



The United States, Turkey, and the Kurdish Regions

The Peace Process in Context

By Michael Werz and Max Hoffman

July 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The past four years have swept away the old pillars of U.S. policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt, a traditional American security partner, is confronting a staggering political and economic crisis. Syria has descended into a horrific civil war with no resolution in sight. Lebanon is clinging to basic stability in the face of long-standing sectarian tensions and a massive refugee crisis. Jordan remains a strong U.S. ally but faces structural threats that stem from demographic trends and the war in Syria. Iraq is once again engulfed in a struggle against militancy stoked, in part, by perceptions that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his supporters have institutionalized their ascendancy in a way unacceptable to Iraq's minorities. Of course, governments across the region are struggling to confront the rising influence of violent Salafi jihadists. The seizure of Mosul—Iraq's second-largest city and home to nearly 2 million people—by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, brought this reality into stark relief.¹

In this context, the potential ramifications of recent developments in Turkey and along its borders have become critical to U.S. interests and the long-term trajectory of the Middle East as a whole. Political and military Kurdish actors have, separately, solidified an autonomous government in northern Iraq and carved out a semi-independent stronghold in northern Syria. Indeed, Kurdish forces in northern Iraq and, to a lesser extent, northern Syria have become a bulwark against jihadi groups such as ISIS and a bastion of stability in a region fracturing along sectarian lines. This reality necessitates a re-evaluation of U.S. policy toward Kurdish political groups and a reinvigoration of Turkey's peace process with its own Kurdish minority.

A key NATO ally and a model of economic and political stability for many years, Turkey is in the throes of a deep political crisis that is distracting from its efforts to achieve a lasting peace settlement with its Kurdish minority, as well as mitigate the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict and counter the rise of violent groups in Iraq. After promising first steps, the peace process seems to be stuck, with Kurdish insurgents halting their withdrawal from Turkey due to the Turkish government's

failure to quickly provide more extensive political and language rights to Kurdish communities. But both the Turkish government and its Kurdish counterparts have come too far to back away; the political cost of a breakdown in negotiations may be prohibitive to both sides given the turmoil on Turkey's borders and the threat of ISIS to Kurdish enclaves in Syria and Iraq.

For the United States and Turkey, the rapidly changing political situation in Syria and Iraq underpins the need for new partners with whom to work toward regional stability and the provision of basic governance. This goal reaches beyond a narrow—albeit important—notion of national security, rooted in combating militancy and denying terrorist organizations space in which to operate. The effort should also be informed by the wider objective of allowing the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean to make political reforms and grow their economies—a goal that is crucial to peacefully accommodating the demographic wave reaching maturity this decade within pluralistic and accountable political institutions. The realities on the ground mean that this search for partners must include engagement with Kurdish political actors to encourage peaceful relations with their respective host countries, thus promoting regional stability and advancing U.S. interests.

This peacebuilding process will take time, requiring long-term efforts to make and cultivate new contacts. Meanwhile, given the complexity and fluidity of current events in the region, the United States and its allies cannot afford to be picky in their search for governance partners. The Syrian conflict has made it necessary for the United States to deal with Kurdish organizations that are helping define the reality on the ground, such as the militant Democratic Union Party, or PYD, with which the United States does not have relations.

Additionally, given Iraq's fractured politics and the pressing security situation in the north of the country, the United States must set aside the concerns of Prime Minister al-Maliki and redouble its outreach to President Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP, to bring it into a productive peacebuilding role. Indeed, this process finally began in earnest with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Erbil in June and Vice President Joe Biden's "drop-by" with representatives of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, at the White House in July.²

Solving many of the region's major problems will require Kurdish participation and consultation. Kurdish organizations have the potential to be constructive partners in providing stability in both Iraq and Syria. Given the pluralistic, secular rhetoric of many of these groups, the United States should re-evaluate its current policies,

which have largely bowed to the traditional Turkish strategy of decreasing Kurdish organizational capacities and shied away from engagement with the KRG for fear of undermining Iraqi national unity. With Iraq fractured, and with Turkey increasingly relying on Kurdish forces as a buffer to instability along its borders, these concerns about maintaining the writ of Baghdad are becoming less important.

This analysis does not represent advocacy for Kurdish nationalism or independence, but rather acknowledges the realities on the ground. In northern Iraq, the KRG—a largely autonomous Kurdish-dominated administrative body—has demonstrated reasonably effective governance and economic growth. Most recently, following the collapse of the Iraqi Army’s presence in Mosul and other parts of northern Iraq, Kurdish forces, known as the Peshmerga, took control of Kirkuk, a major city and oil hub roughly 150 miles north of Baghdad.³ In northeastern Syria, a newly autonomous Kurdish-controlled region—sometimes called Rojava—has formed amid the turmoil of the civil war. Syrian Kurdish forces have also battled with radical Islamist militants, including ISIS, and occasionally fought alongside the Free Syrian Army as part of their efforts to protect local populations and maintain basic stability.⁴

In Turkey, the state’s long-standing efforts to assimilate Kurdish culture and suppress Kurdish political organizations—primarily the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which is also a militant armed group—through military force seem to have been abandoned. The Turkish government has undertaken a new set of political negotiations, accompanied by a softer rhetoric toward cultural differences. Turkey’s approach toward the Kurds remains integral to the country’s process of democratization and the establishment of the effective rule of law, which is in turn important to Turkey’s role as a NATO ally and U.S. partner. It is in this longer-term context—alongside the urgent need to insulate against the further spread of violent groups such as ISIS—that the Kurdish question should be re-examined.

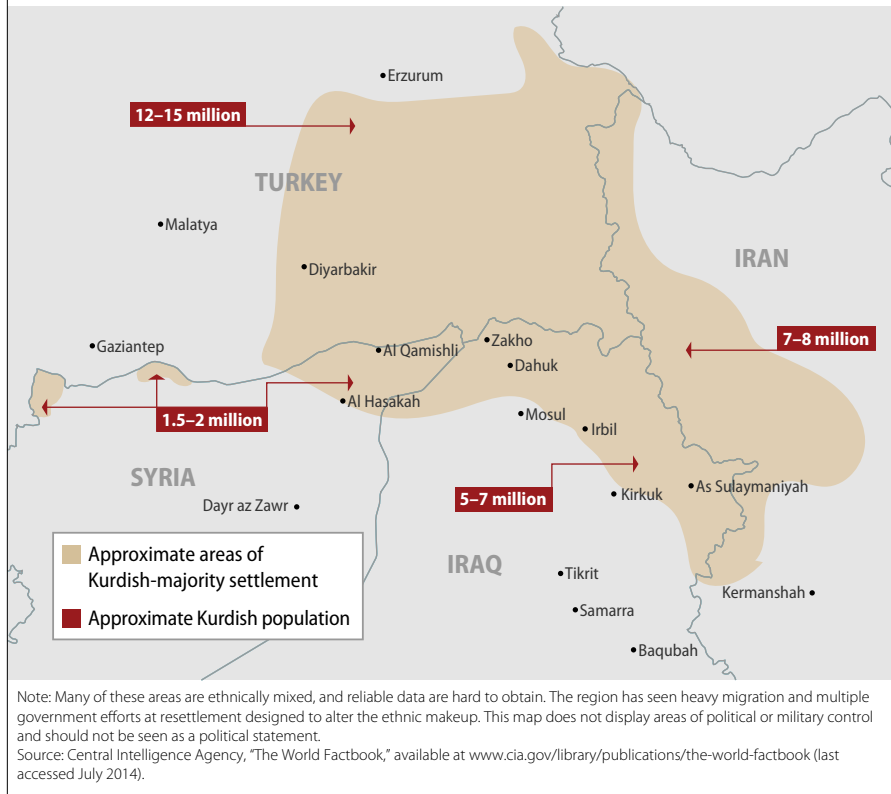
Of course, the Kurds are not a coherent political group. Personal rivalries, national identifications, borders, economic interests, and political beliefs are differentiating factors. But there are signs of a mutual cohering of the political agenda across much of the Kurdish-majority region, driven in part by the rise of Kurdish-language media and growing linguistic convergence.⁵ Regarding the Kurds as a loosely confederated group of political actors sharing a language, history of oppression, and—in some cases—aspirations for political autonomy, a number of questions arise:

- What is a realistic role for Kurdish political organizations in the new Middle East?
- What are the various goals of these groups, and can they be accommodated within a stable regional model?
- What is expected of these groups, and what should be offered in return?
- How should the United States and its NATO allies—including Turkey—interact with these subnational groups and political organizations?

The Kurds' place in the Middle East is not a new question. Neither, more broadly, is the question of how to incorporate subnational ethnic or religious groups within the national borders that emerged from World War I. By and large, most policy-makers have concluded that it would be costlier to redraw those borders than to work within existing lines, problematic as they often are. The national identifications based on these boundaries have taken root over the past century and should not be underestimated. This report does not dispute that core conclusion, nor does it advocate a *de facto* Kurdish nation-state. But the reality of two autonomous Kurdish regions and a third engaged in negotiations with its national government over greater self-determination—along with the effective collapse of central government authority in both Syria and Iraq—demands a re-examination of this question. Western policy circles should devote greater thought to the problem and undertake more frequent and nuanced outreach to Kurdish political actors.

This report seeks to advance this policy conversation by outlining the political context in Turkey; summarizing the relevant history of the Kurdish regions; examining the current state of the peace process in Turkey; placing the issue in its regional context, particularly with regard to evolving autonomy in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish areas in light of the rise of ISIS and the collapse of state authority; explaining the potential consequences of positive or negative outcomes with the Kurds; and evaluating U.S. policy in light of these challenges.

FIGURE 1
The Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran



Glossary

AKP: Turkey's governing party, the conservative Justice and Development Party, founded in 2001. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül are both founding members. The party won 45.5 percent of the overall popular vote in the March local elections.

BDP: The Peace and Democracy Party, the primary Turkish Kurdish political party. The party's support is heavily concentrated in the majority-Kurdish regions of southeastern Anatolia. The recently formed sister party—the Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP—aims to attract urban liberals and non-Kurds to the broader BDP-HDP constituency.

