

# The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the 'Opening'

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary reflects on the Turkish government's recent 'opening' to address the Kurdish problem and the domestic, regional and international conditions that created a conducive environment for this initiative. It maintains that although the Turkish leadership has grasped the new dynamics of the regional and domestic developments and changed its conventional perception of the problem, the initiative is constrained by the fact that it is motivated by a concern to remove the violent aspect of the Kurdish question, i.e., terminating the Kurdish insurgency once and for all. It also suggests that despite the optimism generated by the opening to solve the Kurdish problem, the achievement of its ultimate objective is far more complex than seen at the first glance. The commentary places a special attention on the dilemmas encountered by the Democratic Society Party as it seeks to represent the demands of its predominantly Kurdish constituency.

The policy known as the 'opening' has been rocking Turkey ever since it was launched at the end of summer 2009. Even what to call the policy has been a matter of controversy. The prime minister himself first called it the "Kurdish opening" before broadening the context by referring to it as the "democratic opening," and lately he has decided to label it "the national unity project."

Whatever title is adopted, the government's new initiative ultimately boils down to the objective of removing the armed or violent aspect of the Kurdish question, i.e., finally terminating the Kurdish insurgency. That brings us to the seemingly insurmountable objective of disarming and disbanding the PKK, the Kurdish organization that has been the violent expression of Kurdish grievances and which has been committed to the armed struggle against the Turkish state.

Removing the PKK from Turkey's political equation is not a novel endeavor. However, in-

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ternational and regional circumstances have never been favorable to attain that objective. At the current juncture, there is a more favorable environment to address the many challenges of the Kurdish question. The Turkish leadership too seemed to have grasped the new situation and has thus changed its conventional perception of the problem.

### **The Regional and International Roots of the New Opening**

Since the capture of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's uncontested leader, in 1999, the politico-military leadership of the PKK, with a few thousand fighters under arms, settled in the Mount Qandil and the mountainous terrain around it in the northeastern most corner of the Iraqi territory that is under the virtual control of the Iraqi Kurds. For now, the main challenge for Turkey is to end the activities of the PKK fighters in the Qandil area and to disarm them as a step towards their reintegration into civilian life.

The publicly perceived image of Turkey's leadership, particularly the Justice and Development Part (AK Party) government, is, precisely at the core of the recent expectations for bringing down the PKK fighters from their mountain stronghold. The AKP's popularity both in Turkish and Kurdish constituencies has raised optimism for a settlement.

Developments in relations with Iraq and America also constitute an asset in addressing the Kurdish question now. The American presence in Iraq after the 2003 war was problematic for Turkey. It prevented Turkey from undertaking measures that it resorted to during Saddam's rule in Iraq. Ankara used to undertake military incursions into Iraqi territory against the PKK, which were called "hot pursuit" of the terrorists. This freedom of action, however, in terms of cross-border operations, was lost in the wake of the Iraq war. With the tacit approval of the United States, Turkey regained its privilege of launching cross-border attacks by 2008 and the Turkish air forces started to pound PKK targets from time to time during the same period.

Yet, despite Turkey's continuing capability to launch cross-border military operations, it seems certain that military means alone will not suffice to eradicate the PKK from its strongholds in the Iraqi Kurdistan territory. Moreover, the looming American withdrawal from Iraq, either in 2010 as President Obama aims

or in 2011 as scheduled according to the SOFA, has prompted Turkey to urgently develop a new and relatively more realistic Iraq policy.

On the question of the new circumstances that have led Turkish leadership to reconsider its Iraq policy, one has to mention concerns over the future of Iraq that have unequivocally played a role in pushing Turkey's policymakers to launch an initiative for ending the PKK insurgency through non-military means and to introduce democratic reforms in order to resolve the Kurdish problem. That new assessment of the problem has provided the basis for the government's dramatic undertaking.

