

# Turkey: The Kurdish question takes centre stage

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In recent weeks, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has taken steps—since dubbed the “democratic process”—towards addressing the Kurdish question through peaceful rather than military means. This has once again brought the Kurdish question to the center of political life in Turkey, which has a long history of suppressing its large Kurdish minority.

This history took a further bloody turn in the last 25 years following the beginning of the armed struggle by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) in 1984 against the state in a nationalist and separatist guerrilla war. Since then, estimates place the number of casualties at around 40,000 and the number of internal and external refugees at over a million.

The AKP’s move is very significant, but it also has a peculiar character. It comes amidst months of increased violence, perpetrated by the same AKP government, against Kurdish DTP (Democratic Society Party) members and the party’s deputies in the parliament. A short list of attacks against the DTP in just the month of June provides a glimpse of the situation:

- June 25: As part of an operation in Tunceli district, 15 of the 23 DTP members were arrested for “aiding and abetting a terrorist organization.”
- June 23: The chairman of the DTP’s Sanliurfa Suruc district, Ahmet Yenilmez, was arrested for “promoting crime and criminals.”
- June 18: In the Bingol district, 21 DTP members were issued with arrest warrants for “aiding and abetting a terrorist organization.”
- June 13: 30 DTP members were dispatched to a Bingol court after being detained in operations carried out in the Bingol, Elazig, Bitlis and Sanliurfa districts two days earlier.
- June 3: The chairman of the DTP’s Ergani district, Abdurrahman Bakir, was arrested for “spreading the propaganda of a terrorist organization.”

Similar attacks took place in May and April. Alleged links to the PKK have been used to prosecute DTP members in these attacks. Despite the DTP’s own conciliatory approach, in the eyes of the AKP it is a crime not to openly declare PKK a terrorist organization.

The DTP is a coalition of Kurdish political groups—or more correctly, a derivative of a party that has been closed down five times. The DTP, whatever its contradictions and occasional use of left phrases, it is a bourgeois party. It harbors “hardliners” and “doves” alike. As such, it refuses to denounce the PKK as a terrorist organization, but maintains that it supports a unified Turkey within a democratic framework.

The string of attacks has now come to an abrupt end. On August 1, the Ministry of Internal Affairs organized a workshop in the police academy provocatively named “Resolution of the Kurdish Question: Towards a Turkish Model.” The minister himself, Be’ir Atalay, chaired it. At the meeting, he was quoted as saying, “Should Turkey resolve this question, it will wear wings and fly high.” Participants included well known journalists from various liberal newspapers but, although invited, no members of the opposition parties were present.

On August 5, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan dropped his long-

standing condition that the DTP must declare PKK a terrorist organization and met with its leader, Ahmet Türk, in a widely publicized meeting. This prompted the *Los Angeles Times* to note a “sign of progress.”

The new line began to emerge earlier this year. In March, President Abdullah Gül, who is officially “above politics,” began talking to the press about the possibility of “good developments” on the Kurdish question and “historic opportunities.” In the same month, he met with DTP deputies and advised them publicly how to resolve the question peacefully.

In May, he asserted, “Inside the state, everybody is openly talking about this. When I say everybody, I mean soldiers, civilians, intelligence people. I am speaking for everybody. In such an environment, good things happen.” This was in the midst of the attacks against the DTP.

This U-turn in the AKP’s Kurdish policy can be explained by a number of domestic and international factors. Domestically, the AKP was damaged in the latest local elections, receiving 7 percentage points less than it won in the 2007 general elections. In the southeast of the country, which has an overwhelmingly Kurdish population, much of the vote went to the DTP. The frustration fuelled by the election could explain the campaign of retaliation against DTP deputies in recent months. At least, this was the argument offered by DTP deputies.

However, this did not bring much political success and exposed the AKP for what it is: a bourgeois party incapable of defending the genuine democratic interests of the oppressed masses. Coupled with a sharp shift in the international situation, the AKP is now turning to “democracy” and hopes that it can claw back some of its vote with a populist compromise with the DTP.

Another domestic consideration for the AKP is that the resolution of the Kurdish question would considerably weaken the Turkish army. It would remove the strongest pretext for the “national security” arguments on which the military regularly bolsters its position.

Since its first government in 2002, the AKP has been in a bitter struggle with its Kemalist rivals—amongst whom the army occupies a prominent position—over economic, political and life-style policies. Not long ago, prior to the 2007 elections, the Turkish army tried to bring down the AKP government with an ultimatum and forced the AKP to declare an early election. A landslide victory then gave the AKP the upper hand and the army reluctantly retreated from the political scene. However, there is no guarantee that the army will not assert its position again.

This is not just a matter of settling scores, however. Behind the scenes, powerful international forces are at work.

