

# The Kurdish Question of Turkey's Foreign Policy

Written by Ali Bilgiç

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ALI BILGIÇ, MAR 2 2016

It is often the case that the Kurdish issue in Turkey is discussed and analysed in relation to domestic politics, in line with a generic internalist and Turkey-centric worldview widespread in Turkish society, politics and academia including, paradoxically, IR scholars. However, developments in Turkey's domestic political sphere and its immediate southern borders have rendered this unidimensional perspective obsolete. It is time to talk about the Kurdish question of Turkey's foreign policy.

This article discusses how the Kurdish issue has affected Turkey's foreign policy in general and its policy towards its southern neighbourhood in particular. The discussion will be conducted by exploring the process in which Turkey's domestic politics has gradually captured Turkey's foreign policy. This process is engendered with the rise of the pro-Kurdish Democratic People's Party (DPP) and the political manoeuvres of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government to halt this rise. Furthermore, Turkey's foreign policy following the Arab uprisings has been considered volatile. What Turkey's next move would be, and whether it would serve to end the Syrian conflict, remain difficult questions for the major actors involved in Syria and the wider Middle East. Avoiding targeting Turkey directly, and concentrating on the fight against the radical Islamist groups in Syria, has rendered the PYD (Democratic Union Party in Syria) a reliable ally for major actors while pushing Turkey to the fringes of the Middle East politics. In what follows I will analyse how Turkey's foreign policy has come to be perceived as both unpredictable, unreliable and sectarian by major actors, by relating it to the Kurdish issue.

### Perception of Turkey as an Unpredictable Ally

At the beginning, it did not seem all bad. The JDP intensified the neoliberalization process launched in the 1980s in order to render Turkey a 'trading state' *par excellence*, which was also consistent with global political and economic trends. Moderate political Islam wedged with neoliberal economic practices, provided a stable and predictable foreign policy that was in line with the domestic politics of the JDP, which represented itself as the party that made Turkey a 'global brand'. When Turkey began negotiations with the EU in 2005, in the same year then-Prime Minister Erdoğan recognized the Kurdish identity in his Diyarbakir speech. The Resolution Process continued from 2009 to May-June 2015.

The turning point was the 2011 elections where the JDP won almost 50% of the votes. This election victory consolidated the dominance of the JDP in Turkey's politics over weak and ineffective opposition parties. The military had already lost its privileged position, whereas the JDP managed to construct its own bourgeois class to maintain economic activities and the media to construct a hegemonic common sense among the populace. The only powerful opposition group that remained was the Kurdish movement, which had started negotiating the Resolution Process with the government. It was the time to push for a full presidential system. In 2012, the JDP made its first move to this end.

However the game was challenged in Turkey. First the Gezi protests of 2013 and then the corruption allegations of 2014 shook the government, but, as the following election results underlined, they did not create a transformative affect. The real challenge came from the pro-Kurdish party, the DPP, when it launched a new process that would eventually make the party appeal to opposition groups in western Turkey, as well as to its broad electorate support from the south-eastern region. The DPP wanted to become a 'party of all Turkey', which was jealously adopted by

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the JDP until that moment. The possibilities of the DPP's entry into the Parliament by passing 10% election threshold and of losing nationalist votes to the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) over the ongoing Resolution Process would have seriously diminished the JDP's representation in the Parliament. The game was not working for the JDP anymore, having lost most of the Kurdish votes it had been able to gain through the peace process.

Negative reactions to the process came from President Erdoğan before the June 2015 elections. After the elections, the resolution process was frozen as the election results showed that it was not serving to facilitate the JDP's political agenda. However, while the Resolution Process was shelved in order to prevent the DPP from gaining more political power, the PYD was advancing on the other side of the border ever since the Syrian army had withdrawn from most Kurdish majority areas in Northern Syria in 2012. Furthermore, the PYD enjoyed the support of Turkey's NATO ally US after a successful collaboration in fighting DAESH during the latter's failed siege of Kobane 2014. More recently, the PYD has also established diplomatic and military relationships with Russia. Given the organic connection between the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria, Turkey's policy-makers faced a predicament: how to marginalize the cross-border Kurdish movements while minimizing political costs in its foreign policy. The impossibility of the task led to major oscillations in Turkey's foreign policy.

Two of them were quite outstanding. One was Turkey's permission to allied Kurdish forces of northern Iraq in October 2014, to pass through the Turkish territories to Kobane in order to support the YPG (the People's Defence Units, the military arm of PYD) just a few weeks after President Erdogan had given his infamous speech, 'Kobane was about to fall'. The speech had sparked criticisms and questions about Turkey's 'real' intentions regarding northern Syria. Kobane did not fall, but the wide support of the Kurdish population in Turkey and the USA to the Kurdish fighting units marching to Kobane, underlined that the Kurdish movement would continue gathering power, which would strengthen the hand of the Kurdish movement in the resolution process.

Another oscillation was the attitude towards the PYD. In 2013–2014, Turkey was negotiating with its leader Salih Muslim, who visited Turkey twice in July 2013 and October 2014. However in 2015, when the PYD and the Democratic Forces of Syria (DFS), a newly formed coalition with moderate Arab and other non-Kurdish forces, gained power and more territory and the possibility of Kurdish autonomous region along the entirety of the Turkish-Syrian border became a real option, Turkey declared the PYD a terrorist organization. Organic links between Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and PYD unquestionably exist in terms of its common Marxist-Anarchist ideology, the personalized leadership of Abdullah Ocalan and the coordination council KCK. However, these links were 'remembered' when both the DPP's popularity in Turkey increased and the PYD made serious territorial advances in Syria. Regardless of the hawkish rhetoric in relation to the PYD, the internationally supported Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria seems to be carved in stone. Sooner or later Turkey will have to face the hard truth, that is to negotiate with the autonomous Kurdish region in the federal Syria in the making. Oscillations in Turkey's foreign policy do not give a clear answer to what it would do in that moment.

