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## Chapter 6

### TURKEY'S KURDISH MOVEMENT AND THE AKP'S KURDISH OPENING: A KURDISH SPRING OR FALL?

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#### Introduction

Fighting for a range of political and human rights for Kurds as people and as a nation in the context of an oppressive Turkish nationalist state system—fighting both literally, through an insurgency (state-defined as “terrorism”), and figuratively, through representative politics—the Kurdish movement in Turkey faced a severe crisis at the turn of the century. First, the introduction of Turkish state counter-insurgency measures saw the pendulum of victory through armed conflict swing away from the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers’ Party), agent of the insurgency and primary organization of the Kurdish movement as a whole. This culminated with the 1999 abduction, trial, and imprisonment by the state of Abdullah Öcalan, PKK co-founder and leader. Then, on the political front, the new national government of the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) made major inroads into the Kurdish heartland—Turkey’s southeastern region (and Kurdistan’s north, *Bakur*, but hereafter just “the Southeast”)—claiming (national and local) electoral success there in 2002, 2004, and 2007. And yet, despite these reversals, not only did the PKK stave off military defeat, but the Kurdish movement as a whole managed to recover and go on to firmly re-establish itself in the public arena as the primary representative of Turkey’s Kurdish population. This became evident in March 2009, when the electoral ground lost to the AKP by the Kurdish political party was regained in local elections, an unambiguous victory for the (PKK-linked) DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, Democratic Society Party) which was then followed by its unprecedented success in the 2011 national election, even as the AKP reached its own high-water mark in the country as a whole.

Against the backdrop of armed violence and state oppression—the conflict has now cost some 40,000 lives while counter-insurgency measures displaced a million or more<sup>1</sup>—it is the political ebb and flow in the fortunes of the Kurdish movement and Turkey’s ruling party over the last decade that comprises the main subject of our investigation here. We focus particularly on the pivotal political events around 2009–10, when the AKP, confronted with the emerging “Kurdish spring” and its loss of legitimacy in the Southeast, announced a “Kurdish Opening” (*Kürt açılımı*) of its own. Ostensibly a major attempt to resolve the “Kurdish issue,” as it is framed from the Turkish national perspective, this rather bold move was really, we assert, aimed at containing the Kurdish movement and wresting back political control of the region for the party. This was a battle for the right to claim representation of

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<sup>1</sup> Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds. An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2007).

Turkey's Kurds (over 15 million people, around 20% of the total population of Turkey) and political control of the Southeast (about a sixth of Turkish territory by area).

Here, we first sketch the main narrative and list key events around the Kurdish Opening. We then lay out some of the main characteristics of the political institutionalization of the Kurdish movement, and go on to discuss the Opening, contextualized as the AKP government's response to this institutionalization process and the election reversal. There then follows a consideration of the primary dynamics of this history: the relationship between the AKP and the Kurdish movement, and the AKP drift to an alignment with the state's historical, security-based (terrorist) definition of the issue. Finally, the ways in which this has been received and the current situation are outlined, and future prospects considered.

### **Main Narrative**

The early 2000s saw the PKK not only retrench and restore its military position, but also change its political and ideological outlook. Originally, at the time of its formal establishment in 1978, the primary objective of the organization had been the realization of an independent Kurdistan. Following a critique of the idea of the nation-state formulated by Öcalan, however, the conceptualization of independence was transformed from one of state-building to one of society-building, with the "ultimate aim of independence... no longer embodied in the realization of a classical state, but in the establishment and development of self-government."<sup>2</sup>

