

March 31, 2016

The Kurdish Movement: Politicians and Fighters

Since July 2015, when the conflict between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—a Kurdish militant group designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey as well as the United States—resumed after a period of intermittent ceasefires and a series of abortive peace efforts, the division between the two separate wings of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, the political Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the militant PKK, has become more distinct. Despite President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's assertion in May 2015 that the HDP was "ruled by the mountain"—a reference to the leadership of the PKK—and had "no will [of its own]," the HDP has in fact diverged from the PKK on many occasions. For its part, the PKK has also highlighted its differences with the HDP both through word and action. Consequently, along with the imprisoned PKK founder and leader Abdullah Ocalan, who has a unique role fluctuating between fighter and politician, the PKK commanders and the HDP are the three poles of the Kurdish movement and share a symbiotic but competing tripartite relationship.

Origins of the Modern Kurdish Problem

When the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist after the First World War, the Turkish Republic, its nation state inheritor, effectively found itself as a binational state. Although there were other minorities in Turkey, their numbers were minuscule compared to Kurds. The new republic had a core project to build a novel polity based on the uniqueness of the Turkish language, culture and history, a foundational principle that remains as a constitutional axiom in the Turkish system, in sharp contrast to the multi-ethnic, polyglot Empire that preceded it. Accordingly, the founders perceived a separate and distinct Kurdish identity in Asia Minor as a liability. The policies shaped around this principle lie at the roots of the modern Kurdish problem.

The founders of the Turkish Republic were genuinely committed to the principles of the Enlightenment. However, their interpretation of fraternity from the French Republican motto 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' was that of an integrated uniform society, which entailed an ethnic definition of citizenship that prioritized the Turkish language and culture. The Republic's Kurdish policy, which was a product of this definition of citizenship, was designed to assimilate this demographic group rather than to categorically discriminate against them. This distinction has parallels outside Turkey. French nationalism had similarly sought to assimilate ethnic minorities unlike German nationalism which before and during the Second World War was characterized by—and infamous for—its discriminatory nature.

However, Kurdish nationalism—which the Kurdish intelligentsia had conceived and propagated as an anti-thesis to Turkish nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—became popular as a reaction to these assimilation efforts parallel to state-promoted Turkish nationalism. A 1926 report by

Ministry of the Interior Agent Hamdi Bey, for example, demonstrates that the Republic acknowledged the rise of Kurdish nationalism and identified it as a source of concern. Referring to the predominantly Kurdish province of Dersim where there would later be a rebellion in 1937, he wrote “Dersim is getting more and more Kurdified...therefore the danger is getting bigger.”

The Kurdish Movement: Past and Present

The Kurdish movement in Turkey has been challenging the cultural and legal supremacy of the Turkish language and assimilation efforts. The two wings of the movement, the political HDP and the militant PKK, are united in strategy but divided in tactics. The very different constraints the HDP and the PKK face in the pursuit of the same objective force them to adopt different methods.

The PKK’s precursor, Apocular [Apoists], named after its founder, was formed in 1974 with 16 members, and four years later it adopted the name Kurdistan Workers’ Party through a declaration. Since the group launched its first notable attack in 1984, thousands of Turkish security forces and civilians as well as Kurdish militants and civilians have been killed or wounded. Turkey has always defined the conflict as a fight against terrorism, a characterization rejected by many Kurds.

Ocalan was the supreme commander of the PKK until his capture in 1999 in a Turkish operation with the discreet help of the United States. Although he was condemned to death the same year, three years later his sentence was commuted to life in prison, which he is serving on Imrali Island. Since his capture, the PKK has generally ceased its calls for independence and now claims to be seeking democratic confederalism, an ideological goal similar to libertarian socialism, and limited local rule through regional autonomy. The PKK’s leadership has been based in the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan since the early 1990’s and consequently ‘Qandil’ is commonly used to refer to PKK commanders, the most prominent of whom are Murat Karayilan and Cemil Bayik. However, the PKK continues to recognize Ocalan as its supreme commander.

