



SEPTEMBER 2020

Waiting for blowback

The Kurdish question and Turkey's new regional militarism

Recent Turkish interventions in parts of Syria, Iraq and Turkey itself, look like pushing various Kurdish armed forces and political groupings towards 'defeat' via a concerted regional strategy that combines battlefield action with repression and co-optation. But the 'anti-terrorist' frame and tactics that Ankara uses in a bid to solve its Kurdish problem feature many sticks and no compromises to improve Kurdish collective minority rights. It is likely that this approach will inhibit peaceful resistance and fail to reduce support for armed groups like the PKK and PYD despite their own authoritarian practices. Moreover, Turkey's new regional militarism risks escalating conflict across the Middle East because of the complex international and transnational contexts in which Ankara's interventions take place.

Introduction¹

The Turkish offensive 'Peace Spring' of October 2019 seized control over a strip of north-eastern Syria, including the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. It caused the dominant Syrian Kurdish force (the Democratic Union Party – PYD) and its armed forces (the People's Protection Units – YPG) to turn to the Syrian regime and Russia for protection against the threat of Turkey's border incursion turning into a fully-fledged invasion.² By doing so, the operation diminished the prospect of Syria's Kurds achieving greater autonomy. It also

strengthened the position of the Syrian regime in the country's northeast.³

But that was only the operation's immediate effect. It also put another piece in place of a larger Turkish strategy against the Kurds across the region that includes the Turkish 'liberation' of the borderlands north of the Syrian city of Al-Bab⁴ as well as its

1 We would like to thank Prof. dr. Martin van Bruinessen (University of Utrecht), Kamal Chomani (Tahrir Institute for Middle East policy) as well as another expert (who prefers to remain anonymous) for their review of this brief. Its contents naturally remain the responsibility of the authors.

2 See: Al Jazeera [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

3 The regime always maintained a small presence in the towns of Qamishli and Hasaka after 2011.

4 These lands are largely Arab-populated but connect the Kurdish majority areas of Afrin and Al-Jazira. The main aim of the Turkish intervention arguably was to prevent the YPG from establishing such a connection. We use the word 'liberation' because many of the areas citizens welcomed the Turkish intervention that also liberated them from the Islamic State. In Afrin, the opposite was the case and we use the word 'occupation' to reflect popular sentiment.

'occupation' of the majority-Kurdish district of Afrin; a series of Turkish offensives against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) across Iraqi Kurdistan; air strikes against PKK-linked forces in Iraq's Sinjar area; and the expansion of Turkish military control over its own south-eastern provinces of Sirnak and Hakkari.

In brief, Ankara has engaged in a full-scale regional offensive against its main Kurdish opponents: the PKK and the PYD, which it views as identical.⁵ Each confrontation highlighted the dominance of the Turkish army over Kurdish forces and reduced the latter's freedom of manoeuvre. Ankara's military assertiveness, which has its roots in the failure of the AKP-PKK peace negotiations in 2015, have put a significant damper on the prospects of a 'Kurdish Awakening' across the region.⁶

The rise of the PYD as trigger for renewed anti-Kurdish militarism

In 2015, YPG-forces defeated Islamic State (IS) in the battle for the town of Kobani (Syria), together with Iraqi Peshmerga, elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the US air force. The battle was preceded by growing PYD/YPG control over north-east and northwest (Afrin) Syria. Its aftermath featured sustained American support for the PYD/YPG to lead the fight against

Islamic State (IS),⁷ rapidly expanding PYD/YPG control over north-eastern Syria in the process. Turkey increasingly came to face the prospect of having a PYD-run statelet run along its southern border. In response, Ankara shifted its Syria strategy from aiming to overthrow the Assad regime to containing the Kurdish PYD.⁸

Turkey executed its new strategy effectively and prevented Syrian Kurdish territories from coalescing by occupying the triangular area north of the Syrian city of Al-Bab in 2016/17 (also liberating it from IS), conquering the majority-Kurdish Syrian district of Afrin in 2018, and forcing the PYD to accept an extended military presence of the Syrian regime and Russia along the Syrian-Turkish border in 2019.⁹ These offensives also earned Ankara the renewed enmity of the Syrian regime and negatively affected Turkey's standing in the West insofar as its operations in Afrin, Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad were concerned.

