The New Kurdish Presence

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A people forgotten by history: that is how the world most often refers to the Kurds, a group of some 40 to 60 million people spread across several countries in the Middle East, and everywhere thwarted in their desire for recognition and emancipation. Although oppression was indeed their common lot in the last century, the Kurdish cause has made significant strides over the course of the last decade. A key actor today, the Kurds are now fighting and politically organizing in multiple theatres of the Middle East. Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey: from negotiation to confrontation, their fate plays out differently depending on the country, but in all of them they have established themselves as an essential interlocutor. To the point of being able to claim a state of their own?

Turkey: a Political Solution Hindered

Turkey has the largest Kurdish population of any country in the region. It is estimated that this numerous "minority" accounts for between 15 and 20% of the population, or 12 to 15 million people who have been subjected to a policy of forced assimilation since the founding of the Kemalist Republic (1923). Part of this population has regularly rebelled against the central Turkish government. The founding of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) in 1978 marked a turning point in this endemic rebellion: since 1984, the organization has led a separatist guerrilla movement that has killed more than 40,000 and long hindered any sort of democratic solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey. Civilians have been the primary victims of this conflict, which has resulted in massive population displacements from the eastern Kurdish provinces to the west of the country, as well as a wave of migration to EU countries (mainly, Germany, France and Sweden). Both a major enemy of the Turkish state and a transnational movement, having spread beyond Turkey's borders through the Kurdish diaspora, the PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by both the US and the EU.

Although they have largely been turkified over time, Anatolian Kurds still wish to be recognized within their own particular identity. Mostly located in undeveloped regions, some of which have been ravaged by fighting, they include both legitimists, ready to compromise with the Turks, and staunch Kurdish activists, more or less openly swayed by the PKK's liberation struggle. The Kurds are obviously struggling to create a political negotiation platform that would be acceptable to a Turkish state with a hyper-Jacobinic tradition. Pro-Kurdish political parties have emerged since the 1990s, but most were successively dissolved by Turkish authorities due to their proximity to the PKK.

This deadly, dead-end dialectic has long prevented the Turks and Kurds from reaching a mutually acceptable political agreement. The rise to power of the islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, AKP) in 2002 changed that. The AKP indeed proved able to win over part of the Kurdish conservative electorate by proposing an inclusive social vision based on common interests, combining Muslim values and economic growth. By granting a handful of symbolic cultural rights to the Kurds (a public television network in Kurdish, relaxed restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language), Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government finally extended a hand to the PKK: a peace process with

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the separatist party was officially launched in March 2013. Hostilities ceased for a time and a discussion was begun on the need to reform the Turkish concept of citizenship and the possibility of partially decentralizing the government.

However, negotiations broke down in 2015 and the relations between part of the Kurdish community and the Turkish government have since rapidly deteriorated. The reasons for the breakdown were threefold. First, the complete stagnation of the peace process, and the lack of a clear plan for the disarmament and reintegration of the PKK fighters in civilian life, produced only disappointment, despite several cosmetic reboots. Second, the emergence in Syria of an autonomous Kurdish political organization around a PKK sister party, the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD), is of increasing concern to the Turkish authorities. Third, the large protests linked to the Gezi movement in 2013 paved the road to reconciliation between the Kurdish movement and some of the forces of the Turkish left. This rapprochement gave rise to a new party, the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), which, whilst staunchly pro-Kurd, is nevertheless engaged in a process of "de-ethnification." This new party, whose ranks include non-Kurdish militants, seeks to mobilize support for new issues, such as the environment, social justice, the rights of other minorities, LGBT rights, etc.

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The emergence of the HDP has endowed the Turkish political landscape with a new, credible opposition. It marks a step towards the opening up of the Kurdish cause, winning over a large number of western observers along the way.[1] Led by Selahattin Demirtas, a charismatic forty-something lawyer, the party met with electoral success on a Turkish chessboard previously strongly controlled by the AKP. Thus, to widespread surprise, Demirtas got 9.8% of the vote in the presidential election of August 2014, and the HDP managed to cross the formidable threshold of 10% of the vote in the parliamentary elections of June 2015. With close to 13% of the votes, the party emerged as an unexpected alternative to the flagging traditional opposition parties, the centre-left Kemalist Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP).

