

# Turkey's Choice

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**ABSTRACT** *This article argues that recent upheavals in Turkey's domestic and regional dynamics – the transition to a more crisis-ridden foreign policy around 2011 and the breakdown of the “Kurdish Opening” in 2014-2015 – arose not from any fundamental change in strategic vision, but primarily from external developments such as the collapse of central authority in Syria and Iraq. These developments emboldened the PKK and its offshoots to adopt a more intransigent attitude, and prompted Turkey to add a hard power component to its previously soft powerdriven effort to expand its regional sphere of influence. With events unfolding rapidly, however, Turkey's leadership now confronts some urgent decisions with implications both for its long-standing strategic vision and for the future character of the Turkish state.*

**T**his article proceeds from the premise that there has long been fundamental continuity both in the overall strategic vision of the Turkish leadership, and in the centrality of the Kurdish question in shaping the pursuit of that vision. This was true of Ahmet Davutoğlu's tenure in office as foreign minister (May 2009 – August 2014) and then prime minister (August 2014 – May 2016), despite the fact that it can be divided into two sub-phases which to many observers appeared radically opposed to each other: the first from 2009 to about 2011 and best characterized by Davutoğlu's famous “zero problems” formulation, and the second from 2011 to 2016 marked by escalating crises with almost all Turkey's neighbors. I have already argued elsewhere that this apparent contradiction masked a deeper continuity in outlook – not just in Davutoğlu's mind but also in those of the other main AK Party leaders– extending back even before 2002, and marked by a combination of hegemonic ambition with a realistic appreciation of regional power balances.<sup>1</sup> The transition around 2011 was accordingly occasioned not by a change of outlook, but primarily by regional transformations such as the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings. Here I will argue that the subsequent unfolding of those

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upheavals, beginning with the turning point of the battle for Kobani in 2014, has brought Turkey's leadership to a critical juncture in which the pillars of its long-standing strategic vision are being put to a decisive test.

### "Zero Problems"

Between 2009 and 2011, Turkey's policy toward Syria and Iraq seemed to mirror its generally cooperative, economics-driven engagement with almost all its other neighbors. On the Iraqi front, the reopening of the Gaziantep-Mosul rail line in February 2010 symbolized a new phase of growing integration. Turkish exports to Iraq, which had

grown from \$188 million in 1996 to \$829 million in 2003, skyrocketed to \$8.3 billion by 2011, with much of this growth concentrated in northern Iraq. A key turning point came in 2009 when Turkey's governing AK Party finally wrested control of the state's Kurdish and Iraqi policies from the armed forces. Domestically, its announcement of a "Kurdish Opening" (a democratic outreach initiative) in July 2009 seemed to consolidate the AK Party's break with the monocultural nationalism of its Kemalist predecessors; encouraged about half of the country's Muslim and generally conservative Kurdish electorate to continue voting for it; threatened the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with political marginalization; and induced Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's imprisoned leader, to begin direct negotiations with the government culminating in a ceasefire. Externally, the AK Party's recognition of Kurdish identity freed it to pursue a rapprochement with northern Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) under the leadership of Masoud Barzani and his Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) –a rapprochement signaled by the first high-level meetings between the two sides in March 2009. Himself seeking support against internal rivals as well as external pressure from Baghdad and Tehran, Barzani reciprocated Ankara's overtures and called on the PKK to lay down its arms. As Turkey's exports came to dominate Iraqi Kurdistan's markets and its share of total foreign direct investment in the region reportedly reached 80 percent, and as the KRG began to export oil from territories under its control to Turkey without the approval of the Iraqi central government, the two economies grew increasingly intertwined. Barzani's trip to Turkey in June 2010 laid the groundwork for a deeper security alliance as well, with Barzani pledging to help push the Kurdish Opening forward, and unnamed "Kurdish and Turkish officials" subsequently suggesting "that Ankara would be ready to defend the KRG if Baghdad moves with force to challenge Kurdish autonomy."<sup>2</sup>

