

# The Domestic and Regional 'Kurdish Issue' of Turkish Foreign Policy

Written by Umut Yukaruc

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UMUT YUKARUC, MAR 12 2016

Turkey has a century-old problem with its Kurdish population. It is argued that this could change with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) because of their approach to the 'Kurdish issue'. Yet today as it can be seen, the problem remains on the agenda of the Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP). Baskin Oran, a prominent academic who previously supported the foreign policies of the AKP, discusses that Turkey is worse than in the 1990s in relations to 'Kurdish issue'. In addition to the domestic developments, there is a Kurdish formation in the northern part of Syria supported by the US and other powers that is perceived as a threat by the AKP elites. Therefore, it can be said that 'Kurdish issue' is not restricted by internal affairs.

In this article, I provide an overview of the TFP's approach to the 'Kurdish issue' in the AKP era, by critically reflecting on Ahmet Davutoglu's understandings– considered 'the architect' of TFP. I also focus on domestic policies related to the so-called 'Kurdish issue', while at the same time examining it in the context of Turkey's relations with the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) in Iraq and the PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria.

### The 'Kurdish Issue' in Davutoglu's Imagination

It is important to define the 'Kurdish issue' in Davutoglu's imagination since he is believed as the architect of the TFP during the AKP era. Davutoglu's book, *Strategic Depth* (2001: 437-453), provides a range of guidelines for TFP in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where he spares a section named "'Kurdish Issue', Northern Iraq and Turkey from the Perspectives of Global and Regional Balances". To start with, Davutoglu believes that the 'Kurdish issue' is in the centre of global and regional balances and it affects Turkey in the issues of the TFP, regional strategic planning and domestic socio-cultural and socio-political integration (ibid.). He states that Kurdish terror activities in Turkey were in increase during the Iraq-Iran War and the Gulf War, and it is hard to ensure domestic peace without regional peace. According to him, "the most long-lasting, coldblooded and comprehensive politics should be expected from Turkey due to the common historical experience" (ibid.: 442).

Davutoglu sees the solution of the 'Kurdish issue' in the concept of 'sense of belonging', which is the pillar of economic, cultural and political legitimacy. He states that "if a political system cannot provide sense of belonging that encircles all fractions of the society, it is not surprising that internal tensions fed by external clash of interests would be on the agenda recurrently" (ibid.: 448). The idea around 'sense of belonging' is also used in some of his speeches. In 2014 for instance, he used this term when he welcomed Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish Regional Government, (KRG) and said that "a sense of belonging is the biggest future challenge for the region, with a sense of citizenship going hand-in-hand with a sense of belonging".

However, it is not clear what he means by the 'sense of belonging' and how it can be ensured. In his book, he states that Turkey needs an internal restoration process, which can lead to a sense of belonging among all its citizens and in the long term, 'Kurdish geopolitics' will be consolidated to a regional power as a result of this concept. The 'Kurdish Openings' can be evaluated as a part of this aim.

Thus, the Kurds, as a part of common history, should have the sense of belonging to Turkey since Turkey aims to be

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a regional power in the regions where the Ottoman Empire ruled for centuries. Davutoglu gives references to the era of Ottoman Empire and the time period when the subjects of the Ottoman Empire were bounded to the empire with religious ties. Islam, then, is the constitutive part of Davutoglu's approach to the 'Kurdish issue'. Aaron Stein (2014a) who focuses on the TFP in the Middle East during the AKP era, states that Davutoglu believes that the Ottoman Empire was politically powerful due to its embrace of *Tawhid* (oneness with *Allah*). Stein explains that "should this vision be realised, Middle Eastern governments would be politically and culturally linked to Turkey, thereby lessening the significance of national borders. Their embrace of *Tawhid* would also allow for the resolution of many of the region's problems, including ethnic nationalism and sectarianism" (ibid.: 7). 'Kurdish issue', then, should be evaluated within this approach as this explains the current developments in Turkey, Iraq and Syria in terms of the AKP's approach to the Kurds. Like Davutoglu, Erdogan also uses Islam in articulating ideas around the 'Kurdish issue'. In 2011, in a speech in Diyarbakir he emphasises the connection between religious values and nationalist concepts:

