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# Turkey and the Kurdish Question: Last Exit Before the Bridge

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## Abstract

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government initiated a peace process with the Kurds in January 2013 to become the first government since 1984 to systematically negotiate with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) instead of using the military against them. Nevertheless, a bloody war restarted after AKP lost its majority in the parliament due to the Kurdish backed Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) success in the 7 June 2015 elections. In the coalition negotiation process, the AKP, which is under the strict control of Erdoğan, did not make a serious offer to any of the opposition parties, and Erdoğan did not mandate other parties to form a coalition government. Thus, holding a snap election remained the only option. Erdoğan's strategy to attract the nationalist voters worked, and the AKP re-gained the overall majority in the parliament by receiving the nationalist votes again. Nevertheless, this was a Pyrrhic victory for the AKP. In addition to the domestic polarization, the new AKP government has needed to deal with the Kurdish Question, which has turned into armed conflict since the 7 June elections, along with re-formulating its relations with the allies of the PKK in Northern Syria and in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, increasing activism in the ISIS issue and the "jet crisis" experienced with Russia seems to have complicated Turkey's foreign policy and compelled the AKP to revise its approach towards the Kurdish Question.

## Keywords

Turkish Foreign Policy, Kurdish Question, ISIS, Syrian Civil War, Iraqi Kurdistan, PKK

## INTRODUCTION

Parliamentary elections held on 7 June, 2015 were regarded as a milestone by opposition circles in Turkey due to the ongoing debate surrounding the presidential system. During the election campaign, President Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan exhorted people to vote for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to amend the constitution, allowing the president to exercise full executive power. Unsurprisingly, those discontent with Erdoğan argued that his insistence on full executive power in the presidential system undermined the notion of a parliamentary democracy and paved the way of a more authoritarian regime. Thus, polarization between the ruling AKP and the opposition parties reached a new peak before the run up to Election Day.

As the results began to return, it was clear that they were a blow to Erdoğan's ambitions. After three terms with a majority in the Grand National Assembly, the AKP lost its majority and its share of the vote decreased by about 9 percent, from 49,8 percent to 40,8 percent. The main opposition party, the center left Republican People's Party (CHP), remained around the same level with 25,1 percent, while the right wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) increased its votes from 13 to 16,3 percent. The surprise victors of the night were the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which rose above the 10 percent electoral threshold doubling its vote to 13,1 percent. The party had previously circumvented the threshold by fielding independent candidates and its insistence on running as a party was seen as a gamble.<sup>1</sup>

In the coalition negotiation process that ensued, President Erdoğan branded his stamp on the process. The AKP, which is under the strict control of Erdoğan, did not make a serious offer to any of the opposition parties and did not mandate other parties to form a coalition government. Thus, holding a snap election remained the only option. In this process, Erdoğan designed a new caretaker cabinet. This meant that the AKP effectively maintained control over the government with the help of Erdoğan's constitutional power. On the other hand, violent clashes between Turkey and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) erupted once again, placing the tentative peace process between the state and the PKK in doubt and reopening old wounds both within and outside the country. Following the end of the peace process, tensions between Turkey and Kurds in neighboring countries have also resurfaced. Turkey regarded the

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/genel\\_secim\\_2015\\_7\\_haziran/](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/genel_secim_2015_7_haziran/) (Last access: 25 October 2015).

Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish group fighting against the Islamic State in Northern Syria and in solidarity with the PKK, as a terrorist entity. Turkey's fight against the PKK and policy towards the PYD have also produced discontentment among the left wing political circles in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, Turkey's sudden active involvement in the coalition fighting against ISIS allowing the Incirlik air base to be utilized by US forces has pushed Turkey firmly into the center of numerous conflicts on its borders. Upon Turkey's active involvement decision, the suspected Islamic State suicide bombers killed 34 people in Suruç on 20 July, 2015 and 102 people in Ankara on 10 October, 2015. As a result of the developments Turkey experienced after June 7 elections domestic instability, terrorist attacks, clashes with the PKK and the militarized foreign policy towards Syria characterized the atmosphere before the snap elections.

