

TODAY'S ZAMAN

http://www.todayszaman.com/news-288992-turkey-kurds-and-syria-by-murat-somer*.html

Turkey, Kurds and Syria **by Murat Somer***

Close to 10 years ago, the war on Iraq led to the emergence of the now quasi-independent Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in what Turkey calls northern Iraq.

Similarly, one of the consequences of the deepening civil war in Syria may become the rise of Syrian Kurds in a region that many Turkish commentators have already begun to call northern Syria. In the past, Turkey's greatest concern and foreign policy redline in the region was Kurdish autonomy or statehood along its borders, which was feared to feed Kurdish nationalism and separatism inside Turkey. Mutually beneficial relations with the KRG since 2007 have changed this perception. Turkey no longer opposes Kurdish autonomy per se, but it counters the ascendance of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has fought Turkey in a bloody war for Kurdish rights for three decades, or of any other groups hostile to Turkey. But this situation cannot be stable and the current Turkish foreign policy cannot work unless Turkey also redefines its domestic policy vis-à-vis Kurds and makes what it advocates for Kurds at home consistent with what it advocates for them in its "near abroad." Turkey's domestic Kurdish question took shape when "Ottoman Kurds" were divided between Turkey and the mainly Arab states of Syria and Iraq as a result of a series of international treaties and decisions during the 1920s. Now, as it was then, Turkey cannot resolve its Kurdish question without simultaneously taking into account the transnational Kurdish question in the region.

In the long run, Turkey essentially has three policy options with respect to regional Kurds. First, Turkey may seek an economic and political merger and eventual unity with regional Kurds, thereby containing Kurdish nationalism through inclusion and unification. It is a frequently heard claim in the region that Iraqi and Syrian Kurds would prefer to become part of Turkey instead of the

Arab states. As the argument goes, Kurds share stronger historical, cultural, geographical and economic links with Turks than with Arabs, and Turkey is a flourishing economy and a highly imperfect, but yet stable democracy, which is well integrated with the western world. The problem with this option is that it cannot be accomplished without risking war with Syria and Iraq proper, and without fundamentally redesigning Turkey's political structure as a federal state, which Turkey's unitary state institutions and Turkish nationalist majority would fiercely oppose.

Second, Turkey can advocate political autonomy for Kurds at home as well as abroad, with the condition of respecting Turkey's sovereignty, territorial integrity and security. The first problem with this option is that Turkey could be perceived as hypocritical if it interfered with the domestic affairs of Iraq and Syria (beyond supporting human rights and democracy) by promoting any specific political status for Kurds outside of its borders, while at the same time demanding non-interference from outside powers when it comes to its own Kurdish question. The second problem is that Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey are not all the same in terms of geographical distribution, social and economic development, and political preferences. Thus, it would be unwise to defend the same political status for them all.

The best option for Turkey

The third and best option for Turkey is the following. Turkey should declare that it does not support or oppose any specific institutional configuration determining the status of Kurds in these states, but it would welcome all democratically determined Kurdish rights within the framework of pluralistic democracy and the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq. It should pursue state-wide economic cooperation with all regional Kurds, and its redline should be external meddling with its domestic Kurdish politics and any support of separatism inside Turkey.

Ankara's current policies already reflect a willingness to shift its foreign policy along these lines. A National Security Council (MGK) meeting on July 25 agreed on three positions, which Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu explained to Iraqi Kurds in a visit to Arbil last week. First, Turkey opposes Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria before the regime falls, but will not oppose it afterwards if such autonomy is enshrined in a new constitution approved by the Syrian people. This is the same as supporting Syria's territorial integrity since a majority of Syrian people would be highly unlikely to agree to Kurdish

separation. Second, Turkey will continue to support the KRG and the Syrian opposition represented by the Syrian National Council (SNC) and encourage them to contain the PKK. Third, Turkey will use military power if the PKK becomes established in Northern Syria.

But which aims and redlines should form Turkey's domestic policy vis-à-vis Kurds, so that it can be consistent with this foreign policy and help to resolve the country's festering and violent Kurdish question?