"Brothers, please look: Do they not all sleep in Canakkale side by side? Turks, Kurds, Laz, Arabs, Greeks—do they not sleep side by side? Do our martyrs not sleep side by side in Sarikamis? In Kut-al-Amara we achieved that victory together. We founded this republic together . . . Diyarbakir, we are brothers. We are eternal brothers . . . Oh, brothers, the community praying in Ulus Mosque turn towards the same Kiblah as the people in Suleymaniye [Mosque] in Istanbul, in Selimiye [Mosque] in Edirne, and in Hacibayram [Mosque] in Ankara. See, we have the same Kiblah. [Is there] any separation? No! (Saracoglu and Demirkol, 2015: 309)."

In the same speech Erdogan also says:

"We are all the descendants of the great soldiers of great leader Selahaddin Eyyubi [a Kurdish Muslim who established the Ayyubid dynasty] who conquered Palestine and Jerusalem . . . I am against both Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms. All the Kurds and Turks are my brothers . . . We turn our faces towards the same qibla [the Caaba in Mecca, the holiest place of Islam] (Sarigil and Fazlioglu, 2013: 560)."

In these examples, the AKP elites Davutoglu and Erdogan attempt to articulate Islamic meanings to the 'Kurdish issue'. According to them, there is no 'Kurdish issue' because the Turks and the Kurds are brothers due to common history and common religious values. On the other hand, there is a problem of Kurdish terrorism. Erdogan differentiates the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the HDP from the Kurds who do not prioritise their ethnic identity by playing the religion card.

Islam, thus, is acknowledged as a crucial part of the AKP's approach to the 'Kurdish issue'. When the recent developments are examined, it can be seen that Turkey has problems with the Kurds, however does not show resemblance with the AKP's political Islam ideology. For instance, the AKP identifies the PKK as Marxist-Leninist terrorist organisation and the HDP (People's Democratic Party) as a political party that has organic relations and the same ideology with the PKK. More recently, the HDP is acknowledged as a terrorist organisation similar to the PKK by the AKP elites. However, another Kurdish political party, *Hudapar* (Free Cause Party) has not been identified as a terrorist organisation although it has organic ties with the Kurdish Hezbollah of Turkey, which has a Sunni Islamist identity and a history with violence.

In addition to the ideological differences, two things come forth in defining the 'Kurdish issue' in Turkey. Firstly, the two parts do not trust each other. While the Kurds demand democratic rights, how can they trust a government that has non-democratic implementations? On the other hand, how can the government trust while the PKK are still carrying out terrorist attacks? Secondly, there is an external reason that affect 'Kurdish issue' in Turkey. The developments about Syrian Kurds affect the Kurds in Turkey more than anyone else because two sides are very close to the each other. For instance, the HDP MP Adil Zozani explains that 70 percent of the population of Kobane (Syria) has relatives in Suruc (Sanliurfa, Turkey). Turkey's handling of the Kobane issue in 2014 affected Kurds in Turkey by making the AKP more unreliable for them.

## Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Kurdish Actors

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When the relations of the AKP with the regional Kurdish actors are examined, it is clear that the KRG is one of the 'good' Kurds and the PYD is one of the 'bad' ones. The relations with the KRG have not always been positive. In the 1990s for instance, a Kurdish formation in the Northern Iraq was seen as a threat and the Turkish military was not in favour to develop any kind of relations with the Kurdish actors in the region. The regional government at that time, was not different than the PKK, and Ankara was afraid that the Kurdish formation in Northern Iraq that could encourage the Kurds in Turkey. However, the relations with the KRG improved when the AKP started to fully control the TFP.

The relations with the KRG are particularly based on economic fields. The KRG became Turkey's third largest export market in 2013, which was the nineteenth in 2007. Turkish companies dominates the KRG, 47.87 percent of all foreign companies operating in the region was Turkish in 2013. And a major energy pipeline deal between two sides has been agreed in spite of the objections of the central government of Iraq, which has the sole authority over Iraqi oil. In addition to flourishing economic relations, there are also other important developments between two sides. Turkey is agreed on a programme in which Turkish Special Forces trains the Peshmerga forces of the KRG in the war against the ISIS.

