

Turkey, the AKP, the cultural-religious polarization, the Kurds and the siege of Kobane

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Contents

- [Turkey and the Syrian issue](#)
- [Toward an authoritarian-religi](#)
- [The Kurds of Syria, a problem](#)
- [The AKP and the peace process](#)
- [Kobane and the dilemmas of \(...\)](#)

“Zero problems with the neighbours” - such was the motto of Turkish diplomacy directed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (and current Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoglu since 2009. This goal of “normalization” of Turkey’s relations with the neighbouring countries was paradoxically accompanied by the “neo-Ottoman” motivation to establish a politico-cultural and economic hegemony over the countries of the Middle East. But the crisis today around the resistance of Kobane shows that these goals seem far from being achieved.

Turkey and the Syrian issue

Yet, at the beginning of the wave of revolutions in the Arab countries, the Turkey of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, erected into a “Muslim Democratic” model by the Western imperialisms, appeared to be well placed to show an example to these Muslim societies at full boiling point. Its fraternal relations with the Muslim Brotherhood movements seemed also to favour its ascent in the region.

It is with the popular revolt in Syria that Davutoglu’s “strategic depth” (the title of a book by the latter) began to sink into the abyss of a strategic stalemate. Erdogan first tried to play the role of mediator between the insurgents and his “friend”, President Bashar al-Assad, with a view to negotiation, thus trying to prove his position as “big brother” in the region. But following rejection by Damascus, the Turkish government totally changed its attitude. Unable to analyze the dynamics of Syrian society and the relationship of regional and inter-imperialist forces, Ankara thus gambled on a quick overthrow of al-Assad. This illusion of being able “to pray in Damascus three days from now” (as Erdogan said in September 2012) led him to engage all his weight in this process alongside the Gulf monarchies and the United States.

It was first of all with its efforts at orchestration of the opposition that the Turkish government attempted to direct the situation and weigh on the Syrian National Council to influence the constitution of the new regime following a possible rapid fall of al-Assad. And then, with the militarization of the uprising faced with the violent repression of the regime, and after having obtained the green light from the Obama administration, Ankara centred its entire foreign policy on an ideological, political and especially logistical support (through delivery of weapons) to the Syrian

opposition (first of all to the Free Syrian Army, then after the weakening of the latter to different so-called moderate Islamist groups). Obsessed with its goal of overthrowing the Baath regime, the AKP has become - a saying in Turkish very appropriate to the situation - "more royalist than the king". Thus following the use of chemical weapons in 2013 attributed to the regime, the Turkish government sought the support of the United States and tried to convince them of the need for military intervention in Syria (the agreement between Putin and Obama finally defused this).

This diplomacy centred on an active engagement in the Syrian issue, and the adoption of a foreign policy not matching with any of those of its main allies, has ended up isolating the Turkish state at the international level, a situation that it tries to legitimize by the laconic, and melancholy, formula of "precious solitude". But this relentlessness of the Erdogan regime in achieving its aspirations to become the main regional power in the Middle East has had significant and dangerous impacts in the medium term on domestic policy.

Toward an authoritarian-religious and discriminatory regime

The coming to power of the AKP in 2002 on the basis of a crisis of both economy (crisis of 1999) and political representation (discrediting of the main bourgeois parties) opened a phase of relative democratization of the regime - motivated by the objective of integration into the European Union - accompanied by a powerful neo-liberal offensive. But following the domestication of the military who exerted all their weight on political life and the consolidation of party control over the main institutions of the state (judiciary, presidency of the Republic, armed forces, police apparatus and so on) the liberal democratic phase faded to give way to the construction of an increasingly authoritarian and conservative-religious regime.

The turning point of this change in direction was the referendum of the September 12, 2010 (the anniversary of the coup in 1980) concerning changes in certain articles of the constitution of 1982, presented as a democratization of the system. Convinced of its broad hegemony in society thanks to the 58% obtained by the "yes" camp in the referendum, the AKP has subsequently gradually made its authoritarian-conservative turn. Through the speeches of the former Prime Minister (current President) Erdogan and legal measures, the Sunni character of the regime has increasingly been asserted: attempts to ban abortion and caesarean section ; deification of the family (with "at least three children") ; courses on the Koran and on the life of the prophet in secondary education; restriction of the sale of alcohol; legalization of the wearing of the veil first for university students, then for state officials and finally in schools; an unprecedented development of religious education with an increase of 7% in "Imam high schools" between 2010 and 2014.

