TURKISH SECURITY DISCOURSES AND POLICIES: THE KURDISH QUESTION

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Abstract: A multidimensional problem with lengthy history, the so-called "Kurdish Question" has been one of the most important domestic security challenges that Turkey has had to face since the early 1980s. In this paper, the Kurdish issue is put in the broader framework of Turkey's security concept and foreign policy, along with explanation of the specifics and dynamics in Turkish politics. The relations between the Kurdish groups in the Middle East region were taken in consideration, as well as the emergence of the jihadist group of ISIL. A special focus on security perceptions and results of EvoCS project is presented at the beginning.

Keywords: Kurdish question, security discourse, terrorism, PKK, ISIL, Turkey.

Introduction

Located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus region, Turkey is at the forefront of many of today's greatest security challenges. For the last decade, Turkey tackled these challenges through an active and engaging policy of "zero problems with neighbors," initiated a series of regional mediations, and was promoted in the context of the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative as a "role model" of successful transformation for other Muslim countries and the Arab world.

The Arab awakening, seen at the beginning as an "unprecedented opportunity"[1] for Turkey to take the leadership role in the Middle East, soon proved the limits of Turkey's regional influence and its lack of capacity to provide stability and consistent foreign policy. Moreover, Turkey dropped behind its role of an arbiter, to become increasingly involved in regional conflicts. The case of Turkey's relationship with Syria, once presented as a remarkable accomplishment of the "zero problems" policy at its best, deteriorated into a virtual undeclared warfare with a crucial impact on Turkey's international and domestic policy. In the foreground, as a focal point of the Turkey-Syria relations and a major security challenge in the domestic area once again stood the Kurdish question.

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Kurdish issue has existed as a source of internal conflict and instability, but after the beginning of the armed insurgency in 1984 and the declared aim for a separate statehood it became the main threat and security concern for Turkish policy-makers. Till now the conflict has taken the lives of more than 40 000 people, cost billions of dollars and has had a detrimental effect on social relationships, contributing to the escalation of ethnic polarisation and nationalism. The perception of the problem as an internal issue changed with the end of the Cold War and the increased dynamics in the Middle East. The Kurdish question turned into the main tool to be used against Turkey and containing the PKK's threat has become the main focus of its foreign policy. At the same time, foreign policy was highly instrumentalised to achieve goals related to domestic politics.

Such was the case with the EU accession process which was being perceived as the major driving force of the reforms in the beginning of the 2000's.[2] Since then, the decisive role that EU had played in encouraging democratisation significantly diminished. However, the absence of engagement in the government driven peace initiatives has been replaced by increased concerns over current situation in Turkey. In the context of European energy and security needs, and especially due to Turkey's crucial role in the refugee crisis that spilled out to Europe, the country has reaffirmed its position as an important strategic partner.

Turkey's strategic importance was taken into consideration with the inclusion of the country in the project "The Evolving Concept of Security: A critical evaluation across four dimensions" (EvoCS), aimed to facilitate the development of EU security policies through a detailed analysis of the security discourse and concerns. The period that was examined—from the beginning of November 2013 to the end of October 2014—gave a snapshot of an inward-looking country, with a government being the dominant and "hegemonic" political actor, deepening social and political polarization and an emerging conflict on its borders. The main security challenges were identified as terrorism, refugees, ISIL, Syria and energy dependency. Terrorism as an external threat was pointed out as the major security concern.

Namely, the Middle East crisis and its repercussions is the reason "Territorial integrity and security" to be put as a primary threat in the security discourse, followed by "Physical safety and security" and "Political stability and security." In that year of major corruption scandals, violent massive demonstrations, deadly workplace accidents and censorship, the accent in the domestic policy discourse was put on the "parallel state" as an internal threat. The deepening conflict between the former friends and allies—Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Fethullah Gulen—lies at the core of the ongoing power struggle between the gulenists, infiltrated in police and judiciary,

and the AKP government. It resulted in the mass-scale campaigns against Hizmet's prep schools, media and business groups and led to dismissal of thousands of police officers, prosecutors, judges and even honorary consuls. The securitization of the Gulen movement was marked as an important long-term trend in the EvoCS findings. The opposite process was observed regarding the Kurdish question. The Peace process was seen as an important step towards the final solution and that was reflected in the desecuritization of the Kurdish issue. The recent incidents confirmed the cyclical nature of the Kurdish issue in the public discourse and leave us with the question of a mourning relative of a killed soldier: "Why do those who have been saying 'solution' since yesterday now say war?"[3]