The peace that was not

Turkey did not always approach the Kurdish question in such militarist fashion. In fact, between 2013 and 2015 Ankara sought to enlist the PYD in its fight against Assad.¹⁰ The PYD's leader, Salih Muslim, visited Ankara twice for high-level consultations on relatively good terms.¹¹ Turkey started viewing the PYD as a threat mostly after it

5 On paper the groups profess different agendas. Whereas the PKK's primary stated objective remains to wage an armed insurgency against the Turkish state, the PYD claims to aspire to the creation of a more 'autonomous democratic sphere' in Syria, albeit under PYD-control and via the use of repressive measures. See: ANF News, [online](#); The Kurdish Project, [online](#) (all accessed 14 July 2020). In practice, the organisations have close ties. See: International Crisis Group, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, Brussels: ICG, 2017; Rifai, O., 'The Kurdish identity; from Banishment to Empowerment', *Syria Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2016.

6 Barkey, H., 'The Kurdish Awakening', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019.

7 To fight IS in Syria's Arab-majority areas, the PYD and US created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Mostly Arab in its composition (and in its casualties against IS), it is largely led by YPG officers.

8 Van Veen, E. and Yüksel, E., *Too big for its boots: Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2002 to 2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, July 2018.

9 We leave the matter of Idlib out of account here since it has little relevance to Syria's Kurds or the PYD.

10 It did so via a carrot-and-stick approach by simultaneously threatening military intervention against the PYD in the summer of 2012. Hurriyet, [online](#) (accessed 14 July 2020).

11 Gurcan, M., 'Is the PKK worried by the YPG's growing popularity?', *AI Monitor*, 7 November 2019, [online](#).

refused to refrain from unilateral steps to declare autonomy, sever its ties with the PKK, and join the Syrian opposition.¹² Just as the prospect of a PYD-run statelet along its southern border was problematic for Turkey, so were closer ties with the Syrian opposition problematic for the PYD. After all, Ankara holds sway over the Syrian opposition (the extent of which has varied per actor and over time), which was also initially ambiguous with regard to Kurdish demands for greater collective rights, especially political ones.¹³

In addition, since the mid-1990s, Turkey built a partnership of sorts with Barzani's Kurdish Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, a process that accelerated after the 2005 Iraqi constitution recognised the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The Turkey-KDP relationship even survived the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence and flourishes today, albeit on an uneven keel and under growing tensions (see below).

Moreover, the AKP conducted intense negotiations with the PKK until 2015 in pursuit of a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish question after earlier attempts in 1993 and 2009 failed. Since the AKP was firmly in control of Turkish politics between 2009 and 2015 while the country's economy was booming, it could negotiate from a position of strength. The leaders of both sides – Abdullah Öcalan (the imprisoned chief of the PKK) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Prime Minister of Turkey at the time) – outdid each other in public declarations of support for Turkish-Kurdish co-existence in 'civic and religious brotherhood in a democratising Turkey' during the negotiations.¹⁴ Öcalan wrote: "Turkish people

who know ancient Anatolia as Turkey should know that their coexistence with Kurdish people dates back to a historical agreement of fraternity and solidarity under the flag of Islam. [...] It is time not for opposition, conflict or contempt towards each other, it is time for cooperation, unity, embracing and mutual blessing."¹⁵ Erdoğan himself stated clearly on several occasions that a political solution to the Kurdish question was inevitable.

Despite progress, the negotiations ultimately foundered.¹⁶ The fatal hurdle were the Syrian territories controlled by the PYD, which is closely linked with the PKK.¹⁷ Erdoğan insisted that there could be no second Kurdish statelet along Turkish borders, while Öcalan was just as adamant that the autonomy gains of the PYD would not be jeopardised.¹⁸ Paraphrasing Mehmet Alaca (an Ankara-based Turkish journalist), the PKK saw Syria as an important opportunity to establish an internationally recognised, semi-legal entity in Syria – in the form of the PYD – that would significantly upgrade its own illegal and internationally condemned standing in Turkey.¹⁹ Realistic or not, Turkey's political elites clearly perceived such a step as having the potential to transform the PKK's struggle. The PKK's refusal to disarm and disband was another cause of failure of the peace negotiations, as was the unwillingness of the Turkish government to permit local governance autonomy or Kurdish language education in public schools.²⁰ Other issues that played a role included the escalating AKP- Gülenist rivalry and the 2015 electoral victory of the People's Democratic Party (HDP),²¹ which

12 Park (2020), *op.cit.*; Acun and Keskin (2017) *op.cit.*
 13 Gunes, C. and R. Lowe, *The impact of the Syrian war on Kurdish politics across the Middle East*, London: Chatham House, 2015; Van Dam, N., *Destroying a nation: The civil war in Syria*, London: IB Tauris, 2017; Pollock, D., *Syria's Kurds Unite against Assad, but Not with Opposition*, Washington Institute, PolicyWatch 1967, 2012; see also: HNC (Etüf), *Executive framework for a political solution based on the Geneva communiqué* (2012), 2016, [online](#). It offers mixed messages at best, compare e.g. pages 3 and 9.
 14 Milliyet, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