Under such a violent atmosphere, snap elections brought victory for the AKP. According to the election results, the AKP received 49,6 percent of the total votes. The main opposition party remained around the same level with 25,4 percent. The right wing nationalist MHP decreased its votes from 16,3 to 11,9 percent, while the pro-Kurdish HDP received 10,7 percent. This picture shows that instability and violence helped the AKP to recover from the failure of the June 7 elections and gain an overall majority in the parliament again. Nevertheless, the AKP's attempts to receive popular support for the snap elections created new complexities for Turkey. The question of how to deal with the Kurdish Question and the reaction of the Kurdish groups in the neighboring countries is waiting to be explored after the dramatic shift of the AKP in order to win the snap elections.

#### WHAT WENT WRONG?

To understand the current political malaise in Turkey, one needs to look at the origins of the AKP. Founded in 2002 by politicians from an Islamist background, the AKP adopted a pro-democracy, pro-free market and pro-European Union agenda. With a seemingly reformist agenda in place and a number of transfers from center right parties, the AKP made a concerted effort to appeal moderate, centrist voters and crucially gained legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. This pro-European agenda

also helped the AKP to avert the pressure of the military, which was viewed as the ontological guardian of secularism and nation state.<sup>2</sup> Over the coming years, its successes in pushing the military out of the political sphere, stabilizing the economy and in following a balanced foreign policy led to a clear victory for the AKP in the 2011 General Election when the party received almost 50% of the total votes cast.

This achievement also marked a turning point when the party began to gradually abandon its popular reformist agenda. From 2011 onwards, a cult of personality has been constructed, step by step, around the central figure of Erdoğan. Erdoğan's control over business circles, media, civil society and universities has increased drastically. His ambitions went beyond his own political ego. He started to talk about transforming Turkish society, developing the mantra: "we will raise a religious generation". In this period, the AKP redesigned the education system, and 1 million students joined the Imam-Hatip High Schools (religious schools). Previously suppressed by the military, the number was just 65,000 in 2002.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the AKP's increasing authoritarian tendency created repercussions in wider society. Upon the police brutality against a small group of ecologists protesting the building of a mall on Gezi Park, one of the few open spaces left in central Istanbul, thousands of people gathered in Taksim Square on 31 May, 2013. These protests then spread to the whole country. The Gezi protests also shone light on how the national media had been pacified. CNN Turk infamously broadcast a documentary on penguins during the first night of the protests. In order to suppress the protests, police used excessive force. Seven protestors died as a result of police brutality and hundreds of them were injured. Instead of appeasing the protests, Erdoğan raked up tensions, at one point stating that he was "holding back half the population" from taking to the streets.

In the same year, the AKP faced a graft probe targeting four ministers in the cabinet and Erdoğan's inner circle including his son. Although the AKP government intervened in judicial bodies ensuring the file was

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<sup>2</sup> Ziya Öniş, "Conservative Globalism at the Crossroads: The Justice and Development Party and the Thorny Path to Democratic Consolidation in Turkey", *Mediterranean Politics* (2009), 14:1.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.dogrulukpayi.com/beyanat/5549bb343acbb> (Last access: 23 September 2015).

closed, audio recordings of the investigation leaked onto social media. Conversations highlighted, how Erdoğan arbitrarily uses public resources to control the media and business world.

The AKP managed to overcome these challenges by presenting the affair as a conspiracy theory to the public. Accordingly, the AKP convinced the public that there was an international conspiracy aiming to undermine Turkey's rising power in the world politics. Following earlier changes to the constitution, which led to popular presidential elections, Erdoğan went on to receive 52 percent of the total votes cast and became the president in August 2014. This achievement emboldened Erdoğan and launched a debate surrounding the powers of the president, which persists until today. Turkish presidents have traditionally and constitutionally been neutral, and it was in spite of this backdrop that Erdoğan played an incredibly active role in the election campaign leading up to 7 June. At Erdoğan's behest, the 7 June elections were regarded as a referendum on a presidential system with vastly expanded executive powers.

