Turks, Saudis & Kurds: What's Going on?

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (or AKP) is at the moment involved in a quasi-civil war in the south-east of the country, ostensibly pitting Turks against Kurds. But behind the scenes, I would argue that the country's rulers are trying very hard to redefine the concept of Turkey and notions of nationalism and religion.

Turkey-under-the-AKP has been enjoying the most cordial of relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And these ties appear to be growing stronger all the time, particularly now that the recently ascended King Salman is apparently in the process of re-positioning the Saudi take on the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization much favoured and supported by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (aka the Prez). Ever since he gave the reins of power to his erstwhile-advisor-turned-FM, the wily Ahmed Davutoğlu (aka Wily), Erdoğan has been at pains to convince all and sundry that the problems facing Turkey can only be solved by means of a radical overhaul of the Turkish system, an overhaul that would bring an end to the country’s parliamentary democracy only to replace it with a presidential system in the vein of the U.S. or even Russia (in fact, he himself has now come out and even made a reference to “Hitler's Germany” as an example of a successful “presidential system in a unitary state”). In the meantime though, the dynamic duo of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu (or the Prez and Wily) continue to run the country, like they have done since 14 March 2003. On that day, the former became Prime Minister and the latter his Chief Advisor (a post Davutoğlu had already been manning since 3 October 2002 when Abdullah Gül became caretaker-PM for a little more than five months).

The Kurdish Gambit in Turkey

This year's two electoral contests (on June, 7 and November, 1) served primarily as a legal means to solidify the status quo and prepare the ground for Tayyip Erdoğan's grand move towards changing Turkey's constitution and establishing himself, not just as the first popularly elected president, but also as the first President of Turkey wielding quasi-absolute power. In spite of the eventual happy outcome, it hasn't been all plain sailing though. Following the supposedly inconclusive outcome of the June elections, the Kurdish PKK brought an end to the ongoing peace process. This so-called Solution Process was launched in 2009 with the AKP's self-styled 'Kurdish overture' but really only took off on 23 March 2013 when the PKK publicly declared a ceasefire that was met by a cessation of military operations on the part of the Turkish state. In the near-5-month period that succeeded the June elections, one could argue that the powers-that-be engineered a Kurdish gambit in the hope of garnering greater popular support and subsequent electoral favour. On 20 July 2015, a suicide bomber attacked a peaceful gathering of socialist/pro-Kurdish activists in the small border town of Suruç, resulting in the deaths of 34 individuals. The gathering in the Turkish town had been planning to visit the Syrian city Kobanê in the Kurdish enclave of Rojava, then still besieged by the Islamic State (or IS/ISIS led by the Caliph Ibrahim, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), to deliver aid and supplies. On the same day, the wily PM told the press that “[i]talian findings point to a suicide bomb attack and Daesh [the Arabic acronym for IS/ISIS].” Davutoğlu continued saying that “[t]his is a terrorist attack by a suicide bomber. The target of this attack is Turkey”, adding that he “want[s] to make a call to our nation. Maintain your common sense.” In this way, the PM surreptitiously whipped the flames of hatred and distrust by means of appealing for calm. While finishing off by saying that “[w]e have convened with security officials and planned the
steps that we will be taking”, hinting at possible military action across the border. As a result of presumed ties between the AKP and the terror group formerly known as ISIS, many Kurds as well as other opponents of the overtly Islamic government in Ankara immediately started accusing the authorities of complicity and thus insinuated that the Suruç massacre was nothing but a false flag attack, meant to jeopardize the ongoing peace process and whip up a nationalist frenzy that would result in a public mood more amenable to continued AKP rule in the land. On 22 July, two policemen were assassinated by armed members of the PKK and as a result, tensions between the government and the Kurdish political movement came to a head and the Peace Process (or Solution Process) to an end. The end of the ceasefire was followed by intense waves of violent clashes between state forces and the PKK (or rather its military arm, known as HPG or People's Defence Forces).