CHP: The Republican People's Party, Turkey's main opposition party. The party was founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's first president, and has a nationalist history but is in the process of rebranding itself as a social democratic alternative to the AKP.

DTP: The Democratic Society Party, a pro-Kurdish Turkish political party, banned in 2009 by the Turkish Constitutional Court for alleged links to the PKK.

ISIS: The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, an extremely violent jihadi militant group active in Syria and Iraq. The group has claimed large swaths of territory in both Syria and Iraq, proclaiming an Islamic caliphate. Recently, the group has started calling itself simply the Islamic State, or IS, but this report will continue to use the ISIS acronym.

MHP: The Nationalist Movement Party, Turkey's ultranationalist party, strongly opposed to Kurdish autonomy.

MIT: Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, the primary state intelligence service.

KDP: The Kurdistan Democratic Party, founded by Mustafa Barzani and currently led by President Massoud Barzani, is the dominant political party in Iraqi Kurdistan.

KRG: The Kurdistan Regional Government, the largely autonomous ruling structure of Iraqi Kurdistan, a federal region of Iraq.

PJAK: The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, a militant Kurdish separatist group operating in Iran that is regarded as the PKK's Iranian sister organization.

PKK: The Kurdistan Workers' Party, a militant armed group that has waged an intermittent war against the Turkish state and is seeking Kurdish independence. Led by Abdullah Öcalan, now imprisoned by the Turkish government, the organization has softened its demands to greater Kurdish autonomy and cultural rights and has upheld a unilateral ceasefire for two years.

PYD: The Democratic Union Party, a Syrian Kurdish political party and sister organization to the PKK that seeks Kurdish federal autonomy in the context of the Syrian state. The PYD has declared autonomy for three majority-Kurdish cantons in northern Syria.

YPG: The People's Protection Units, the military units fighting to defend Kurdish areas in northern Syria, widely regarded as the armed wing of the PYD.

The Turkish political context and the challenge of diversity

In the face of this regional turmoil, Turkey remains a crucial regional pillar and U.S. ally. As the regional power with the most at stake in the upheaval along its borders, Turkey is deeply invested in the outcomes of political and military struggles in both Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the porous nature of Turkey's southern border, its economic interests in northern Iraq and its desire for Iraqi energy, and the presence of more than 800,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey mean the country is extremely vulnerable to spillover effects from the conflicts in both countries. These interests and vulnerabilities underpin Turkey's relations with Kurdish political actors in Syria and Iraq. Finally, Turkey is also conducting delicate negotiations with domestic Kurdish insurgents—the PKK.

All of these trends get swept up into Turkey's passionate domestic political debate, which is why it is important to place the regional picture in its Turkish political context. It is also equally important to analyze the regional implications of domestic Turkish political developments. Turkey's ongoing transformation from a society in which cultural homogeneity trumps minority rights toward a more open, pluralist community capable of reconciling ethnic and religious differences has contributed to the country's heated political debate and is contributing to a recasting of Turkey's relations with political actors in northern Iraq and Syria. The so-called Kurdish question lies at the center of this effort to recognize internal diversity.

Since its victory in the 2002 elections, the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, has driven the latest chapter in the process of recognizing the Kurds. Dubbed the “Kurdish opening” before being rebranded as the “democratic opening,” the AKP has attempted to temper conflict between Turkey's Kurdish minority and the military while gradually extending more of the rights available to all Turks to Kurdish communities.⁶ At its core, the issue turns on many Turks' acceptance that Kurds should enjoy equal rights as Turkish citizens but resentment of what they view as efforts to achieve special collective rights. At the same time, many Turkish Kurds believe that they need certain collective cultural and political rights due to historical repression and marginalization.

Resolving this issue is not an easy task—the legacy of fierce, state-driven nationalism dates back to the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. After leading the nationalist revolution that succeeded the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Turkey, spearheaded an accelerated process of secularization and modernization that implemented the Gregorian calendar and Latin alphabet, abolished religious courts and schools, and established a purely secular system of family law.⁷ Kemalism—Atatürk’s ideology—sought to aggressively build the power of the secular nation-state at the expense of acknowledging and integrating diversity. The perceived need to neutralize ethnic and religious differences drove this effort in the wake of the national disintegration and retrenchment that followed World War I. Atatürk and many of his supporters felt that the Ottoman Empire had been undermined, in part, by its diversity, which contributed to internal unrest that gave outside powers pretexts for territorial claims.

Even today, Turkey’s constitution leaves no room for the linguistic and cultural differences of minority communities, declaring, “The Turkish State, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.”⁸ The preamble is similarly categorical, stating, “No protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to ... [the] historical and moral values of Turkishness.”⁹ This constitution, written when Turkey was under military rule, has become largely unworkable in the face of the diversity of the Turkish people and the body politic, with little explicit legal acknowledgement of this cultural and linguistic diversity.

However, as economic standards improved after the end of the Cold War, the effort to establish cultural pluralism and acknowledge Turkey’s sometimes violent history with minority groups has gained impetus. But traditional Turkish fears of national fragmentation have not subsided. The emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan following the first Gulf War, as well as the militant PKK’s use of northern Iraq as a launching pad for attacks against the Turkish state, have contributed to these concerns. Indeed, American support for Iraqi Kurds has reinforced some Turks’ belief that the West wants to dismember Turkey, a fear that was used to justify the Turkish state’s ruthless campaign against the Kurds throughout the 1990s.¹⁰

But despite recent efforts to address Turkish diversity, Kemalism—with its narrow conception of nationhood and citizenship—has maintained a grip on Turkish society. A significant segment of the body politic continues to contest the very existence of ethnic and religious plurality in the country and fears any political assertiveness from Turkey’s minorities. After the decisive electoral success of the AKP in 2002, the government did take the positive steps of ending

martial law in the Kurdish regions and engaging in negotiations with representatives of Kurdish political groups. Even though this process has stalled, it represents an important move toward overcoming what political scientist Ümit Cizre describes as Turkey's "chronic political insecurity."¹¹

These are not abstract questions. They underpin the deepening of democratic practices in Turkey and, therefore, its future role as a part of the NATO alliance, potential member of the European Union, and partner of the United States. The most aggressive and undemocratic portions of the existing constitution and the worst state excesses of the past century are linked to these questions of minority rights, fears of separatism, and challenges to state authority. The opportunity now exists for the Turkish state to permanently recast its relations with minority groups and peacefully incorporate them into the political system. Events in the region have only added urgency to this effort.

But this goal cannot be achieved without concessions. Final resolution of the Kurdish question will be dictated by political realities shaping the negotiations and may ultimately require a new constitution shorn of ethnic definitions of citizenship and the most problematic ultranationalist provisions and electoral reforms, such as lowering the threshold to parliamentary representation. Some observers believe this resolution could be achieved without a new constitution through a series of laws and amendments. Peace will also likely require a final historical acknowledgment of the roughly 40,000 victims of the war in eastern Anatolia.¹²

With decades of delay, Turkish society is beginning to address these issues. To regain leverage in the region, it must acknowledge diversity as a strength instead of a weakness. The latest round of peace talks with the PKK launched in December 2012. This peace process is a critical component of moving Turkey toward a more inclusive society and a more confident regional role.

The recent history of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey

In 1984, the PKK—established in the late 1970s—launched a full-scale separatist guerilla war in southeastern Turkey. The PKK was responding to the aggressive suppression of Kurdish language and cultural rights by the Turkish state and sought an independent—and, at the time, communist—state for the Kurds, who are still referred to as the largest ethnic group in the world without a state.¹³ The conflict quickly escalated, with insurgent attacks focused in the eastern region but not limited to the traditional Kurdish homeland in southeastern Turkey. At the height of the conflict in the early 1990s, the PKK was estimated to have up to 15,000 fighters and considerable infrastructure in the Iraqi Qandil Mountains, just across the border from Turkey, as well as tacit support from then-President Hafez al-Assad in Syria, where the organization had its headquarters and a number of training camps.¹⁴

Confronting the PKK threat became the key driver of Turkish regional policy and, alongside its role in the NATO alliance against the Soviet Union, the animating impulse of its overall foreign policy. The end of the Cold War left Turkey more confident and able to act beyond its borders on this regional goal of eradicating the PKK. Turkish troops entered the Iraqi safe havens with military offensives of 20,000 troops in 1992 and 35,000 troops in 1995.¹⁵ Turkey threatened Syria with war over its support for the PKK in 1998, and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and much of the party infrastructure was forced to leave Syria.¹⁶ Öcalan was eventually captured in Kenya in 1999, brought to Turkey to face trial, and sentenced to death. His sentence, however, was later commuted to life imprisonment at the request of the European Union.¹⁷

The cost of the conflict was enormous. Since the outbreak of hostilities, the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University in Sweden estimates that there have been between 25,000 and 30,000 Kurdish fatalities, with the destruction of more than 2,000 villages.¹⁸ Other estimates put the total at as high as 40,000 or 44,000 dead.¹⁹ The International Crisis Group evaluated the economic cost at an estimated \$300 billion to \$450 billion.²⁰ Nearly 7,000 members of Turkish security forces—military, police, and gendarmerie—are estimated to have been killed in the conflict, according to government sources.²¹



A Kurdish female member of the Popular Protection Units stands guard at a checkpoint near the northeastern city of Qamishli, Syria. Syria's Kurds have dramatically strengthened their hold on the far northeast reaches of the country, carving out territory as they drive out Islamic militant fighters allied with the rebellion and declaring their own civil administration in areas under their control amid the chaos of the civil war.

(PHOTO: AP PHOTO/MANU BRABO)

The capture of Öcalan, the enormous financial cost of the fighting, and the growing desire for democratization has led many Turks to ponder the government's endgame for the Kurdish conflict. Following Öcalan's capture, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire and softened its demands for independence.²² Surely, as many began to argue in the late 1990s, it was time to recast the terms of the conflict from the strictly military framework used thus far by the Turkish state to a political negotiation and cultural dialogue.²³ The Kurdish question started to become about more than the PKK—and an increasing number of Turkish political leaders recognized that the Kurds and the PKK are not one and the same.