15 See: <https://www.euronews.com/2013/03/22/web-full-transcript-of-abdullah-ocalans-cessfire-call-kurdish-pkk>; or: <https://tr.euronews.com/2013/03/22/abdullah-ocalan-in-mektubunun-tam-metni> (both accessed 5 September 2020).
 16 Van Veen and Yüksel (2019) *op.cit.*
 17 ICG (2017), *op.cit.*; Rifai (2016), *op.cit.*
 18 Demokrathaber, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).
 19 Alaca, M., 'Rojava Çözüm Süreci Denkleminin Neresinde?' *OrtaDoğu Analiz*, 2014, [online](#).
 20 Ahaber, [online](#); Aksam, [online](#) (both accessed 13 July 2020).
 21 The HDP is a Turkish-Kurdish political party that champions the rights of the country's many ethnic and religious minorities.

brought it close to eclipsing the PKK as pre-eminent representative of Turkey's Kurds, lost the AKP its parliamentary majority, and temporarily blocked Erdoğan's plans to introduce a presidential system.²²

In brief, both negotiating partners appear to have had 'higher aims' than achieving peace in Turkey: the PKK prioritised its Syrian venture and the AKP continuation of its rule. The AKP's resulting shift towards authoritarianism, its alliance with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the growth as well as increasing authoritarianism of the PYD/YPG in Syria have ruled out a re-start of talks ever since.²³

A return to Turkey's default strategy of securitisation

In this context, and faced with an urban war in the Kurdish-majority cities of its southeast after the peace negotiations with the PKK broke down, Ankara reverted to its default strategy of securitising the Kurdish question.²⁴ The origins of this strategy can be found in the late Ottoman empire and the early Turkish republic. The late Ottomans viewed the Kurdish question as a problem of establishing central rule at the periphery of empire and sought to resolve it through a mix of force and co-optation.²⁵ They mostly framed the 'Kurdish question' as one of backward tribalism and ignorant resistance against the benefits of empire,

in a sort of 'Ottoman orientalism'. In a context of birthing problems like war, foreign interference and unruly minorities, the Turkish Republic of 1923 heavily securitised the late Ottoman approach. This survivalist reflex was institutionalised over the next decades by the centralised development of the Turkish state, which remained grounded in a narrow conception of nationalist identity and autocratic rule with 'democratic characteristics'.²⁶

Thus conceived, Ankara's task was to integrate its unruly border zone population into the 'imagined community' of the Turkish state by means of a colonial-type civilising mission.²⁷ Force became the main currency of exchange given the Kurds' enduring refusal to assimilate.²⁸ In this context, the Turkish state employs terms like 'separatism', 'banditry' and 'terrorism' to delegitimise dissidence.²⁹ Such framing choices indicate that Ankara hardly bothers to separate its Kurdish citizens who air their grievances more or less peacefully from those who do so in militant or even terrorist fashion. The choice of frame also reflects Ankara's consistent refusal to conceptualise the Kurdish issue as one of a significant minority in search of greater collective rights.

The mid-1980s saw the emergence of an upgraded Turkish strategy in response to the rise of the PKK that deployed coercion, local co-optation and development (in that order) in its Kurdish 'border zone' to suppress the rebellion and enforce assimilation.³⁰ The coercive plank of this approach bore fruit in the 1990s after the PKK failed to translate its late 1980s guerrilla warfare successes into a popular uprising and/or adequate political pressure for peace, and after the Turkish

22 See: <https://secim.haberler.com/2015/hdp-secim-sonucu>; Milliyet, [online](#); Cemal, H., 'Murat Karayılan ile Kandil'de 5,5 saat', *T24*, [online](#), 24 March 2013; Yenisafak, [online](#) (all accessed 13 July 2020).

23 Zürcher E. J., *Turkey: A Modern History*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017; Ozkahraman, C., 'Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim of Traditional Turkish Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?', *The Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 27 February 2017.

24 Alptekin, H. and İlhan, B., *Kayyum Atanan Belediyelerin Pkk Terörü İle Mücadeledeki Rolü*, Ankara: SETA, 2018; T24, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020); Konaev and Kadercan (2018), *op.cit.*

25 Aydın, A. and C. Emrence, *Zones of Rebellion: Kurdish Insurgents and the Turkish State*, Ithaca: CUP, 2015.

26 Zürcher (2017) *op.cit.*

27 Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 2006.

28 Özpek, B. B., 'Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'', *Middle East Critique*, 27 December 2017.