If all non-Muslim, non-religious and non-Sunni fringes of society had reason to be worried faced with this escalation of religious references in the system, the nearly twelve million Alevi (out of a population of 80 million people) seem to be the most affected by this gradual confessionalisation of the regime. It is true that under the AKP multiple "Alevi workshops" have been organized in order to discuss the claims of this religious minority, primarily their recognition at state level - with financing of their "cemevi" (places of worship) and payment of wages to the "Dede" (spiritual leaders). But beyond the fact that no concrete action has been taken in respect to this question, the Alevi are the subject of a systematic stigmatisation by Erdogan, taken up by the conservative media and the organic intellectuals of the AKP. In this context it should be remembered that the great majority of young people murdered by the security forces during the Gezi revolt were Alevi and this relates primarily to the level of violence used during police repression in the Alevi neighbourhoods. At his rallies Erdogan incites tens of thousands of people to boo the leader of the Republican Party of the People (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, recalling the fact that he is Alevi.

The discursive strategy of the AKP also articulates skilfully but dangerously elements of the Syrian issue to the Alevi question in order to consolidate its Sunni religious base. Thus the CHP, founding party of the (western and secular) republic, today led by an Alevi and historically supported by the Alevis, is presented as the Turkish equivalent of the Baath party, a “putschist” party with an Alawite dictator at its head. And the refusal of the CHP, the main opposition party in parliament, to approve the Syrian policy of the government is explained by the alleged denominational kinship between the two parties (ignoring the historical and theological differences between the two beliefs). But it should be stressed in passing that a certain amount of sympathy has emerged in certain currents of the Turkish left and especially in the republican-secular fringe of society for al-Assad, regarded as anti-imperialist and defending a secularist regime against the offensives of the jihadists supported by Western imperialism. This same schematic political approach explains the almost total absence of support for the Syrian revolution but also the lack of solidarity with Syrians migrants (who number more than 1.7 million in Turkey of which only 225,000 reside in the “reception camps”, installed moreover in the vicinity of cities with a high Alevi population). Therefore there is a dynamic of cultural-religious polarisation which the AKP government has engaged in, sowing the seeds of a denominational divide which will be difficult to repair.

The Kurds of Syria, a problem for Turkey

One of the main reasons for the commitment of Erdogan’s regime to the struggle for the overthrow of al-Assad was certainly the presence of a large Kurdish population on the Syrian-Turkish border. The formation of a regional administration in the Kurdish north of Iraq following the imperialist intervention in 2003 without doubt constituted a most significant political trauma for the Turkish state. It is therefore clearly the fear of seeing the same scenario realized as a result of a change of regime in Syria which pushed the Turkish government to attempt to intervene in the Syrian crisis from the beginning of the uprising and to establish control over the opposition (faced with other “friends of Syria”), first of all through the Muslim Brotherhood, and then by support to other Islamic currents. However the situation has become all the more critical following the withdrawal of the armed forces of the regime from a part of Syrian Kurdistan in July 2012, after which the Democratic Union Party (PYD) succeeded in taking control of this region bordering Turkey, subsequently proclaiming its autonomy.

The PYD is a party originating from the trend towards decentralization of the PKK in 2003 but still recognizing the ideological and political leadership of Abdullah Ocalan, imprisoned and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1999. The administration of the three townships of Jazira, Afrin and Kobane following the “Revolution of Rojava” (“west” in Kurdish, designating western Kurdistan) is furthermore an attempt of application of the strategy of “democratic autonomism” (or “democratic federalism”) developed by Ocalan, supposed to replace the former adhesion of the PKK to Marxism-Leninism (which he renounced in the early 1990s).

On reading the Charter of Rojava declared in January 2013, one is struck by the democratic, secular, multiculturalist discourse and by the ecological sensitivity that it contains. The emphasis on the rights of women, ethnic and religious minorities, especially in the midst of the Syrian chaos, is impressive. If all these commitments are not a completely dead letter, despite the instability in the region, we must state that the political pluralism of this experience of self-government through various councils and assemblies is not his strong point, far from it. The PYD, not having a strong historic implantation in Rojava, succeeded in establishing its hegemony after its return from exile from Iraqi Kurdistan in 2011 thanks in large part to its military power (YPG: Units of Protection of the People). It did not hesitate to use this to exclude and liquidate politically the various currents of local Kurdish nationalism united since autumn 2011 in the ENKS (National Council of the Kurds of

Syria) under the aegis of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mesut Barzani, a historic rival of the PKK.

