

## Analysis

August 13, 2012

**Summary:** Recent events involving the Syrian Kurds, serve as a stark reminder of the many obstacles still before Turkey's Syria policy and its decades-old Kurdish problem. At least two questions raised in the ongoing debate are of particular note, corresponding to two distinct lines of criticism against the government's handling of Syrian conflict and Kurdish demands. Did Turkey fail to take note of the Kurdish dimension its Syria policy? And will Turkey adopt a security-oriented approach to Kurdish demands?

## Turkey's Syria Policy and the Kurds: Resisting Temptation

by Şaban Kardaş

### Introduction

The recent phase of the Syrian uprising has brought mixed blessings to Turkey. The advances of the Syrian opposition over the last few weeks came as a relief to Turkish leaders who have grown tired of criticisms of their Syria policy. Presenting the new situation as the evidence that the endgame is on the horizon, they felt vindicated for their policy of supporting the opposition and cutting off ties with the regime. Recent events involving the Syrian Kurds, however, clouded the air, serving as a stark reminder of the many obstacles still before Turkey's Syria policy and its decades-old Kurdish problem. Even if a potential downfall of the regime eventually justifies the Turkish government's policies, the Kurdish angle will raise additional questions over how Ankara will tackle the security challenges in a post-Bashar al-Assad era.

Kurdish groups have claimed control over several towns along Turkish border from which Syrian government forces have withdrawn in an effort to reinforce their positions against the Free Syrian Army's offensive in Damascus, Aleppo and other major cities. In addition to the presence of

groups supporting the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Massoud Barzani, in the region, the growing visibility of the biggest Kurdish party in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is seen as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has captured the attention of the Turkish public. By showing pictures of PKK flags flying on official buildings, the Turkish press rang the alarm bells about the emergence of a "Kurdish state" in northern Syria. The tipping point came when video footage featuring peshmerga forces crossing from northern Iraq into Syria was aired in the Turkish media and Barzani acknowledged offering military training to Kurdish defectors from Syrian army.

### Northern Iraq Analogies: Déjà Vu All Over Again?

These developments sparked a heated debate, which hinges on the assumption that Turkey could be confronted with a situation similar to the one in northern Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion. According to many in nationalist circles, Syrian Kurds' possible drive for self-rule could directly affect Turkey's security by offering the PKK militants



**G | M | F** OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS  
BRUSSELS • BELGRADE • ANKARA  
BUCHAREST • WARSAW



## Analysis

a safe haven and granting them access to arms from the disintegrating Syrian army. This in turn could help them reignite their terror campaign, or intensify demands for autonomy among Turkey's Kurds.

Such arguments resonate well with the prevailing perceptions of the Kurdish issue among the Turkish public and security elite, who have been extremely disturbed by the gradual evolution of self-governance in northern Iraq since the Gulf War. The U.S. support for this entity has been the most important irritant in the bilateral relationship, which led to major divergence between the two allies. Turkey and the United States have coordinated their policies in the Middle East and are working closely on Syria, but conspiracy theories about alleged U.S. plans for an independent Kurdistan are widely circulated in Turkey.

In its early days in office, the AK Party government also shared the same security-oriented approach toward the nascent self-governance structures in northern Iraq, and sought to isolate it. Over time, however, the government has taken courageous steps to move beyond the narrow focus on the security challenges from that region. Presenting it as a successful application of “zero problems with neighbors” principle, Turkey deepened ties with the KRG, which also facilitated the growth of its economic exchanges with Iraq. The partnership with Barzani has been the key component of the government's policies to address the Kurdish issue and the broader Middle East policies. That said, the process leading to the emergence of the KRG in northern Iraq and the government's engagement policy towards Barzani are seen as major concessions and a source of liability in Turkey's fight against the PKK by nationalist circles.

### **Myths of a U.S.-Orchestrated Independent Kurdistan: A Powerful Rhetorical Tool in Domestic Politics**

The conspiracy theories that the uprising in Syria is an external manipulation to divide that county already enjoy wide popularity among large segments of the Turkish public. Recognizing a potential avenue to discredit the government domestically, the opposition parties and critics of the government immediately capitalized on the developments in the northern towns in Syria, fueling the fears of a Kurdish state. They argue that, after Iraq, the West is now working to create another “Kurdish state” in Syria, with the

If conspiracy theories are proven right in Syria, there will be nothing left to prevent the Turkish public from believing that their country will be the next target of an externally manipulated social engineering project.

final stage being the dismemberment of Turkey. Interestingly, such arguments also parallel the opposition parties' constant criticism of the government's Syria policy as dictated by the West.

Obviously, a possible repetition of the northern Iraq scenario in Syria will seriously undermine the Turkish government's Middle East policies in the eyes of the wider public, as well as constraining Turkey's cooperation with the West. If those conspiracy theories are proven right in Syria, there will be nothing left to prevent the Turkish public from believing that their country will be the next target of an externally manipulated social engineering project, eventually giving birth to self rule for a Kurdish entity in south-eastern Turkey. Therefore, although it might be difficult to tell how probable the scenario of an independent Kurdistan in Syria is, what is certain is that the wide appeal of such theories in domestic discussions is likely to have a real impact on the evolution of Turkey's Middle East policy.

At least two questions raised in the ongoing debate are of particular note, corresponding to two distinct lines of criticism against the government's handling of Syrian conflict and Kurdish demands.