#### THE DECLINE AND RISE OF THE AKP

Notwithstanding its authoritarian inclinations, the AKP initiated a peace process with the Kurds in January 2013 and became the first government since 1984 systematically to negotiate with the PKK instead of using the military. As a result of the negotiation process, there was no armed conflict between January 2013 and July 2015. However, a bloody war restarted after the AKP lost its majority in the parliament due to Kurdish backed HDP's success in the 7 June elections. The day after the election, Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan contended that "the HDP can only make a movie about the peace process from now on. The peace does not come by saying *peace, peace*". In the meantime, the PKK declared that ceasefire was over due to the ambiguous stance of the AKP government. Following the harsh statements of the AKP and the PKK elites, both the PKK attacks and the Turkish army's operations re-launched with an intensity not seen in many years.

There seems to be a causal relationship between the failure of the peace process and Erdoğan's bid for a presidential system. This is supported by no concrete steps taken during the peace process, and negotiations being carried out behind closed doors. Erdoğan also presented the

presidential system as a precondition for the continuation of the peace process. In doing so, he aimed to hide the content of the peace process to keep nationalist voters on his side while he played the conditionality card to court Kurdish voters. With the help of this strategy, Erdoğan expected the AKP to receive enough seats in the parliament to change the constitution.

Nonetheless, Erdoğan's strategy collapsed. The post-election polls indicated that votes from the AKP were mainly lost to the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP. Furthermore, the surveys showed that some of the existing and potential voters of the CHP strategically voted for the HDP to stop the AKP from winning an overall majority. In other words, the increasing allergy towards Erdoğan motivated the secular and liberal voter, allowing the HDP to rise above the threshold. According to KONDA Group's post-election poll, the HDP and the MHP received almost equal numbers of votes from those who had previously sided with for the AKP. In addition, this survey shows that 28 percent of the HDP's new voters were ethnic Turks with a secular/liberal orientation—a striking development for a party, which had until now been largely confined to the Kurdish electorate.<sup>4</sup>

In regards to Kurdish voters, it is apparent that there was a collapse in trust between them and Erdoğan. According to the HDP, Erdoğan blackmailed Kurds and aimed to use peace process as a bargaining chip for his own aims. Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chair of the HDP, asserted that “the issue of peace should be decoupled from political gain, and should not be a bargaining chip for the AKP”.<sup>5</sup> Kurds demanded institutional guarantees rather than Erdoğan's personal initiatives. In addition to that, it was unclear for the Kurds, what would compel Erdoğan to conduct a fair negotiation process if he becomes an authoritarian ruler of the country. Such a question mark was the product of Erdoğan's authoritarian performance since 2011. This was what led to the HDP's decision to contest the elections as a party as opposed to using independent candidates.

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<sup>4</sup> For the full text of Konda Post-Election Survey, see [http://survey.konda.com.tr/rapor/KONDA\\_7HaziranSand%C4%B1kveSe%C3%A7menAnaliziRaporu.pdf](http://survey.konda.com.tr/rapor/KONDA_7HaziranSand%C4%B1kveSe%C3%A7menAnaliziRaporu.pdf) (Last access: 08 July 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/peace-should-not-be-part-of-bargain-hdp-co-chair-demirtas.aspx?pageID=238&nID=68289&NewsCatID=338> (Last access: 10 July 2015).

The AKP also lost the support of nationalist voters. The MHP declared its ontological objection to the peace process and successfully exploited the opaque nature of the negotiations between the government and the PKK. During the election rally, the MHP emphasized the peace process undermined the territorial integrity of the nation state. In addition to that, instead of running a completely ideological campaign, the MHP tapped into Turkish notions of human dignity, criticizing the crony-capitalist and client list system of the AKP.

Finally, secular liberals approached with skepticism the intentions of Erdoğan during the peace process. Accordingly, the AKP government viewed the peace process as an immunity shield and used it to deflect criticisms of opposition groups and to distract attention from the recent corruption scandals. Furthermore, secular liberals did believe that the AKP initiated the peace process because of Erdoğan's personal aims as opposed to any idealist commitment to peace.

Nevertheless, 7 June elections showed that Erdoğan had to give up his presidential ambitions because he has to attract Kurds, nationalists and secular liberals to reach 330 of 550 deputies, the number required for a constitutional referendum. This seemed unlikely; however, in the absence of this happening, Erdoğan and the party attempted to regain the overall majority in parliament and preserve the *status-quo*. Otherwise, Erdoğan would likely have needed to step back and allow the AKP to share power if a coalition government was formed after the snap election on 1 November, 2015.