It is, moreover, through the intermediary of the PDK and the regional administration of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan with which it enjoys strong economic reports that Turkey has tried to intervene to marginalize the PYD. If the PDK has sometimes been ready to support the manoeuvres of Ankara, neither support for the ENKS nor the attempted blockade of Rojava, by the closure of its border with Iraqi Kurdistan, have succeeded in preventing the development of the autonomist experience under the domination of the PYD.

However, guessing that pressure through the PDK would not be enough for the destruction of Rojava, the AKP has not hesitated to play the jihadist card (facilities for border crossing, health, financial and logistical aid) to crush the Kurdish rebellion. Which international public opinion could witness in view of its late involvement in the international coalition and its restraint regarding support for resistance to the siege of Kobane.

However, the tensions between the PYD and the ENKS (and therefore the PDK) appeared to be allayed following the common battles of the YPG and Peshmerga, in Sinjar and Mosul against "Islamic State", and then with the Dohuk agreements according to which the PYD will share power with the ENKS in the Rojava and the Peshmerga will participate in the resistance of Kobane. This is presented as a "national union" at the level of western Kurdistan by the KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, Union of Communities of Kurdistan, which encompasses all the structures related to the Ocalan movement). However it is quite possible that this also means an indirect control by the United States through the influence of Barzani.

The AKP and the peace process

The crisis Ankara faced in regard to the events of Kobane came after the Turkish state had been conducting negotiations with Abdullah Ocalan for nearly two years. The AKP, through the Turkish intelligence services, had already begun talks with the representatives of the PKK in Oslo in 2009, but had to reverse this following the nationalist reaction affecting its electoral base. But as a result of the takeover and the proclamation of autonomy in Rojava (and a misguided attempt on the part of the PKK to conduct a "people's revolutionary war" based on the Syrian experience, to form a liberated zone in the city of Hakkari, which cost the lives of more than a thousand Kurdish fighters) the government resolved to resume the negotiations, but this time directly with Ocalan, a prisoner on the island of Imrali. This initiative by the AKP is due less to the democratic convictions of the latter than to the obstacle that instability due to the Kurdish question represents for the regional interests of Turkish capitalism and Ankara's neo-Ottoman aspirations.

Also, during the national holiday of the Kurdish Newroz, on March 21, 2013, Ocalan proclaimed, via a letter read by a Kurdish party deputy in front of a huge crowd in Diyarbakir, the opening of a peace process, of which the first steps should be the implementation of a cease-fire and the withdrawal of armed combatants beyond the Turkish borders, in the mountains of Kandil in Iraqi Kurdistan, where the PKK's bases are located. The other steps were to follow. If this "peace process" or, according to the official version, "solution process" has been greeted with enthusiasm by different sectors of society, but especially by the Kurdish people - victim of a thirty years war - the disappointment accumulated after two years of waiting has been greater. In fact, outside of a few advances concerning the teaching of the Kurdish language and the release of some of the thousands of civilian activists (including mayors and a deputy) of the Kurdish movement incarcerated in 2009-2010, none of the claims of the Kurdish people - such as primary and secondary education in

Kurdish, the return to civilian life of armed combatants, the acceptance of Kurdish identity through a new democratic and pluralistic constitution, or the improvement of living conditions (or even the liberation) of Ocalan - have been met.

It is clear that throughout this period of negotiations the AKP was faced with a dilemma. It was supposed to resolve this thorny issue which prevents it from being perceived as a true model for an entire geographical and cultural area without scaring its electoral base, as nationalistic as it is conservative. On the other hand Erdogan needed to broaden his electorate to win the presidency in 2014 (as he indeed succeeded in doing) and needed therefore to win the votes of the Kurds (mostly religious) but also not to lose those already acquired. Finally the AKP tried to do both at the same time, leading it to take almost no concrete measures and fill the void left by a discourse which was both democratic and nationalist. It thus hoped to play for time and keep the Kurdish support necessary to the construction of its new regime, while de-radicalizing the Kurdish armed and civilian movement. However the Kurdish masses, in the expectation of even partial satisfaction of their aspirations, had to be content with the messages from Ocalan, regularly transmitted through members of the Democratic People's Party (HDP, a left reformist formation linked to the Kurdish movement) announcing each time that the process was continuing and that it was going soon reach a decisive stage.