The period that saw the PKK instigate a (unilateral) ceasefire and focus on autonomy also witnessed the coming to power of the AKP, which broke the Kemalist monopoly of state power.<sup>3</sup> Many had felt a sense of hope that political reforms might begin to genuinely democratize the public sphere in Turkey (including for Kurds), when a raft of measures were passed aligning the country's legislative framework with minimal EU standards in areas like civil rule and human rights (including the ending of direct rule from Ankara over the Southeast under continuous state-of-emergency protocols). Others, however, saw this as aimed more at securing the democratically elected government against military intervention—among whom, some perceived the secular republic to be under threat from the Trojan horse machinations of the religiously-oriented ruling party and the clandestine Islamic movement it was seen as fronting.<sup>4</sup> Others again regarded the ruling party as so concerned with guaranteeing its own place in the state structure that it was left strangely impotent to impose any kind of radical agenda, religious or otherwise (including, that is, in respect of the Kurdish issue).<sup>5</sup> There are merits to all of these views—illustrating the complexity of the Turkish political environment within which its "Kurdish issue" is positioned—but it is probably the latter that most resembles what came to pass, as the recent history of the Kurdish issue in Turkey testifies.

Despite its ostensibly strong position, with an unassailable majority in parliament along with the presidency, a claim to represent Kurds as the biggest party in Turkey's majority Kurdish southeastern region and a clutch of Kurdish MPs to boot, the AKP never really attempted to risk its uncertain position within the Kemalist establishment and put political capital into departing from the default Turkish nationalist position, regarding the Kurdish movement as a threat to state integrity and simplistically adopting the populist discourse equating its PKK leadership with terrorism. As a result, while the government did move public investments in the Southeast—into education (the establishment of universities in Batman, Siirt, Tunceli, Hakkari, and Mardin), medical services, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through breaks?" in *Nationalisms and politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, eds. Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (New York: Routledge, 2011): 143-162.

<sup>3</sup> Referencing Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the iconic founding father of the Turkish republic, 'Kemalism' indicates a (Turkish) ethnocentric nationalism constructed around a Westernizing (secular, modernizing) and centralizing 'statist' vision. This had defined the political landscape of the country from the establishment of the Republic in 1923 during the one-party period, and then dominated it during the post-WWII "democratic" era—which saw three formal (and one informal, "postmodern") military coups enacted in its name.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Hanefi Avcı, *Haliç'te Yaşayan Simonlar. Dün Devlet Bugün Cemaat* [The Simon Living on the Golden Horn. Yesterday the State, Today the Religious Schools] (Ankara: Angora, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Ihsan D. Dagi, "Rethinking Human Rights, Democracy, and the West: Post - Islamist Intellectuals in Turkey, Critique," *Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 13:2 (2004): 135-151; Sahin Alpay, "Making Sense of Turkish Politics," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 43:3 (2008): 5-12.

infrastructure projects such as road-building—it also gave full support to (cross-border) military attacks on PKK bases after the 2007 election (and even while state agents were secretly engaged in talks with PKK representatives in Oslo and Abdullah Öcalan in his prison on the island of Imrali).<sup>6</sup> More than any other single event, it was these attacks that undermined the faith placed in the national government by a large part of the Kurdish public and allowed the Kurdish political party to regain political ascendancy in the Southeast in the nationwide local elections of 2009.

At that point, the Kurdish party's success and the continuing re-orientation of the PKK (away from secession and towards an emphasis on local democracy and autonomy), coupled with the increasingly secure national position of the AKP seemed to coalesce to create a fruitful political atmosphere for a possible solution of Turkey's apparently intractable Kurdish issue. These factors were only furthered by the development of regional autonomy for Kurds in Iraq, which operated practically and morally as a pressure on the Turkish state to change its stance and seek to resolve the issue.<sup>7</sup> Essentially, however, the AKP did not take this opportunity. The Kurdish Opening that it announced in the wake of what was its first electoral setback of note when it lost the Southeast was so fashioned on its own terms, avoiding and excluding the Kurdish movement, that it became known in Kurdish circles as the "Kurd-less Opening" (*Kürtsüz açılım*). Indeed, the AKP soon removed the Kurdish nomenclature altogether, when it redubbed the initiative a "Democratic Opening." Not only did the Kurdish Opening fizzle out without addressing the real issues of cultural identity and political control, but the AKP used its coercive power and extending influence to try to contain and roll back the Kurdish movement.