Liberal Turks and moderate religious groups who were chafing under aggressively secular state institutions recognized that a number of immediate domestic goals revolved around the necessity of establishing a more inclusive notion of Turkish citizenship. These goals included the need for a new constitution to replace the existing document; the EU requirement to establish judicial independence and press freedom in line with European norms; and the abolition of draconian anti-terror laws and special, secret courts. Indeed, it was this political alliance—bolstered by the rise of a new Anatolian middle class—that would transform Turkish politics in 2002 with the electoral victory of the AKP.

There were political considerations driving the process as well: An estimated 2 million to 4 million Kurds lived in Istanbul alone, and the group had become an important reservoir of voters.²⁴ The leaders of the AKP tried to emphasize “brotherly unity” between Turks and Kurds, invoking Islamic tradition to avoid confronting the legacy of state violence and forced assimilation head on, a confrontation that would undoubtedly trigger a nationalist backlash.²⁵ It became clear that a permanent solution would only be found if common political ground were established that acknowledged past crimes and reversed the nationalist Turkish heritage codified in the constitution and reinforced by the state-dominated education system.



Men with their faces covered by images of jailed Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Öcalan demonstrate during the Nowruz celebrations in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakır, Turkey. The banner reads, “Negotiation or the war!”

(PHOTO: AP PHOTO)

The AKP’s decisive electoral victory in 2002 allowed the party to eschew coalitions and form a single-party government, the first in more than a decade,²⁶ and provided a solid political platform upon which to base reforms. This gave rise to hopes of a new era in minority relations and the abolition of bans on Kurdish education and broadcasting—part of a wider AKP push to open the political process to people beyond the traditional Kemalist elite, such as minorities and devout Muslims. The following year, the Turkish Parliament—eyeing EU membership—passed laws that eased restrictions on freedom of speech and Kurdish language rights and reduced the political role of the military. Turkish state television broadcasted the first-ever Kurdish-language program in 2004, a sign of the AKP’s new openness and

the state's acceptance of defeat in the effort to control Kurdish diaspora and unofficial communications. Kurdish-language media has grown since then, leading to several second-order effects, including an increased sense of a pan-Kurdish political dialogue and rising mutual intelligibility of Kurdish language and dialects.²⁷

Evren Balta Paker, a professor of political science at Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul, describes this juncture:

In this period, all political camps grew aware that the consolidation of [the] AKP's political rule was contingent on the normalization of the Kurdish issue and the demilitarization of politics. Both proponents and opponents of [the] AKP started to view democratization as the ground for "strategic" trench warfare. Whereas both the military authority and the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) approached democracy through the lens of "secularism", [the] AKP interpreted democracy through the lens of "civilian rule." [The] period would be dominated by a conflict between these two perceptions of democracy. In fact, neither side had a comprehensive program of democracy; both expressed a strategic demand for fragmented democracy in order to consolidate its own power. Neither side would refrain from recourse to non-democratic methods whenever this strategic demand for democracy failed to yield the desired results.²⁸

In the absence of fundamental reforms, however, tensions flared, with a series of bloody PKK attacks on Turkish military and civilian targets in 2007. Nearly 50 Turkish soldiers were killed in October 2007 alone.²⁹ In response, the Turkish military conducted operations along the Turkish-Iraqi border against Kurdish rebels. Turkish forces launched numerous air and ground raids into northern Iraq in pursuit of PKK fighters between October 2007 and February 2008. These actions eventually led to improved intelligence sharing between American and Turkish forces, launched in an effort to halt Turkish military incursions that the United States felt threatened efforts to achieve stability in Iraq.³⁰

To defuse the situation following the AKP's second decisive electoral victory in 2007 and the show of military strength in late 2007 and early 2008, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan held a rare meeting with Ahmet Turk, the leader of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party, or DTP, in August 2009. This meeting would provide the foundation for the so-called Kurdish opening, which tried to provide space for a negotiated settlement.³¹ Three months later, the government introduced measures in parliament to increase Kurdish language rights and reduce the military presence in the mainly Kurdish southeast.

The opening proved short lived, however, as the efforts to extend piecemeal rights to Kurds failed to alleviate grievances in the absence of fundamental reforms to anti-terrorism laws or the drafting of a new constitution. The AKP government also failed to explain the details of the program and convince the public of its necessity before its announcement. When PKK fighters entered Turkey from Iraq following the announcement and were welcomed at a large rally by locals and officials of the Kurdish-majority DTP, a predecessor to today's Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP, in Turkey, the media coverage of the incident triggered a strong nationalist reaction and a hasty political retreat by the AKP, fearful of losing votes.³² While the PKK members entered Turkey at the invitation of the government and were processed by courts at the border, the AKP had not prepared the Turkish body politic for the image of PKK fighters openly celebrating on Turkish soil and gave in to fierce criticism. The failure of the opening resulted in escalating military confrontation and the banning of the DTP, subsequently succeeded by the BDP.³³

The failure of the Kurdish opening in 2009 inaugurated another period of sharp violence between the Turkish state and the PKK, with persistent attacks on Turkish soldiers throughout 2010, 2011, and 2012. Despite ongoing secret negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, or MIT, in Norway from 2009 to 2011, the bloodshed continued.³⁴ The collapse of these secret talks inaugurated the bloodiest period of the conflict since the capture of Öcalan: The International Crisis Group counted more than 900 deaths, including at least 304 Turkish security forces or police, 533 militants, and 91 civilians—34 of whom were killed by the Turkish Air Force in a single raid—from 2011 to 2013.³⁵

In this context, it is important to recognize a more fundamental point about the Turkish state's Kurdish policy: It is often swept up in larger Turkish political debates or used in the service of broader strategic goals. In the early years of the AKP government, the Kurdish issue fell under the umbrella of facilitating EU membership, partly to open up politics to minorities and religious people—and thus to the AKP itself—and partly to weaken the military's role in the political sphere. More recently, the peace process has become important in light of efforts to reduce energy shortfalls through outreach to the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq.

Currently, Prime Minister Erdoğan has a vested interest in maintaining the process to hold together his political base in the face of corruption inquiries and growing international skepticism of his authoritarian tendencies. The process simultaneously neutralizes the pro-Kurdish BDP's role as a progressive opposition party and maintains one of the last positive initiatives in the eyes of the international community. Another major motivation for Prime Minister Erdoğan is his need to secure Kurdish votes in his bid for the Turkish presidency in the elections scheduled for

August 10, 2014. The balance of motivation for the AKP's engagement with the BDP—viewed by some as the political arm of the Kurdish nationalist movement—is open to debate, but the Turkish state has still never engaged with the issue in a comprehensive way with the sole goal of achieving a lasting peace.

Prime Minister Erdoğan seemed to revive the peace process when he confirmed in December 2012 that the head of the MIT had been in contact with jailed PKK leader Öcalan in an effort to achieve a negotiated ceasefire and disarmament.³⁶ But despite renewed mediation, the Turkish government continued to suspect the PKK's intentions and refused to decrease military pressure on the organization. Although the PKK had been visibly withdrawing from Turkey into its Iraqi strongholds in the Qandil Mountains, Turkish armed forces—with American intelligence support—continued to operate attack helicopters and drones over areas of PKK activity. In Diyarbakır, Turkey's largest Kurdish-majority city, Kurds still complained of governmental marginalization, judicial discrimination, political arrests, bans on public use of the Kurdish language, and economic strife—despite another symbolic and historic meeting of Prime Minister Erdoğan and Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, in the city.³⁷ President Barzani—whose father Mustafa Barzani founded the KDP, which has dominated Iraqi Kurdish politics for years—had long been branded an insurgent by the Turkish state, so his reinvention as an ally of the conservative Turkish government came as a surprise. This event also demonstrated some of the inconsistencies inherent in Turkish treatment of different Kurdish political actors, as the PKK is still considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union, and its leader Öcalan is in a Turkish prison.



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, center, Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, left, and Kurdish singer Sivan Perwer, right, attend a mass marriage ceremony for 400 couples in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakır, Turkey. Barzani was in Turkey to support the Turkish government's Kurdish peace process.

(PHOTO: AP PHOTO)

But the most dramatic recent development in the Turkish-Kurdish story came in March 2013, when Öcalan publicly called for an end to the PKK's armed struggle and lent his support to a delicate new effort at peace, a move welcomed by Prime Minister Erdoğan.³⁸ With Öcalan, still lionized by many Kurds and apparently influential at all levels of the PKK, working for peace, the prospects seem better now than they have for decades. The increasing diversity of Turkish society, inter-marriage, the shift away from strict Kemalist state ideology, and the costs of the violent struggle mean there is new political space for a negotiated settlement; two-thirds of Turkish society favor the settlement, and many hard questions—including the personal future of Öcalan—are discussed openly, something that would have been strictly taboo just a decade ago. The details of a viable disarmament process and the reintegration of Kurdish insurgents into legal political structures remain to be hashed out, but a political solution seems possible.

The status of the peace process

The ceasefire between the Turkish government and the PKK remained in place throughout 2013 and has held for the first part of this year, but the durability of the peace remains unknown. While previous breaks in the fighting have proved fragile, structural trends such as intermarriage, economic growth across Turkey, and overall integration—along with short-term political conditions such as Öcalan’s participation in the process—may make this particular instance different. The domestic political turmoil that has engulfed Turkey over the past year—including the June 2013 Gezi Park protests and the corruption scandal that broke in December 2013—has drawn public attention away from the peace process.³⁹ But this domestic political distraction might be good for the process, allowing both sides room to politically maneuver. The rise of ISIS along Turkey’s southern border may also prompt Ankara to acquiesce on the PYD’s movement toward autonomy in Syria and increase the urgency of the PKK peace process.

Beyond immediate security concerns, many in the AKP still recognize the opportunity to use a long-term peace arrangement as a bridge to a fresh start in the dysfunctional relationship with the Kurdish minority, along with the economic benefits that could accrue if a lasting peace is achieved. But the AKP has been focused on political damage control and preparation for the first-ever popular presidential election in August. On July 10, the AKP passed a new bill granting legal protections to officials negotiating with the PKK—which was previously illegal—and allowing the government to offer amnesty to PKK fighters as part of a disarmament program.⁴⁰ The new bill could be interpreted as another tangible step toward peace or as an election-year ploy to shore up support from Kurds—crucial if Prime Minister Erdoğan is to win the presidency in August. Despite the distraction of the impending election and Turkey’s domestic political crisis, the ultimate success or failure of the process will have implications for Kurdish regional dynamics, for Turkish relations with the United States and the European Union, and for U.S. interests in the region—particularly in Iraq and Syria.

