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# Unrest in Turkey's Kurdish Region

## Challenges for Turkey and the EU

Heinz Kramer

In late March 2006, the Kurdish part of Turkey experienced its most violent clashes in a decade. Since then, the level of insecurity inside the country has risen, because it has become abundantly clear that there can be no question of any 'normalisation' of the Kurds' situation in Turkey. The Kurds themselves disagree on what constitutes the 'right' policy to conduct vis-à-vis the state, and Prime Minister Erdoğan's government has no political concept for dealing with the problem. Moreover, the signals sent out to Turkey by the European Union vacillate between messages in line with the EU's anti-terrorism policy and appeals to respect human rights. It is high time for the EU and Turkey to engage in an intensive dialogue on the long-term objectives of their Kurdish policy and the best way of achieving these goals.

On 28 March 2006 there were serious disturbances in Diyarbakır, the unofficial Kurdish capital in south-eastern Turkey. This unrest escalated over the next few days and spilled over into other towns and cities in the region. Thousands of demonstrators, led mainly by Kurdish youths and children, rampaged through the streets, throwing Molotov cocktails, destroying banks and shops, and even trying to demolish police stations and other official government buildings. Their rage was directed against the Turkish state. The rioting was triggered by the funeral of four PKK fighters killed the previous week along with 10 other terrorists in clashes with the security forces in the area around the city.

The PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) had seized on the opportunity to call on the

public to demonstrate and engage in acts of civil disobedience. Faced with the violence of the demonstrators, government security forces took drastic steps, firing not only tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets, but also live rounds, which they claimed to have fired into the air to disperse the protesters. In all, 16 people lost their lives in the disturbances, and hundreds more were injured and taken into custody, making the incident the worst of its kind in many years. Briefly the unrest spread to Istanbul, where three women uninvolved in the demonstrations were killed during violent protests staged by PKK sympathisers. Members of the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, an organisation which the security forces believe is controlled by the PKK, also carried out several bomb attacks. The group

is also blamed for several other bomb attacks committed last year in tourist destinations in western Turkey.

Nobody had anticipated either the scale or the violence of the rioting, which broke out virtually overnight, shattering the illusion of any creeping normalisation of the Kurdish problem in Turkey.

### **Mixed responses from state institutions**

The violence triggered both heated debate amongst the political elite and the Turkish public on how to end the PKK's reign of terror and also wild speculation about who might stand to gain from the organisation's continued existence. At the same time, it reignited the controversial debate about whether Turkey has a Kurdish problem or just a terror problem, whether or not the clashes were merely the result of a 'development problem', and who was to blame for the renewed violent outbreak of the conflict or for not keeping the situation sufficiently under control.

Initial reactions by the government and political elite in Ankara conveyed their speechlessness and a sense of helplessness. Military leaders, too, refrained from issuing immediate official statements. The security forces on the ground—in this case the police, paramilitary gendarmerie and military special forces—reacted harshly and resolutely, whilst the civilian state authority—the governor of Diyarbakır Province—called for restraint and a political solution to the conflict. The governor was supported in this endeavour by Osman Baydemir, the city's Kurdish mayor. However, Baydemir's attitude appears contradictory, to say the least, for at the same time he showed some understanding for the anger voiced by the demonstrators. In so doing, he not only indirectly endorsed violence, but also avoided clearly distancing himself from the PKK.

The mixed messages sent out by the various state authorities and political decision-makers reflect the extreme com-

plexity of the situation underlying the events that unfolded, with Kurdish representatives and government bodies alike failing to agree on a uniform response to the fact that the situation in the Kurdish part of the country remains anything but normal.

### **Unclear power structure among the Kurds**

Kurdish differences of opinion can mainly be explained in terms of the continued legacy of the 'Öcalan factor' and PKK. Since being imprisoned in summer 1999, since when he has languished in perpetual solitary confinement on the island of Imralı, Abdullah Öcalan's political influence may be limited, but he still retains a certain grip on political developments in Kurdish circles. This applies both to the PKK and to attempts to establish an overarching 'civilian' Kurdish political party. Moreover, the PKK leader still enjoys widespread popular support amongst Kurds in the region.