Security Perceptions and Domestic Discourse

Shaped by its geopolitical status and strategic importance, historical legacy and cultural identity, the Turkish concept of security is focused on self-preservation, officially defined as "ensuring the survival of the population; protecting territorial integrity and preserving the basic identity of the nation."[4]

For many decades, the traditional discourse on security in Turkey has been that of the civilian-military bureaucratic elite. It embodied "a fear of loss of territory, a fear of abandonment and geographical determinism"[5] and perceptions that the civilian establishment has not been adequate to deal with the internal threats successfully.[6] The broadening of Turkey's security agenda during the 1990's identified Islamism and Kurdish separatism as major threats and showed the usage of "national security" as a key instrument in shaping political processes by the military establishment.[7] The 1999 decision to recognise Turkey as a candidate country to the EU was a turning point in many aspects. It contributed to the emergence of a public debate on the definition of "national security" and especially to the transformation of civil-military relations that led to diminishing the military's "political" participation and abandoning their role as a political actor.

However, despite that the security perceptions passed through a reconstruction and reformulation, especially since AKP (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002, the traditional approach to security remains and transformation from hard security issues to soft security considerations failed to be consistent. According to the EvoCS research findings, the security discourse in Turkey attaches the greatest degree of salience to the "territorial integrity"[8] and among the major issues is the Kurdish question.

Being the main source of political instability and existential threat to Turkey's territorial integrity since the early 1980s', the Kurdish question has been perceived strictly as a "security concern" and a problem of "terrorism." It led to the rejection of

Kurdish demands and a failure for constructive engagement of the Kurdish population and has been the main obstacle to finding a peaceful solution to the conflict.[9]

The most important part of the problem is the securitisation of ethnic existence of the Kurds and their demands.[10] And the securitising actors are not just the Turkish government and the Turkish army, but also the civilian bureaucracy, political parties, certain civil society organisations and the mainstream media. The securitisation has become a part of the public discourse where it gains even more political salience.[11]

The transformation of the discourse became possible with the capturing of Abdullah Ocalan and the beginning of the EU integration process. It evolved from a problem of "terrorism" to an issue related to "democratisation," especially with AKP reforms granting more rights and freedoms to the Kurdish population. It should be noted, that the change in the conceptualisation of independence by PKK—transformed from separatism to the establishment and development of self-government[12] and instigation of ceasefire—has also had a major impact on the discourse.

The desecuritisation of the issue happened exclusively during periods of PKK ceasefire in 2002-2005, 2009-2011 and 2013-2015 through government initiatives such as Kurdish Opening, the Oslo Process and the Peace Process. It involved discussions of cultural-linguistic rights and political solutions and the results of public perception surveys proved the crucial importance of the Kurdish problem and growing expectation for the implementation of new methods, other than security-oriented approaches. Moreover, there has been a clear call to certain political parties and legitimate political arenas, such as the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, to take an active role in the process of resolving the Kurdish question.[13]

Although there are numerous Kurds within the main political parties, the claims of the pro-Kurdish movement for its own political representation remain persistent. Along with the electoral threshold of 10 percent, the main remaining difficulty is that due to the nature of the Kurdish demands, articulated in their discourse, they are seen as part of a wider "separatist" Kurdish movement and labelled as "illegitimate."[14]

Disbanding of political parties is not an unfamiliar process in Turkey. The first pro-Kurdish party HEP (Halkin Emek Partisi – People's Labour Party) was established in 1990 and after some time was banned by Turkey's Constitutional Court. The now existing HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – Peoples' Democratic Party) is the eighth pro-Kurdish political formation which united multiple political factions, previously represented by independent candidates. Each time, the links with PKK and the promotion of separatism were pointed as the reasons for disbanding those parties, and after each closure the government launched intensive campaigns against the

Kurdish movement through various forms of political suppression. The source of the indictments is the revised Anti-Terror Law which allows any demands similar to those of the PKK to be defined as terrorist propaganda. They are prosecuted for demanding rights, such as mother tongue education, even through non-violent means.[15]

AKP's policy on the Kurdish question is far from being consistent. It has its own cycle, swinging back and forth between promoting peace initiatives and granting rights on one hand, and the usage of coercive power through judicial investigations and mass scale counter-terrorism operations, on the other. An example of the latter can be seen in the events of 2009. In the local elections DTP (Demokratik Toplum Partisi – Democratic Society Party) managed to increase its support significantly as compared to the 2004 local elections, mainly at the expense of AKP.[16] Only two weeks later, more than 40 people—including elected on-duty mayors—were arrested. The massive police operation was against journalists, municipal officials, politicians, lawyers, and academics, and continued for two years. Over 1500 Kurdish activists were jailed during that period and in March 2012 the indictment against 193 people was sent to court.[17] Along with the "KCK Operation" and amid ongoing arrests of Kurdish activists, the government announced its "opening" initiative, later labelled as "the national unity project," which sought to solve the Kurdish issue "with more freedom and more democracy."[18] As a part of it, the first state-run Kurdish language TV channel was launched; some restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language were lifted and economic investments were promised through the GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) Action Plan.