On the Syrian front, bilateral relations improved at least as dramatically after Turkey pressured Damascus to crack down on the PKK in 1998. A free trade agreement had already been signed in 2004, and all visa requirements between the two countries lifted in 2009. Turkish exports to Syria consequently rose from \$411 million in 2003 to \$1.6 billion in 2011.<sup>3</sup> By 2009, Turkey was supplying Syria –like northern Iraq– with electric power, and by 2010 a daily train service connected Gaziantep to Aleppo. Here as well, however, one could detect signs of concern in the capital city about Turkey's deepening presence. As an International Crisis Group report noted in 2010: "some Syrian officials have begun to worry that the balance of payments is now in Turkey's favour, and wonder whether northern Syria, parts of which are only loosely connected to Damascus in terms of infrastructure, services and even identity, may slip into a Turkish sphere of influence."<sup>4</sup>

As if to confirm such concerns, a public opinion survey conducted by a Turkish think tank in 2009 revealed that 82 percent of Syrians and 73 percent of Iraqis believed "Turkey should play a larger role in the Arab world." Apparently impressed by the AK Party's experiment at synthesizing Islamic values, multiculturalism, and democratic practice, moreover, and also in an indication of frustration with their own authoritarian governments, 72 percent of Syrians and 62 percent of Iraqis polled in the survey agreed that Turkey offered a "model for the Arab world."<sup>5</sup> Although these developments convinced some observers that Davutoğlu's "zero problems" approach constituted a shift to a "desecuritized" liberal foreign policy, they were also congruent with a more *realpolitik* interpretation according to which Turkey's soft power now complemented its hard power as twin elements of growing regional influence.

## From the Arab Spring to Kobani

The spread of the Arab Uprisings to Syria in March 2011 ended this phase of Turkish foreign policy. Convinced that a fundamental transformation of Arab politics was underway in which Turkey was well positioned to play a guiding role, Ankara first urged the Syrian leadership to carry out meaningful political reforms, and then when that failed cut its ties with the regime and set about trying to organize the Syrian opposition. Ahmet Davutoğlu's public rhetoric evolved in line with the collapsing Arab *status quo*, initially maintaining the modest tone of previous years:

Our foreign policy is essentially based on the principle of "Peace at home, peace in the world" as laid down by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk... Turkey has, in this regard, also managed to de-securitize its foreign policy understanding, which allows us to see our neighborhood through the prism of opportunities

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım met with the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region on February 27, 2017.

AA PHOTO / UTKU UÇRAK



rather than a perception of threat. ... Certain circles accuse us of pursuing a neo-Ottoman agenda. These allegations are baseless. ... The key word defining Turkey's relations with the Arab countries is not 'hegemony,' but 'mutual co-operation.' ... [W]e do not want to present ourselves, nor to be seen, as a role model.<sup>6</sup>

Other government officials, however, had no hesitation about presenting Turkey as a role model for the Arab world,<sup>7</sup> some going so far as to assert that this "third wave of democracy is very important for Turkey. We must turn it to our advantage. We've been in a phase of retreat since 1699. ... Now we are rising once again after 300 years. There is now a Turkey that lays claim (*sahip çıkan*) to the lands we ruled in the past."<sup>8</sup> As the Arab Uprisings continued to unfold, Davutoğlu's language grew more ambitious as well. In April 2012 he announced that Turkey intended to "direct the great transformation wave in the Middle East," and by March 2013 he was declaring that "we will render these borders meaningless. ... If Diyarbakır is cut off from Aleppo and Urfa is cut off from Mosul, won't they be losing their hinterland? ... We will break the mold Sykes-Picot drew for us."<sup>9</sup>

When it came to Syria, this new approach took the form of assistance and sanctuary for both the political and military arms of the opposition. Early hopes of a rapid victory evaporated, however, as the Ba'hist regime proved more resilient than expected. As it concentrated on defending its core Arab territories during the summer of 2012, the regime ceded control of the northern

Kurdish regions to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an offshoot of the PKK led by Salih Muslim. The PYD in turn moved to suppress rival Kurdish groupings –including those aligned with Masoud Barzani’s KDP– and quickly emerged as the dominant force in Syria’s Kurdish regions. At the same time, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) captured large swathes of both countries, including the cities of Raqqa and Mosul, and declared a caliphate, thus eclipsing both its radical Islamist rivals and the more democratically inclined Turkish-backed Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. By 2014, then, Turkey found itself confronting an array of hostile forces to its south.