Many Kurds revere Ocalan, who has built a reputation as a tough, uncompromising leader. He has also been pragmatic and shown a willingness to make concessions. For example, in October 2009 he was reported as saying “We have no problem with [Erdogan’s slogan] ‘One State, One Nation, One Flag’...we have no problem with the unitary state.” Although Ocalan’s cult of personality gives his words great influence with his followers, their dissemination is now subject to strict government control and, accordingly, his statements are viewed with caution in Qandil and on the Kurdish street.

Even though most Kurds still hail him as a hero, Ocalan’s imprisonment has inevitably altered his general disposition. While he has always been politically inclined, at his core he is not a politician but a fighter. At Imrali he has been reduced to having to act as a politician, which makes him dependent on the government as well as the political wing of the Kurdish movement. Nonetheless, he carries the burden of maintaining an appearance of a fighter to keep a strong public image. This was easier for him in the past as he had led the PKK with an iron fist before his capture, to the extent of even alienating his brother Osman.

Before the HDP, the Kurds had established many political parties, including HADEP, DEHAP, DTP and BDP. However, all of these parties were constrained and most were closed down. In 2012, the Kurdish movement unveiled the HDP with the goal of appealing to a broader audience beyond the Kurdish areas. Selahattin Demirtas, the HDP's co-leader alongside Figen Yuksekdag, serves as the main public face of the party. His oratorical skills are excellent, making him one of the most charismatic faces in Turkish politics. Although the HDP exercises no direct control over the PKK and has no military power, it does have parliamentary representation and therefore a channel to communicate with non-Kurds and the international community.

Internal Struggle and Contradictions

While the PKK and the HDP maintain a degree of distance from each other, the PKK is a fundamental element in the Kurdish problem and the HDP cannot separate itself from it. Although the political wing is also essential, the PKK predates all contemporary Kurdish political parties in Turkey. Accordingly, many defining characteristics of the Kurdish movement were present before modern Kurdish parties emerged. For example, the PKK's leftist tendencies have deeply influenced the political wing's narrative and the HDP's great emphasis on gender equality can be traced back to these initial choices.

Although the political wing is bound by certain conditions and rules that were not of its own making, it has changed the playing field in a number of ways. Demirtas, for example, has used Islam in election campaigns in contrast to the staunchly secular PKK, thus introducing a religious element to the movement. He has also distanced himself from the PKK's methods, a stance that many HDP voters agree with.

Many Kurds believe that the PKK should avoid military confrontations as many civilian Kurds are inevitably caught in the crossfire, especially in urban warfare. Nevertheless the group still has undeniable support in the local populace, a factor the HDP must take into consideration. Even devout Kurds who disagree with the PKK's methods seem to begrudgingly respect the group because of its perceived role in advancing the broad Kurdish agenda of transforming Turkey into a multiethnic state.

Qandil's challenge to the HDP has often come in the form of intra-party contention as Yuksekdag has seemed to face less criticism from Qandil in contrast to Demirtas. After the June 2015 elections, for example, Demirtas vehemently opposed any coalition with the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which lacked sufficient seats in parliament to form a government on its own. A short time after the elections, Karayilan commented "Statements...such as 'I will never make a coalition with such and such' are emotional. This is not politically sound. Nevertheless, co-leader Figen Yuksekdag's media statement 'We are open to all suggestions and meetings to form a coalition and a government' shows that the HDP is trying to overcome narrow-minded attitudes about these issues." In July 2015 Karayilan further reinforced his message by saying "A party that won the elections...should have been more active." Despite these contentions, Demirtas has remained the most visible figure in the party and the HDP's actions have been consistent with his progressive, pluralist and comparatively moderate line as well as his public declarations, even when these were at odds with Yuksekdag.