One challenge facing the peace process is that it is difficult for those outside the Turkish government to assess its progress because information is so tightly held within AKP ranks. Indeed, it is difficult to even speak of a formal process, given the fact that the negotiations are taking place intermittently through unknown intermediaries, lacked a legal basis until the passage of the July 10 bill, and have not brought in acting commanders of PKK field units or leaders of the Turkish opposition parties. Nonetheless, this informal process has achieved several obvious positive developments since the beginning of the latest peace initiative, most notably the beginning of a PKK withdrawal from Turkey to camps in northern Iraq and Syria and the lack of casualties over the past year.⁴¹ Many critics observe, however, that the process is essentially a “two-man show,”⁴² involving Prime Minister Erdoğan and Abdullah Öcalan, with only a small inner circle beyond these two principals having input and visibility. While there are advantages to having a streamlined process—including ease in decision making and fewer voices of dissent—stakeholders excluded from the process have begun to express concerns, and the AKP may be repeating the mistakes of the ill-fated Kurdish opening of 2009. Among them is a lack of outside expertise on useful precedents, such as relevant peace negotiations that have occurred elsewhere in the world.

Furthermore, the AKP has sought to manage this important national process with only very limited participation of the opposition parties. CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has repeatedly asked Prime Minister Erdoğan to include a wider range of Turkish elected officials in the process and to diversify the stakeholders by establishing a reconciliation commission in parliament with all parties represented. At the same time, Kılıçdaroğlu has opposed the Turkish government’s direct engagement with PKK leader Öcalan, most likely due to pressure from nationalists within his own party.⁴³ The absence of a clearly defined road map and the lack of transparency are limiting the broader discussion of the issue within Turkish society, which is crucial to building political consensus on such a controversial and emotional subject.

A second challenge is the potential for the process to disintegrate if either principal pulls back from the process due to philosophical or personal disagreements or domestic political considerations. Prime Minister Erdoğan and Öcalan obviously do not have a history of partnership, and the 2014 elections—the nationwide local elections last March and the presidential election this August—have introduced an unpredictable element to the negotiations. Indeed, opposition politicians and some outside experts speculate that Prime Minister Erdoğan and the PKK are pursuing the peace talks for political advantage and that motivation to continue working through a difficult process will wane after the presidential

elections in August, when the prime minister will no longer need to reach out for Kurdish votes.⁴⁴ Of course, there is a fundamental power imbalance with Öcalan imprisoned and at the mercy of Prime Minister Erdoğan's government. Likewise, the two men are not sitting down directly with each other, and—with all negotiations passing through interlocutors—the risk of misunderstandings is high.

Another, more basic challenge is reason for concern—and possibly greater Western involvement. Turkey's conservative political leadership began the peace process by emphasizing Islamic unity and values, drawing a strict distinction between the AKP and its Kemalist predecessors, who had stressed the concept of "Turkishness."⁴⁵ This transformation of the politics of the conflict was an important step away from the legacy of state repression of Kurdish language and culture, but it also exaggerated the cultural and religious dimensions of what is still largely a conflict over political economy and the right of self-determination within a diverse nation-state. To deflect criticism of this cultural and religious outreach by nationalists, some AKP officials framed the solution as a step toward a "Great Turkey" strategy to enhance Ankara's influence in the wider region.⁴⁶

The political strategy to deflect nationalist criticism while reaching out to Kurds seems to be working—at least for the time being. While the March local elections were primarily a referendum on Prime Minister Erdoğan and the AKP, the party also received support from Kurds in urban areas where the BDP did not field competitive candidates, and the victory could be interpreted, in part, as demonstrating the political benefits of expending political capital on the peace process. Alternatively, despite claiming to support the process, it is unclear how committed to its conclusion or adept at managing its intricacies other political parties would be should they win power. Indeed, the CHP continues to rely on nationalist support, and the Nationalist Movement Party, or MHP—another opposition group—is a devoted nationalist party. Even the moderate CHP elements might shy away from alienating the older, nationalist portion of their political coalition by pursuing the peace process.

The AKP's victory in the March nationwide local elections has bolstered Prime Minister Erdoğan's perceived strength as a leader in further negotiations with the PKK. The AKP's victory and fresh political capital have increased the chances that the Erdoğan-Öcalan dialogue will remain a feature of Turkish politics. In addition, the results of the March elections have made it clear that Prime Minister Erdoğan must maintain Kurdish support if he hopes to secure

election as Turkey's first directly elected president. Kurdish support for the AKP in the March elections eliminated the possibility that a defeat for Prime Minister Erdoğan could undermine the peace negotiations, causing the AKP to limit his freedom to pursue a Kurdish settlement. But clear Kurdish support for Prime Minister Erdoğan may also entrench CHP opposition to a settlement if opposition parties are given a more substantial role in the peace process. Hence, both the AKP and the BDP have taken a cautious approach; the BDP has named its own candidate and warned that Kurdish support should “not be taken for granted,”⁴⁷ while Prime Minister Erdoğan has pledged to continue the peace process if elected president and has pushed through the bill to provide a path to amnesty and a legal framework for negotiations.⁴⁸

While there have been significant public developments over the past year, none of them demonstrate much progress in permanently easing tensions. The AKP presented and passed reforms meant to advance the peace process in October 2013, including allowing Kurdish-language education in private schools and electoral campaigns and the repeal of the law that required Turkish students to recite a nationalist vow each week in school. But the package did not commit to lowering the 10 percent threshold for admission to parliament—a key limit on Kurdish representation in Ankara—or provide for Kurdish-language education in state schools.⁴⁹ Öcalan made rare public comments reacting to the package, noting that while the process had eased social tensions, “mountainous problems” remained.⁵⁰ In a written statement released by the BDP, he remarked that he was “waiting for the state to respond with meaningful, deep negotiations,” and that while he remained hopeful, he was “repeating once again [his] historic call so that this hope does not turn into disillusionment.”⁵¹ These comments were watched closely by PKK fighters in the mountains of northern Iraq, who have been considering whether to maintain the ceasefire after what is, in their minds, a disappointing reform package.⁵² These concerns about the lack of significant reform compounded the misgivings that led PKK units to suspend their pullout from southeastern Turkey in fall 2013 due to the AKP's failure to make enough progress on democratization.⁵³

Another complication is that the desired areas of focus for the talks are not fully aligned between the PKK and the AKP at this juncture. The PKK expects Turkey to make significant progress in improving Kurdish rights, including dismantling the anti-terrorism law that has been used to jail thousands of individuals with alleged links to the PKK and allowing Kurdish youth to be educated in their own language in public schools. It accuses Ankara of building new dams and military posts in Kurdish areas and not properly consulting Kurds about reform plans. For its part,

the AKP insists that the PKK must withdraw fully from Turkey and lay down its arms in order for peace talks to advance.⁵⁴ The process remains deadlocked at this phase, with the PKK military withdrawal halted and the Turkish state unable or unwilling to go further without complete PKK disarmament. Several incidents in late 2013 and early 2014 indicate how delicate this stalemate could be, including PKK fighters' blockades of highways near Diyarbakır; several kidnappings, including of Turkish soldiers, reportedly carried out by the PKK; and the ongoing construction of gendarmerie posts, which the PKK views as a provocation.⁵⁵

The incentives for the Turkish government to get past these stumbling blocks and conclude a permanent peace are strong, with regional and international governmental stakeholders also poised to benefit. For the AKP, a successful resolution of the Kurdish issue could help neutralize one of the major obstacles to meaningful democratic reform in Turkey—if, indeed, that remains a goal of the party.⁵⁶ In addition, a successful completion of the peace talks with the PKK and a political solution to the multidecade conflict with the PKK would be a major boon to Prime Minister Erdoğan in the months leading up to the presidential election in August.⁵⁷



A masked man in a guerrilla outfit holds a flag of the PKK during the Nowruz celebrations in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakır, Turkey. Nowruz, the Farsi-language word for “new year,” is an ancient Persian festival celebrated on the first day of spring, March 21, in the Central Asian countries of Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iran.

(PHOTO: AP PHOTO)

It would help him solidify support among wavering or hostile constituencies such as the Kurdish population, urban liberals, young people, and the conflict-weary population of southeastern Turkey, most of whom are eager to move on from the PKK conflict and see their country focus on improving political freedom and economic development. This is the logic behind the July introduction and passage of the bill to legalize direct talks with the PKK and allow the government to take “all necessary measures” to create a path for PKK fighters to disarm and reintegrate.⁵⁸ While a pathway to amnesty, disarmament, and dismantlement of Qandil Mountain camps will be crucial to the resolution of the conflict, the bill remains very vague at this point—leading to accusations that it is just an election-year ploy.

To move forward, the AKP and its political leaders have to overcome several challenges. The party has no strong presence in Kurdish civil society and lacks trusted interlocutors.⁵⁹ The AKP’s electoral presence is likewise limited—despite success in the 2014 local elections in provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Muş, Bingöl, Elazığ, and Malatya on the periphery of the Kurdish regions, the BDP won all the provinces in the Kurdish heartland.⁶⁰ Also, despite some success bringing infrastructure investments such as irrigation projects to southeastern Anatolia,⁶¹ economic development and educational attainment in Kurdish-majority areas still lag behind the rest of Turkey, leading to anger and disillusionment.⁶²

Most importantly, the current AKP discourse tends to limit the question of Kurdish self-determination to cultural issues and avoids the more pressing political steps that need to be taken. Kurds want a serious debate about new ways to administer local economies, provide local government, and decide on infrastructure plans in the Kurdish-majority regions. In essence, the Kurds want a higher degree of autonomy—a term that has taken on such symbolic value in Turkish political discourse that it has become almost meaningless. The Turkish state and many Turkish citizens view Kurdish autonomy as an anathema. The issue of public school education elicits particularly vehement opposition from many Turks. Dating back to Atatürk’s transformation of the country, control of public education has been a source of great political power and the root of many Turks’ political consciousness. Therefore, education means the difference between, as they see it, Kurdish assimilation into Turkish society or a movement toward a Kurdish-Turkish federation. For nationalist Turks schooled in the vision of Atatürk, federation is tantamount to national breakup and decline, while for Kurds assimilation has historically meant shedding cultural freedom and ceding all political authority to Ankara.