29 Özcan, A., "Ama Eşkıyalık Çağı Kapandı!": *Modern Türkiye'de Son Kürt Eşkıyalık Çağı (1950-1970)*, İstanbul: İletişim, 2018.

30 Aydın and Emrence (2015) *op.cit.*

Armed Forces improved their doctrine, equipment and mode of operations.³¹ Turkish military performance already suggested in the mid-1990s that Kurdish militancy by itself does not constitute a viable pathway to autonomy or independence. Turkey's recent 'Peace Spring' operation in Syria made the same point once again. Yet, this has not stopped the PKK from trying, and raising the cost of the conflict for Ankara.³²

The local co-optation dimension of Turkey's securitisation strategy for dealing with the Kurdish question consist(ed)(s) of Ankara building a patron-client type relationship with a key segment or actor of a Kurdish communit(ies)(y) to prevent the emergence of a united Kurdish front. Initially, it capitalised effectively on the many religious, ideological and tribal cleavages among Turkey's Kurds to attract Kurdish voters and supporters.³³ For example, the originally Marxist orientation of the PKK was problematic for more religious and conservative Kurds, which explains in part why the PKK does not enjoy greater support. Even though the Kurds proved to be susceptible to co-optation tactics, their opportunistic use by Ankara failed to re-orient Kurdish loyalties towards the Turkish state in a more durable manner.³⁴

Accelerating the economic development of its Kurdish region has generally been an afterthought in Turkish strategy.³⁵ While central support for local economic clusters and modest economic stimuli created some opportunities for Kurdish entrepreneurs

and catalysed some local businesses, they have typically been insufficiently resourced, unevenly operationalised and deprioritised whenever military confrontation required it. Also, the PKK developed a habit of targeting development projects, especially high-profile symbols of state power like dams and pipelines, as well as using mafia-style threats against Kurdish entrepreneurs playing a role in such projects.

In other words, Turkey's three-pronged strategy of repression, co-optation and development suppressed the PKK with relative ease after the early 1990s but was unable to assimilate the Kurdish question away. On the contrary, Ankara's securitised approach greatly increased Kurdish political identity, awareness and activism. Repressive practices – such as torture, large-scale incarceration of dissidents, redistricting, and massive population displacement – highlighted the *de facto* second-class status of many Turkey's Kurdish citizens. The grievances accumulating from such practices have produced a growing willingness to engage in political activism, as illustrated by the rise of the HDP, as well as enduring militant resistance.³⁶ The PKK remains alive and well.³⁷

Doubling down on a broken strategy?

If decades of repression and co-optation achieved only token resolution of the Kurdish question, it may come as a surprise that Ankara has been applying the same strategy with renewed vigour since 2015/2016 and is expanding it across the region. The key drivers of this development are deep internalisation of the 'script of securitisation' among Turkish ruling elites, its firm linkage with core concepts of the perceived identity of the Turkish state as centralised, unitary, benign and (ultra-) nationalistic and, more recently, the spectacular rise

31 Marcus, A., *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York: New York University Press, 2007; Aydin and Emrence (2015) *op.cit.*

32 International Crisis Group, *Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer*, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

33 Natali, D., *The Kurds And the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*, New York: SUP, 2005.

34 Aydin and Emrence (2015) *op.cit.*

35 Sarigil, Z. and Karakoc, E., 'Who supports secession? The determinants of secessionist attitudes among Turkey's Kurds', *Nations and Nationalism*, 12 February 2016; Marcus (2007) *op.cit.*

36 Sarigil and Karakoc (2016) *op.cit.*

37 Geerdink, F., *Dit vuur dooft nooit: Een jaar bij de PKK*, Hoofddrop: Spectrum, 2018.

of the PYD/YPG in Syria with support from the PKK. Arguably, ‘doubling down’ has happened despite, not because of, the script’s manifest political failure and the socioeconomic cost of the conflict for Turkey. The stubborn refusal of the PKK to implode after the arrest of its ruthless leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999 already offered a clear warning that securitisation was no silver bullet.³⁸ Yet, Turkey’s post-2015 strategy towards the Kurdish question is nevertheless premised on the assumption that Kurdish militancy – chiefly the PKK in Turkey/Iraq and the PYD in Syria – is a form of terrorism that can be eliminated via prolonged counter-insurgency campaigns.