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Matters came to a head in mid-September 2014 when ISIS laid siege to the town of Kobani, center of one of the three Kurdish cantons under PYD control. This would turn out to be a critical turning point for Turkey. As the PYD’s unexpectedly effective defense of Kobani excited the imaginations of Kurds everywhere and gained international recognition as well, the Turkish government moved to prevent the PKK from accruing any benefits. On 30 September 2014, the Council of Ministers announced a ten-point program designed to advance the domestic peace process, while Davutoğlu (at that time prime minister) pursued talks aimed at pulling the mainly Kurdish opposition Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) away from the PKK’s orbit. Two days later, Turkey’s parliament approved a resolution authorizing military operations in Syria if necessary (with the HDP voting against). Finally, Salih Muslim was invited to Ankara in early October for discussions in which Turkey reportedly offered to allow the PYD to ship reinforcements and heavy weaponry from its other Syrian cantons to Kobani through Turkish territory. In return, it asked that the PYD distance itself from the PKK field leadership and closer to the imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan –viewed by Ankara as a more tractable interlocutor– and that it integrate more closely with pro-Turkish elements in the Syrian opposition.<sup>10</sup>

Could the Turkish military, positioned right across the border within eyesight of Kobani, have instead intervened directly itself at this point, perhaps in coordination with its Kurdish KRG allies? There appears to have been some discussion of this option in Ankara, but no consensus could be reached and Turkish tanks remained idle as the cameras of the international media re-

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dilemma would be resolved quickly in a manner that left the PYD discredited as an effective fighting force.

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On October 19, the same day that Davutoğlu tried to keep the peace process alive by announcing agreement on a "roadmap" forward – an agreement quickly denied by HDP leader Demirtaş – the United States dropped military supplies to PYD forces in Kobani. With the tide of battle now turning decisively, Turkey invited KRG peshmerga fighters from Iraqi Kurdistan to transit to Kobani through its territory, and at the end of the month some hundreds of peshmerga and Arab FSA fighters did indeed arrive there, but it was too little too late. When ISIS was driven out of Kobani town at the end of January 2015, and out of the Kobani canton altogether by the following spring, it was clear to all that the victory had been won by the PYD, backed by U.S. air support.

laid dramatic images of the PYD resisting ISIS. With the PYD trying to fend off Ankara's tutelage and threatening publicly to resist by force any Turkish incursion, there may have been reluctance to engage in an operation that could end up further alienating Turkey's own Kurdish population as well, particularly with a national election looming eight months down the line. And with U.S. military officials predicting the imminent fall of Kobani to ISIS, there may have been an expectation that the whole

The electoral consequences became clear in the June 7, 2015 elections, when the AK Party suffered the first ever decline in its national vote and lost its absolute majority in parliament. Particularly damaging was the massive loss of Kurdish voters to the HDP, which by contrast won an unprecedented 13 percent of the vote and 80 parliamentary seats. Another bloc of AK Party voters, apparently disillusioned with the government's accommodating stance on the Kurdish question, simultaneously switched to the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Faced with the choice of trying to win back either its Kurdish or Turkish nationalist constituencies, the AK Party leadership chose the latter, ramping up both the nationalist rhetoric and the military campaign against the PKK, while eschewing coalition talks in preparation for a repeat election to resolve the parliamentary deadlock. The Kurdish nationalists, for their part, tried to press their advantage, with the PKK escalating its urban combat operations and the HDP, initially at least, ruling out any coalition with the AK Party.<sup>11</sup> As KRG leader Masoud Barzani put it in an interview a year later: "at that time, I thought that the [AKP] wasn't accepting HDP to be part of the coalition government, but later I heard from the people within HDP that it was they who didn't want to be part of the coalition. I think this was a big mistake."<sup>12</sup> In the event, the decision by President Erdoğan and his advisors paid off, as the AK Party's vote rose to 50 percent once again in the repeat elections of November 1, allowing it to regain its absolute majority in parliament. Moreover, it appears to have won back a significant number of voters from both the MHP and HDP simultaneously. Altan Tan, an HDP Parliamentarian who speaks for the more conservative wing of the Kurdish electorate, estimated that about a third of Kurdish voters who defected from the AK Party in June had returned there, blaming this outcome on the PKK's destructive urban warfare strategy, and echoing Barzani by describing the HDP's refusal to enter a coalition with the AK Party as "wrong."<sup>13</sup>