Building on the discussions above, the AKP aimed to attract nationalist voters by ending the peace process and initiating military operations against the PKK, which would result in the AKP maintaining its single party government by receiving the nationalist votes. Nevertheless, this strategy would inevitably cause the AKP to lose potential Kurdish and secular liberal voters. In summary, the AKP's panicked attempt to hold on to its position and the *status-quo* might be an answer to the question of why the clashes restarted between the army and the PKK and why Turkey's relations with the allies of the PKK in the Northern Syria and Northern Iraq are strained.

On the other hand, Turkey also tried to strengthen its position in the coalition fighting ISIS after 7 June elections. Turkey reluctantly joined the

anti-ISIS coalition in September 2014 but adopted an ambiguous stance. For example, Turkey and the US could not reach an agreement over the use of Incirlik Air Base against ISIS until July 2015. Besides, Turkey refused to take any action when the Kurdish populated Kobani city was sieged by ISIS in October 2014. Furthermore, the AKP government was frequently accused of assisting Islamist groups in Syria by the opposition parties and the Turkish and international media. Therefore, the question of why Turkey changed its position towards the anti-ISIS coalition has been subject to much debate.

Turkey's sudden policy shift against ISIS and opening the Incirlik Air Base might be related to Erdoğan's aforementioned strategy, which is based on fighting against the PKK to gain the sympathy of nationalist voters. According to columnist Amberin Zaman, the Turkey-US agreement on Incirlik was regarded as an opportunity by Ankara to justify its campaign against the PKK.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, according to the *Economist*, there was a connection between Erdoğan's domestic ambitions and Turkey's active involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition. Accordingly, Turkey's eagerness to join American-led operations against ISIS had an additional agenda, which was limiting the growing power of the Kurds in the region. In doing so, Erdoğan aimed to exploit anti-Kurdish sentiments in Turkish society behind the mask of fighting against the ISIS before the snap election.<sup>7</sup>

This picture shows that Erdoğan's attempts to re-win the majority in the parliament go beyond Turkey due to the transnational character of Kurdish identity. The regional implications of Erdoğan's strategy should also be dealt with in order to make an analysis on the possible outcomes of the domestic turmoil of Turkey after the 1 November 2015 elections.

#### REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF ERDOĞAN'S STRATEGY

During the initial days of Turkey's military operations against the PKK, the writers of this paper visited Arbil and Suleimania and conducted interviews with prominent figures of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although there is a national unity government in Iraqi Kurdistan, political polarization could

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<sup>6</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Amerika Kürtleri Sattımı?", <http://www.diken.com.tr/amerika-kurtleri-satti-mi/> (Last access: 22 October 2015).

<sup>7</sup> "Erdoğan's Dangerous Gambit", <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21660123-bombing-kurds-well-islamic-state-turkey-adding-chaos-middle> (Last access: 20 September 2015).



easily be observed. On the one hand, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and the Gorran (The Change Movement) represent tradition, which is the amalgamation of nationalist, secularist and left wing policies. This creates a natural platform on which the PUK, the Gorran, the PYD and the PKK converge. Therefore, the end of the truce between the Turkish government and the PKK and Turkey's potential hostility towards the Syrian Kurdish PYD generated strong reactions in the PUK and the Gorran. On the other hand, the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) is seen as the representative of conservative politics in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the KDP has been the leading organization of the Kurdish liberation movements in the Middle East, it has adopted a realist foreign policy rather than a nationalist one. Therefore, the KDP leader, Masood Barzani, is seen as the architect of the close relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. In line with this picture, Turkey's domestic political turmoil also shapes the domestic political debates in Iraqi Kurdistan.