Nevertheless, the Kurdish HDP (or the Peoples’ Democratic Party and the spanner in the works for the AKP’s best-laid plans in the June elections) issued a statement following the Suruç suicide attack, imploring its supporters to “constitute a peace block opposed to ISIS [or the IS]. It is the [AKP-led] government that is responsible for any kind of security breach.” The HDP declaration next minces no words: “[t]oday we have witnessed once more what this army of rapists and barbarians that has lost its human dignity is capable of. This is an attempt to break the international solidarity that has sprung up around Kobanê, particularly targeting the anniversary of the Revolution of Rojava and those revolutionaries pertaining to Turkey who had been on the road to Kobanê to express their solidarity. This is a message to our peoples, to those brave persons who have encircled Kobanê in the spirit of revolutionary solidarity [saying] ‘Give up on this solidarity’. All the countries and regimes supplying ISIS [or the IS] and other armies of rapists with support are accessories to this barbarity. The leaders in Ankara who are stroking the head of ISIS [or the IS, and who] have even flung threats at the HDP, who remain silent in the face of ISIS [or the IS], [and] who are even afraid to raise their voices, [they] are accomplices to this barbarity”. In this way, the Kurdish HDP directly accused the AKP-led government of allowing the massacre to take place, of being in some ways allied to the Caliph and the IS. In the next instance, on 10 October 2015, a peace rally in Ankara was targeted by twin suicide attacks, killing more than a hundred individuals. As a result, the atmosphere in the country got severely poisoned and the general population became very much concerned with the apparent terror threat. And so it was that the second round of elections, taking place approximately three weeks following the Ankara attacks, resulted in an overwhelming victory for the ruling AKP. In fact, the AKP received about 50% of the vote, meaning that Turkey's population basically gave the Prez and Wily a more than convincing mandate to continue fashioning a “New Turkey”-- a New Turkey that has moved into distinctly post-Kemalist waters. This Turkish November surprise all but means that Turkish voters appear to have become resigned to distancing themselves from Atatürk’s legacy and fully embracing their Islamic heritage and Ottoman predecessor.

Return to the Nineties??

Over the past months Turkey has seen an ever-increasing escalation of violence. As expressed by Human Rights Watch recently, “[c]lashes have taken place between government forces and armed opposition fighters since the breakdown of the Turkish government’s peace process with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). In towns throughout the southeast massive security operations are under way against an armed movement, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), associated with the PKK. The youth movement’s supporters have dug trenches and erected barricades to seal off neighborhoods . . . Human rights groups including Mazlum Der and the Human Rights Association, and the Diyarbakir Bar Association, have reported the killings of scores of men, women and children in the southeast in recent months. Among the dead and wounded are young children, teenage boys, adult men and women. Some teenagers and young men who were killed may have been armed and actively participating in the armed clashes against the police, and others may have been unarmed but in the vicinity.” The Turkish state-under-the-AKP has thrown its full weight into the renewed fight against the PKK, or as some would argue, against the Kurdish population of south-east Anatolia: “since August 16, there have been 52 open-ended, round-the-clock curfews affecting 17 towns, in which approximately 1,299,061 people reside (2014 population census), according to the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV),” as expressed by the Ankara-based journalist Uzay Bulut. Currently, these curfews affect the Kurdish-populated districts of Sur in Diyarbakır, Nusaybin in Mardin and Cizre and Silopi in Şırnak. About a fortnight ago, the wily PM declared that “all those towns will be cleansed of terror elements. If necessary, neighborhood by neighborhood, house by house, street by street.” According to Yılmaz Kan, co-chairman of the organization Göç-Der (Migrants’ Association for Social Cooperation and Culture), about 200,000 people have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the recent military assaults. In view of these troubling developments some people have started asking aloud whether Turkey is headed for a return to the 1990s, when the Turkish state was waging a full-out war on the PKK. In response, the apparently always well-informed Economist relates that “[u]nlike in the 1990s . . . today the PKK’s armed youth wing [or the YDG-H] is firmly entrenched in urban centers across the south-east."
Kurdistan and Saudi Arabia