The PKK may have been defeated militarily, but it has not been utterly annihilated. Its military leaders pulled back into the Kandil Mountains in northern Iraq, on the border with Iran, together with a hard core of several thousand fighters. There they have been allowed to recover from the imprisonment of their leader largely undisturbed by the Kurdish parties in northern Iraq and their peshmergas. It was the shift in strategy announced by Öcalan from his jail cell—entailing the PKK's official renunciation of terrorist violence, abandonment of the aim of securing the Kurdish areas' secession from Turkey, and announcement of a 'truce'—that saved the surviving forces of the PKK from final destruction. Ever since, there have been rumours of PKK-internal power struggles and of differences of opinion between the fighters in the Kandil Mountains and the group led by Öcalan, who continues to influence the organisation primarily via his lawyers.

The survival of the terrorist organisation was also favoured by Turkey's rapproche-

ment with the EU and the USA's war in Iraq. The launch of Turkey's accession process went hand in hand with a certain 'taming' of Turkey's policy on the Kurdish question. This political shift, and the associated nationwide democratisation process, gradually defused tensions in the south-eastern part of the country and prompted greater restraint on the part of the Turkish security forces in their pursuit of the 'separatists'. Turkey's aloofness from the war in Iraq made the Kurds in northern Iraq important allies of the USA in the fight against Saddam Hussein's regime. In return, Washington is promoting the consolidation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq that enjoys a relatively high level of law and order. Turkey's wishes to see military action taken against the PKK fighters have been repeatedly blocked by the USA in the interests of perpetuating this relative stability. Moreover, although they oppose the PKK in principle, Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq are showing no interest in complying with Turkey's wishes whilst Ankara continues to consider the development of a 'Kurdish state' in northern Iraq as a latent threat to its own national stability and whilst the PKK steers clear of political involvement in northern Iraq.

In Turkey, this situation has been exploited by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in particular, which managed to establish itself as a political force in the Kurdish area, not only in the general election, but also in the local elections held in spring 2004. Having said that, its political impact is limited by the dominance of the Kurdish Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), which merged into the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2005. This is the body representing nationalistically minded Kurds in civil society, whereby it is unclear how much sway Öcalan and his PKK hold over the party (all we know is that their leverage so far has been sufficient to prevent the DTP leadership from clearly disowning the PKK).

Nonetheless, Öcalan and the PKK no

doubt feared that they were losing too much influence amongst the Kurdish population, and this may have prompted them to call off their 'truce' in June 2004 on the grounds that the Turkish state had not taken up their offer of a political solution to the conflict. Ever since, the clashes between the terrorists and the military in Turkey's Kurdish provinces have steadily intensified, recently claiming lives each week.

This change of tack by the PKK has confronted the civilian party's leadership with a serious dilemma of solidarity. For whilst the organisation tried to continue to avoid alienating Öcalan's numerous supporters, it could not bring itself to distance itself unequivocally from the new strategy of violence. On the other hand, by acting in this way it is running the risk of losing its reputation amongst the Turkish public as 'civilian' representatives of Kurdish interests vis-à-vis the state. This reaction is already apparent in the population in Turkish centres in the western part of the country, where people no longer differentiate between the DTP and PKK and instead generally advocate a tough stance by the state against an element they now simply refer to as 'the Kurds'. As a result, Kurdish nationalism and Turkish nationalism is again becoming more clearly polarised in Turkey, with the rift being further deepened by the recent disturbances.

The aforementioned dilemma applies in particular to the DEHAP/DTP mayors running many important towns and cities in the Kurdish part of the country, having been voted into office with large majorities. Since the EU's call for the general democratisation of Turkey's state apparatus and society, these local politicians have succeeded in positioning themselves as relatively successful people's representatives, making them potential rivals for Öcalan and the PKK in the bid to gain leadership of what may loosely be termed the 'Kurdish movement'—especially since they let no doubts arise as to their basic Kurdish national political aspirations.

In fact, today the position of these DTP mayors has become so strong that both in mid-February 2006, on the anniversary of Öcalan's arrest, and on 21 March, the start of Newroz (Kurdish New Year), they were able to prevent most of the population from answering the PKK's call to demonstrate en masse. Consequently, DTP politicians must have been surprised by the run of events after 28 March. Since they were both unwilling and unable to distance themselves unequivocally from what happened, for the reasons explained above, they immediately became targets for government countermeasures, and in the meantime legal proceedings have been initiated against several mayors and other prominent members of the DTP for allegedly supporting a terrorist organisation.