Domestically, Ankara’s strategy is one of security-heavy counterterrorism. The tools it deploys are urban curfews, emergency powers, special forces, airpower (drone strikes, especially) and, if needed, wholesale urban destruction. Regionally, Ankara’s strategy is based on the newly-minted concept of ‘preventive intervention’, which is similar to the doctrine of ‘preventive strike’ set out in the 2002 US national security strategy.³⁹ It claims the right to use offensive force for defensive purposes. It no longer views cross-border counter-terrorism operations as temporary hot pursuits, but as permanent tools to maintain regional stability. Ankara justifies the longevity of such operations by depicting them as supporting the states on their receiving end – Syria and Iraq – to maintain order and territorial integrity, albeit without their request or

consent.⁴⁰ But the way in which Ankara puts its concept of ‘preventive intervention’ into action – using proxy forces (Syria), displacement and reconstruction efforts (Syria), permanent military bases (Iraq, Syria) and co-optation (Iraq, Syria) – has far-reaching implications for the region as it creates permanent Turkish military or administrative control of territories that do not belong to Ankara.

The regional expansion of Turkey’s counter-terrorism operations into Syria and Iraq is the biggest difference from its actions against its domestic Kurdish population in the 1990s and 2000s. It is a profound difference because it turns the Kurdish question from a largely domestic issue into a regional factor of instability. There are several noteworthy elements.

For a start, it takes the fight against the PKK across the Iraqi frontier and into the foothills of the Qandil mountains – the PKK’s headquarters – on a permanent basis.⁴¹ Since 2015, the Turkish army undertook more than 400 military operations in northern Iraq to sever the PKK’s communication and recruitment lines, dismantle PKK bases, and delink the PKK from the PYD in Syria and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran (it considers both organisations as PKK

38 Marcus (2007) *op.cit.*

39 Güney, A.N., ‘Türkiye’nin yeni stratejik gerçekliği: Terörle Sınır Ötesi Mücadele’, *Türkiye’nin Güvenlik Stratejisi*, Ankara: Anadolu Ajansı Yayınları, 2018; The White House, *The National Security Strategy*, September 2002, [online](#).

40 Legally, Turkey has justified its Syrian operations with reference to the right of self-defence (Article 51 of the UN Charter) and several UN Security Council resolutions pertaining to Member State responsibilities in the fight against terrorism (notably UNSC RES 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005), 2170 (2014), 2178 (2014), 2249 (2015) and 2254 (2015) – despite the fact that the PYD/YPG neither posed a credible threat to Turkey nor engaged in significant or repeated offensive cross-border military action. See: Güney (2018) *op. cit.*; <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2019/804> (accessed 13 July 2020).

41 Note that the 1984 Iraqi-Turkish protocol authorising cross-border hot pursuit for 5 kilometres was abrogated in 1988, while the 2007 Iraq-Turkey anti-terrorism agreement has no hot pursuit clause. See: Öztüğ, L. I., ‘1988-1991 Kuzey Irak Siğınmacı Krizi’, *Türk Dış Politikası Kriz İncelemeleri*, 28 January 2016, [online](#); Bianet [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

franchises).⁴² Since August 2018, operation ‘Resolve’ has established over a dozen Turkish military bases on Iraqi soil, creating pockets 15 to 20 kilometres deep in the Avashin, Basyan and Hakurk regions of Iraq, as a buffer against PKK militants intending to infiltrate Turkey.⁴³ Turkey also carries out regular airstrikes in Iraq’s north-western area of Sinjar, which is under PKK influence.⁴⁴ Such strikes were recently expanded towards Makhmour.⁴⁵ Finally, Ankara further expanded its military presence in Iraq’s Hakurk area, which is close to the Turkish-Iranian border, by means of Operation ‘Claw’ in May 2019.⁴⁶ This resulted in the establishment of up to ten more permanent bases.⁴⁷ Since June 2020, Turkey has also gradually enlisted Iranian military support against the PKK and PJAK in exchange for Ankara’s ‘condemnation’ of US sanctions against Iran.⁴⁸ Yet, while PKK supply lines and mobility have been curtailed, they are not fatally compromised. The inhospitable terrain of the Qandil mountain range makes it unlikely that the Turkish military presence can expand beyond the reach of effective air cover without suffering high casualties in a mountain guerrilla war of attrition.

Another major element of Turkey’s regionalised anti-Kurdish strategy has been to roll back the territorial gains that the PYD/YPG made during the Syrian civil war. While the fight against IS and provocation played a role, Turkey conducted Operation Euphrates Shield (2016/17), Operation Olive Branch (2018) and Operation Peace Spring (2019) primarily with the aim of bringing