"Turkey has re-adopted its traditional reflexes. I cannot understand, why Turkey does not view Demirtaş and the HDP as an opportunity for peace", says Nawshirwan Mustafa, the leader of the Gorran Movement. According to him, ongoing armed conflict between Turkey and the PKK inevitably creates a pressure on the KDP and Barzani family, which has extremely personal and commercial ties with the AKP and the Erdoğan family. "If conflict continues and spreads to Syrian Kurds, even Barzani will have to stand against Erdoğan", he adds. The PUK also showed a similar stance. "Turkey should adopt an institutionalized policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan. That is to say, Turkey should not only deal with a single party or family. And this policy should couple with a truce with PKK. For Iraqi Kurdistan to keep its stability, this is a must. Otherwise, both Turks and Kurds will drift into a state of instability", says Bahros Ghalali, the representative of the PUK in Ankara.

Meanwhile, the KDP deputy and cabinet spokesperson Safeen Dizai reject the allegations surrounding the secret and personal relations between Erdoğan and Barzani. To him, the PUK and the Gorran are in the government and informed about treaties. Thus, Dizai does not regard the interpersonal relations between Erdoğan and Barzani as a factor shaping the KDP's policy. However, unlike the PUK and Gorran, Dizai holds the PKK and the PYD to account for their conflictual attitudes. "The PKK

should stop its activities and give a chance to the politicians. Its activities undermine the HDP and the opportunity for peace”, says Dizai and adds: “the PYD is a marginal organization and it cannot continue in the way of a one man show. The PYD should adopt a moderate agenda and be receptive to sharing power with other Kurdish groups. That is how Kurds could avert Turkey’s aggression”.

Finally, Aydın Maruf, a deputy of Iraqi Turcoman Front, known for having close ties with Turkey was interviewed. Unsurprisingly, the Iraqi Turcoman Front aligns with the KDP. “Iran is playing a game to counterbalance Turkey’s power in the Iraqi Kurdistan. In doing so, Iran cooperates with anti-Turkey groups, such as the PUK, the Gorran, the PKK and the PYD”, says Aydın Maruf. To him, Turkey’s relations with the KDP threatens Iran’s influence. Therefore, Turkey and the KDP are not responsible for neither the conflict with PKK nor the internal polarization of Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition to the interviews in Arbil and Suleimania, HDP deputy and party spokesperson Ayhan Bilgen in Ankara was questioned. “The PYD’s success in Northern Syria and the HDP’s victory on June 7 created panic within Turkey’s bureaucracy”, says Bilgen and adds: “the AKP exploits this panic in order to increase its political gains”. Bilgen acknowledges that the AKP’s policy shift towards the Kurdish Question in Turkey could produce repercussions in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northern Syria. He says that “there is an interaction between Turks and Kurds. However, for this interaction to produce a permanent peace, it is necessary to promote transparency and good governance instead of striving for short term and political interests. Without a genuine commitment to peace and the building up of necessary institutions, political calculations might easily initiate a conflict as we observe today”.

Finally, views of Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, shed light on how the AKP’s sharp turn after the 7 June elections affected relations between the Kurds and Turkey. According to him, regardless of the PYD’s function against ISIS, Turkey views it as a terrorist organization.<sup>8</sup> Muslim argues that Turkey’s operations against the PKK in Northern Iraq and potential invasion of the PYD-controlled enclaves in Northern Syria can only bene-

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2015/10/turkey-syria-russia-pyd-leader-muslim-moscow-prevent-ankara.html#> (Last access: 3 November 2015).

fit the Islamic militants.<sup>9</sup> He also posits that “if somebody attacks us, we will defend ourselves”.<sup>10</sup>

#### AN UNEXPECTED GUEST AND DISPLEASED NEIGHBOR

The strained relations between Turkey and the Kurd began a new phase with the Russian military involvement in Syria at the end of September 2015. According to Russia, the Assad regime is the legitimate authority in Syria and it should be supported against ISIS, which imposes a serious threat not only for Syria, but also at global scale. Putin's interventionist strategy became a game changer for the future of the Assad regime and substantially threatened Turkey's policy towards Syria. As noted, Turkey's involvement in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition has sharply increased after the fight against the PKK re-started. However, this did not mean that Turkey acknowledged the legitimacy of the Assad regime and the PYD just because they were fighting against ISIS. This attitude created a friction between Turkey and Russia because Russian military involvement directly aimed to restore the legitimacy of the Assad regime and initiated a war against the armed groups challenging the authority of Damascus government. Russia viewed the Assad and the PYD forces as the natural allies against ISIS and other radical rebel groups. It should be noted that the Assad government does not raise any objection to the Kurdish autonomy within the framework of a united Syria,<sup>11</sup> while the PYD recognizes the legitimacy of Bashar Al-Assad during the period of conflict resolution.<sup>12</sup>