This time the PKK leadership has evidently succeeded in getting its message across to the large number of youths and young adults who find themselves in a despairing social situation (especially those living in Diyarbakır, but also in other Kurdish towns and cities), with no job and no future prospects. It was their resentment of the Turkish state, which does nothing for them, and the anger fomented by the security forces' killing of the PKK fighters that created a sufficiently explosive mixture to trigger mass disturbances. At the same time, the run of events made it clear that the PKK still wields enough influence in these ghettos of poverty to orchestrate major actions of civil disobedience lasting several days and including acts of violence perpetrated against the state authorities. The battle between the PKK's terrorists and civilian party politicians for the political leadership of the Kurdish nationalists has still not been decided, especially since the DTP too has failed to adopt a unified approach for dealing with the PKK and its fighters.

This state of affairs will continue as long as the Turkish state and public attitude tend to hinder, rather than promote, the much-needed process of differentiation. Symptomatic of this situation may be the

words of the mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman Baydemir, who is also esteemed in European circles as a civilian representative of the Kurds. In a press interview Baydemir warned that if the present tensions continued, it would be impossible for the Kurds and Turks to continue living together. Since then he has described the reporting of this statement as a 'misinterpretation' of what he actually said. At the same time he has described as unrealistic the expectation of the Turkish public that Kurdish civilian politicians and intellectuals might openly distance themselves from the PKK and Öcalan.

If Baydemir is right, then the relations between Turks and Kurds are less stable than had generally been assumed up to now. That being the case, for many Kurds in south-eastern Turkey, the prospect of seeing a largely independent Kurdish state established in northern Iraq after a possible disintegration of Turkey's neighbour could prove more attractive than might at a first glance appear to be the case. This would make it all the more urgent for the Turkish leadership (and its European partners) to build up long-term relations between Turkey and Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq that are as constructive as possible. Only this can allay the fear prevalent in Turkish nationalist circles that a Kurdish state in northern Iraq would kindle the spark of separatism amongst the Kurds living in Turkey.

### **Failures on the part of the AKP government**

The latest developments in the Kurdish part of Turkey also clearly reflect the AKP government's failures to find a solution to the Kurdish question. Government bodies and the political elite in Turkey disagree just as strongly as ever on how to tackle the Kurdish issue. The security forces, led by the country's military general staff, see it as their prime duty to counter the terrorists' threat to national security, resorting to extreme measures if necessary. On the

other hand, during the relatively quiet phase following the imprisonment of Öcalan, they repeatedly reminded civilian politicians that they were responsible for dealing with the political and social aspects of the problem.

Unfortunately, this appeal largely fell on deaf ears in the respective governments. Even the AKP government, normally so courageous when it comes to introducing democratisation measures, has failed to take any noteworthy initiatives in relation to the Kurdish question. During a visit paid to Diyarbakır last summer, Prime Minister Erdoğan spoke openly about a 'Kurdish problem' in Turkey and tried to appease Kurdish nationalists by attempting to launch a discussion about the 'proper' definition of the Turkish nation. But he was merely lambasted by the media and Turkish nationalists, who are religiously ensuring that the sacred Kemalistic principle of the indivisible unity of the nation and state is not called into question. Erdoğan's own party also contains such elements, whereby the general views of Islamic politicians in Turkey and their Kemalist counterparts hardly differ with respect to the Kurdish issue.

This may well be the main reason why the AKP government has seen no need to put together a comprehensive programme aimed at substantially tackling the Kurdish problem. The specific steps taken to give the Kurds greater cultural freedom in line with EU demands, by allowing broadcasts of radio and TV programmes in the Kurdish language and Kurdish language teaching in private schools, did not really defuse the existing tensions, because the bureaucratic hurdles associated with these measures and the rather limited broadcasting times imposed by the Turkish authorities soon turned out to be totally inadequate 'window dressing'.

In addition, these measures failed to get to grips with the core problem afflicting the Kurdish part of Turkey, namely its massive economic and social underdevelopment, established over decades. In the

1990s, this situation was further aggravated by the war between the PKK and the Turkish Army. The violent clashes between these two forces not only claimed a total of 37,000 lives, but also resulted in over 1 million Kurds being driven from their homes in villages in the mountainous border region, a favourite PKK refuge. Since being forced out, these people have either been living in urban slums in south-eastern Turkey or migrated to the main economic centres in western and southern Turkey, where they often subsist without jobs and with no hope of any rapid improvement of their situation. The economic boom that Turkey has been enjoying for several years now is barely making itself felt in the south-eastern part of the country, and the government is not really making much of an effort to return the displaced persons to their villages in any significant numbers. These impoverished, hopeless masses are the breeding ground for the violent protests staged by the PKK at the end of March.