The failure of the government initiative in 2011 resulted in the worst upsurge of violence the country had seen since the 1990s, with more than 900 people killed by March 2013. The end of the violence came with the historical message by Abdullah Ocalan during the Kurdish Newroz celebrations. His call upon the PKK to retreat from Turkish territory and lay down arms was fulfilled the very next day with the declaration of unilateral ceasefire.

This episode has had great importance. It showed that the influence of the Kurdish leader had not diminished, and that the loyalty to him had been undisputable, which could be used by the government as a tool to handle the eruption of violence and as an approach towards solving the Kurdish question. It also emphasised the role and importance of Massoud Barzani, invited as a broker of peace with the PKK, and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq as the most critical partner to guarantee the implementation of the ceasefire's conditions and prevent the Kurdish separatism in Turkey's southeast.[19]

The beginning of the new peace process gave many hopes for real solution-oriented negotiations. The establishment of a respective legal framework, which was defined as a necessary condition to initiate negotiations, started with the legalisation of the National Intelligence Organisation's (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı, or MIT) involvement in the talks with PKK and the establishment of a mechanism to evaluate and determine an action plan and monitor the process. However, no timelines were specified, key actors as political and societal power holders have not been involved, disagreement over official goals erupted and no comprehensive framework ever appeared.[20] With entering into a series of election campaigns (local elections in March 2014, presidential elections in August 2014 and general elections in June 2015) and returning to the confrontational discourse, it became clear that the process has been more a matter of crisis management than a real move for the ultimate resolution of the Kurdish question.[21] Moreover, the process was put into the broader context of constitutional reforms and proposed transition to a presidential system.

The collapse of the ceasefire in July 2015 put the end of the two-and-a-half year long peace process and reversed the dominant security discourse back to "terrorism," attributing "PKK terror" to the Kurdish issue in general. But in the current cycle of confrontation, this approach hides greater potential to foster political instability not only in Turkey itself, but also in the region as a whole.

Regional Dimensions of the Kurdish Question and the Impact of the Syrian Crisis

Being the largest stateless minority in the world, the Kurds are spread in a geographic area including territories in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Armenia. Since the 1990s' changes in the political structure in the Middle East, the rise of PKK and its struggle for an independent Kurdish state and the establishment of a distinct Kurdish political subject such as the KRG in Iraq led to the internalisation of the Kurdish issue.

As was mentioned before, Turkish foreign policy in the region was deeply impacted by the Kurdish question. The substantial support provided for the PKK during the 1990s laid in the core of Turkey-Syria relations. To counteract the hostile neighbour, Turkey followed a deterrence strategy, using its upstream exploitation of Euphrates River waters and politics of alignment with Israel. At the end of the 1990s, Turkey's pressure had increased significantly, as Turkish armed forces had started to relocate military equipment to the Syrian border and to conduct large military exercises in the area. The cancellation of Syria's support for PKK in the 1998, as well as the death of Hafiz Al-Assad in 2000 led to a new era of unprecedented cooperation between the two countries and assured Syria's engagement in anti-PKK operations.

The US intervention in 2003 and the possibility for the creation of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq, considered as a major security challenge, directly threaten the interests of the countries in the region, mainly Turkey, Iran and Syria. The common threat perception led to informal security partnership, driven by Turkey's new approach to foreign policy.

The Islam-rooted AKP's coming to power and the new foreign policy strategy had major impact on the long-standing rivalry with Iran. In a way similar to the development of the relations with Syria in the 1990's, Turkey's relations with Iran were directly dependent on the latter's financial and overall support for the PKK. Moreover, their confrontation was affected by the rivalry over expanding the influence among the newly emerged states in the Caucasus and Central Asia; Turkey's alliance with Israel and support for opposing Kurdish factions in Northern Iraq; as well as the Turkish domestic issue with the rise of the political Islam. The change in Turkey's ruling elite helped the rapprochement, deepened further by high-level military and intelligence cooperation against the PKK, Turkey's mediation and stance on Iran's nuclear program and an economic and energy partnership.