The regional dimensions of the peace process

The peace process in Turkey cannot be seen in isolation from the regional dynamics that affect it, particularly the increasing leverage of Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire completed by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne split the region's Kurdish population among four sovereign states—Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran—administered by central governments based in distant cities. This historical split forced the Kurdish population to develop in different ways and at different rates, while occasionally working collectively across borders.

Turkey may finally be starting to resolve its century-old Kurdish issue, buoyed by the PKK ceasefire. At the same time, Syrian Kurds are seeking autonomy while the country collapses. In Iraq, of course, the Kurds remain deeply divided from the country's Arab population, an unfortunate legacy of the country's history and especially of former President Saddam Hussein's rule. Most recently, Kurdish Peshmerga have taken control of Kirkuk, providing security in the wake of ISIS's rapid offensive against central government forces, which sowed chaos through much of northern Iraq, thereby solidifying a de facto partitioning of the country. The Iranian Kurds remain under the control of Tehran, but are closely watching the changing circumstances of neighboring Kurdish minorities. The central governments of Syria, Iraq, and Iran are also monitoring the Turkish peace process closely and have stakes in its success or failure. Many Kurdish nationalists believe that the movement is poised for a significant breakthrough and have tried to capitalize on the regional chaos caused by the implosion of Syria, the hostile relations between Turkey and the Assad regime, and the collapse of Baghdad's authority in northern Iraq.⁶³ These regional dynamics will affect the ultimate success or failure of the peace process.

Syria

The crisis in Syria has thrown the Middle East's political future into flux and will continue to influence the course of the Turkey-PKK peace process. Far from ending with the U.N. chemical weapons deal, the Syrian civil war has sent destabilizing currents through all of the country's neighbors, though some Syrian Kurds believe they have a chance to build political capital and consolidate control of their territory. In particular, the PYD has taken control of parts of northern Syria along the borders with Turkey and Iraq.⁶⁴ The PYD-led Syrian Kurdish Council unilaterally declared "self-rule" of three separate Kurdish cantons on November 12, 2013, an announcement condemned by some other Syrian Kurdish parties, the Turkish government, and President Barzani's Iraqi KDP.⁶⁵

The PYD's forces control sizable swaths of territory and have fought jihadi and Al Qaeda-linked groups such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS, and they have recently drawn fighters across the border from Turkey.⁶⁶ The PYD has also occasionally cracked down on dissenting Kurdish groups—mostly younger and liberal Kurds who disagree with the PYD's authoritarian tendencies and supporters of President Barzani's KDP in Iraq, which is at odds with the PYD. Indeed, the PYD's declaration of autonomy undermined previous efforts by President Barzani to mediate between the various Kurdish political groups in Syria and bring the PYD into a united Syrian Kurdish political alliance, efforts that culminated in the formation of the Supreme Kurdish Council in summer 2012.⁶⁷ The Supreme Kurdish Council at least provided a venue for the Barzani-aligned Kurdish National Council⁶⁸ and the PYD, along with other Syrian Kurdish groups, to air grievances and coordinate action, but the PYD's battlefield successes outpaced the Supreme Kurdish Council's political progress. As the overall Syrian conflict moved into a purely military framework, the PYD's military predominance made it the driving force in Syrian Kurdish-controlled areas, leading it to exert its authority over dissenting groups in areas under its control.

Despite the PYD's unilateral steps toward autonomy, the 2 million to 3 million Kurds in Syria—about 10 percent of the overall population—are fragmented, partly as a result of past repression by the Assad regime. Since the murder of Sheikh Mohammed Mashouq al-Khaznawi in 2005, apparently by Syrian intelligence operatives, Syrian Kurds have largely lacked a unifying leadership figure.⁶⁹ Many Kurds support the PYD's military gains and are happy to have a Kurdish enclave in Syria, even if they may disagree with aspects of the PYD's political platform.⁷⁰ Perhaps most importantly, the efforts of the PYD's military arm—the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG—to protect local populations from attacks by extremist groups such as ISIS have earned them a modicum of legitimacy.

The PYD's stated goals include ensuring the right of Syrian Kurds to govern themselves and promoting democracy and equitable representation within the Syrian republic, but the group rejects Kurdish secession from Syria.⁷¹ The PYD was founded as a Syrian offshoot of the PKK, and the Turkish and Syrian militant organizations have had close links—hence the similarity of the PYD's position to Öcalan's concept of “democratic autonomy”—dating back to the era of current President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad. Then-President Hafez al-Assad, angered by Turkey's damming of the Euphrates River in 1984, supported the PKK as a lever to pressure Turkey from time to time and to appease the Kurdish minorities in his own country, though he also had deep reservations about potential Kurdish separatism within Syria and oversaw attempts to resettle Kurdish areas with Arab settlers.⁷²

Despite the PYD's stated democratic goals, there have been abuses—for example, the PYD authorities' violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in Amuda, which left six people dead, dozens wounded, and 90 activists detained.⁷³ Nevertheless, the YPG has emerged as a formidable force in the region. The YPG is said to have several thousand fighters, which would place it among the largest military organization in northern Syria.⁷⁴ Unlike the PKK, however, neither the United States nor Turkey has ever officially listed the PYD as a terrorist organization.

The PYD seized control of many areas it now holds when the Assad regime withdrew its forces in July 2012—effectively ceding control without a fight. The PYD took advantage, filling the security vacuum and providing protection from jihadi forces. The regime's withdrawal was part of a strategy to retaliate against Turkey for supporting the rebels and to split the Kurds from the majority-Arab rebel forces.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the circumstances of the Assad regime's withdrawal from Kurdish areas of Syria and the lack of major fighting between the PYD and the regime have led many—including Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, President Barzani's KDP in Iraq, and many among the majority-Arab rebels—to argue that the PYD has a tacit deal with the Assad regime, though there have been occasional, minor clashes between the PYD and Assad-regime forces.⁷⁶ PYD leader Salih Muslim Muhammad, for his part, has repeatedly rejected this claim, arguing that YPG forces are the most effective forces confronting ISIS and that they only want to protect the population in their areas.⁷⁷



Kurdish female members of the Popular Protection Units stand guard at a checkpoint near the northeastern city of Qamishli, Syria. Syria's Kurds have taken first steps toward creating an autonomous region similar to the one across the border in Iraq, which is run as virtually a separate country. But the Kurds' drive has angered rebels who are fighting to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. (PHOTO: AP PHOTO/MANU BRABO)

The Kurdish forces' battlefield successes have been impressive since the Assad regime's withdrawal. The YPG captured the town of Manajeer, near the Turkish border, and expelled all Al Qaeda-linked forces from the border province of Ras al-Ain in late 2013. Over the first few months of this year, the YPG captured 19 towns and villages spanning Syria's northeastern border. Just one week before capturing Manajeer, the YPG overtook the Iraqi border-crossing point in the town of Yarubiya.⁷⁸ Despite the uneasy and sometimes violent relationship between the PYD and the patchwork of Sunni rebel groups in Syria, Kurdish forces have managed to preserve a modicum of stability in areas under their control. Fighting continues for control of key towns and border crossings, such as Ceylanpinar-Serekaniye, and the access to outside supplies that the crossings bring.⁷⁹

With the consolidation of political control in northern Syria under the PYD, conditions have emerged that point to the creation of a viable transborder Kurdish nationalist movement, the first of its kind since World War I. Indeed, the flow of PKK fighters across the border to join the PYD's fight in Syria can be seen, in part, as evidence of a consolidation of Kurdish self-perception. Even Kurdish supporters of President Barzani in Iraq—no friends of the PYD—may see their interests as more closely aligned with the PYD's struggle against ISIS. These developments have changed the regional power equilibrium, as some argue that Syrian Kurdish autonomy could strengthen the hand of hardline PKK elements in Turkey, which might attempt to operate outside Syria even if the peace in Turkey holds.⁸⁰ On the

other hand, hardline Kurdish nationalists and PKK fighters are leaving Turkey to help secure autonomy in Syria, drawing potential violent actors away from confrontation with Turkey. Likewise, fighters for both the PYD and the PKK view the confrontation with ISIS as a more pressing fight. They may increasingly see Turkey as a potential partner in that struggle, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, the Assad regime has no reason to want a peaceful outcome to the PKK negotiations with Turkey, given Turkey's support for the Arab rebels, and would likely seize any opportunity to derail the negotiations in order to cause a problem for Ankara. But the Syrian state is a shadow of its former self and has effectively ceded control of most of the northeast to the Kurds to focus on fighting the majority-Sunni Arab rebels elsewhere, meaning its leverage is limited. Barring a major turn in the momentum of the Syrian civil war in favor of the Assad regime or a major provocation by Turkey toward the PYD, it is hard to see a scenario in which President Assad has the ability to undermine the negotiations on his own.

While the PYD has had success consolidating military control over regions in northern Syria and has declared autonomy,⁸¹ major challenges remain, including the continuing presence of the Syrian central government, serious disagreements between the PYD and Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq, the exclusion of Syrian Kurds from the Geneva negotiations to achieve a political settlement, and basic questions about the form of political economy that will be established in the newly autonomous areas. The rise of ISIS has led to some rapprochement between the PYD and Barzani-affiliated groups in Syria and across the border in Iraq—for example, through the easing of the KRG's "blockade" of certain border crossings to PYD-controlled areas.⁸² The PYD must still institute a more inclusive and accountable form of government and share power with all elements of society in the majority-Kurdish areas, including other ethnic groups, in order to gain access to sources of international support—but that is difficult to execute or to verify under the current circumstances. The United States should clearly convey the requirements for cooperation to the PYD, such as some form of political power-sharing with other Kurdish political entities, including those with ties to the KDP.