As Tan himself acknowledged, however, the PKK continued to determine Kurdish opposition policy, pursuing a dual strategy of sustaining the conflict internally while focusing on strengthening its positions in Syria and Iraq – all in a bid to drive a decisive wedge between Turkey and the Kurdish populations across the region. In mid-June 2015, PYD forces captured the town of Tal Abyad from ISIS. This united the two eastern Kurdish cantons of Kobani and Jazira, and set the stage for a push to link up with its third canton of Kobani in northwestern Syria as well, amid accusations by Amnesty International that the PYD was ethnically cleansing Arabs and Turkmens from territories it had captured. According to press reports, Davutoğlu suggested a direct military intervention at that point, but was opposed by the Chief of Staff.<sup>14</sup> If true, this may have been Turkey's last chance to take the initiative in northern Syria relatively unhindered. Instead, still hoping to win the backing of the United States for a joint campaign against the Assad regime, Turkey allowed coalition fighters to use its Incirlik air base for the first time, and launched air strikes



Writing on the wall of a house in Kobane, Syria is indicative of the close co-operation between PKK, MLKP (Marxist-Leninist Communist Party) and HPG (an offshoot of PKK).

JONATHAN RAA / NURPHOTO

of its own against ISIS in June (in turn prompting the release of an ISIS video urging Turks to rise against Erdoğan). But not only did the United States, focused single-mindedly on ISIS, rebuff Turkish requests for a no-fly zone to protect the anti-regime Free Syrian Army, it also continued dropping arms supplies to the PYD as the latter acquired more and more territory. A year later, the message was driven home when a number of large American flags were raised in PYD-occupied Tal Abyad, apparently to warn off a possible Turkish incursion.

To make matters worse, Russia began deploying its own forces to Syria in September 2015 – a development that reversed the dynamic of the civil war and curtailed Ankara’s freedom of action dramatically. Turkey’s shooting down of a Russian warplane on November 24 then led to a sharp escalation in bilateral tensions that peaked the following February, when a Russian Defense Ministry spokesman asserted that “Turkey is actively preparing for a military invasion” of Syria, and Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev warned a week later that any intervention by foreign troops could unleash a broader war.<sup>15</sup> After Syrian rebels shot down three regime warplanes in March and April 2016 using shoulder-launched missiles allegedly provided by Turkey, a prominent Russian parliamentarian warned that Russia could provide the PKK with similar weapons, and on May 13, the PKK did indeed shoot down a Turkish Cobra helicopter with a Russian-made shoulder-launched missile.<sup>16</sup> The HDP and PYD also hastened to take advantage of this geopolitical opportunity, Selahattin Demir-

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taş visiting Moscow in late December 2015, and the PYD opening an office there in February 2016.

Turkey's leaders did not fail to note the less than robust support expressed by its NATO allies in this confrontation with Russia.<sup>17</sup> Nor was there any relief on the ground in Syria. The capture of Tal Rif'at, east of the Kurdish Afrin canton, in mid-February 2016 by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) –established the previous fall ostensibly as a coalition of ethnic militias, but in reality dominated overwhelmingly by the PYD– constituted another step in the PYD's efforts to link up its three cantons. Turkey retaliated by shelling PYD positions in Afrin and deploying its own Syrian allies, but even as Russia provided air support to the PYD forces, a U.S. State Department spokesman was urging Turkey to cease its attacks.<sup>18</sup> In subsequent months, reports emerged of construction work at two air bases for U.S. use in the eastern Kurdish cantons, while the publication of photographs showing U.S. military personnel in Syria wearing PYD insignia sparked further Turkish outrage. Erdoğan had publicly asked the United States in February: "Am I your partner, or the terrorists in Kobani?"<sup>19</sup> Any remaining doubts as to the answer appeared to be dispelled in May 2016 when the SDF, backed by U.S. Special Forces and air support, launched an attack from Kobani canton on the ISIS-controlled town of Manbij, well to the west of the Euphrates River, which Ankara had declared a red line for the PYD. As an unnamed U.S. official put it: "We have bitten the bullet on the Kurds."<sup>20</sup> It was at this point that Ahmet Davutoğlu lost his position as prime minister.