This remarkable electoral success nevertheless had the paradoxical effect of marginalizing the HDP. Deprived of a parliamentary majority, the AKP was forced into talks with the opposition to form a coalition government. The HDP did not participate in the talks at all, and when they failed, new elections were called for November. The election campaign, which was particularly violent and deemed unfair by OSCE observers,[2] was marked by renewed clashes between the PKK and the Turkish army. The HDP's share of the vote slipped to 10.8%, although that was still enough to keep it in Parliament.

The Return of the "Dirty War" with the PKK

Thus, the fragile honeymoon between the AKP and the pro-Kurdish party did not last long; the breakdown in the political dialogue coincided with the official end of the peace process with the PKK in the summer of 2015. The confrontation between the Turkish security forces and Kurdish radicals resumed following an attack on 20 July by an Islamist suicide bomber in Suruc, near the Syrian border, at a rally to show solidarity with Syrian Kurds. The Turkish government attributed the explosion, which left 33 people dead, to Islamic State (IS), which never claimed responsibility for it. The next day, PKK militants killed two Turkish police officers, whom they accused of collaborating with IS, attributing indirect authorship of the attack to President Tayyip Erdogan. Clashes and attacks followed, setting the

[1] Denizeau, Aurélien. "Le *HDP*, un nouveau venu en quête d'ancrage." IFRI, *Note franco-turque*, No. 16, January 2016.
[2] OSCE, *Turkey, Early Parliamentary Elections, 1 November 2015: Final Report,* www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/219201

relentless gears for the start of a civil war in motion. Another explosion, again attributed to IS by the regime, struck on 9 October at a peace rally in Ankara, leaving more than 100 dead. Pro-Kurdish sectors question the origin of the violence, relaying increasingly insistent rumours of the possible involvement of the "deep state."[3]

The Turkish government has since proclaimed its desire to "eradicate" the PKK, tracking down its civilian supporters whilst conducting a veritable armed offensive against the Kurdish fighters in the east. Turkish aircraft are bombing the movement's positions in Iraq and Turkey itself. Curfews have been imposed on several cities to facilitate operations in the heart of militant neighbourhoods. Barricades and trenches have appeared in city centres, where a new generation of radicalized resistance, which makes similar demands to the PKK's albeit without formally belonging to it, is making its first weapons. The ancient neighbourhood of Sur, the historical pride and tourism nerve centre of Diyarbakır, Turkey's largest Kurdish city, has been destroyed by the fighting. Direct clashes are compounded by the increasingly deadly attacks carried out by the PKK and a kindred organization, the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks, which targets Turkish institutions but also strikes civilians: two major attacks left more than 60 dead and 200 injured in downtown Ankara in February and March 2016. The Turkish forces have suffered several hundred casualties since the offensive began, whilst the Turkish authorities claim to have taken out several thousand PKK fighters. In addition to the belligerents, the violence has, to date, killed hundreds of civilians and led to the displacement of tens of thousands more.

The Turkish government is continuing the confrontation in the name of the fight against terrorism, and Tayyip Erdogan now presents himself as a bulwark against chaos. But the use of broad-spectrum anti-terrorism laws has led to a widespread clampdown on Turkish society that affects, in addition to Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists themselves, those in favour of dialogue and liberal circles. Dozens of journalists and academics have also been investigated, fired, imprisoned and tried for "complicity with a terrorist organization," a general expression used to sanction their real or alleged ties to the PKK. The mass arrests of activists and the inability to ensure safety at campaign rallies partially explains the relative rout of the HDP in the November 2015 elections.

The Kurds in Combat

The rupture of the peace process with the PKK is even more worrying given that total victory against the organization seems less likely than ever, both in Turkey and abroad. In Turkey itself, the level of violence against civilians is dangerously polarizing the situation, further cleaving the Kurdish community by encouraging separatist nationalism amongst those who have never supported the AKP. A segment of the abandoned youth, faced with bleak economic prospects and daily extreme violence, is pushing to join the PKK, as long as the organization knows how to capitalize on the revolt on the ground politically and, especially, militarily.