### **Elements of a forward-looking policy**

Bearing in mind such extremely tense relations between Kurdish and Turkish nationalists and the fact that recent events have shown the situation in the Kurdish provinces to be anything but normalised, Turkey's political leaders need to draw up a genuine programme for dealing with the Kurdish problem and then implement it, assisted by their international partners. But the Kurdish and Turkish public must be made to understand that any political opening up to the civilian representatives of Kurdish interests cannot and will not be accompanied by any loosening or relinquishment of the state's legitimate monopoly on authority. This situation also means that where the government is concerned violent terrorists cannot—as a matter of principle—be accepted as dialogue partners.

However, this does not rule out the possibility of those leading representatives of

the DTP *not* justifiably suspected *a priori* of approving the line taken by Öcalan being included in non-binding consultations on a potentially successful Kurdish policy. In addition, it should be possible to consider easing the extremely rigid solitary confinement of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan without such a move instantly being equated with posing a threat to national security. In the longer term, the Turkish leadership will also have to deal seriously with the issue of how to arrange a potential amnesty that could trigger a 'meltdown' within the PKK, inducing a majority of fighters to return home and leaving the remainder as 'unteachable lost causes'. Ultimately, the Turkish state's unflinching adherence to the strict principle of retribution perpetuates the heroic image of the PKK, confronts Kurdish civilian politicians with an unnecessary dilemma of self-justification and solidarity, and thereby continues to foster instability in Turkey's Kurdish provinces.

Having said that, political steps of this kind, which could also entail lowering the 10% hurdle in parliamentary elections, will only pave the way to easing tensions and normalising the situation in the Kurdish provinces in the long run if they are accompanied by a full package of measures designed to improve the economic and social situation as well. Such steps would necessarily involve making substantial investments in infrastructure in the health and education sectors. On the other hand, they would also have to go hand in hand with initiatives designed to surmount the prevailing traditional structures of Kurdish society. Such a policy would run up against opposition in the region and no doubt cause headaches for a large number of AKP representatives.

The financial resources required for such a comprehensive, fast-acting development programme will place a substantial burden on Turkey's budget. Accordingly, such a programme could easily clash with the policy of economic consolidation conducted over the last few years. For this

reason it ought to be embedded in an international framework. For instance, funds set aside for the EU's pre-accession assistance could deliberately be allocated to such ends. Furthermore, in their dealings with the IMF, the EU Member States should seek to ease the conditions imposed on Turkey's financial recovery programme to an extent that enables Ankara to temporarily undercut its objective of achieving a primary budget surplus of 6.5% of GDP if the development programme for the south-eastern part of the country cannot be financed in any other way.

But it is just as important to ensure the swift return home to their villages in very large numbers of displaced Kurdish families. This measure would not only offer these people the simplest, fastest way of escaping their city slums, but also put them back in a position in which they were able to start fending for themselves again. The international framework referred to above must also apply to the financial assistance required in this context. In this connection it is just as important that the Turkish state disbands the 'village guards' set up in the 1990s, in which government-funded Kurdish clans were pitted as militia against the PKK and their sympathisers. Many of these groups have now appropriated land and homes left behind by their original owners (not always voluntarily). If need be, the state should deploy its security forces as enforcers, to help the original inhabitants regain the use and possession of their former properties.

Improving the general situation in the region is a long-term development goal that needs to be attacked soon, with recognisable effects. Major infrastructure projects like the South-Eastern Anatolia Project (GAP) may cost billions of US dollars, but only have a limited impact. Until now, at least, no lasting effects of the dam construction and irrigation project launched over 20 years ago have been felt, either in the domain of energy generation or in the promotion of agri-business in the region. Just as important as such mega-projects is

the entirely separate promotion of small and medium-sized companies intent on supplying the region and engaging in cross-border trade with northern Iraq. However, any such trade must be preceded by the normalisation of Ankara's relations with Kurdish representatives in northern Iraq (see above). This can be achieved independently of political developments in Iraq, provided that the Turkish leadership amends its attitude regarding the Kirkuk issue by accepting Kurdish dominance in this important 'oil city' in northern Iraq and reaching agreement with northern Iraqi leaders on a form of cooperation that would also benefit the Kurdish region in Turkey.