## Analysis

### Did Turkey Fail to Take Note of the Kurdish Dimension its Syria Policy?

From the perspective of critics in the nationalist circles and the opposition parties, the government simply stood by while a Kurdish state was in the making in the region. In their view, the recent developments were yet more evidence for the myopic nature of the government's Middle East policies. While focusing its attention on the removal of Assad from power, Turkey had arguably failed to anticipate the unfolding situation in Syria's north and watched the PYD expand its grip in the region. Turkey's coordination of its policies with Barzani also misled it, and as a result of this neglect, the PYD is now perfectly positioned to declare autonomy, if not independence, in areas under its control in the event of a civil war or end to the regime.

It is true that Turkish leaders did not declare that the likely developments in the Kurdish populated areas in Syria posed a risk to Turkey. Nonetheless, it hardly means that such calculations did not figure out in the formulation of Ankara's Syria policy. For some time, the Turkish government had warned that Assad might be giving free hand to the PKK to inflict harm on Turkey in retaliation for Ankara's sheltering of the Syrian opposition. More importantly, building on the lessons learned from Iraq, Turkey's Syria policy first and foremost sought to ensure the territorial integrity of the country, as the best antidote to disintegration and all the security externalities that come with it. Similarly, Turkey wanted the Syrian National Council to have broad based participation, reflecting the ethnic and religiously diverse structure of Syrian society, and worked to integrate the Kurds into its ranks, though with limited success.

The repercussions of the Syrian uprising on the Kurdish question were always in the background as Turkish leaders formulated their position on the Syrian conflict. So far, it has been largely overshadowed by the idealistic manner in which Turkey's Syria policy has been couched, i.e., in terms of a moral duty to support a neighboring people's fight against an oppressive government. But Turkey's proactive policy in Syria was grounded in something more than the ethical purism implied by its leaders' rhetoric. The recent events related to the Kurds highlight clearly how there is a strong *Realpolitik* angle in Turkey's deep interest in Syrian affairs. Ironically, the Kurdish dimension could help the

### Turkey's Syria policy first and foremost sought to ensure the territorial integrity of the country.

government offer a pragmatic justification for its proactive approach, especially at a time it is criticized for pursuing "a blindly idealistic" policy in Syria. But to the extent that it does so, it comes under criticism from a rather different quarter.

### Will Turkey Adopt a Security-Oriented Approach to Kurdish Demands?

In an opposite direction, liberal commentators raise concerns about the government's potential drift towards a security-centric approach to the demands of Kurds, and Ankara's readiness to interfere with Syrian internal affairs in pursuit of its interests. The initial reactions by some government officials appeared to be lending credence to such arguments.

In his reaction to the developments, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seemed to have reflected the same alarmist spirit as his nationalist critics. Following a security summit where he discussed the developments with top bureaucrats, Erdoğan, though noting that Turkey's major concern is the PKK, threatened to intervene when necessary to thwart any infringement on Turkey's security that might be posed by the developments in Syria. He also called Barzani's statement about training Syrian Kurds ugly and invited him to avoid undermining mutual trust.

Erdoğan was obviously seeking to dispel concerns about the security implications of another self-governing Kurdish entity on Turkey's southern borders. Following the downing of a Turkish jet, he was seeking to erase any image of weakness about his foreign policy, as well as sending clear signals to Barzani that he should avoid testing Turkey's limits. But his initial reaction led some liberal commentators to maintain that the government might revert to the old security-centered approach, whereby Ankara would view any gains



## Analysis

by Kurds in negative-sum terms and would use coercive policies to suppress Kurdish demands in Syria.

Fine-tuning Erdoğan's strongly worded statement, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu presented a calmer and more nuanced reading of the developments. He downplayed the possibility of a Kurdish state in northern Syria, noting, among other points, the geographically dispersed composition of the Syrian Kurds. He underlined that the fears of a Kurdish state would not dominate Ankara's approach toward Syria and the Kurds, and Ankara would not view Kurds as a threat to Turkey's security. More importantly, he emphasized that they would respect the Syrian Kurds' right to determine their future within a democratic Syria, but would react to any attempt by the PKK to use the region as a rear base to terrorize Turkey.

Davutoglu then paid a visit to Erbil to meet Barzani on August 1. In their joint press statement, they emphasized that they share the same perspective about attempts by terrorist groups to take advantage of the security vacuum in northern Syria. Overall, this trip underscored once again that Turkish government will not be easily swayed by the nationalist groups' call for a more security-oriented approach. Ankara will continue its engagement policy towards the KRG, which has been a key element of its Middle East policies, as well as working to address the demands of Syrian Kurds within a broader democratic platform bringing together Syrian opposition.

### Challenges

Granted, maintaining this policy will not be straightforward. First, in the rapidly changing geopolitical realignments of the region, Barzani's commitment may not be taken granted, as was reflected by his changing positions recently. Similarly, Barzani's leverage over the Syrian Kurds is yet another uncertainty, which may limit his ability to deliver on Turkey's expectation that developments in northern Syria will not take a direction that will agitate Ankara.

Second, the government will need to resist pressure to adopt a security-centric perspective on northern Syria, and observe the fine line between managing direct threats to

### About the Author

Dr. Şaban Kardaş works as an associate professor of international relations in the Department of International Relations at TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara.

### About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

### About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at [www.gmfus.org/turkey](http://www.gmfus.org/turkey) or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.

its security and respecting the legitimate demands of the Syrian Kurds.

Last but not least, the government will need to consider reviving the democratic opening to find a comprehensive solution to the Kurdish demands. As long as it maintains its ambivalent position on the domestic Kurdish issue and tries to address it with half-hearted initiatives, it leaves intact a fertile breeding ground for the nationalist myths and conspiracy theories that may eventually haunt its regional policies.