A political understanding among Syrian Kurds is still possible; there is room today for the PYD and the PKK to move past their Cold War revolutionary traditions and broaden their appeal to an expanded range of Kurdish actors. The threat of ISIS, now viewed as more immediate and serious than the fight against Turkish or Syrian state oppression, may precipitate such a political opening. Indeed, ideology only serves to marginalize both organizations today, undermining their ability to consolidate democratic autonomy and contribute to regional stability.

Indeed, in his writings from prison, Öcalan has acknowledged that the PKK's "theory, programme and praxis of the 1970s produced nothing but futile separatism and violence."⁸³ For Syrian Kurds, a political understanding could strengthen their position and unity, reassuring Turkey of their ideological openness, thereby removing a major outside opponent and paving the way for potential cooperation with the United States and other Western powers.

Given the absence of any good options or morally unimpeachable actors in the Syrian conflict, a political conversation between PYD leaders and American officials would be practical—Turkish officials have already undertaken such meetings, despite their hostility toward the PYD. A recent analysis by former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford emphasized that the PYD will emerge "somewhat victorious" from the ongoing conflict.⁸⁴ The United States and Turkey did little to address Kurdish concerns as part of the early efforts to organize the overall Syrian opposition, meaning that both powers now face a long-term process to convince the PYD that its strategy of tactical alliances in pursuit of Kurdish autonomy should be subordinated to wider regional efforts at stability. Still, a political dialogue would begin this process, improve understanding of the situation on the ground, build personal relationships with Kurdish leaders, and help enhance political options in the region in the long term. Indeed, it is in the interest of the U.S. and European governments. Finally, the PYD's consolidation of power in northern Syria raises the long-term stakes of the Turkish-PKK peace process, as any breakdown in negotiations and return to military conflict would see Turkey confronting a hardened and well-entrenched military force across the border in Syria that is able to aid PKK operations in Turkey.



A Kurdish Peshmerga fighter stands guard as new equipment arrives at Kalak refinery on the outskirts of Erbil, Iraq, as Kurdish authorities are trying to help ease the fuel shortage. Islamic militants have laid siege to Iraq's largest oil refinery in the city of Baiji.

(PHOTO: AP PHOTO)

Iraq

As the PKK negotiations continue in Turkey and as the PYD consolidates its autonomy in Syria, the Iraqi KRG remains the best-established Kurdish political entity. The KRG's position has only been enhanced in the short term by the collapse of Baghdad's authority in the north following ISIS's advance and the fall of Mosul. The fall of Mosul placed Kurdish stability and the effectiveness of the Peshmerga in stark relief and allowed the KRG to take control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and its pipelines—a long-standing Kurdish goal—without provoking a direct clash with Baghdad. The KRG's position was further boosted by the recent receipt of a \$100 million payment for oil it piped through Turkey to international markets—a key step in the KRG's quest for energy and economic independence.⁸⁵

Because of its strong position, the KRG plays a crucial role in engaging Kurds across the Middle East and, for many Kurdish nationalists, raises immediate hopes for a Kurdish state. Massoud Barzani, president of the KRG and leader of the KDP, has worked diligently to solidify his political control over northern Iraq and to cultivate an image as the father of the broader Kurdish people. But while President Barzani is an important elected figure and is working hard to position himself as a representative of the Kurdish people as a whole, he does not represent the entire Kurdish community. Indeed, his cultivation of close ties with Prime Minister Erdoğan has cemented a split with the Syrian PYD, which has its roots in political disagreements

between the KDP and the PYD; rivalry for leadership of the pan-Kurdish political movement; and personal disputes between President Barzani, Öcalan, and Muslim Muhammad. Nonetheless, President Barzani's personal ambitions and nationalist aspirations will be important in shaping the future of the Kurdish regions.

President Barzani has reasons to be self-confident; northern Iraq represents an exceptional success given the troubled history of the country over the past two decades, though human rights challenges remain.⁸⁶ The U.S.-led no-fly zone to protect Kurdish civilians in the wake of the first Gulf War resulted in the return of many refugees and gave a degree of de facto autonomy to the region.⁸⁷ In part since the 1991 Gulf War, but particularly since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan has been largely autonomous. Parliamentary democracy has produced two successive presidential elections, economic development, and some of Iraq's lowest poverty rates.

Economically, the KRG is easily the most impressive Kurdish case, exporting nearly 400,000 barrels of crude oil per day by the end of 2013⁸⁸ and receiving about 15 percent of the central Iraqi budget—though these payments are in arrears given the collapse of central government authority, disputes over Kurdish efforts to export oil independently, and the inability to form a consensus government in Baghdad.⁸⁹ At the same time, the KRG relies heavily on the energy sector as a whole and its share of the central Iraqi oil revenues in particular.⁹⁰ While this reliance has begun to change with the takeover of Kirkuk and the first payment for independent oil shipments through Turkey, the legal basis for these sales is still unclear. The Supreme Court of Iraq has delayed its ruling—meaning the KRG's ability to attract international loans to finance its budget is still in flux.⁹¹

This reliance on Baghdad—with which the Kurds have a deeply troubled relationship—has led President Barzani to cultivate deeper trade and energy ties with Turkey over the past two years. Indeed, the proceeds from the first independent sale of Kurdish oil were deposited with Halkbank, Turkey's state-owned lender.⁹² These energy politics underpin the confrontation with Baghdad, inevitably pulling the United States into the conflict. The United States' official position has been that all Iraqi oil must be exported through the State Oil Marketing Organization of Iraq, while the KRG believes it should be able to market its oil independently.⁹³ A multibillion-dollar pipeline deal, solidified in 2012 and designed to help meet Turkish demand by pumping oil directly from the KRG, has heightened the tensions. The pipelines, when finished, could export up to 1 million barrels of oil per day to Turkey, with much of it bypassing the central Iraqi oil network.⁹⁴

The United States, concerned that these deals could tear the country apart, has continued to assert that the deals require Baghdad's approval. Meanwhile, Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki has repeatedly condemned the move and has threatened to sue Ankara for dealing directly with the KRG, as well as resorting to tactics such as closing Iraqi airspace to Turkey's energy minister in an attempt to block negotiations with the KRG.⁹⁵ Most recently, Baghdad stopped cargo flights to Erbil and Sulaimaniya in retaliation for independent oil exports and Kurdish ministers' decision to boycott cabinet meetings in protest of Prime Minister al-Maliki's accusations that the Kurds were aiding ISIS.⁹⁶

The fall of Mosul and ISIS's remarkable gains in northern Iraq have changed the overall strategic picture, dramatically strengthening the KRG's hand and weakening Prime Minister al-Maliki. The need for Kurdish support in countering ISIS, forming a new Iraqi government, and holding the country together may mean that concessions to the Kurds on oil revenues and control of Kirkuk are necessary. President Barzani certainly believes so, declaring that Mosul's fall has made a "new reality and a new Iraq," a sign that the KRG may not relinquish control of Kirkuk to the central government if security in the north is restored.⁹⁷ U.S. policy has only begun to react to this new reality, and there are signs that Washington may be acknowledging that its principled stance on revenue sharing may have been overtaken by events on the ground. Signs of a potential softening of U.S. policy toward the KRG were visible in Secretary of State Kerry's visit to Erbil in June⁹⁸ and Vice President Biden's meeting with KRG officials at the White House in July.⁹⁹

But despite Washington's reservations and Baghdad's protests, dynamics on the ground have continued largely unabated. Iraq was Turkey's second-largest export market in 2012, accounting for \$11 billion in trade, up from \$8.3 billion in 2011, and Turkey was a primary source for crucial items such as machinery, cereals, produce, and finished metal products. Iraq, meanwhile, accounted for \$3.1 billion in imports to Turkey in 2012, up from \$2.5 billion in 2011.¹⁰⁰ While trade to the KRG is not broken out from the overall Iraqi statistics, the geography means that the Kurdish regions are central to this bilateral trade. These growing economic ties have brought closer political cooperation; President Barzani has effectively allied himself with Prime Minister Erdoğan. This new relationship was on display at a public rally in Diyarbakır in November 2013, at which the two men appeared on stage together and President Barzani offered his full support to the Turkish-Kurdish peace process—an unthinkable sight just a few years ago.¹⁰¹ The rise of ISIS—and its targeting of Turkish diplomats and truck drivers¹⁰²—may only cement this alliance, once again demonstrating to Ankara the benefits of having a reliable security partner in the KRG.

The KRG's closer ties with Turkey have revealed fault lines in the regional Kurdish bloc, though the growing ISIS threat may prompt a rapprochement between the Kurdish parties. Prime Minister Erdoğan's hostility toward the PYD in Syria and the PKK in Turkey—along with President Barzani's political ambitions—have contributed to the confrontation between the KDP and the PYD. KRG authorities have periodically closed the border crossings between northern Iraq and Syria and have even begun construction of a trench to block the flow of smugglers, militants, and—unfortunately—aid supplies.¹⁰³

President Barzani also has mixed feelings about the emergence of the Syrian Kurds as an influential political bloc, as it represents a positive development for the Kurds at the regional level but a threat to his personal leadership ambitions if it continues to be dominated by the PYD. President Barzani's political coalition also espouses a more conservative, traditional political doctrine that is at odds with the radical leftist ideology of the PKK and the PYD. That said, the rise of ISIS—both the security threat it represents and the nationalist opportunity it has created—may lead to greater cooperation between the KRG and the PYD. Indeed, there are already indications that the Peshmerga and the YPG are seeking greater coordination to combat ISIS along the Syrian-Iraqi border.¹⁰⁴

The personal relationship between President Barzani and PYD leader Muslim Muhammad has been tense, mirroring the regional maneuvering. President Barzani condemned the PYD in late 2013 for unilaterally declaring its autonomy and ignoring other Kurdish parties,¹⁰⁵ and Muslim Muhammad was denied access to Iraqi Kurdistan as relations worsened.¹⁰⁶ This rift between two prominent Kurdish leaders has escalated into a confrontation verging on a proxy war that has not been settled today, despite the shared ISIS threat. Many Kurdish nationalists lament the split as it undermines the potential to politically unify the Kurds by pitting a “Baghdad-Damascus-PKK axis” against a “KRG-Ankara-Washington axis.”¹⁰⁷

But this simplistic division—and the assumption behind it that the divide is maintained by outside powers—ignores the legitimate divides among the various Kurdish political actors. In particular, President Barzani's hopes have been dampened by the PYD's victories in Syria against forces affiliated with his own KDP, and he is mobilizing his political capital to try and recapture control of Kurdish nationalist forces in the region. It remains to be seen if the ISIS threat is sufficient to cause Kurdish leaders to set aside political differences and personal rivalries.