Alarmed by the 2009 local election outcome, the ruling AKP effectively began to work against the Kurdish movement in tandem with the judicial and security organs of the Kemalist-oriented state. Along with the Opening came an upsurge in judicial investigations and arrests of activists deemed to be PKK members and then the watershed event of the banning of the DTP. The launch of the Kurdish initiative thus operated as a direct political and ideological challenge to the PKK and its affiliated organizations, a part of what effectively became an attempt by the state hegemony to paralyze the Kurdish movement.

This analysis should not be mistaken for a simple conspiracy theory, however. On the contrary, this was in many ways a fortuitous symbiosis, and the shared aims of the AKP government and the Kemalist establishment still in control of the military and the judiciary in 2009 should not blind us to the complications of an essentially triangular power structure. To clarify, the nexus of sociopolitical relations determining the evolution of the Kurdish—or, as some would say, Turkish—issue at this time comprised three sets of actors. These were 1) the traditional statist institutions (primarily the Turkish Armed Forces and the judiciary, ideologically represented here as "Kemalists", supported by the police and other security organizations along with the other two major political parties, namely, the principle opposition party, Atatürk's own Turkish nationalist, statist, and secular CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, Republican People's Party), and the right-wing, strongly Turkish nationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, Nationalist Movement Party); 2) the AKP government (and more widely the parliamentary party and party as a whole, and the "Islamist" movement that it represents, including the Fetullah Gülen Movement, charged by Kemalist and liberal secularists with stealthily advancing the real Islamic agenda); and 3) the Kurdish movement (comprising "pro-Kurdish" or "Kurdist"

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<sup>6</sup> The talks in Oslo involved Hikmet Fidan and Afet Güneş from the intelligence organization MIT, and Mustafa Karasu, Sabir Ok, Zübeyir Aydar, and Adem Uzun from the PKK and related organizations. Instead of continuing these talks with political representatives from Turkish side, however, the state discontinued them, for reasons difficult to ascertain. Perhaps the MIT representatives were preparing the ground or maybe the AKP aimed to neutralize the PKK while rounding up its civilian agents, representatives and others in the Kurdish movement (see below). However the fact remains that talks took place between political representatives of the PKK, and intelligence officers representing Turkey, and not between political representatives from both sides. Another reading of the AKP support for the military strikes is that this was just a strategic mistake, the AKP having become over-confident of its Kurdish base after the election victory and misreading the nature of this support, which was always motivated as much or more by hope (a change for the better) and pragmatism (support for the party that seemed best placed to advance local interests) as by identification with party ideology. See e.g. Jake Hess, "Behind the Kurdish Hunger Strike in Turkey," Middle East Report Online, November 8, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Cuma Çiçek, "Kürt Açılımdan Öilli Birlik ve Kardeşlik Projesine: Ovada Kürdi Siyaset Yapmanın Sınırları", *Birkim*, 250 (Şubat [February] 2010): 104–115.

organizations led by the PKK and the legal party, along with several human rights' groups and professional associations).<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, the AKP's national rather than regional centre of gravity meant both that it had as many votes to lose as to gain among a general population deeply inculcated with Turkish nationalism,<sup>9</sup> and that its main institutional concern lay with consolidating its own position vis-à-vis the Kemalist establishment. Its predecessor, the Welfare (*Refah*) Party, had, after all, been removed from government by the 1997 "post-modern" coup, while the same Constitutional Court that outlawed the DTP later came within one vote of doing likewise to the AKP.<sup>10</sup> In fact, we would argue, AKP insecurity in this respect, coupled with its own cultural origins in the Turkish nationalist discourse, comprises one of the principle dynamics of the history of the Kurdish Opening and subsequent events. This may be referred to as the Kemalization of the AKP, which was soon to take about as tough a line on the whole Kurdish issue as any governing party since the PKK was launched some 35 years ago.