The latest moves come at a time when the AKP government is eager to establish Turkey as an influential regional player. In the last few years, the AKP government has attempted, with mixed success, to play the role of a mediator in the region, especially between Israel and its foes.

It would be very difficult for any Turkish government to realize these efforts with a bloody war going on within its own territory. After 25 years, sections of the Turkish bourgeoisie seem to be looking for alternatives.

The US is behind the new line. After taking office, Obama paid his first overseas visit to Turkey in order to approve this initiative, in line with Washington's desire to turn Turkey into an outpost of US foreign policy—military as well as diplomatic. In its attempt to shift the focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, the Obama administration has been looking for an exit strategy in Iraq that would enable the US to maintain its strategic interests.

Iraq is deeply beset by sectarian divides. It is an open secret that there are serious tensions between Kurds in Northern Iraq and the central Iraqi government. Since 2007, the Maliki government has been openly seeking to reverse some of the territorial gains of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the north.

In July this year, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) reported, "Kurdish leaders are unanimous that a US withdrawal would be calamitous for Iraq, including the Kurdistan region. The KRG's Peshmerga minister said that 'once US troops leave, there will be a catastrophe in all of Iraq.'"

The ICG report also quoted Fouad Hussein, the chief of staff of Masoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, as saying: "If the Shiites choose Iran, and the Sunnis choose the Arab world, then the Kurds will have to ally themselves with Turkey."

As early as 2007, after the AKP government won its landslide election victory, KRG leaders started to talk about the need to deal with Turkey, the ICG noted. The best way forward, an unnamed minister said, according to the ICG, was for "the Kurdistan region to join Turkey as part of a new Mosul *vilayet* and for Turkey to join the EU (European Union), with a solution for the situation of the Kurds in Turkey." ("Mosul *vilayet*" is Iraq's old Mosul province, to which post-Ottoman Turkey had laid claim).

The ICG stated that Ankara officials have made clear that the formal incorporation of an additional population of Kurds by Turkey would be undesirable and politically inconceivable, although an economic arrangement would not be out of the question.

One might ask why, rather than softening its military position, Turkey is not simply attempting to profit from the plight of the Iraqi Kurds. The answer lies in the fact that the Turkish bourgeoisie needs a stable Middle East in order to further its own interests in the region.

For the same reason, the Turkish bourgeoisie was very nervous when the US invaded Iraq, fearing that it would destabilize the region and strengthen the Kurds in Iraq—in turn inflaming its own Kurdish population. Now it sees an opportunity to play a significant role in shaping and stabilizing the region.

The EU is also interested in a peaceful resolution, especially Germany, where there is a large Kurdish immigrant population from both Turkish and Kurdish backgrounds. The EU has long insisted that Turkey resolve its Kurdish question as a precondition for its admission.

The prospect of access to the energy reserves in Northern Iraq and Central Asia via Turkey is also a good reason for the European bourgeoisie to pressure Turkey for a resolution. This would provide a realistic diversification for European energy markets, which are currently heavily dependent on Russia.

Thus, the Kurdish "turn" of the AKP has a pro-imperialist character.

At the same time, it is an issue deeply rooted in the history of the country, and a peaceful resolution will be met with resistance. Substantial forces have long made a living out of the nationalist policies surrounding the Kurdish question.

There is also no clear political direction from Kurdish leaders in Turkey, including the PKK, which is in a position to sabotage the process even before it gets underway. As such, the Turkish press has been eagerly waiting for a "road-map" to be released by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from his jail cell on Imrali Island in Turkey.

Öcalan announced on August 15 that he had issued such a "road-map,"

but it appears that its official release was postponed indefinitely by the AKP government, under the pretext that it needed to be reviewed before being made public. However, it was leaked in its outlines to the press.

Through his leaked document, Öcalan appeals to three main players. He speaks favourably of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the founder of the Turkish Republic, thereby appealing to Kemalists in Turkey. He also speaks favourably of Fethullah Gülen, the leader of an Islamist sect sympathetic to the AKP government. And he appeals to US imperialism by presenting it to the Kurdish masses as a progressive force.

He declares 2007 a turning point in US policy. According to Öcalan, the US began compromising with Kurds and stopped supporting extra-judicial killings in Turkey directed against the Kurdish population.

In fact, the opposite is the case. The US increased its support for the Turkish military in 2007 and not only allowed Turkey to temporarily invade Northern Iraq, but also provided intelligence to the Turkish army regarding PKK positions. Öcalan's lie, however, serves as a necessary step in the PKK's journey further to the right. It is an attempt to position the PKK as a junior partner of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

Öcalan avoids speaking of any concrete steps, but emphasizes that he is against an independent Kurdish state. Rather, he promotes "cultural" Kurdish nationalism. He also does not mention amnesty for the PKK members in Turkish jails.