Iran

Iran's main concern regarding the Kurdish issue is preventing PKK fighters from attempting to join forces with its Iranian sister organization the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, or PJAK. Tehran would also ideally want Iraqi Kurds to more actively join the fight against ISIS and agree to a political settlement that maintains Shia control in Baghdad, but Iranian officials likely realize the improbability of this goal. In its current form, the PJAK does not present a threat to the Iranian state—it concluded a ceasefire with Tehran in 2011 and largely withdrew to the Qandil Mountains in Iraq¹⁰⁸—but the group could become more dangerous with PKK reinforcements.¹⁰⁹ Kurds in Iran have many of the same complaints as Kurds in Turkey and, indeed, as Iran's other minorities: structural unemployment, discrimination in procuring government jobs, inadequate educational institutions, underdevelopment, and a lack of cultural representation in the media.¹¹⁰ In Syria, Iranian Kurdish fighters have joined the fight to secure an autonomous Kurdish-controlled region along the Turkish border. The PJAK—considered to be the Iranian branch of the PKK—reported that it would be sending fighters to its counterparts in northern Syria.¹¹¹

But it is difficult to discern how concern about potential reinforcements for the PJAK will shape Iranian policy. Iran has supported the PKK in the past, using the organization as leverage against Turkey in much the same way that Syria has used the group.¹¹² Iran may calculate that the peaceful resolution of the PKK conflict in Turkey could lead to the reinforcement of the PJAK and try to sabotage the peace process. Indeed, the acting military leader of the PKK, Murat Karayılan, has claimed that Iran offered the organization material support, including heavy weaponry, if it derailed the peace process; the PKK rejected the offer, according to Karayılan.¹¹³ Alternatively, Iran may see the prospect for closer cooperation with Turkey against violent Kurdish actors who threaten both governments as a worthy goal, as it has in the past when violence has flared up.¹¹⁴ While Iran and Turkey nominally share an interest in combating both Kurdish nationalist ambitions and the rise of ISIS, the countries' regional rivalry means any real cooperation is very unlikely, unless the threat dramatically increases.

Remarkably, Turkey and Iran have thus far managed to compartmentalize relations on a range of issues; the two countries are able to cooperate on individual tracks with little regard for other issues on which they find themselves in opposition. For example, they find themselves on opposite sides of a bitter proxy war in Syria, while simultaneously seeking to improve bilateral trade ties. This careful sectioning of interests has led to strange outcomes. Prime Minister Erdoğan, for instance, sat down in Tehran with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani to negotiate bilateral trade and energy deals¹¹⁵ while Turkish-backed rebels clashed with Iranian-backed Hezbollah fighters in Syria.¹¹⁶ But the two countries rely on each other economically; Iran was Turkey's third-largest export market in 2012, accounting for \$10 billion in trade,¹¹⁷ while 39 percent of Turkey's total crude oil imports—most of its supply—came from Iran.¹¹⁸ It is likely that the governments have decided to compartmentalize their shared Kurdish challenges in the context of wider strategic maneuvers and the realities of their extensive trade and energy ties.

Iran has displayed how carefully it considers the burgeoning situation with the Kurds in the Middle East. It has countless safe houses throughout the KRG through which it both gathers information on the ground and establishes its stake in northern Iraq.¹¹⁹ Iran is also one of the most ruthless repressors of its own Kurdish population, regularly authorizing public executions and floggings that have continued under President Rouhani.¹²⁰ With the political spotlight focused on the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the international community—largely relegating other facets of internal Iranian politics to secondary importance—it is unlikely there will be much movement on Iranian Kurdish issues in the near future. The negotiations only strengthen the current Iranian government, thus giving it more authority and public backing of its current policies.

Regional Kurdish dynamics and Washington's role

In assessing the political implications of recent regional power shifts, it is important to recognize the historical context. The Kurds constitute the largest ethnic group in the world without a nation-state in which they are the majority, though national borders, different sublanguages, tribes, politics, history, and sectarian orientation divide them. Because they are split between four countries and have different relations with each of those central governments, they present a fundamentally intermestic policy problem. While the Kurdish question remains centered in Turkey, where half of all Kurds live, the issues discussed in this report are deeply intertwined—what happens in one country will directly affect the internal politics of neighboring central governments and Kurdish political groups. The cross-border nature of Kurdish political organization forces central governments to address the issue through foreign policy, while they wish to relegate the Kurds to domestic status. The conflict in Syria and the legacy of the U.S. invasion of Iraq have today placed the question of Kurdish autonomy in its varied forms at the center of each of these countries' foreign and domestic policies. Despite internal divisions, Kurdish political actors are making strides in their quest for greater self-determination and cannot be ignored.

The West has been understandably hesitant to engage with subnational groups for fear of upsetting central governments. But for Washington, refusing to grapple with this conundrum for reasons of national sovereignty is becoming increasingly untenable. Certainly, there are serious concerns to be addressed, and the United States and Europeans should require Kurdish political leaders to do so. As mentioned earlier, the PYD has demonstrated authoritarian practices in Syria, and the PKK has not fully renounced violence and remains an official terrorist organization under U.S. and European law.¹²¹ Still, the United States and its allies will not get to choose perfect partners in a time of massive transformation and partial disintegration and must at least talk to those with the ability to influence outcomes on the ground. Furthermore, the success or failure of the Turkish-PKK peace process will affect regional dynamics—particularly in neighboring Syria and Iraq—for years to come.

Despite Kurdish frustration with many aspects of U.S. policy toward the region, Washington has not been explicitly positive or negative—nor even particularly consistent—toward the Kurds. The best example might be the United States’ relationship with the KRG; the American-led no-fly zone and subsequent invasion of Iraq essentially created the autonomous zone, but the relationship has grown tense due to independent KRG energy projects, which Washington fears will tear Iraq apart. In Turkey, Washington has pressed the government to resolve the conflict with the PKK in a peaceful fashion while simultaneously labeling the PKK a terrorist organization and sharing intelligence to direct Turkish air strikes, though strikes have been discontinued since the most recent ceasefire. Secretary of State Kerry’s visit and Vice President Biden’s call with President Barzani and meeting with representatives of the KRG during their White House visit demonstrate the growing realization that this distance is untenable.

In Syria, the United States has distanced itself from the PYD, denying PYD leader Muslim Muhammad a visa while the PYD is engaged in fighting the most nihilistic and violent extremists in the conflict. Indeed, the PYD’s fight with ISIS and affiliated groups has drawn Kurdish fighters from across the border in Turkey. Ironically, this American policy is rooted in deference to the demands of the Turkish government, upon which the United States relies for security cooperation, including counterterrorism assistance in the face of a growing threat from extremists circulating back out of Syria. In other words, the United States has refused to talk to an armed group that is fighting Al Qaeda-linked extremists in order to preserve a counterterrorism relationship with Turkey to combat Al Qaeda-linked extremists. The United States’ reluctance to talk to the group is also likely rooted in the PYD’s close ties to the PKK and its ambivalent relationship with Damascus. But the PYD is trying to ensure its survival and has calculated that it must preserve some semblance of a relationship with the Assad regime, or at least not provoke the regime’s air force, as President Assad does not seem to be going away anytime soon. Indeed, even the Turkish government held discussions with Muslim Muhammad in Ankara in 2013 in an attempt to address concerns along the border, despite Turkey’s deep hostility toward the group and its objectives. Refusing to invite the PYD—one of the most powerful actors on the ground—to the Geneva talks, for example, when the Assad regime itself was represented, seems counterproductive.

The United States’ ambivalent, nuanced, or confused policy—depending on your perspective—toward Kurdish political groups now provides an opportunity. As outlined in this report, Kurdish political actors can affect the trajectory of crucial regional trends, and the United States has much to offer the Kurds in exchange for cooperation toward stability.

Recommendations

The peace process

Turkish stakeholders in the peace process will ultimately determine whether the ceasefire grows into a long-term success, leading to a new era in Turkish-Kurdish relations. While a number of challenges and uncertainties lie ahead, there are reasons to be hopeful. Despite the conventional wisdom that the United States is hamstrung by Turkish anti-Americanism and thus has no constructive role to play in the peace process, there are helpful things the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, could do over the coming months.

Perhaps most importantly, the U.S. government and policy NGOs could help facilitate the sharing of expertise from those involved in other peace processes with AKP officials overseeing the Turkish-PKK peace process. Experts involved in the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, could be particularly helpful, given the many similarities that exist between that conflict and the one in Turkey, including the strength of the rebels, the decades of failure in trying to reach an agreement, the disagreements over disarmament, the complicating factor of narcotics financing on the PKK and FARC sides, and the desire of local populations for dialogue and resolution. Indeed, a dialogue with the PKK-dominated Kurdish nationalist movement at large might help encourage the transition from an armed movement to a political organization—a strategy that the conservative government of President Juan Manuel Santos is successfully using in Colombia to overcome its own decades-long guerilla war.

While remaining outside the official negotiations, the U.S. government could funnel these expertise-sharing efforts through existing international visitor programs at the U.S. State Department that regularly bring together policy and security professionals to share best practices. U.S. policy NGOs with strong ties to Turkey and the U.S. State Department could be helpful intermediaries in identifying participants—which should include Turkish organizations with ties to the AKP—and U.S. legal and policy experts who have been involved in long-term reconciliation efforts in former Yugoslavia, South Africa, and Northern Ireland, among other places.



Kurdish regional President Massoud Barzani, right, speaks during a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry at the presidential palace in Erbil, Iraq. Kerry arrived in Iraq's Kurdish region in a U.S. diplomatic drive aimed at preventing the country from splitting apart in the face of militants pushing towards Baghdad.