### **Challenges facing the EU**

The recent run of events in Turkey requires a response from the EU that is not merely limited to providing the pre-accession assistance mentioned above. In addition, the Union will inevitably have to determine its position more clearly with regard to other aspects of the Kurdish problem. For instance, will it side with those MEPs who, in a letter sent to Prime Minister Erdoğan, placed most of the blame for the recent disturbances on the Turkish authorities and on Erdoğan's unbending approach, or will it subscribe to the view taken by the Chairman of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, Dutch politician Joost Lagendijk, and his fellow Green Party member Cem Özdemir, who tend to view the PKK as responsible for inflaming the situation in south-eastern Turkey?

It is not enough to appeal to both sides for restraint and call upon them to agree on a political solution to the problem (as everyone is naturally doing) if at the same time the EU does not unequivocally state what it considers to be the essential components of such a solution. The Union and its Member States must agree amongst themselves which specific political consequences they wish to draw from having officially labelled the PKK a terrorist organi-

sation. Under such circumstances, can the Union seriously expect the Turkish government to accept this organisation, or a party like the DTP (which, as you will recall, has so far been unable to bring itself to come out and clearly condemn the PKK), as a dialogue partner?

The EU Member States should thrash out a common view with respect to how they intend to deal with organisations and institutions in Western Europe that are allegedly or undeniably linked to the PKK. In this context the Brussels-based and edited Kurdish TV channel Roj TV, which broadcasts from Denmark for licence-related reasons, constitutes a special case. The Turkish government has long been accusing the channel of systematically broadcasting propaganda on behalf of the PKK, and has also reproached it for having disseminated the calls for action made by leading members of the PKK prior to the latest disturbances. The Danish government has so far not acquiesced to Turkey's requests to ban the channel, invoking principles of press freedom. As a result, it is now being admonished by the Turkish public for having at least indirectly supported the acts of terror perpetrated by the PKK—a reproach that rubs off on the EU as a whole.

At the same time, EU-internal agreement on substantial aspects of the Kurdish issue is also important for Turkey's ongoing accession negotiations, especially if the Member States end up adopting an approach that entails including the political criteria of Copenhagen (which were established by the EU as prerequisites for membership in 1993) in the talks on individual, rather technical chapters of the accession negotiations, such as Science and Research or Education and Culture. For example, the EU Member States would then have to clarify how the principle of the preservation of the Kurds' cultural identity ought to be fulfilled in these areas. Do the steps taken so far by the Turkish government in this connection go far enough, or will additional measures be required? If so,



which measures are we talking about? For instance, should the Kurdish language have to be admitted as a subject taught at state schools? Should Kurdish Studies be accepted as a discipline and field of research at universities? And should Kurdish broadcasts be free of any constraints?

Another problem that the EU Member States will have to face will entail reaching internal agreement on the pretty fundamental questions of whether and to what extent they are prepared to take on board Kurdish demands for a more substantially guaranteed political identity. Will this necessitate officially bestowing minority status on the Kurds, as called for by some MEPs? Are special institutional arrangements required to secure the representation of Kurdish interests at national level? And who do the EU Member States believe should be allowed to represent these interests in Turkey: the PKK, Kurdish parties whose links to the PKK are somewhat unclear, Kurdish parties who unequivocally oppose the PKK, or the not insubstantial number of MPs of Kurdish origin who are anyway elected in general elections as candidates of established Turkish parties?

One thing is certain: against the backdrop of the still smouldering Kurdish conflict and the ongoing accession negotiations, in political terms the EU and its Member States will be doing too little in the long run if they merely call on the Turkish government to step up its attempts to find a political solution or warn both sides to show restraint in the event of any outbreak of disturbances, and thereby implicitly place the Turkish state on an equal footing with the PKK. Unless the EU's opinion on Turkey's Kurdish issue is significantly clarified and a corresponding dialogue is conducted with Ankara, this problem—along with the Cyprus conundrum—will become a second burden weighing down on the accession negotiations. And such a situation could only suit those political forces in the EU that consider the talks to be a mistake anyway and want them to fail.

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