In order to better understand Turkey's new policies, a number of factors besides the concerns over 'Iraq's situation' in the near future ought to be listed here. An important one is Turkey's ambitions to be an energy hub and crossroads for pipelines that are already in operation or projected to come from the Transcaspian basin, the Gulf, and elsewhere, such as from Russia and Iran. The adjacent Iraqi territory and the unexplored hydrocarbon wealth underneath Iraqi Kurdistan are essential components of Turkey's strategic outlook. Once Turkey resolves its Kurdish question, it would also be able to secure its environs for the realization of new energy transportation projects including Nabucco. Likewise, the resolution of the Kurdish question will remove a major irritant that has been hindering full fledged cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds, who are set to emerge as major players in energy policies given the presence of significant hydrocarbon resources in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The normalization of ties with the Iraqi Kurds fits squarely into the new Turkish regional policy formulated by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu of "zero-problem with neighbors." In order to achieve such ambitious objectives, Turkey needs to have stability and peace in the region and to foster cooperation with neighboring countries. Attaining all these objectives requires finding a solution to the Kurdish question through disarming the PKK.

When Turkish policymakers sent signals that the PKK can be tackled by instruments other than military means, it became synonymous with a new policy of rapprochement and cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). In that regard, it represented a watershed in Turkey's approach toward Iraq given the fact that Turkey had refrained from extending legitimacy to the KRG in the post-Saddam era.

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Indeed, a new Iraqi policy acknowledging the new realities of Iraq had to be a policy of close cooperation with the KRG on the other side of Turkish-Iraqi frontier, considering the need for having them on board to address the presence of the PKK in the region. As a matter of fact, the rapprochement with Erbil was started, and has been gradually moving on, since Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's visit to Turkey at the end of January 2008.

### **Domestic Factors Affecting the New Opening**

In the appraisal of the substance and timing of the opening, the March 29, 2009 local elections ought to be seen as yet another watershed. The Democratic Society Party (DTP), which is believed to depend on the pro-PKK constituency mainly in the southeast, achieved a dramatic increase in its share of the votes. Including the major cities of the region, it won 99 municipalities in the elections while the share of the votes for the AK Party in the Kurdish electorate decreased. In response to this development, it appears that the AK Party started to strive to regain its votes by initiating a 'democratic opening.'

The ongoing Ergenekon case is also a very important element for paving the road to the enterprise widely called the Kurdish opening. With such a staunchly anti-Kurdish network occupying some key positions within the military-security apparatus and the civilian bureaucracy, any sort of Kurdish opening would have either been doomed to failure from its very beginning or been deterred from starting at all. Curbing the power of these elements within the state establishment through the Ergenekon investigation facilitated the prospects for addressing the Kurdish issue through non-military means.

### **Understanding the Opening**

But what exactly is the Kurdish opening, a.k.a. democratic opening or national unity project?

This question is frequently asked by some in order to ridicule the whole enterprise. Some critics expected the government to disclose a package of measures to flesh out the opening. To the extent that the opening was not disclosed, it led to sarcastic remarks that the whole initiative was an empty package, devoid of any substance.

The opening is not a package. It rather is an enigma and for every party concerned or involved there is a different definition or explanation of what it really is. In any case, the common denominator is the hope it has generated for ending the violence related to the Kurdish question.



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On March 10, when President Abdullah Gül, on the road to Tehran, had hinted for the first time that “good things are about to happen soon, concerning the Kurdish issue” or later during his visits to Baghdad and Damascus when he declared that “there is a window of opportunity before us,” he implied that there exists a possibility for ending the PKK’s armed struggle once and for all. Turkey’s energetic Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s efforts in the region were also focused on ending the PKK’s presence in northern Iraq. Turkey’s new and ambitious regional policy, a policy of reaching strategic cooperation treaties with its neighbors in the Middle East with the overriding principles of preserving the territorial integrity and the inviolability of the borders of each country, provided the parameters for a policy of rapprochement between itself and the KRG.

The departure from the conventional contours of Turkish republican foreign policy induced a new thinking and optimism that Turkey is close to the beginning of the end, in other words, the ultimate resolution of the Kurdish question. While it is not fully groundless, the success of such a policy is not assured and the achievement of its ultimate objective is far more complex than seen at the first glance.