### **Timeline: 2009-2011**

A brief listing of key events that form the backdrop to this paper can be taken from the nationwide municipal elections held on 29 March, 2009, in which the DTP won the Southeast back from the AKP.<sup>11</sup> Then, starting a fortnight later (14 April), came the detention of over 70 DTP officials, including three vice-presidents of the party, along with others publically active in Kurdish political life in a wave of police operations across the Southeast, as well as in Ankara and Istanbul. Next, in May 2009, President Abdullah Gül made a public statement, naming the Kurdish issue as the most pressing problem in the country, followed by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's announcement of a new initiative, the "Kurdish Opening." In mid-August 2009, Erdoğan made an emotional appeal for all parties to unite behind a solution to the Kurdish question, rhetorically asking parliamentarians: "If Turkey had not spent its energy, budget, peace and young people on [fighting] terrorism, if Turkey had not spent the last 25 years in conflict, where would we be today?"<sup>12</sup>

The AKP attempt to deal with the Kurdish issue faced harsh criticism from opposition parties, especially at the end of October, when a test-the-water return of PKK fighters and families appeared unpalatably to the Turkish mainstream as a PKK-victory parade.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the fall of 2009 the AKP retreated. The PKK return initiative was abruptly ended, and the Kurdish opening was rephrased as a project of national unity, first subsumed under the wider (but really diluted) "democratic" initiative, and later to be further dissipated and re-named again as the National Unity and Fraternity Project

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<sup>8</sup> But these are simplifying characterizations rather than discrete, well-defined entities. All three sets of actors include in their ranks a range of groups and individuals with quite widely diverging perspectives and motivations. The AKP houses elements sympathetic both to Turkish nationalism and to Kurdish aspirations under its umbrella of economic neo-liberalism and social conservatism more or less closely wedded to Islamist values, or 'political Islam'; Kemalists range from ultra-nationalists to social-democrats, as indicated by the MHP/CHP alignment; and the Kurdish movement is home to a mix of militants, democrats, nationalists, leftists, and liberals desiring reforms that span from basic rights to radical political autonomy and the establishment of a unified Kurdistan.

<sup>9</sup> For the Turkish mind-set, see the anthropologically oriented analysis by Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> A 6 to 5 majority in July 2008 voted not to ban the party but just issue it with a warning and withhold half its state funding. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/turkish-verdict-top-court-rejects-ban-of-ruling-akp-a-569147.html>.

<sup>11</sup> The DTP increased the number of municipalities under its control from 56 to 98 (listing among its gains the province of Siirt, birthplace of Prime Minister Erdoğan's wife and constituency from which he was first elected into parliament in 2002). Siyar Ozsoy, "Local Elections in Diyarbakir, Kurdish Conference in Erbil: Is There Any Space for Hope?" *Kurdish Herald* 1:1 (May 2009).

<sup>12</sup> "Erdoğan Makes Emotional Appeal for Unity on Kurdish Initiative," *Today's Zaman*, August 12, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> A total of 34 persons, of which eight were PKK guerrillas from the Qandil mountains and 26 from the Mahmur refugee camp in Northern Iraq, entered Turkey as a 'peace group' at the border town of Silopi. The group members were welcomed by several ten thousand enthusiastic Kurds making victory signs in a welcoming ceremony organized by the DTP with mayors and parliamentarians in attendance, which was widely publicized.

(*Milli Birlik ve Kardeşlik Projesi*). Indeed, the government had made it clear that it was searching for a new way of defining the Kurdish issue.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent failure of the AKP—betraying its inherent ideological conservative reflexive concern with its own survival, and, ultimately, we would argue, what has become a form of neo-Kemalism—was that given the opportunity to build for the future, it proved unable to develop an alternative narrative, vision, or idea on how to solve the Kurdish issue (let alone tackle democracy, or unity and fraternity more generally). This became painfully evident when the government had to respond to new moves from the security forces and judiciary.

On 11 December 2009, not long after the announcement of the Kurdish Opening, the Constitutional Court banned the DTP (a rather sudden, not to say timely conclusion to a long-standing case), and less than a fortnight later, on 24 December, the Diyarbakır Chief Prosecutor's Office began another operation, which resulted in the arrest of some eighty persons, mainly party officials and representatives of the DTP replacement, the newly-formed BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, Peace and Democracy Party).<sup>15</sup> A few weeks later, in mid-February 2010, came yet another round of arrests, with dozens of (now) BDP executive members taken into custody.