### **Intervention**

With the PYD receiving military support from both the United States and Russia, Ankara's Syria policy lay in tatters by the summer of 2016. Retreat, however, was not an option as it would mean a PYD victory that would give the PKK a tremendous strategic edge in the struggle within Turkey as well. Realizing that there was no longer any prospect of meaningful coordination with the Obama administration, Ankara decided on a reset with Russia which would

increase its room for maneuver in Syria. A letter of regret for downing the Russian warplane delivered to Moscow on June 27, 2016 led to an immediate improvement in relations, and –after surviving the coup attempt in mid-July amid tepid support at best from the United States and the EU– President Erdoğan arrived in Moscow on August 9 for talks with his Russian counterpart. These, and subsequent high-level security discussions, paved the way for Turkey’s direct intervention in Syria on August 24.

The operation, dubbed Euphrates Shield, initially involved a push by a 1000 strong FSA force into ISIS-controlled Jarablus backed by Turkish troops and tanks. It quickly captured a swath of territory extending from Jarablus to A’zaz that drove ISIS away from the border while creating a physical barrier between the Kurdish cantons of Afrin to the west and Kobani to the east. Washington, taken unawares<sup>21</sup> but still hoping to exercise some control, scrambled to provide air support to the Turkish and FSA forces as they took Jarablus. The main U.S. concern was to avoid an all-out showdown between Turkey and the PYD, whose leader Salih Muslim tweeted that Turkey had entered a quagmire in which it would be defeated. In order to prevent such a confrontation, Washington tried to accommodate Turkey’s demand that the PYD forces in Manbij retreat back east across the Euphrates River. Vice-President Joe Biden, during a hasty visit to Ankara, promised that there will be “no corridor” uniting the Kurdish Syrian cantons and added: “We have made it absolutely clear ... that they must go back across the river. They cannot, will not, and under no circumstances will get American support if they do not keep their commitment. Period.”<sup>22</sup> Both the PYD and PKK complained about Washington’s apparent acquiescence in the intervention, but as Turkish-controlled territory steadily expanded at the expense not just of ISIS but increasingly the PYD as well, the American tone changed, with the influential National Security Council official Ben Rhodes declaring: “We do not support and would oppose Turkey’s efforts to move south and engage in activities against the Syrian Democratic Forces, which we support.”<sup>23</sup>

Ankara’s response was articulated in a series of speeches by President Erdoğan in October in which he pointed out that the United States had not kept its promises regarding the disposition of PYD forces, declared that Turkey had accordingly understood that it could not rely on anyone else but would have to pursue its interests itself, and promised to advance still further south.<sup>24</sup> The practical implications of these statements unfolded during the final months of 2016. Following another telephone conversation between the Turkish and Russian leaders on October 18, Turkey resumed its air and artillery attacks on the PYD. Despite a visit to Ankara by U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joe Dunford in early November in which he announced agreement on an unspecified Turkish role in the upcoming attack on ISIS’ Syrian stronghold of Raqqa, and despite a cosmetic “withdrawal” of the PYD from Manbij in mid-

month (which still left the town under the control of its SDF proxies), Turkey now charted an increasingly independent course. Turkish and Syrian rebel forces moved against ISIS-controlled al-Bab, halfway between the Afrin and Kobani cantons, in order to preempt its takeover by the PYD, while a Turkish court issued an arrest warrant for Salih Muslim himself on November 22. At the same time, a series of negotiations between Turkish, Russian and Syrian opposition representatives led to the evacuation of rebel forces from Aleppo in December, and then to a countrywide ceasefire agreement at the end of the month. These agreements excluded the PYD and ISIS, as well as the erstwhile al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fath al-Sham. They were also reached without the participation of the United States, highlighting the extent to which it had alienated Turkey and marginalized itself, and demonstrating by contrast Moscow's pragmatism in acquiescing to some degree of Turkish influence within Syria. By year's end, Russian planes were bombing ISIS positions in al-Bab while Turkish and allied Syrian ground forces advanced on the city.