The discrepancy between Turkey and Russia has turned into a crisis upon the Russian bomber aircraft downed by Turkish Air Forces near Turkey's border with Syria on 24 November, 2015. The downing of the Russian jet has triggered the deepest crisis in Russian-Turkish relations since the beginning of the Cold War. Although Turkey's NATO membership has

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-kurdish-leader-says-collapse-of-assad-regime-would-be-a-disaster-despite-its-10515922.html> (Last access: 1 November 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrias-kurds-flock-to-iraq-to-prepare-for-assads-onslaught-8200079.html> (Last access: 1 November 2015).

<sup>11</sup> See <http://ekurd.net/assad-regime-ready-to-accept-kurdish-autonomy-in-syrian-kurdistan-2015-04-20> (Last access: 21 January 2016).

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/turkey-syria-russia-pyd-leader-muslim-moscow-prevent-ankara.html#> (Last access: 22 January 2016).

prevented the escalation of conflict and retaliation of Russia by military means, Russia has initiated a program of economic sanctions as a response to the Turkey's act of downing the Russian jet. In addition to the economic sanctions, reaction of Russia has also aimed to outmaneuver Turkey in Syria. For example, Russian president Vladimir Putin threatened Ankara in a veiled way and posited that "any targets threatening the Russian grouping or our land infrastructure should be immediately destroyed. I would like to warn those who would once again try to organize some sort of provocations against our servicemen".<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Putin also accused Turkey of cooperating with ISIS and getting oil from ISIS controlled territories. He stated that "we have all grounds to suspect that the decision to down our plane was motivated by the intention to secure these routes of delivering oil to ports where it is loaded on tankers".<sup>14</sup>

It is apparent that Russian strategy is based on keeping Turkey out of Syria, and the "jet crisis" has provided an opportunity to achieve this end. In December, Russia deployed the S-400 missile defense system in Syria to prevent similar events from happening again. Upon the deployment of the missile system Putin said that "we have increased our presence in Syria, have increased the number of combat aircraft deployed there. There was no Russian air defense system there—now there is the S-400. If before, Turkey had constantly violated Syrian airspace, let them try it now".<sup>15</sup> Russian presence has considerably diminished Turkey's role in the ongoing civil war in Syria.

Playing the Kurdish card has been another step of Russia to contain Turkey's activism in Syria. In doing so, Russia has initially strengthened its ties with the PYD. In January 2016, it deployed soldiers and engineers in Qamishli in order to expand the airport facilities. According to media reports, this move aimed to enable the landing of Russian fighter jets and

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<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/putin-orders-military-to-take-tough-action-against-threats-in-syria-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=92405&NewsCatID=352> (Last access: 20 January 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/01/europe/syria-turkey-russia-warplane-tensions/> (Last access: 24 January 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20151217/1031887147/putin-press-conference-s400.html> (Last access: 19 January 2016).

cargo planes.<sup>16</sup> What makes the situation alarming for Turkey is the increasing Russian military presence in Kurdish areas of Syria. The new airport could be interpreted as a Russian military base, which provides an immunity shield for the PYD against Turkey's potential aggression. Upon the Russian efforts to expand the airport facilities in Qamishli, Erdoğan stated that "we have said this from the beginning: we won't tolerate such formations along the area stretching from the Iraqi border up to the Mediterranean".<sup>17</sup>

Russia's attempt to exploit the Kurdish Question has not been confined to the Syrian Kurds. Moscow has also aimed to take the advantage of the conflict between Ankara government and the PKK. In December 2015, Sergey Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chair of the HDP, held a meeting in Moscow. During the meeting, Lavrov implied the transnational character of the Kurdish Question by saying that Russia is ready to actively cooperate with those fighting against ISIS.<sup>18</sup> Upon the meeting, Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu accused Demirtaş of treason for siding with Russia after the "jet crisis".