(PHOTO: AP PHOTO/BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI)

The United States should also consider increased engagement with CHP officials who are interested in being constructive in the peace process and privately encourage the AKP to open more lines of communication to receive CHP input. Such an engagement is a key aspect to generate broader support in Turkish society. First steps could consist of an ongoing dialogue with the social-democratic current and younger politicians within the CHP to encourage them to take a more active role when it comes to the peace process. While high-level CHP leaders have expressed a willingness to be helpful in the process and exasperation at being largely shut out, it is also important to remind the older, Kemalist elements of the party that nonengagement with what is arguably Turkey's foremost long-term problem will doom the party to political irrelevance.

Finally, the United States should consider developing stronger informal ties with the BDP in Turkey. While the BDP has perhaps lost some of its wider appeal in Turkey with its tactical decision to back the AKP during the corruption crisis, it is still the most influential Kurdish political voice in the country and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. Stronger ties could increase U.S. legitimacy among the Kurds, and more meetings with the BDP's Washington representative would be a good way to start building this relationship.

Wider Kurdish relations

Regarding the future of the Kurds more broadly, the United States should continue to be clear about its concerns over backsliding on the human rights and democracy fronts in Turkey. President Barack Obama—to whom Prime Minister Erdoğan still listens—and Secretary of State Kerry should be more vocal. While it likely would be counterproductive for the United States to weigh in on the Kurdish issue specifically, more frequent and vigorous public calls for enhanced multiethnic tolerance and inclusion in Turkey from the highest levels would be an encouraging message for Kurdish civil society organizations, Turkish political parties, and populations throughout the region.

In addition, the two U.S. State Department bureaus that cover the Kurdish regions—the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, which covers Turkey, and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, which covers Syria, Iraq, and Iran—should ensure that U.S. policy is properly coordinated and balanced between the understandable U.S. interest in maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity and other long-term strategic concerns. In his 1999 speech before the Turkish Parliament, then-President Bill Clinton outlined these core U.S. interests, noting that the “avenues are opening for Kurdish citizens of Turkey to reclaim that most basic of birth rights: a normal life.”¹²²

A decade and a half later, the United States has decisions to make about two armed Kurdish groups—the PKK in Turkey and the PYD in Syria. The former is a longer-term dilemma, while the latter requires immediate action. The United States has designated the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization, or FTO, since 1997 and has refused to grant support to the PYD in the Syrian conflict. However, the United States must consider whether, in refusing to interact with relevant forces in the region, it is undermining its long-term ability to shape outcomes. It might be time to acknowledge that the PKK, once a malicious terrorist organization guilty of targeting civilians and any challenger to Öcalan, has morphed into a militant political group during its leader’s decade-long incarceration and, if it engages fully in the peace process, could earn the removal of the terrorist designation.¹²³

This would not happen immediately; a U.S. redesignation of the PKK is not likely or prudent at this time. It is still too early in the peace process for such a step—no disarmament and reintegration plan has been agreed to, too little is known about the organization’s long-term goals and exact leadership structure, drug trafficking and arms trading by PKK actors continues, and the Turkish government would

react very poorly. But there could be potential benefits if and when the PKK is eventually delisted—the official terrorism designation is a powerful bargaining chip, which could enable the United States to influence the PKK’s behavior.

The United States could achieve this leverage by setting out clear conditions for lifting FTO status for the PKK. This would have to be done in coordination with Ankara. Although Turkey would almost certainly object, simply broaching the subject would send an important message to the Turkish government—that progress is needed on the peace process. But unlike terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or ISIS, the PKK has demonstrated with its recent moves that it could eventually evolve from a terrorist organization to a legitimate political actor. Indeed, it seems Öcalan is trying to oversee such a transition, and Turkey and the United States can incentivize and speed that process.

The United States should more quickly shift its policy toward the PYD. The group was excluded from the Geneva negotiations to resolve the Syrian conflict due in part to U.S. objections. The United States also supported the Syrian Opposition Council and other rebel groups in their decision not to make guarantees that would grant special status to the Kurds, arguing that Kurdish concerns will be addressed after President Assad is removed. Finally, U.S. officials, including former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Ford, have raised objections to dealing with the PYD due to a potentially hostile Turkish reaction to such outreach.¹²⁴

But neither the United States nor Turkey has ever officially listed the PYD as a terrorist organization, meaning that there are no legal restrictions on communication. From a U.S. perspective, it is an armed Kurdish organization struggling to protect itself within the context of the brutal Syrian civil war. Its radical revolutionary past and links to the PKK should not prevent careful engagement if such cooperation could contribute to regional stability or the achievement of a political settlement in Syria, both key American interests.

The PYD will be an important component of a future, post-crisis Syria and can positively or negatively affect the long-term viability of the Turkey-PKK peace process. The PYD—and, for that matter, the Kurdish National Council—has made it clear that without guarantees of autonomy and protection in a post-Assad Syria, it sees no reason to throw its lot in with the rest of the Syrian opposition. Given the history of violent repression directed against the Kurds in Syria and the wider region, such a position is not unreasonable. It seems clear that there can be no lasting political settlement in Syria without political concessions to the Kurds—likely some form of federalism. Since the PYD has never been officially listed as a PKK affiliate, the United States is free to talk with the group.¹²⁵

Strategizing now about how to manage relations with the PYD—in a transparent way that does not surprise Turkey—would be prudent. If the highest U.S. policy priority is achieving a political transition in Syria and ending the bloodshed, incorporating the Kurds more fully into the anti-Assad coalition—with the concessions that will require—seems necessary.

In addition, establishing regular communication with the Syrian PYD could allow the United States to more effectively influence the organization. The PYD's battlefield victories and aggressive targeting of Al Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, and ISIS have conferred on it a degree of legitimacy on the ground. It has also gained political clout by serving as a de facto governing body in the wake of the collapse of the Syrian state.¹²⁶ The Kurdish armed groups will be essential to any policy that both supports local populations' right to self-determination and condemns the radical jihadi movement; engaging with these groups would allow the United States to clarify its position on the Middle East and tackle these two essential problems. The United States can do little to shape the PYD leadership's behavior if it does not have ties with the group. The United States should revisit Muslim Muhammad's visa requests and attempt to extract political concessions from the PYD in exchange for informal relations.

The international community also has things to offer the Kurds. Syrian Kurdish groups lack the Gulf sponsors that back many factions within the Islamic Front and the opposition Supreme Military Council, and the Kurds are an effective and relatively cohesive force on the ground in Syria who could cooperate in a helpful way. As the International Crisis Group has argued, the PYD will need to take several steps in order to begin such cooperation, including decreasing its reliance on military force; severing its ties with the Assad regime; reaching out to Kurdish and non-Kurdish opponents, including a range of anti-Assad rebels; broadening access to basic services and resources; and reaching out to the international community in order to establish legitimacy over the long term.¹²⁷ This process must include talks with Turkey to secure its acquiescence. All of these goals would be more easily achieved with U.S. cooperation and might prove impossible in the face of U.S. opposition.

At the same time, the U.S. government should pursue its own interests more independently of possible Turkish concerns. If Prime Minister Erdoğan's advisors can negotiate with jailed PKK leader Öcalan, the United States should be able to engage with the PYD for such practical purposes as enabling aid flow to the Syrian Kurdish areas. Indeed, ensuring a modicum of stability in Kurdish-controlled parts of Syria should be in Turkey's interest, avoiding more refugees and the potential radicalization of another generation of Kurdish fighters. Given the trajectory of

rapidly improving Turkish-KRG relations and the pragmatic cooperation between Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Barzani, similar developments vis-à-vis northern Syria might be in the cards—and some movement in the direction of a rapprochement is already visible. This trend could help ameliorate the negative effects on U.S.-Turkish relations if the United States establishes an informal relationship with the PYD.

It is also in the U.S. interest to promote dialogue between the KDP in Iraq and the PYD. The Syrian conflict offers an opportunity to begin a conversation with the broader Kurdish nationalist movement in ways that can help encourage the PKK's and the PYD's transition from armed movements to political entities. There are more tangible benefits as well. The United States is already sending aid via the Iraqi Kurdish-controlled Semalka border crossing into Syria, and direct talks with the PYD and coordination between the PYD and the KDP would help facilitate these transfers. Such technical, humanitarian cooperation could pave the way for further PYD and KDP engagement. The United States must continue to remind Iraqi Kurdish leaders that ISIS is as much a long-term threat to Iraqi Kurdistan as it is to the PYD and Syrian Kurds—or, indeed, Baghdad.

Considering Washington's relationship with Ankara, particularly its absolute reliance on Turkish cooperation to deal with the flow of fighters back out of Syria and Iraq to Europe and the West, the United States may not be able to immediately recast its policy toward the Kurds. Ironically, the Turkish government has shown signs of new openness toward Kurdish nationalist actors—demonstrating the effect of ISIS in changing the security calculus for Ankara. However, one of the obstacles to recasting Turkish policy is the perception of U.S. hostility toward greater Kurdish autonomy. But for the United States, ignoring the problem will not make it go away. It is time for proactive engagement to positively affect the trajectory of the Turkey-PKK peace process, the civil war in Syria, the security situation in Iraq, and the burgeoning Kurdish nationalist movement.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank a number of esteemed experts for their comments on this report, including:

- Alan Makovsky, former senior professional staff member, House Committee on Foreign Affairs
- Nuray Mert, political scientist and journalist for *Hürriyet Daily News*
- Amberin Zaman, Istanbul correspondent for *The Economist*
- Spencer Boyer, former deputy assistant secretary for European and Eurasian affairs at the U.S. Department of State
- Hugh Pope, deputy program director for the International Crisis Group in Istanbul
- Günther Seufert, senior researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin
- Omar Hossino, independent researcher on Syrian Kurds

Acknowledgements

The Center for American Progress thanks the Heinrich Böll Stiftung for its support of our national security programs and of this report. The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the Center for American Progress and the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Heinrich Böll Stiftung. The Center for American Progress produces independent research and policy ideas driven by solutions that we believe will create a more equitable and just world.

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