the PYD/YPG down.⁴⁹ Respectively, these initiatives prevented the PYD/YPG from connecting Syria’s Afrin and Jazira areas, captured the only Syrian district with an almost completely Kurdish population (Afrin before 2011), and forced the PYD to let Syrian regime and Russian forces re-enter crucial Syrian-Turkish border areas. The collateral damage of these operations included the displacement of 150,000 Syrian Kurds from Afrin and about 200,000 Kurds, Arabs and others from the Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain area.⁵⁰ This was preceded by earlier displacement waves caused by the PYD/YPG’s advance that sent tens of thousands fleeing from the Tel Hamis, Tel Rifaat and various other areas in 2015/16.⁵¹ After the last Turkish operation, President Erdoğan subsequently suggested that Syrian Arab refugees residing in Turkey might substitute for displaced Syrian Kurds: “What is important is to keep this huge area [referring to Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain] under control. To keep its lifestyle under control. The most suitable ones for this are Arabs. The area does not suit the lifestyle of the Kurds. Why? Because it is virtually a desert region.”⁵²

A final element of Turkey’s regional ‘counter-terrorism’ strategy is the export of its longstanding practice of dividing Kurdish communities by exploiting their many existing social cleavages and divergent leadership interests. The Turkish-KDP patron-client relationship has been key for Ankara in splitting the Kurdish front. Paradoxically, the basis of this relationship is the KRI’s territorial autonomy, which Turkey feared would set a precedent for Kurdish independence ambitions across the region. This is because the KRI relies

42 Aslan, M., *Türkiye’nin Terörizmle Mücadelesi: Pençe Harekâtı*, Ankara: SETA, 9 July 2019.

43 Suriye Gündemi, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020); Al-Shadeedi, H. and Yüksel, E., *The Curious Incident of the Turkish Military Base in Shiladze*, The Hague: Clingendael, February 2019; Aslan, M. (2019) *op.cit.*

44 Anadolu Agency (2019) *op.cit.*

45 Rudaw [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

46 Aslan (2019) *op.cit.*

47 Milliyet [online](#) (accessed 20 August 2020).

48 Yücesoy, V., ‘The recent rapprochement between Iran and Turkey: is it durable or is it a relationship of convenience?’, *Turkish Studies*, 21:2, 274-296, 2020; Behraves, M. and H. Azizi, *What’s behind Iran’s sudden realignment with Turkey?*, Responsible statecraft, [online](#), July 2020.

49 Turkey had for example warned the PYD/YPG several times that efforts to connect Afrin with Al-Jazira would trigger a reaction. So it did.

50 See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-january-november-2018>; <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13994.doc.htm> (both accessed 14 July 2020).

51 See for instance: Amnesty International, ‘We had nowhere else to go’: *Forced displacement and demolitions in northern Syria*, [online](#), 2015.

52 Gözlem, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

to an appreciable extent on oil sales to maintain itself, and the continuity of these sales depends on Turkey due to the area's pipeline geography. Ankara has played its cards cleverly by encouraging a model of intergovernmental economic cooperation in which KDP elites benefit from increased trade, business privileges, oil sales, corruption, and Turkish glad handing. President Erdoğan hosted the KDP political leadership multiple times for high-level visits over the past years, even after Barzani held the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum.⁵³ In other words, the KDP leadership has a lot to lose from supporting a transnational Kurdish liberation agenda that runs counter to Turkish interests. Despite the KDP's public distancing from Turkey's operations in Syria, it has become a Turkish client more than it cares to admit, which is illustrated by the KDP's silence in respect of Ankara's permanent military presence in northern Iraq.⁵⁴

Ankara also leverages the ideological enmity between Barzani and Öcalan-inspired Kurdish groups in Syria, Iraq, and even Turkey itself, to 'divide-and-rule'. Both aspire to the mantle of leadership of the transnational Kurdish struggle. Where the KDP is more patriarchal, conservative and tribal in nature, linked with the Naqshbandi (Sufi) order, compromise-oriented and a US-ally, the PKK remains Marxist-inclined, is linked with Syria/Iran, and aspires to a new social order that is more egalitarian and inclusive – although under PKK leadership. Ankara has cracked down on all Kurdish political parties it sees as linked with Öcalan's ideology, but tolerates the Barzani-affiliated KDP in Turkey itself.⁵⁵ In short, Turkey's relationship with the KDP has made the western part of the KRI a complex area for transnational Kurdish resistance to take root.

Turkey has sought to replicate the co-optation of the KDP in Iraq by supporting the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria – an umbrella group of over a dozen Syrian Kurdish parties operating out of Erbil, Qamishli and Istanbul that is linked with Barzani's KDP.⁵⁶ Contrary to the PYD, the KNC stands against the Assad regime. It also seeks to maintain Syria's territorial integrity on a federal basis. But it does not hold any ground in north-eastern Syria, commands no forces in the area (the PYD refused its 6,000 KDP-trained Peshmerga entry) and has little political sway. Ankara's support for the KNC nevertheless splits the political voice of the Syrian Kurds and strengthens Turkey's narrative of fighting against terrorism (i.e. the PYD) because it can point to its ability to work with 'more moderate' Kurdish groups.⁵⁷ Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu summarised Ankara's strategy well when he said: 'We are together with them [non-Öcalan affiliates] against terrorist organisations. It is necessary to distinguish between the terrorists and other Kurds.'⁵⁸ But he should have added that Turkey makes this distinction only beyond its own borders.