First, the only redline vis-à-vis a redefinition of Kurds' status should be the constitutional presence of one political nation within the territory of Turkey, i.e. one sovereign nation. The term nation has political and cultural meanings depending on context. Unless one recognizes these different meanings, Kurdish claims that they form a separate nation, which may well be many Turkish Kurds' most deep-seated claim, raises Turks' existential fears of disintegration.

This is because while Kurds think of the claim for a separate nation as "recognition," Turks think of it as "giving away" something that they have, something that would reduce their own sovereign nationhood. They also think of it as a stepping stone for political-territorial separation. But this is not necessarily the case. Nation, and, thus, national unity, has one political and one cultural meaning. Two political nations cannot live in a unitary state but two cultural nations (or nationalities) can coexist and share the same territory, cultural legacy, and political institutions. Many states have recognized the existence of different nationalities within their territory and have accomplished devolution without forsaking their political unity and territorial integrity.

Reforms should be open to negotiation

Thus, beyond the condition of one political nation in Turkey, any other reforms including administrative decentralization, symmetric or asymmetric devolution, cultural and educational rights, and the recognition of Kurds or any other groups as cultural nations or nationalities should be on the table and open to democratic negotiation and deliberation. Any voluntarily accomplished reforms satisfying this condition can only strengthen Turkey's unity and democracy.

Second, the elected representatives of all Turkish Kurds should be represented in this process of democratic reform and of peace and reconciliation freely and

as Kurds, i.e. with their freely chosen ethnic-national, political and ideological identity. This means that the government should abandon its present policy of rounding up the elected local representatives of substantial portions of Kurds, who are generally members of the Peace and Democracy party (BDP). These people may be affiliated with the PKK but apparently are not being charged with any direct involvement in violence. As for the main opposition party the Republican People's Party (CHP), it should talk to and decide how much it can cooperate with the BDP, with which it shares a secular ideology but sharply differs on the issue of Kurds. In a hopeful sign in June, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu announced a new position on Kurds and started an initiative to discuss the Kurdish question with all parties in Parliament. But the contours of this initiative never became clear and Kılıçdaroğlu has not yet meet with the BDP or the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). For example, what does the CHP think of providing education in the Kurdish language or the constitutional recognition of different ethnic groups or nationalities in Turkey? Potentially, the CHP has a lot to offer to this process as the party which founded modern Turkey and the only party in Parliament with a dormant social-democratic orientation waiting to be awakened and formulated.

The present, multi-party process of writing a new constitution by a parliamentary commission provides a golden opportunity to reconfigure the status of Kurds and other ethnic or national groups in Turkey in a way to achieve peace and unity. Most of Turkey's secular and Muslim-conservative Kurds as well as Turks are represented in the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the CHP, and the BDP whose constituency overlaps with that of the PKK. Parliament also includes the Muslim-conservative and Turkish nationalist MHP.

The government can, and ought to, continue its unofficial negotiations with the PKK in the name of ending the violence. And, the PKK would serve its constituency's interests by stopping its attacks during this process. But the parliamentary process should not be made conditional upon the talks with the PKK because the PKK is unlikely to be very cooperative given that it is gaining ground in Syria. Democratically recognizing Kurdish rights by using democratic institutions and talking to elected representatives of Kurds is in Turkey's own interest and ultimately the only way to defeat the PKK.

None of this is easy or even likely. All of this requires a massive mental shift on the part of Turkey's elites. Turkey should also be ready for the possibility of a

prolonged civil war and the “Lebanonization” of Syria, and may have to be involved militarily in this conflict. But in the end Turkey’s ability to protect its long-term economic and security interests in Syria and Iraq will depend on its ability to put its own house in order by making its Kurdish citizens feel truly at home as fully equal citizens. Only then, and if it can resolve its growing deficit in freedom of expression, political pluralism and rule of law, can Turkey justly claim to be an example for the region.

**Murat Somer is an associate professor of International Relations at Koç University, İstanbul.*

2012-08-08