Turkey is now trying to resynchronize its domestic and foreign policies as the Kurdish issue is now addressed in confrontational, militarist forms simultaneously in domestic and foreign policy. However, whichever strategy it adopts, it ends up with substantial political costs. Supporting the Kurdish forces in Syria would lead to more empowerment of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. This empowerment most likely would concentrate on the south-eastern region and unquestionably strengthen links between the Kurdish population in Turkey and northern Syria. One proof of this is that against the backdrop of the failure of the resolution process, the regional autonomy declaration of the Kurdish movement in Turkey in late 2015 was performed in parallel with the advances of YPG and DFS in Syria. What these developments may lead to in Turkey's domestic politics is unclear, but it can be argued that the JDP as a conservative-nationalist party will not gain from it.

Not supporting and adopting a militaristic approach means a clash with all major actors in the region. Turkey's unease with the USA when Vice President Joe Biden called Turkey to stop shelling PYD territories in February 2016 was a manifestation of this clash. When both USA and Russia have granted their support to the PYD and DFS, 'what will be the Turkey's next step?' is not an easy question to answer anymore, as each foreign policy decision regarding the Kurdish question will have strong implications for domestic politics in Turkey.

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## Perception of Sectarian Foreign Policy of Turkey

The Arab uprisings not only transformed the geopolitics of the MENA region, but also changed the course of Turkey's foreign policy. The first reaction of Turkey to the uprisings was on the side of the protestors against authoritarianism, which was more-or-less in line with the JDP's rhetoric in domestic politics. However, regional developments again challenged Turkey's approach. Developing close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood elements in the protests movements, especially in Syria and Egypt, culminated in strong support for the Mursi-led Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. Subsequently this led to cutting relations with the country following the military coup, and its non-reaction to the Saudi intervention in Bahrain's Shia-led popular uprisings were some of these developments. The situation became more complex when Turkey gave a strong reaction to the capital punishment sentences to the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, while the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shi'a cleric and 47 people (most of them were Sunni) in early 2016 and Turkey's reaction was that 'it is the Saudis' domestic issue'.

Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria is situated within the general framework of these contradictory policies, therefore the question of whether Turkey is pursuing a sectarian foreign policy arises. While ISIS was treated as a terrorist organisation from the beginning, al Qaeda-related al Nusra has been a more complicated issue for Turkey. It is known that Turkey had an ambivalent position towards al Nusra from 2011 onwards. However, first the USA in 2012 and then the UN in 2013 put al Nusra on their blacklist. In June 2014 Turkey declared it terrorist organization. However, the contradictions deepened. In the June 2015 elections, when the JDP lost its single-party majority and the DPP became the third largest party in the Parliament, pro-government media in Turkey came out with a synchronized headline that declared the PYD more dangerous than ISIS. This was surely a strategy to marginalise the DPP in domestic politics and lay the groundwork for a Turkish intervention in Syria that would lead to a possible military confrontation with Russia and Iran. Recently, President Erdoğan criticized the West and stated that 'Al Nusra was also fighting ISIS. Why do you call it evil?' he asked.

Since the Arab uprisings, these and other Turkish foreign policy acts have resulted in accusations about a 'sectarian' dimension of the foreign policy and in questioning Turkey's role as an ally in Syria. In 2014, the Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Centre published a report about sectarianism in Turkey's foreign policy. The aforementioned facts about Turkey's oscillations with regard to al Nusra are surely another episode where Turkey's unpredictability is manifested. In addition, it also works for the PYD and the DPP to argue that Turkey is supporting radical Islamists against the Kurds in Syria. This is not a difficult discourse to pursue, given the already-formed rhetoric in the West and Turkey's foreign policy's sectarianism.

Perceptions about unpredictability and sectarianism of Turkey's foreign policy might have a factual basis or not, and under these conditions, this does not really matter. What matters is that the inextricable links between domestic politics and foreign policy in Turkey have contributed to reproducing these perceptions. The Kurdish issue lies at the centre of these links. The PYD and the Kurdish movement in Turkey have so far successfully capitalized upon these perceptions to marginalise Turkey in its foreign policy. Turkey's own policy practices have also provided a basis for this. Turkey's shelling of PYD territories since late February have been strongly criticized by all major actors in the region, while its no-fly zone in Syria proposition has been continuously rejected. In such a picture, the Kurdish forces have emerged as the main ally of major actors, forcing Turkey's Syria policies into isolation, safe for the intra-Sunni alliance with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The only realistic way to break this cycle is to resume the domestic resolution process without delay regardless of the costs it might inflict upon individualistic domestic political interests.

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Dr Ali Bilgiç is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University. His research interests include feminist postcolonial approaches, critical security studies with a focus on security, migration, contemporary protest movements, Middle East and North African politics, and Turkey's foreign policy. He is the author of *Rethinking Security in the Age of Migration: Trust and Emancipation in Europe* (Routledge, 2013) and *Turkey, Power and the*

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*West: Gendered International Relations and Foreign Policy* (forthcoming I.B. Tauris, 2016).