The Arab Spring changed significantly the security environment in the region. It opened the opportunity for the emergence of an independent Greater Kurdistan and realigned the political balance between Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq.[22] Turkey's shift from the policy of "zero problems with neighbours" and partnership with the Syrian government to an active supporter and host of the Syrian opposition contributed to the escalation of the conflict. Moreover, Turkey agreed to serve as a home base for the opposition's armed wing, the Free Syrian Army, allowing the deployment of training camps, the creation of a powerful transport and logistics network on its territory and the supply of huge volumes of weapons and ammunition to the fighters.

The impact of the Syrian crisis on the Kurdish issue has become visible since its early phases. Assad's strategic withdrawal from northern Syria in 2012 allowed PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party), a party close to PKK, to establish itself along the border with Turkey. The emergence of three de facto autonomous Kurdish enclaves – Jazira, Kobane and Afrin, known collectively as Rojava, were described by the Turkish government as a "threat," but due to the increasing importance and rising international legitimacy of the PYD and the already ongoing Peace Process, Turkey did not manage the situation through military measures and adopted a less antagonistic policy.[23] However, despite the opportunity to begin the process of cooperation, the Turkish government chose the policy of confrontation, refusing assistance on several occasions, crucial for the Syrian Kurds.

In contrast to the tense relations with the Syrian Kurds, Turkey continues to improve and develop its partnership with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).[24] Being at first a source of instability and a security threat for providing a place for the PKK insurgents to launch attacks against Turkish territory, Northern Iraq was refused any political or official relations with Turkey. As the PKK threat waned, the KRG came to be viewed as an opportunity rather than a challenge for the Turkish state. Strong economic ties, energy politics and mutual profit, as well as ideological differences between KRG and PYD made Turkey much more tolerant to the Iraqi Kurds and inclined to use their mediation in the domestic dimension of the Kurdish issue.

The emergence of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) constitutes a major security threat not only for the Kurds but for the whole region. Its impact on the Kurdish issue has several implications.

Primarily, the threat to the very existence of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq urged rival Kurdish groups to cooperate and to consider the creation of a joint council for further collaboration. Ideological differences and years of tensions between KRG and PYD were put aside and support was provided to the Yazidi Kurds in the Sinjar area of Iraq and in the battle of Kobane in Syria. The military support of KPG by supplying arms and sending Peshmerga forces with heavy military equipment was decisive for the YPG (People's Protection Units) militia.

The battle of Kobane itself turned into a symbol of Kurdish resistance, into a "Kurdish Stalingrad."[25] It marked a significant transformation in the Kurdish nationalism: from localised and weak nationalism towards a collective, stronger form of nationalism with the help of the diaspora's mobilisation.[26]

The victories of the Kurdish forces, not only in the siege of Kobane, but more recently in capturing the town of Tel Abyad in Syrian Kurdistan, proved the effectiveness of the YPG fighters and gained international legitimacy for the Kurdish movements. The change in the way they are being perceived—once as terrorist organisations and now as an ally against terrorism—and the clear distinction between secular Muslims, who treated their women equally, and radical Islamists, who declared Caliphate, is an important part of their struggle for international acceptance.

The shift in the international strategy in Syria—fighting against ISIL and not aiming specifically to oust Syrian President Assad—put the Turkish government in isolation. Intending to force PYD to join the anti-Assad coalition and forgo their autonomy plans, Turkish policy-makers undertook an inactive approach thus failing to manage the developments during the Kobane siege. The government's rhetoric identifying the PYD/PKK as a terrorist organisation equivalent to ISIL and the refusal to provide support led to political instability and massive violent demonstrations within Turkey.

The subsequent decision to open a corridor for the delivery of weapons and the passage of volunteers and KPG Peshmerga fighters can be seen through the lens of a broader policy of trying to build the KPG as a competitor of PYD interests among the Syrian Kurds.[27]

Turkey's reluctance to join the anti-ISIL coalition and the official reaction to the siege of Kobane made it clear that Turkey has become an "increasingly undependable" partner for US.[28] The claims that Turkey is effectively supporting jihadist groups, although rejected by the government, received unofficial confirmation by means of allowed passing of foreign fighters, artillery support, arms shipment and even treatment of members of Islamist extremist organisations in Turkish hospitals.

After a year of hesitation and as a reaction to terrorist attacks on its territory, Turkey decided on an active involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition, authorising the US to use its military base in Incirlik to conduct airstrikes against Islamic State. The agreement also envisions the creation of a 100-km-long buffer-zone in the border region which triggers concerns among the Syrian Kurds of its real purpose.