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### **Meanwhile in Iraq...**

ISIS's dramatic expansion in Iraq, culminating in the capture of Mosul in June 2014, laid the ground for a convergence of interests between the PKK and its allies on the one hand, and the United States on the other, that bore striking parallels to the situation in Syria – the main difference from the Turkish perspective being the presence here of a relatively friendly Kurdish element in the form of Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Regional Government. When ISIS took the far northwestern town of Sinjar near the border with Syria's PYD-controlled Jazira canton in August and began oppressing the Yazidi people living there, the United States responded with air strikes while PYD fighters from the west and KRG peshmerga from the east intervened by land, leading to the recapture of Sinjar in December. As the Iraqi army and allied Shia militias recaptured town after town in the Sunni Arab heartland during the following two years – Tikrit (April 2015), Ramadi (December 2015), Rutba (May 2016), Falluja (June 2016) – driving ISIS farther and farther north, the PKK was able to establish a presence in northwestern Iraq by organizing Yazidi militias which took control of the region between Sinjar and the PYD-held Syrian territories. With a combined final assault on Mosul looming on the horizon, therefore, Turkey confronted an alarming situation in which both the Iranian-backed Shia

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PKK. ... They are exactly one and the same thing. ... They [the Americans] know very well, but they don't want to say they know very well."<sup>25</sup> Sensing an opportunity to capitalize on internal dissatisfaction generated by the KRG's increasingly unpopular relationship with Ankara at a time of Turkish attacks on the PKK at home and the PYD in Syria, and also by a sharp drop in oil prices and hence KRG revenues, a coalition of Iraqi Kurdish opposition parties, encouraged by Iran, moved against Barzani's leadership. On September 21, 2016, accordingly, representatives of these opposition forces, including the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), joined a majority of Iraq's parliament in sacking federal Finance Minister Hoshyar Zebari, Barzani's uncle and ally.

It was in this context that Turkey tried to reassert influence and prop up its allies. On October 1, Turkey's parliament extended the mandate of its 2000 or so soldiers in northern Iraq, including 500 troops who had been training a Sunni Arab fighting force for over a year in Bashiqa, just northeast of Mosul. President Erdoğan told reporters that Turkey intended to participate in the impending Mosul operation and "only Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Sunni Kurds should remain there" in the aftermath.<sup>26</sup> As Iraq's government and parliament, backed by Iran, ruled out any role for Turkey in Mosul and demanded the withdrawal of its troops from Iraqi territory, a KRG spokesman confirmed Ankara's argument that its troops had deployed to Bashiqa with Baghdad's consent and that the KRG had facilitated the deployment (a position criticized by the PUK and four other Kurdish opposition parties, who by contrast condemned the Turkish presence as illegal). In mid-October, a group of Sunni Arab tribal chiefs in Erbil expressed their support for Turkey, and a month later, on November 14, a group of pro-Turkish Arab figures –including wealthy businessman Khamis Khanjar and former Iraqi vice president Usama al-Nujaifi, whose brother Atheel commands the Sunni militia training in Bashiqa– held talks in Erbil with

forces and the PKK stood to benefit from the American-led campaign against ISIS.

Masoud Barzani was at least as concerned. In March 2016, in the same interview in which he criticized the HDP for not joining a coalition with the AK Party, Barzani reaffirmed his alliance with the Turkish president, called on the PKK to leave Sinjar, and criticized American tolerance for the PKK and PYD: "the PYD does not appear to be sincere about democracy. ... Any support for the PYD means support for the



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan meets with then Vice President of the U.S. Joe Biden in August 2016. This was the first visit by an American official to Turkey after the coup attempt.