The Demirtas-Qandil divide cannot be explained away as simple disagreements on superficial matters. In fact, it is the result of deeper disagreements. For instance, the PKK's long term plan is to challenge and resist the state to force the government back to the negotiation table and thus to restore the 'peace process,' which was a part of mutual efforts from 2009 to July 2015 to resolve the conflict. The militant group also desires to conduct negotiations directly, bypassing the HDP as in the past. These goals are deeply troubling for the HDP, which is pushing for an immediate ceasefire and a political solution. The party also resents its exclusion from essential elements of the peace process, especially the negotiations.

It is also important to note that while the HDP champions anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, secular and pluralist policies, it must balance its message with its internal fault lines. For example, while the party needs the support of conservative Kurds, who switched from the AKP to the HDP in the 2015 elections, in order to pass the 10 percent national electoral threshold for entering parliament, prominent HDP members closer to the Qandil line, who are generally disliked by these voters, are essential to the party. At a broader level, the HDP is subject to contradictions which cannot be resolved but only suppressed as its internal divisions are structural in nature.

Impact of the Syrian Civil War

The conflict in Syria has had a significant impact on the Kurdish movement, the peace process and the perception of the AKP in the eyes of Kurds in Turkey. Having previously supported the AKP government as their best political interlocutor, the frustration Kurds felt from the lack of tangible results towards peace began to boil over in October 2014 when Turkey was seen as refusing to aid Kurds who were being besieged by ISIS in the Syrian town of Kobane just across the Turkish border. The Kurds of Turkey expected Erdogan, who had launched the peace process, to side with their Syrian brethren. However, he refused to do so by alleging that Syrian Kurdish forces fighting ISIS were affiliated with the PKK.

Ankara's position clearly had the effect of strengthening Kurdish solidarity across the border, as evidenced by a June 2015 report by the Turkish newspaper Hurriyet that 8,500 volunteers, 4,000 of whom were PKK militants, left Turkey for Syria to fight in the ranks of the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The Suruc suicide attack reportedly carried out by ISIS on July 20 targeting a group of Kurdish youth travelling to Kobane, furthered this solidarity. After the attack, for example, the PKK issued a harsh statement saying "The number one responsibility for this massacre is the AKP. They have made ISIS what it is today." The combination of solidarity because of the Syrian Civil War and the sense of angry disillusionment with the AKP contributed to the unprecedented 13 percent share of the vote the HDP earned in the June 2015 elections and helped the party remain over the 10 percent barrier in the November 2015 elections.

Return to Conflict and its Aftermath

The killing of two police officers in Ceylanpinar two days after the Suruc attack, apparently by Kurdish armed elements, effectively ended the peace process. Karayilan disowned the attack, saying that the killing was "not a centrally taken decision by the PKK" but was carried out by a self-styled group which was not an "official extension of the PKK." For his part, Demirtas went so far as to condemn the attack, referring to the fallen officers as "children of the oppressed, the working people." Within days, Turkey began to

bomb PKK camps in northern Iraq and simultaneously the police commenced an extensive campaign against suspected PKK operatives in urban areas. At the same time, there were many PKK attacks on Turkish military targets. On July 28, Erdogan declared that it was no longer possible to “continue the peace process.” However, a day later PKK sources countered “the [peace] process can be reinitiated, this is not that difficult.”

The AKP’s decision to return to the state’s traditional policy of resorting to military means—despite its failure to produce lasting results—may be a long term policy shift. Much of the Kurdish voting base the AKP gained during the peace efforts had already left the party for the HDP and questions remain as to whether this change in strategy was an attempt to attract nationalistic Turks, a large demographic, in the November 2015 elections and perhaps in future elections.