Kobane and the dilemmas of the Kurdish movement

It was in this atmosphere of disillusionment and activist impatience that the Kobane crisis broke out. The reaction in the face of refusal of the AKP to help the resistance in the city of Kobane besieged by Islamic State, to open a corridor to the inside of its borders for the delivery of weapons and the passage of volunteer fighters (which it eventually had to accept under US pressure), as well as the government rhetoric identifying the PYD/PKK as a terrorist organization equivalent to Islamic State, together with indignation at the widely shared conviction that the AKP was logistically supporting the latter, was translated by an explosion of anger by the Kurdish masses. Responding to the call by the HDP to mobilize support for the resistance in Kobane, tens of thousands of Kurds occupied the streets in both the Kurdish area and in the west of the country on the evening of October 6, 2014. The brutal repression by the security forces led to an equally violent reaction by the indignant crowds: use of firearms, mass looting of stores, setting fire of administrative buildings and schools, murders of civilians suspected to be Islamic State activists. In the west of the country, the entry into play (with the blessing of the government and security forces) of the hordes of nationalists and Islamists ready to clash with the Kurds fuelled this unleashing of violence, and genuine attempted pogroms were undertaken against the Kurdish neighbourhoods. In addition, in Diyarbakir (the main Kurdish city) armed conflicts between (pro-PKK) Kurdish demonstrators and its historical Kurdish radical Islamist opponent Hezbollah - under its new name Hûda-Par - caused deaths on both sides. Faced with this turn of events, Ocalan and the HDP e called on their supporters to be calm and not make use of violence but without really succeeding. Despite his indisputable leadership even Ocalan could not control the masses of young Kurds.

These events arising in the context of support for the resistance in Kobane have unveiled a series of tensions that were developing within the different structures linked to the Kurdish movement.

The main tension is between the positions of Ocalan, conducting negotiations from his prison cell, and the leadership of the armed branch taking refuge in the mountains of south Kurdistan (in Iraq). While affirming on each occasion their commitment to Ocalan, the PKK leaders have for a long time said that for them the peace process is almost finished. The leader of the armed wing and co-president of the executive council of the KCK, Cemil Bayik, had already said in April 2014 that "the

AKP government is a government of war. The Kurdish people must organize in order to protect themselves against probable attacks. To expect the government to resolve the Kurdish question would be reckless" [1]. Following the events in Kobane, Besê Hozat, also co-chair of the KCK, stated that Ocalan and the Kurdish movement had made all the steps needed for peace and that if the AKP continued on this same track it will be facing a "violent war", "a chaos extending through all the century" [2]. A member of the executive committee of the KCK, Murat Karayilan, claimed that the attacks of the Turkish state against the Kurds constituted a "declaration of war" and that the process of negotiations no longer had any meaning, that it was finished. "But we await the last word from our leader Apo (Ocalan)", he added [3] .

It is not difficult to understand that these messages are directed more to Ocalan than to the AKP. The leadership of the KCK also tries to put pressure on him while trying to demonstrate to the rank and file of the Kurdish movement that they are still in the game.

The position of the HDP is much more difficult. With the peace process, the Kurdish movement had attempted a change of perspective in trying to make the HDP a party not just of the Kurdish cause, but a "Party of Turkey", by integrating various other left political and associative structures. It was thus obliged to support the revolt of June 2013, the largest mobilization in the west of Turkey, known as "Gezi", where the participation of Kurds - for perfectly understandable reasons, given that their historic leader was involved in negotiations with the state - was limited.

However, despite the setback in the municipal elections of March 2014 (outside of the regions with a Kurdish majority in the south-east), the HDP, through lack of an alternative but also thanks to the personal qualities, sincerity, and radical democratic discourse of its candidate, Selahaddin Demirtas, managed to reach 10% in the presidential elections of August 2014. It thus bettered its usual 6-7% by winning the votes of a section of Turkish secularists and democrats. But, in the wake of the riots in October and the rise of nationalist feeling among Turks, it seems doubtful that the HDP can maintain these votes for the general elections planned for June 2015.

As the main legal structure of the Kurdish movement (with 27 members in Parliament) it is the HDP which faces all the attacks of the political class and particularly the AKP. In addition, the legal framework in which it must work is hardly compatible with the radicalism of the Kurdish youth who are as much its base as that of the KCK. All the more so in that these youth, organizing themselves in the YDG-H (Movement of Patriotic Revolutionary Youth), aligns more on the positions of "the mountain" - to continue to lead the resistance in the streets and to "liberate" the neighbourhoods - than its own.