The armed conflict appears to be continuing unabated in the new year, though some curfews and restrictions have now been lifted. And against this backdrop, Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-leader of 'the Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP, is under investigation for calling for autonomy for Turkey's Kurdish minority. The move follows Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu cancelling a meeting with Selahattin Demirtas, accusing him and his party of political immaturity," as worded by the VOA's Dorian Jones. In the run-up to the June elections and in its aftermath, the HDP tried to turn "itself into a bona fide Turkish political party," as a regular player in the game of politics as practised by all the other, non-ethnically-aligned groupings in Turkey's parliament (the TBMM). Such a development was anathema to outside machinations that aimed to further the cause of an independent Kurdistan in the region. In fact, the Kurds first started occupying global headlines following the First Gulf War (1990-91), which ultimately led to the establishment of the KRG (or Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq). Subsequently, the ill-fated Bush invasion of Iraq in 2003 and George W.'s Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice introducing the term "New Middle East" in June 2006, meant that "the issue of a Kurdish homeland . . . occupied center-stage in plans and schemes for the region. And in some ways, AKP-led Turkey appeared amenable to this redrawing of the Sykes-Picot-inspired map of the Middle East, inclusive of an independent Kurdistan that comprised the city of Diyarbakır in south-eastern Turkey." Over the past years, AKP-led Turkey has also been developing more than cordial relations with the KRG in order to facilitate the import of cheap oil and gas into the country and arguably also to pacify the Kurds living in south-eastern Anatolia on the borders of northern Iraq. Ankara has thus been playing a tricky game with Erbil. As it turns out now, even Saudi Arabia has a stake in the Kurds' fate and appears to be in cahoots with the state of Israel in order to facilitate the formation of an independent Kurdish state or Kurdistan in the region. Would this now mean that Turkey's direct and short-term interest in cheap gas might very well undermine its territorial integrity in the long term? Some time ago, the former Saudi General Anwar Majed Eshki publicly declared that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is striving "peacefully [and behind the scenes], for the creation of [a] Greater Kurdistan . . . [a] new state [that] will embrace one-third of the territory of each of the said three states," meaning Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. But this entity would arguably be based solely on ethnic and/or political considerations.

The New Turkey: A Nation of Believers

During Turkey's Kemalist era (1923-2002), when the ideology of nationalism was the country's one and only credo, Kurds living in the south-east were regarded as trouble-makers at worst or as "mountain-Turks" at best. But now that the Prez and Wily are taking the country down a distinctly Islamic path, Turkey's leadership is clearly changing its tune. As a politician, Tayyip Erdoğan loves to travel the country supervising rallies and throwing speeches. Last May, for example, he was in the south-eastern city of Şanlıurfa, a place with a mixed population consisting primarily of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens. Addressing his audience directly, Erdoğan expressed the wish that "[o]ur Lord make our unity, our togetherness last forever." This sentence appears very significant indeed. About a week ago, while addressing a meeting of municipal headman (known as muhtar, in Turkish) in the capital Ankara, he elaborated on the phrase, "[m]ay our Lord make our unity, our togetherness last forever. What are we saying then? We will be one, [we] will be strong, we will be brothers, all together we will be Turkey." In this way, it seems that the AKP leadership is now trying to re-define the concept of Turkish unity (or Turkish citizenship, if you will) as a God-given quality, as a state of unity and togetherness that is grounded in a common faith. This means that the citizens of the New Turkey will be held together by means of their common allegiance to the religion of Islam and the tenets of the Prophet. As a result, the continuing conflict with the PKK and its sympathisers could thus be understood as an attempt to rid the country of Kurdish elements that are more inclined to cling to their ethnic identity and adhere to the ideals of Socialism (and possibly to the ideas of Murray Bookchin as well), rather than the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam that is being promulgated by Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (or Diyanet), and that is arguably meant to form the crucible for forging the identity of the citizens of the New Turkey.

Dr. Can Erimtan is an independent scholar residing in İstanbul, with a wide interest in the politics, history and culture of the Balkans and the Greater Middle East, , especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”