## DTP's Challenges

The debate, inevitably, put the Kurdish DTP, which scored a stunning success in the March 2009 local elections in the mainly Kurdish populated areas, in the spotlight. The DTP is widely believed to have the same constituency and grassroots support as the PKK. Its elevation to the center stage of the developments related to the implementation of the government's policies pointed to a very complex phenomenon that the Turkish polity seems unable to solve at this period. The DTP was established under the instructions of Abdullah Öcalan and was controlled mainly by the PKK leadership. It had no tradition or experience of formulating policies on its own. Hence, when the Kurdish opening was launched, and as it was primarily aiming at disarming and disbanding the PKK, the DTP found itself in an abyss and passed the ball to the PKK's court, drawing criticism from every corner of Turkey's political spectrum, including Öcalan himself. Moreover, it undermined its own *raison d'être* as a legitimate political entity in Turkey. Consequently, the DTP's role and significance in Turkish politics has been increasingly questioned.

The DTP's inaction was partly due to its inability to contribute to the process because of its subordinate status in the Kurdish decision-making mechanism. But it was also partly due to a justified argument that if the issue at stake is disarming and disbanding the PKK, then Imralı, i.e., Abdullah Öcalan, should be addressed for that.

Despite its own misdoings, the DTP could have been utilized as a go-between between Turkey's policymakers and the PKK leadership. However, as the Turkish system has long been accustomed to demonizing and delegitimizing the PKK, it does not seem to be flexible and pragmatic enough to accord such a role to the DTP. A policy of empowering the DTP by assigning such a role to it might in effect lead to the consolidation of its alleged role of representing the Kurdish constituency.

Inaction on the part of the DTP consequently pushed Imralı and Qandil to the fore, but any overt dealing with them is a non-starter for the government and its democratic opening, a paradox that seems set to remain for the foreseeable future. The central question is who to talk to in order to bring down the PKK militants from the mountains. On the one hand, the DTP is unwilling, and in fact unable, to be the 'agent' or a mediator between the state and the PKK on the question of disarmament. But on the other hand, talking directly to the PKK will make any deal impossible to sell to the general Turkish public.



Out of this dilemma the danger is that the opening may run out of its steam before it can deliver tangible results in terms of disbanding the PKK and ending the Kurdish armed struggle.

### **Quo Vadis Opening?**

One major factor for hope and optimism is that the ruling party and its leader, Prime Minister Erdoğan, remains committed to lead the “process” to its final destination.

Another important factor which might contribute to the eventual success of this initiative is the weakening military power of the PKK, simply because the armed struggle has run out of its steam in the region.

However, as the appeal of the PKK’s armed struggle is waning, there is also a quasi-consensus that defeating the illegal Kurdish insurgent organization by military means is not possible. This is also believed to be the conviction of the general staff of the Turkish Armed Forces.

Responding to Abdullah Öcalan’s instructions, the arrival of eight PKK fighters from the Qandil area and 26 residents of the Makhmur Refugee Camp in northern Iraq and surrendering themselves to Turkish authorities, and in turn their release, will seem to be very strong impetus and stimulus for the ultimate disbanding and disarming of the PKK. Although the fanfare and the tumultuous welcome that they received from the pro-PKK (and DTP) Kurds in the southeast triggered some disappointment and anger in the government circles, including by Prime Minister Erdoğan, and elsewhere in Turkey, the act in itself may also be interpreted as a harbinger of the ultimate resolution of the problem.

Even if there is no clear road map, the government remains committed to its initiative of the Kurdish opening that may include short-term, mid-term and long-term measures. Whatever the short-term and mid-term steps might be, addressing the Kurdish question requires, in the final stage, a rewriting of the constitution with a new preamble and a new approach to citizenship without any ethnic reference or connotation. That may only be forthcoming following the general elections scheduled for 2011.

Anything and everything related to resolving the Kurdish question in Turkey will take time. The issue is to what extent time will be generous to Turkey.

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