No end in sight

To the unwary eye, Turkey's military assertiveness would seem to be paying off. The PKK is boxed into a corner of the Qandil mountains, the PYD's prospects for establishing greater autonomy have diminished, the Turkish HDP has been eviscerated, and divisions within the Kurdish transnational community are rife. Yet it is likely that these results will prove to be ephemeral for several reasons.

First and most importantly, Turkish anti-Kurdish militarism follows a particularly rigorous version of the 'global terrorist playbook' by treating anyone as a terrorist

53 See: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/Search?s=barzani&p0=barzani&p1=-410-&p2=28.08.2014&p3=14.02.2020&sT=1&langText=tr&presidentId=12> (accessed 14 July 2020).

54 VOA Türkçe, [online](#) (accessed 14 July 2020).

55 BBC, [online](#) (accessed 14 July 2020).

56 Özpek (2017) *op.cit*; Carnegie Diwan, *The Kurdish National Council in Syria*, 15 February 2012, [online](#).

57 Ibrahim, S., 'US wants Kurdish groups to reconcile in eastern Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 17 July 2019, [online](#).

58 See: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-mevlut-cavusoglu_nun-a-haber-e-verdigi-roportaj-9-10-2019.tr.mfa (accessed 14 July 2020).

who advocates – peacefully or militantly – for greater Kurdish political representation, more collective rights, or increased autonomy.⁵⁹ For instance, more than 5,000 HDP members, most of the party’s leadership and over 150 Kurdish journalists are jailed for alleged links with the PKK in Turkey alone. Kurdish-majority cities in southern Turkey, such as Cizre and Sur, are partially destroyed. Selective and arbitrary application of Turkey’s anti-terror laws has also sharply curtailed freedom of expression and silenced thousands of Kurdish activists, academics and journalists.⁶⁰ Such measures create many new grievances but fail to offer a positive alternative. The likely result is another cycle of conflict.

Second, Ankara underestimates the depth of Kurdish resistance. Many of the individuals in jail, prosecuted or otherwise repressed continue to challenge the AKP while Turkish Kurdish voters keep supporting the HDP.⁶¹ Moreover, while groups like the PKK and PYD are authoritarian in nature, use repressive methods and engage in acts of terrorism, they do have constituencies that enable them. These constituencies grow in response to practices such as those listed above. For example, the PKK has dropped all talk of reconciliation – which is still espoused by Öcalan – and calls for a comprehensive armed struggle against Turkey in its 2020 strategy.⁶² Turkish militarism without compromise simply fast-tracks recruitment.

Third, regionally, Ankara’s securitization tactics have resulted in the wholesale plunder of Afrin by Turkey’s Syrian proxies, largescale displacement of Syrian Kurds

and growing collateral damage in Iraq.⁶³ In northern Iraq and Turkey, the Crisis Group counts over 4,800 deaths, 100,000 disappearances, and 400,000 displaced people since 2015.⁶⁴ Such results trigger a similar backlash as is the case within Turkey. In Iraq, Turkey’s growing military activity is generating popular discontent due to the collateral damage it produces, KDP fears of a permanent Turkish presence in the KRI, and more vocal protests from Baghdad.⁶⁵ In Syria, Ankara faces an insurgency against its forces in Afrin by two armed groups linked with the YPG – Ghadab al-Zaitoun (The Wrath of Olives) and Hezen Rizgariye (Afrin Liberation Forces).⁶⁶

59 Human Rights Watch, *Turkey: Events of 2018*, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020); Amnesty, *The aftermath of the failed Turkey coup: Torture, beatings and rape*, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020); European Commission, *Turkey 2018 Report*, 17 April 2018, [online](#); European Commission, *Turkey 2019 Report*, 29 May 2019, [online](#); Sabah, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

60 European Commission (2018), *op.cit.*; European Commission (2019), *op.cit.*

61 Siyasi Haber, [online](#) (accessed 14 July 2020).

62 ANF Türkçe, [online](#) (accessed 14 July 2020).

63 Konaev, M. and Kadercan B., *Old Dogs, New Tricks: Urban Warfare In Turkey’s War With The PKK*, War On The Rocks, [online](#), 3 January 2018; International Crisis Group, *Managing Turkey’s PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin*, Brussels: ICG, 2017; Van Veen, E. and Yüksel, E., *Turkey in the Northwestern Syria: Rebuilding empire at the margins*, The Hague: Clingendael, June 2019; Yüksel, E., *Strategies of Turkish Proxy Warfare in Northern Syria: Back with a vengeance*, The Hague: Clingendael, November 2019; Al-Shadeedi and Yüksel (2019), *op.cit.*; Zaman, A., ‘Turkey grants Kurdish militants no peace, even in death’, *Al Monitor*, 28 April 2020.