However, the main targets of the Turkish campaign are considered to be PKK/PYD camps in Syria, south-eastern Turkey and Northern Iraq. It has to be noted that Turkey's currently active role in the anti-ISIS coalition came shortly after the capturing of Tel Abyad – a strategic point used by the 'Islamic State' for importing fighters and supplies. Moreover, it allowed the connection of the three autonomous Kurdish enclaves and strengthened PYD's position as a valuable partner. Hence, Turkish involvement is seen as an effort to undermine Kurdish advances and prevent the establishment of a stable political subject with a prospect for international recognition.

Recent Developments in Turkey-PKK Conflict and Implications for the Kurdish Question

The new cycle in the Turkey-PKK conflict began with a deadly attack in the border town of Suruc, when a suspected ISIL militant killed 32 people – young Kurdish activists preparing to go to Kobane. The rumours that the attack had been carried out with the assistance of MİT and was instigated by the government as a pretext for the beginning of an armed conflict played their part. This caused mass protests, prompted a violent reaction from PKK—launching numerous attacks on military and infrastructure targets—and put an end to a two-year ceasefire between PKK and the Turkish government. Since then hundreds have been killed or injured and the escalation of violence raised fears that Turkey is entering in a period reminiscent of the cataclysmic bloodshed of the 1990s.

Shortly after military operations—within Turkey and as a part of the international anti-ISIL coalition—started, around 1,600 people have been arrested, and the access to the websites of pro-Kurdish newspapers and news agencies has been denied. Turkey's Interior Ministry has launched investigations into 93 eastern municipalities on charges of lending logistical support to PKK. The pro-Kurdish party HDP was denounced by both President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu as the "political extension of the separatist terrorist organization."[29]

Similar developments were observed after the last ceasefire's breakdown in 2011 when peace negotiations failed and over 900 people died in the clashes with PKK. The return to this specific rhetoric represents one of the characteristics of the Turkish political environment – instrumentalisation of the conflict with PKK for political purposes.[30] The demonisation of HDP and the prospect for disbanding the party could be seen as part of a "controlled conflict." For the imprisoned Ocalan the ongoing violence could be an opportunity to strengthen his position within the Kurdish movement and to reconfirm his role as the only person who could halt immediately PKK's resurgence. For President Erdogan, on the other hand, the temporary settlement of the violent conflict could prompt his image as the one who "beat the PKK" and restarted the peace negotiations.[31]

Recent developments also should be viewed through the lens of the upcoming snap elections and their immense importance for the future of AKP and President Erdogan. The results of the June 7th general elections were crucial for the ruling party and marked some important trends. Primarily, for the first time since coming to power in 2002, AKP lost majority in the Parliament, thus failing to achieve the fundamental goal of their campaign – securing the presidential system. The growing dissatisfaction of the Turks with the authoritarian policy and pro-Islamist agenda of President Erdoğan resulted in unwillingness to support his vision of "New Turkey."

The major AKP losses occurred in Turkey's southeast, largely ousting the party from the Kurdish-dominated region.[32] One of the reasons for the significant shift is due to a specific of the Kurdish voters – their long struggle with the status quo and with staunch Kemalist military-dominated Turkish state apparatus.[33] With the emergence of HDP, many Kurds who previously voted for AKP preferred to support a Kurdish party in the run for Parliament and thereby exert pressure on the ruling party for further continuation of the Peace Process.

The undoubted success of HDP, proclaimed to be the big winner in the June 7th elections, could be found in their broad political program, exceeding the Kurdish question. They succeeded to draw attention on minority rights, receiving support from liberal-democratic voters, feminists, LGBT community, Armenian religious minori-

ties, environmentalists, Istanbul elites, and secular youth, many of whom became politically active during the 2013 anti-government demonstrations at Gezi Park.[34]

During the election campaign HDP's slogan and main election promise was to "hinder the presidential system." Being accused in secret bargaining with AKP to support the constitutional amendments in exchange for Kurdish demands, the pro-Kurdish party resisted and now it is subjected to state-backed "lynching" and "collective punishment and psychological warfare."[35]

Conclusion

The latest surge of violence could be partly attributed to pre-electoral dynamics in Turkey, but it has important implications. The widespread social distrust and the outrage among PKK supporters strengthen the sense of hostility towards AKP. As a long-term dynamic, it is leading to a constant increase in the numbers of PKK recruitments and radicalisation among the younger generations. The return to the harsh anti-Kurdish rhetoric and aggressive Turkish nationalism has to be considered as a complex national security challenge. It could jeopardise any efforts for settling the Kurdish issue in the long term and determine even greater ethnic, sectarian and political polarisation in the already fragmented Turkish society.

Acknowledgement

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