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Outside Turkey, the PKK and its "subsidiaries" have also been strengthened by the growing regional chaos. The PKK soldiers who withdrew to their Iraqi base in the Qandil Mountains benefit from the variable-geometry laisser-faire of Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). An ally of Tayyip Erdogan, today he authorizes Turkish strikes on PKK positions whilst trying to maintain the fragile political equilibrium of the autonomous Kurdish entity he leads. His position is made even more uncomfortable by the fact that the PKK's combat legitimacy has been shored up on another front. Indeed, the PKK's spontaneous rein-

[3] In Turkey, the notion of the "deep state" refers to a supposed clandestine organization tasked with defending by all means possible the institutions of the State in times of great instability. The conspiracy theorist imaginary and the mystery maintained regarding some shady affairs involving government officials (the Susurluk scandal, the Ergenekon affair and major trials of military personnel under the AKP) have gradually lent the idea a mafia connotation. See: Schmid, Dorothée, "Réflexions sur 'l'État profond'," *Le Un*, No. 80, 28 October 2015.

forcements provided decisive support in Iraq against Daesh in autumn 2014, when the KRG's Kurdish Peshmerga forces were on the verge of defeat. The PKK made a remarkable showing in the retaking of Mount Sinjar, making it possible to save thousands of Yezidi refugees. Its military leaders likewise played a decisive role in the establishment and training of the Kurdish armed units of the Syrian PYD, the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG). Although most of the YPG troops are Syrian, its leaders and the PKK's military wing are still partially merged.[4]

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The Kurds' resistance in Syria has established them, in Western public opinion, as the essential positive heroes in a conflict that has become too complex. In the siege of Kobane in autumn 2014, the YPG fighters took on the barbarism of IS with rudimentary weapons, whilst at the same time braving the ongoing hostility of the Turks, who were especially anxious to prevent the PKK reinforcements from crossing the border. This pivotal battle sparked considerable sympathy for Syrian Kurds. Journalists have expressed particular admiration for the YPG's female units: their involvement in combat has helped to spread the image of a democratic, secular Kurdish society that offers women spaces for emancipation that are rarely found elsewhere in the Middle East.[5]

Today, the Kurds are perceived as the leading ally of the Western anti-Daesh coalition, and mainly of the Americans, to whom they indeed provide invaluable ground support; however, since late 2015, they have also become friendly with the Russian army, which intervened in Syria to support Bashar al-Assad's regular army. This unprecedented convergence of interests of the major powers, which plays in favour of the Kurds, is indicative, above all, of the extreme confusion of the Syrian theatre. In fact, the YPG are fighting against various jihadist groups there, including IS, whilst at the same time maintaining ambiguous ties to the Syrian regime, in order to pursue a separate Kurdish political project in territories that they are striving to "Kurdify" quickly. Now, they must anchor the new Republic of Rojava – or Western Kurdistan, in the vocabulary of Kurdish activists, now the name of a political entity in its own right, taking shape within the map of Syria.

Weaknesses and Divisions of the Kurds: Unequal Opportunities

The strengthening of the political status of the Kurdish minorities can thus be seen throughout the Middle East, except in Iran, where the regime continues to repress what have, to date, been sporadic outbursts of protest.[6] Whilst eastern Turkey is a tinderbox, the dual pillars of Kurdish stability are today well established in Iraq and Syria; however, the respective regional units of the KRG and Rojava have different political models and might thus appear to be competitors.

For the last decade, the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan has been considered an area of relative calm in a country devastated by civil war. A homogeneous region with a strong identity in a fragile federation, the KRG has thus far managed to hold out politically against the central Iraqi Arab government without yet making the leap to full independence. For whilst Massoud Barzani, the ever-present leader of the currently governing Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and scion of a large family of resistance fighters, regularly raises the prospect of separation, Erbil's fate remains financially tied to Baghdad's. In theory, the Kurds do not have the right to exploit the hydrocarbon resources in the region on their own; in exchange for that concession, the Iraqi constitution

