar Human Rights Committee and internationally.

Professor Naomi Roht Arriaza

Professor at University of Berkeley, United States, expert and author on transitional justice, human rights violations, international criminal law and global environmental issues.

Professor Dr. Mithat Sancar

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