In the final analysis, latest military involvement of Russia in Syria and the "jet crisis" have complicated Turkey's relations with the Kurds. On the one hand, Turkey lost its capability to protect and mobilize the Syrian opposition groups conflicting with the PYD due to the Russian strategy backing the Assad government and the PYD. On the other hand, collapse of the peace process between the Ankara government and the PKK represented an opportunity for Russia to exploit against Turkey. Considering the transnational character of the Kurdish Question, it is safe to argue that Russian presence in Syria does not only make Turkey actively fight against ISIS, but it also recognizes the Assad government and the PYD as legitimate actors.

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russia-sends-soldiers-engineers-to-qamishli-near-turkish-border.aspx?PageID=238&NID=94136&NewsCatID=352> (Last access: 25 January 2016).

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12116807/Turkey-alarmed-by-Russian-troop-build-up-in-northern-Syria.html> (Last access: 25 January 2016).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://ekurd.net/turkeys-kurdish-politician-moscow-2015-12-23> (Last access: 25 January 2016).

#### ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME

This story tells us that Erdoğan's post-election strategy that escalated the polarization not only in Turkey, but also in the neighboring Kurdish territories. Both Erdoğan and Barzani are challenged by strong opposition. The ongoing war between Turkey and the PKK raises doubts on the future of Kurdish Question in Turkey and the potential intervention of Turkey into the Kurdish areas in Northern Syria. This situation also creates repercussions in Iraqi Kurdistan. Erdoğan's survival strategy undermines the KDP and Barzani's legitimacy in the domestic realm. If Turkey's fight against the PKK and hostility against the PYD resumes, the KDP and Barzani might adopt an anti-Turkey discourse in order to appease the opposition. This means that a unified Kurdish front might appear against Turkey as a result of Erdoğan's changing policy towards the Kurdish Question after June 7 elections.

In addition, Turkey's involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition might complicate its foreign policy further. As mentioned previously, there might be a linkage between opening the Incirlik Air Base to the anti-ISIS coalition and Erdoğan's strategy based on weakening the PKK/PYD presence in Syria and Turkey. Accordingly, Turkey is assumed to use Incirlik as a bargaining chip in return for having a free hand over the PKK/PYD. Nevertheless, for this to happen, Turkey is supposed to take responsibility of fighting against ISIS as the PKK/PYD have been doing for more than a year. Otherwise, the US might not allow any action that could weaken the Kurdish groups' struggle against ISIS. Moreover, if Turkey makes that commitment, it will face ISIS's hostility in addition to the unified Kurdish front in Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

Last, Russian military involvement in Syria to restore the authority of the Assad regime has complicated Turkey's relations with the Kurds. Following the "jet crisis", Russia's relations with the Kurds of Syria and Turkey have deepened. Furthermore, Russian military presence has compelled Turkey to pursue a restrained foreign policy towards Syria, meaning Russia does not only expect Turkey to fight against ISIS but also to recognize the legitimate authority of the Assad regime over Syria and the autonomy of the PYD in Northern Syria. In other words, Russian strategy necessitates Turkey to be involved in a war against the Assad regime and

Russia in addition to the Kurds and ISIS, if it wants to maintain the war against the PKK.

In summary, Turks and Kurds are at the crossroads after the 1 November snap elections. Erdoğan's strategy to attract the nationalist voters worked and the AKP regained the overall majority in the parliament by receiving the nationalist votes again. Nevertheless, this was a Pyrrhic victory for the AKP. In addition to the domestic polarization, the new AKP government has needed to deal with the Kurdish Question, which has turned into armed conflict since 7 June elections, and reformulated its relations with the allies of the PKK in the Northern Syria and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, Turkey's increasing activism against ISIS and "jet crisis" experienced with Russia might complicate its foreign policy and compel the AKP to revise its approach towards the Kurdish Question. In other words, either Erdoğan's authoritarian inclinations will continue to blend with a nationalist tone, and Turkey will get involved in endless conflicts with the PKK, the PYD, ISIS, and Russia in the meantime, or he will put his presidential goals aside and comply with the principles of democracy to relieve domestic polarization and prevent the regional repercussions of the Kurdish Question.