This is a difficult topic, as the AKP government could be denounced for "aiding and abetting a terrorist organisation" if it did provide such an amnesty. If the process failed, the AKP's return to a military solution would also be complicated.

President Abdullah Gül publicly dismissed Öcalan's "road map" as irrelevant, but it is no secret that the Kurdish population is closely following Öcalan's moves. Hence, the DTP urges the government to take on the PKK as a partner in the process. In all likelihood, the government's tactic is to delay PKK involvement until the process becomes much more serious.

So far, the AKP has avoided making any concrete concessions to the Kurds. This is a cautious approach aimed at measuring the initial reaction from the opposition parties in the parliament. The main opposition party, CHP (Republican Peoples Party), initially reacted negatively to the AKP's moves, but has since adopted a wait-and-see policy.

It is clear to all sides that there is overwhelming public support for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question. Consequently, the initiative has the potential to bring either political glory or political death to any party involved.

On August 21, through its powerful National Security Council, the army stated its support for the "democratic process." Despite its bitter confrontations with the AKP government in relation to state matters, the army has always favoured the AKP's Islamist influence over Kurdish nationalism and the growing influence of the DTP.

This also comes at a time when the army has been weakened politically, following the AKP government's prosecution of the ongoing Ergenekon trials, which have revealed that secret army units were working with elements from the underworld in an ultra-nationalist formation called Ergenekon. It is also worth noting that the army's pension fund—the OYAK Group, which has the third largest capital holdings in the country—is the most prominent Turkish company involved in rebuilding Northern Iraq, and would profit from a stable Northern Iraq under the influence of Turkey.

When the AKP made its move public, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the third largest party in Turkey, the fascist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), reacted hysterically and predictably accused the government of treason. Even though he has no visible support from the Turkish bourgeoisie, he has refused to back down. However, he remains isolated. This indicates that the ultra-nationalists were caught unawares by the shifting international political landscape.

Mustafa Kumlu, president of the largest trade union confederation, Türk-Ýþ, met Minister of Internal Affairs Atalay on August 14 and stated his support for the process. Salim Uslu, the president of Hak-Ýþ, one of the largest trade unions in Turkey, has also declared his support.

Their support, however, has nothing to do with improving the wellbeing of Kurdish workers—the most exploited layer in Turkey. Rather, they hope to profit by offering their services to the Turkish ruling class for policing the activities of one of the most militant sections of the working class.

The so-called “radical left” has remained largely silent, but their past history indicates that they are likely to support Öcalan’s road map. They completely ignore the class character of the DTP and the PKK.

The DTP represents the Kurdish bourgeoisie, while the PKK largely represents petty-bourgeois layers. The “left” groups would have the working class believe that these corrupt politicians could somehow bring a democratic resolution to issues rooted in the interests of the Turkish ruling class and the imperialist needs of the great powers. The largest of these groups is the ÖDP (Freedom and Solidarity Party).

Despite all the rhetoric about the “democratic process,” the Turkish bourgeoisie is organically incapable of resolving the Kurdish question democratically. Doing so would require a government in the interest of the working class. Even as Erdogan speaks of a democratic solution, he has ordered his own deputies not to discuss this issue publicly. He wants to make sure that all the important decisions are confined to his own narrow circles.

Any solution worked out between the AKP, the DTP and the PKK will not bring the Kurdish working class its long awaited democratic rights. It will serve the interests of the Turkish ruling class, which is itself subservient to the interests of the great powers.

The most radical solution proposed by the DTP—and now accepted by the exhausted PKK—suggests the building of a federal structure to grant Kurds some limited autonomy. This is currently flatly rejected by the “democratic process.”

But even were it to be accepted at some point, it would do nothing to alleviate the poverty engulfing southeastern Turkey. On the contrary, it would provide a pretext for the Turkish bourgeoisie to withdraw even the limited resources it devotes to the region now. In the long run, the region could slide into chaos as the demands for a unified Kurdish state intensified and Syria, Iran and Iraq—with their large Kurdish populations—came into conflict with Turkey over its influence in the region.

The AKP’s U-turn in regards to the Kurdish question highlights the fragile situation in the Middle East. It is an attempt by US imperialism to stabilize the Middle East after committing grave crimes against the Iraqi population. Turkey’s custodianship of the region is required to continue the subjugation of the people of the Middle East.

The AKP’s tenuous moves on the Kurdish issue have nothing in common with a genuinely democratic resolution in the interests of Turkish and Kurdish masses, as well as the masses of the entire Middle East.

Via Öcalan’s road map, the PKK has applied to the Turkish bourgeoisie for the job of junior partner and enforcer to head off the opposition of the Kurdish masses and help in the exploitation and suppression of Kurdish workers and peasants.

The only feasible way forward for Kurdish workers is to unite with their Turkish brothers and sisters in the fight for a socialist reorganization of the entire Middle East.



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