Thus the HDP cannot risk criticizing the degeneration of riots into gratuitous violence, or take responsibility for its inability to measure the consequences of its appeal on the street, and recognize the impossibility of controlling its rank and file, which would put it in a difficult situation in relation to the government. The only criticism came from the deputy for Diyarbakir, Altan Tan (who originates from the Islamist movement), who after having stated that the HDP should have prevented the arson and destruction during the mobilisations and criticized the supporters of the PKK for having first attacked the members of Hüda-Par , has drawn the wrath of the KCK. According to Mustafa Karasu, a member of its executive board, Tan was interested only in broken windows while Kurdish patriots were murdered by the cooperation of the police, the fascists, the Hezbollah and Islamic State. To which Tan replied curtly: "The looting and the burning of hundreds of shops, supermarkets, jewellery stores and banks, the burning of roads and cars, the assassination of a youth of sixteen and his friends in the house where they were refugees, the fact that he was then thrown off the balcony, had his head crushed with stones and that his corpse was subsequently overridden by a car, that armed actions are organized against several police stations in the region on the evening of the day when the instruction by Mr. Ocalan to stop the events has been read in the

Parliament - I do not consider this as “a few broken windows”... The oppressed cannot behave like the oppressor” [4].

Apart from this critical reaction, unusual in its ranks, the HDP, torn between its loyalty to Ocalan and its responsibility to its base, has preferred to opt for a conspiracy theory to explain events. According to Sirri Sureyya Onder, former filmmaker, deputy for Istanbul and the main “messenger” of Ocalan, the agents of various foreign intelligence services on the ground steered the events, while a “coup mechanic” would have been implemented. Of course there was no precision on the actors in this “mechanic” [5]. Besê Hozat has also stated recently that if the AKP did nothing for the continuation of the process, new conspiracies and coups would take place [6].

It should be clear that the rhetoric of the coup (to which Ocalan does not hesitate to resort to explain any obstacle to the negotiations) is the main alibi of the AKP to criminalize any challenge aimed its regime. Thus the revolt of Gezi, the anti-corruption operations of December 2013 aimed at the ministers of the AKP and the Erdogan’s cronies, the revolt of Kobane or even minor incidents such as the failure of the undersea subway in Istanbul would be so many “putschist” attempts to undermine or overthrow the government. And behind all of this would be of course the foreign powers (anonymous) inevitably with the contribution of the former ally and new adversary, the brotherhood of Fethullah Gülen. This reading based on the primacy of conspiracy seems to have reached the ranks of the Kurdish movement.

While the heroic resistance against the barbarity of Islamic State continues in Kobane, with the support of the strikes of the international coalition and the participation of veterans of the Free Syrian Army (imposed by Turkey) and Peshmerga (imposed by Barzani), the Turkish state is preparing to strengthen its security and repressive apparatus in order to prevent further mass demonstrations. From the point of view of the Kurds, the continuation of the cease-fire and the negotiation process is strongly linked to the situation in Kobane. There is an urgent need for the revolutionary left, despite its weakness, to give its full support to the struggle of the Kurdish people whatever the criticisms of its leadership. It has the task of organizing a broad democratic movement, pluralistic and in solidarity with the Kurdish cause, to stop the infernal machine of the AKP which promises a dark future for all the peoples of Turkey.

Uraz Aydın, October 30, 2014

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] [Http://www.sendika.org/2014/04/cemil-bayik-akpden-kurt-sorununu-cozmesini-beklemek-gaflet/](http://www.sendika.org/2014/04/cemil-bayik-akpden-kurt-sorununu-cozmesini-beklemek-gaflet/)

[2] Besê Hozat, “AKP ve süreç”, Özgür Gündem, 10.22.2014

[3] “Son Söz Önder Apo’da”, www.ozgur-gundem.com , 09.24.2014

[4] [Http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/tan-karasu-tartismasi](http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/tan-karasu-tartismasi)

[5] [Http://www.demokrathaber.net/guncel/nuray-mert-sirri-arkadasimiz-bizimle-dalga-mi-geciyor-h39919.html](http://www.demokrathaber.net/guncel/nuray-mert-sirri-arkadasimiz-bizimle-dalga-mi-geciyor-h39919.html);

http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/ne_iyi_bir_savas_vardir_ne_de_kotu_bir_baris-1220944

[6] [Http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/10/ulusal-kongre-bir-ihtiyac-bese-hozat/#.vfizl_msuxs](http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/10/ulusal-kongre-bir-ihtiyac-bese-hozat/#.vfizl_msuxs)