The return to armed conflict has also highlighted Ocalan’s weakening role in the Kurdish movement, especially as the restoration of peace has become a more distant possibility. Ocalan has long been trying to end the conflict, perhaps in the hope of being set free from prison or serving his sentence under better conditions, and his efforts were surely hurt by the PKK’s aggressive military campaign after July 2015. Bayik’s statement in November 2015, referring to Turkey’s longstanding demand that the PKK pull out of Turkey as part of the peace process, that “Only we can decide that...no one else. Neither the HDP nor leader Apo can take this decision. Leader Apo is their [Turkey’s] hostage. How could he take any decisions under these conditions?” clearly demonstrates the loss of status Ocalan has suffered. Such a public statement could have easily led to Bayik’s purge by Ocalan two decades ago.

The HDP-PKK divide has also become more apparent after July 2015 as Demirtas has underlined his differences with Qandil, demanding for example that those who perpetrated the January 2016 PKK car bomb attack on a Turkish police station in Cinar “apologize to the people.” He also visited the family of a Turkish soldier killed by the PKK in August 2015. Demirtas surely feels great pressure to portray Qandil and the HDP as separate entities, especially to devout Kurds who voted for his party. Moreover, he has consistently maintained a pro-peace line and has long supported a political solution, certainly before the summer of 2015. Nevertheless, he has been able to be more vocal in his opposition to armed conflict thanks to the HDP’s changing electorate and its presence in parliament. Despite its success in the recent elections however, the HDP remains stuck between Qandil and a Turkish public that loathes the PKK and views the HDP with great suspicion. It is also haunted by bitter memories of Kurdish MP’s who had their parliamentary immunity suspended before being arrested at parliament in 1994, especially as similar moves to prosecute HDP MP’s are underway for charges including “being member of an armed terror organization.”

Looking Ahead

Many of the post-July 2015 confrontations with Turkish security forces have been perpetrated by groups of frustrated, millennial Kurdish militants with loose ties to the PKK in urban areas in southeast Anatolia. Many but not all of these young fighters were connected to the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), which was incorporated into the Civil Protection Units (YPS) in January 2016. Militants who used to be in the YDG-H but who are now in the YPS tend to be in their teens and early twenties and show

generational differences compared to PKK commanders. In contrast to Qandil and Ocalan, who did not hesitate to negotiate with the Turkish state and showed a willingness to make concessions, these young volunteers are less willing to compromise. Moreover, these militants have been fighting highly trained and heavily equipped security forces and have even held towns and urban areas for weeks despite very high casualty rates, showing an apparent indifference for their own lives. This can be partly explained by the fact that the generation of Kurds who are now young adults now have been traumatized by conflict and the stories of older family members who have been living in a constant state of tension for over three decades.

Even though this new generation of militants currently do not have a prominent role in the Kurdish movement, this could change in the near future. As the PKK has become increasingly involved in the Syrian Civil War, it has also changed the way it operates as a group. It has adopted the practice of using loosely coordinated cells while passing decision making authority lower in hierarchy unlike its rigid chain of command in the past. Without direct supervision from Qandil, young militants act on their own initiative. In time, the PKK's changing organizational scheme may pave the way towards an inter-generational power struggle between the PKK and millennial Kurds. This would break the HDP-Ocalan-Qandil monopoly in the Kurdish movement, especially when active warfare in Syria ends and more young but battle-hardened Kurdish militants come back to Turkey. The February and March 2016 Ankara suicide attacks, both claimed by PKK-affiliate Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK) which had emerged in 2004, may have further underlined this increasing willingness to resort to more radical tactics by younger militants. The Turkish Ministry of Interior claimed that the 24-year-old female suicide bomber in the latter attack was trained in Syria.

For the time being, Qandil is riding the tiger in the pursuit of tactical victories. However, if peace once again becomes a possibility, dismounting and returning to the negotiating table will be very difficult and dangerous. Qandil will then have to confront a base that may perceive bidding farewell to arms as tantamount to treason, especially considering the fact that the PKK is seeking regional autonomy rather than independence. Many years ago, prominent lawyer and former minister Serafettin Elci predicted this would happen. He said "We are the last generation you can negotiate with. After us you will find an angry [Kurdish] youth that grew up with war."

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