AA PHOTO / KAYHAN ÖZER

KRG leader Masoud Barzani in which they called for an “enhanced federal system” that would give Iraq’s Sunni Arabs a similar degree of autonomy as that enjoyed by the Kurds.<sup>27</sup>

As in Syria, the United States proved reluctant to sanction greater Turkish intervention, with Vice President Biden reportedly urging Masoud Barzani to publicly refute Turkey’s claims that the KRG had invited its troops into Bashiqa, and an American military spokesman in Baghdad saying that all armed participants in the Mosul campaign “should be here with the coordination or with the permission of the government of Iraq.”<sup>28</sup> Washington explains its position by noting Iraq’s sovereignty and expressing the fear that a Turkish-Iraqi clash would undermine the anti-ISIS campaign. Ankara, however, suspects that the United States is seeking to curtail Turkey’s influence by allowing hostile forces to gain the upper hand in northern Iraq – the PKK in Sinjar, and Shia militias in Mosul and the predominantly Turkmen city of Tel Afar after they are recaptured from ISIS. As the attack on Mosul got underway on October 16, 2016, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım warned: “Sorry, everyone. We will never allow a *fait accompli* right on our borders.” Erdoğan himself declared: “Just as we took action in Syria, we are determined to act in the same manner in Mosul. We will not leave that place to a different sectarian outlook.” Eight days later Erdoğan added that “we will pursue this struggle” in Sinjar and Tel Afar as well.<sup>29</sup> By the beginning of November, Turkish forces were massing at the intersection of the Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi borders in preparation for an incursion into northern Iraq should it prove necessary.

## Turkey's Choice

This review of Turkish actions in Syria and Iraq during the past five years or so indicates that initial expectations of a less assertive posture following Davutoğlu's departure –fueled in part by his successor's call for fewer enemies and more friends in the region– were premature. If anything, the opposite has proven true, with one actual military intervention in Syria and a second potential one in Iraq, and with President Erdoğan now calling into question the very borders of his country.<sup>30</sup> Recent recalibrations such as the rapprochements with Russia and Israel must therefore be understood as securing all other fronts the better to concentrate on the core area of concern along Turkey's southern frontier, in line with the pragmatic calculation of power balances characteristic of the AK Party leadership. As before, then, the overall thrust of Turkey's foreign policy has been to expand its sphere of influence in northern Syria and Iraq – the only difference being that whereas this agenda had previously been pursued through the application of soft power alone, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the campaign against ISIS, by creating vacuums that could be filled by hostile or rival actors, brought Turkish military power into play as well. And as before, as this review has demonstrated in considerable detail, the prosecution of such a foreign policy remains inextricably intertwined with the dynamics of Turkey's domestic Kurdish problem.

So what happens next? President Erdoğan's stance on the Kurdish question since Kobani can be interpreted in two very different ways. The first, favored by his critics, is that he has abandoned the peace process altogether, reverting decisively to the repressive policies of past decades. 2016 ended, they note, with an ongoing and systematic crackdown on Kurdish institutions nationwide, including the arrest of Selahattin Demirtaş and other top HDP leaders. Turkey's interventions in Syria and Iraq, according to this view, can therefore be understood primarily in terms of denying the PKK safe haven in either country while at the same time burnishing the AK Party's nationalist credentials at home. Because such an approach would eliminate the multicultural and democratic normative grounding –much of the soft power– for any broader projection of influence into the Middle East, this interpretation necessarily envisions an insular Turkey hitting back at its enemies in a reactive manner but otherwise hunkering down within its own borders. It would mean, in short, abandoning the strategic vision to which the AK Party's leaders have adhered for some two decades at least.

The second interpretation is that Turkey's leadership is pursuing a much more ambitious agenda, aimed at defeating the PKK and its PYD allies on the battlefield and exerting pressure on the HDP precisely in order to bring to the fore a Kurdish interlocutor –allied with Masoud Barzani's KRG and perhaps under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan– more amenable to the AK

Party's regional vision than the narrow separatist nationalism of the PKK hardliners.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the hitherto limited incursions in Syria and Iraq have laid the groundwork for a deeper extension of Turkey's sphere of influence extending from Aleppo through Mosul to the Iranian border, once domestic and external conditions become opportune.