64 Mandıracı, B., *Assessing the Fatalities in Turkey’s PKK Conflict*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 22 October 2019, [online](#); International Crisis Group, *Turkey’s PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer*, [online](#) (accessed 13 July 2020).

65 Al-Shadeedi and Yüksel (2019), *op.cit.*; Taştekin, F., *Iraqi Kurds fear Turkey’s military campaign aims beyond PKK*, *Al-Monitor*, 2020, [online](#) (accessed 20 August 2020). For example, a recent drone strike killed two Iraqi battalion commanders, together with a senior member of the PKK, as they were trying to defuse tensions with PKK forces following Baghdad’s endeavour to increase its military presence in the area. See: Wali, Z., *Turkish attack kills two Iraqi border officials in northern Erbil province: Iraqi security cell*, Rudaw, [online](#) (accessed 20 August 2020).

66 Veen and Yüksel (2019) *op.cit.*; Zaman, A., ‘Turkey faces growing Kurdish insurgency in Syria’s Afrin’, *Al-Monitor*, 4 March 2019, [online](#).

Fourth, even Barzani's KDP and the KNC demonstrate increasing discomfort with Turkey's military interventions.⁶⁷ Although the KNC and PYD are engaged in another round(s) of talks under US pressure that could appease Turkey's militarism, their differences are likely to prevent meaningful agreement.⁶⁸

Fifth, Turkey's international standing has suffered from its anti-Kurdish militarism. While operation Peace Spring was a tactical success, it was also a public relations nightmare as the PYD gained global sympathy by playing the David versus Goliath card on the back of its anti-IS credits.⁶⁹ Turkey has moreover created a long-term vulnerability by engaging its military in Syria. Such exposure might tempt actors such as the Assad regime or certain Gulf states to sponsor Kurdish armed groups against it. Finally, should Turkey's regional militarism facilitate the comeback of radical Islamist groups, its international standing will further plummet. For example, Turkish military actions that weaken the PYD/YPG in Syria, target PKK-linked forces in Iraq's Sinjar and Makhmour areas, and push the KDP into confrontation with the PUK because of the PKK, could increase the space for radical Islamist groups to grow.

What to do?

On balance, Ankara's repressive approach has a high likelihood of simply sowing the seeds of the next round of conflict by creating new grievances, destruction and disillusionment without offering anything positive. Its underlying philosophy remains one of forcing Kurdish assimilation within a centralised Turkish state based on a narrowly conceived Turkish identity at home and repression of Kurdish movements abroad.

Hence, without some reconceptualisation of what it means to be 'Turkish', resolution of the Kurdish question will remain difficult. Until that time, the European Union (the Netherlands included) should increase the pressure on Turkey to curb its regional militarism and open its domestic political space up for elected Kurdish representatives to engage effectively in national politics as the best long-term counter to the PKK and PYD's militancy and their own brand of authoritarianism.

Turkey's regional militarism can be constrained by greater support for Iraq's border security forces via the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) or the EU Advisory Mission. Iraqi forces should subsequently 'keep the Turks out and the PKK down' – on their territory. The EU should also strongly condemn Turkish practices of Kurdish displacement in Syria while at the same time recognizing its vital role in hosting millions of Syrians and protecting Idlib from the terrible fate of reconquest by the Syrian regime. Turkish domestic politics are harder to influence but the EU should nevertheless insist that Turkey acts on key recommendations of the Council of Europe, such as restoring judicial independence, and stop targeting human rights defenders, on pain of downgrading the EU-Turkey customs union.

67 Kurdistan24, [online](#); BBC, [online](#) (all accessed 14 July 2020); Zaman, A., 'Risking Turkey's ire, Iraqi Kurds back Syrian brethren', *Al-Monitor*, 4 November 2019, [online](#).

68 Netjes, R., *Why is it so difficult for Syrian Kurdish parties to unite?*, Acta Fabula, [online](#).

69 Gurcan, M., 'A post-mortem of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring', *Al-Monitor*, 25 October 2019, [online](#).

About the Clingendael Institute

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