Why, then, does Turkey see the KRG as a partner in both economic and security terms while a Kurdish formation in the 1990s was seen as a threat to Turkish national interests? This can be explained in two ways: Firstly, the KRG and Turkey mutually make profit from economic relations. This does not threaten Turkey's interests in the Middle East. Secondly, Turkey aimed to counterbalance Shia power (*Dawa Party of Nouri Al-Maliki*) in the central government in Iraq by supporting the KRG and other Islamist parties such as the IIP (Iraqi Islamic Party) – the Iraqi branch of Muslim Brotherhood Party (Stein, 2014b). Therefore this can be evaluated that the KRG becomes a proper actor in the TFP.

On the other hand, the same cannot be said for the PYD in Syria. The PYD has been linked to the PKK by Turkish state elites, and therefore it is defined as a terrorist organisation that threatens the national interests of Turkey. Recently, Davutoglu defines PYD as a part of the same terrorist structuring with PKK, HDP and TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) after the second bomb attack to Ankara. The PYD has organic links with the PKK in terms of ideology (Marxist-Leninist). Moreover Saleh Muslim, the leader of the PYD, who took refuge in the PKK camp in Iraq in 2010, admits that the PYD is following the same ideology of Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the PKK, although he refuses any relationship with the PKK. In addition, Ocalan had taken refuge in Syria from the early 1980s to 1998 and there were PKK camps in the Northern Syria (Aykan, 1999).

Turkey is against a Kurdish formation in Syria that has the same ideology with the PKK, the terrorist organisation that Turkey has suffered from for more than 40 years. Yet, since 1998 Turkey and Syria were in collaboration against the PKK, and the Kurds in Syria were not perceived as a threat to national interests of Turkey. In fact, Turkey has not officially acknowledged the PYD as a terrorist organisation, and in 2013 and 2014 Saleh Muslim visited Ankara to talk about Syria's future with high-level state officials. However, after the PYD expands its control on territories near the southern borders of Turkey, the PYD was perceived as a threat for Turkey.

After the Syrian uprising in 2011, the AKP elites believed that Turkey could increase her influence in Syria if Assad is replaced by a 'pro-democratic' government, in other words a Sunni political Islamist government. In other cases such as Egypt, Tunisia or Iraq, Turkey established close ties with Muslim Brotherhood affiliated organisations and hoped to achieve similar in Syria. Therefore, Turkey supported opposition groups in Syria and even Al-Qaida affiliated groups such as Al-Nusra took advantage of this support. However, the PYD perceived the opposition groups as a threat when these groups did not mention Kurds in constitution talks (Stein, 2014c) and prevent the PYD from joining forces against Assad.

If the PYD is a terrorist organisation as Davutoglu states, why would Turkey support Al-Qaida affiliated groups in Syria? Why do these groups not constitute a threat for Turkey's national interests although Al-Qaeda carried out terrorist attacks in Turkey in the previous years? If an autonomous Kurdish state is a threat for Turkey, then why did Turkey create outstanding relations with the KRG even by bypassing the Iraqi central government? Davutoglu's perception of the security and the other AKP elites prefer Sunni groups that prioritise their Islamist identity, since

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these groups can be influenced more easily due to the common ideology. Davutoglu and the AKP elites believe that the countries in the region can be politically or culturally linked to Turkey as in the past and they may share a common ideology as part of this imagination. Turkey supported the Muslim Brotherhood branches in the region and aimed to increase her influence by these groups.

Islamist groups in Syria have privileges such as having trainings in Turkish territories or their accession from Turkish territories to Syria, while Turkey turns blind eye to them. Turkey's positive relations with the KRG can also be explained with this approach since the KRG has a Sunni majority and can act in balancing Shia power in the central government of Iraq. On the other hand, the AKP knows that it cannot influence the PYD in the fight against Assad since the PYD has a leftist ideology and has a clash of interests with the Free Syrian Army and the Islamist groups. Thus in domestic politics, while lack of thrust is increasing between the AKP and the Kurdish groups that do not share the AKP's ideology, the AKP's approach to the PYD intensifies the tension both internationally and domestically.

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Umut Yukaruc holds an MA in International Relations from the University of Exeter, and is currently pursuing a PhD in International Relations at the University of East Anglia. His research focuses on issues of the Turkish foreign policy, cultural studies and popular television.