[4] Interview with Cyril Roussel, CNRS researcher, MIGRINTER laboratory, Paris, March 2016.
[5] See: "Kurdistan, la guerre des filles," a documentary by Sauloy, Mylène, ARTE, 2015. To qualify the idyllic vision of the feminism of the PKK and its avatars, see: Guillemet, Sarah, *Quand discours et pratiques ne font pas « bon ménage » : le mythe des rapports sociaux de sexe égalitaires à l'épreuve du quotidien, dans la diaspora kurde de Turquie (2000-2014)*," memoire for a Master of Social Sciences, Sciences-po Bordeaux, 2015.
[6] Zaman, Amberin, "Iran's Kurds rise up as their leaders remain divided," *Al-Monitor*, 11 May 2015.

guarantees that 17% of the federal budget will be allocated to them each year. This windfall has allowed the KRG to pursue economic development and consolidate its administrative structures; a proto-rentier state, it has begun to engage in incipient diplomacy, including forging the remarkable and unexpected alliance with Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey.

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Daesh's offensive in Iraq allowed the Kurdistani authorities to seize the disputed city of Kirkuk, along with its oil reserves, without firing a shot in spring 2014. This power play would seem to reflect the confidence the authorities in Erbil have in their destiny. Yet the political chaos plaguing Iraq today also undermines the KRG, always through an old division: the rivalry between the KDP, which won power from its western strongholds and remains an ally of Washington and Ankara, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), installed in the east and under Iranian influence. Massoud Barzani, desperate to stay in power, now faces pressure, especially as the economy falters due to the war and the repeated disagreements with Baghdad. The share of the national budget is no longer being paid and Erbil has been all but bankrupt since late 2015.

The Syrian Kurdish areas, in contrast, are experiencing a form of participatory democracy unprecedented in the context of the Syrian mess. The "self-governing zone," which comprises three cantons (Afrin, Kobane, Jazira) became a "democratic federal entity" in March 2016. This *sui generis* entity is located in territories that have been conscientiously turned into sanctuaries since the outbreak of the fighting in Syria and which the YPG fighters are seeking to unify: Syrian Kurdistan is gradually spreading along almost the entirety of the Turkish-Syrian border, to the great concern of Ankara, which considers the PYD to be the local equivalent of the PKK. In any case, the PYD's recognized political practice belies these democratic proclamations: it has managed to oust the other Syrian Kurdish political forces from the Kurdish zones, including by force, whilst at the same time co-opting marginal Arab parties in order to give the illusion of plurality and maintaining a gentlemen's agreement with Damascus. Excluded from the Geneva peace talks, the PYD is preparing a de facto regionalization, which could be part of a future Syrian federation. The economic future of such an entity could be partially assured by the exploitation of Jazira's oil and agricultural resources. The gradual emancipation of the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria serves not so much to achieve the old dream of a pan-Kurdish state. The divisions between the different communities, whether partisan or tribal, indeed remain numerous and hinder the prospect of a new Kurdish regional order. Competition is fierce between the leaders, including Abdullah Ocalan, who continues to lead the PKK from his prison cell in Istanbul, Massoud Barzani, who is struggling to keep his grip on the KRG, and Saleh Muslim, the leader of the PYD. Major ideological differences persist between the parties with a Marxist tradition (PKK and PYD), and the liberal management of the Iraqi KDP. Each faction must deal with its own currents and threats of splitting. The current dynamic of armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and now Turkey, too, moreover tends to restore the supremacy of military logic everywhere: the prestige of resistance once again prevails over political reflection. In any case, the idea of Kurdish independence makes external powers squeamish: whilst the US or Russia might marginally play the map of nationalities to develop tactical alliances in the Middle East, they are no more willing than Turkey or Iran to support the emergence of one or more Kurdish states.

Although the dream of independence may be no more than a distant spectre, the emergence of the Kurds is a reality everywhere: for their ability to capitalize on the chaos, their resilience and their combat training, they have earned a place of their own on the regional political chessboard – and well beyond it, too, for the struggle for Kurdish rights is effectively relayed by the European diasporas. The trap now would be for the Kurds to perpetuate the warrior reflex on which they have built their reputation without taking the time to build a viable political future.