Either way, time is running short. New facts are being created on the ground by the day, and not all may play out to Ankara's advantage. Euphrates Shield units finally took al-Bab in late February 2017, but their subsequent drive toward Manbij encountered both another deterrent display of U.S. military presence, and a reportedly Russian-brokered agreement for the PYD to hand over territories under its control there to Syrian regime forces instead. What if such a development heralds a broader regime-PYD accommodation in northern Syria, backed by both Russia and the United States, that freezes Turkey out? What if the KDP's rivals in Iraqi Kurdistan succeed in ousting it and aligning with Baghdad and Tehran instead?

The longer Turkey's domestic and regional campaigns drag on inconclusively, moreover, the greater the damage to its soft power. One poll conducted in late 2016 concluded, for example: "Once held in high esteem in every Arab country, Turkey has suffered declines in favorable attitudes in all countries covered in our survey, with only Jordan and Lebanon now giving Turkey a net favorable rating." In Iraq, Turkey's "unfavorable" rating rose from 55 percent in 2012 to 70 percent in 2016, while in Egypt it soared from 9 to 67 percent.<sup>32</sup> Even within Turkey, where according to another recent poll just over a third of respondents oppose military intervention in the Middle East, the tolerance for a campaign that does not produce tangible results cannot last indefinitely.<sup>33</sup>

As the preceding discussion should make clear, however, what is at stake goes far beyond projecting soft power or even maintaining Turkey's regional spheres of influence. Given the inextricable connection between developments in northern Syria and Iraq and Turkey's own internal dynamics, what happens there next may prove consequential for the future character of the Turkish state as a whole. With events unfolding so rapidly, the Turkish leadership's strategic choice will likely have to become manifest very soon one way or the other. ■



**Given the inextricable connection between developments in northern Syria and Iraq and Turkey's own internal dynamics, what happens there next may prove consequential for the future character of the Turkish state as a whole**

## Endnotes

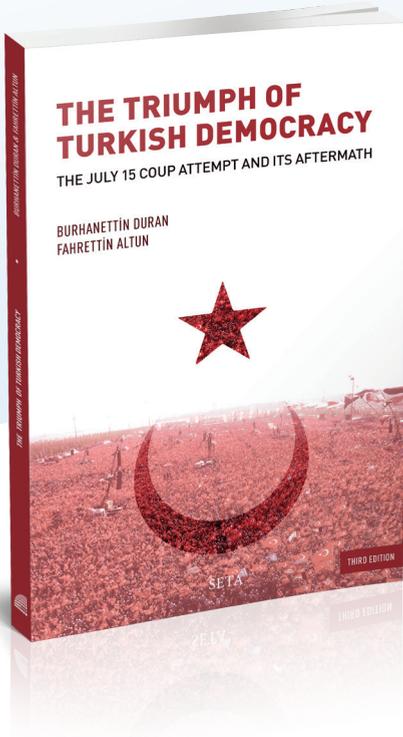
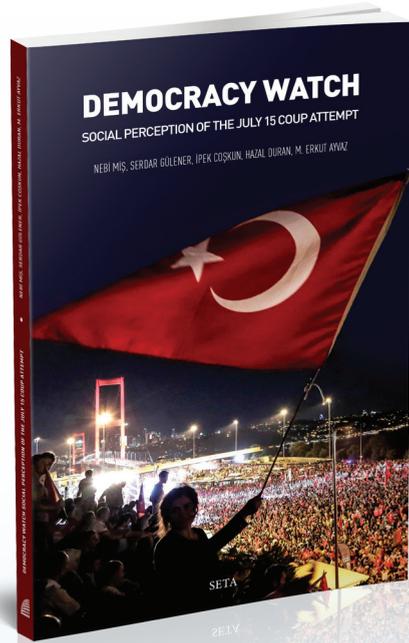
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### Democracy Watch: Social Perception of 15 July Coup Attempt

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August 2016 | Fahrettin Altun, Burhanettin Duran

*The aim of this book is to overcome the prejudice and the misunderstanding against Turkey by analysing the events that took place on that night and the developments that followed.*