According to the indictments, the detainees of the April, December, and February operations were all members of a terrorist organization, the Turkey Council of the KCK (*Koma Civaken Kurdistan*, Kurdish Communities Union), an organization linked to the PKK, as its popular (or so-called “urban”) wing. The people arrested, among them elected members of municipalities and provincial councils, were accused of running their local authorities under the direction of the KCK/PKK.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, the AKP defended these arrests and prosecutions, asserting the government's duty to preserve the state's monopoly on justice and the use of force, and thereby unequivocally reproducing the Kemalist security discourse.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, there developed a legal-security attempt to muzzle the Kurdish movement at the organizational level, by banning the political party and investigating and arresting activists deemed to be (surrogate) PKK members, in combination, it should be added, with continuing military pressure on the PKK based in Iraqi Kurdish territory, now supported by US satellite imagery and drone technology). This occurred fairly much concomitantly with the government's launch of its Kurdish initiative, challenging the Kurdish movement and apparently attempting to restructure the relationship of the Turkish state to the Southeast and its Kurdish issue. Despite, or precisely *because of* these moves, however, the BDP was able to consolidate its position as the main representative of Kurds in the June 2011 election, securing strong majorities and increasing its number of representatives in the Turkish Assembly by more than a third to become the fourth party in parliament.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Kurdish Movement: Political Institutionalization and Ideological Development**

Large parts of Turkey's Southeast have been under the political and ideological influence of the PKK since the end of the 1980s – for part of that time the region was even partly controlled by the

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<sup>14</sup> These, apparently on-the-hoof, developments were aimed at including recognition of (some) other minorities and minority rights within the traditionally non-pluralist Turkish state system, and extended to include an attempted improvement/normalization of relations with the country's eastern neighbors. The former were not really followed through, while the latter were undermined by the “Arab Spring”.

<sup>15</sup> The arrests included the mayors of Batman, Siirt, Cizre, Diyarbakır-Kayapınar, Diyarbakır-Sur, Çınar, Viranşehir, and Kızıltepe, and the former mayor of Diçle.

<sup>16</sup> On June 18, 2010, Diyarbakır prosecutors would ultimately charge 151 of the Kurdish politicians and activists detained during that period with aiding the terrorist organization (the PKK). Most of these people are still in detention while the courts hear their cases. See Aliza Marcus, “Troubles in Turkey's Backyard,” *Foreign Policy* (July 12, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> For example, meeting with criticism during a visit to Batman in February 2011 on the day before a court hearing in the ongoing KCK case in nearby Diyarbakır, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that those “guilty of constitutional crimes should be punished.” “[E]ğer Anayasal Suç İşlenmişse Cezası Cekilir”.

<http://www.gunlukgazetesi.net/?haberID=6261&haberBaslik=Ovada>.

<sup>18</sup> The prohibitive 10 per cent party threshold was circumvented through party members standing as independents.

guerrillas.<sup>19</sup> Participation in the political process since 1990 has provided the Kurdish movement with a legal representation and political structures for public gathering, new access to domestic and international audiences, and new means to engage in politics (such as multi-lingual municipality policies). Essentially, one might say, it has come in from the cold.

Successive Kurdish political parties close to the PKK, each founded as its predecessor was closed by the state, have steadily increased their power and confidence. The formation of HEP (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, People's Work Party) in 1990 and the election of its candidates in October 1991 provided the Kurdish movement with an institutional basis for organized administration and collective action, enabling it to expand its base.<sup>20</sup> With the DEP (*Demokrasi Partisi*, Democracy Party) in 1993, HADEP (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, People's Democracy Party) in 1994, and DEHAP (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, Democratic People's Party) in 1997, the movement gained some EU recognition and support in the context of human rights,<sup>21</sup> as well as establishing itself in local elective bodies and gaining some success nationally.

This growing strength of legally organized political power, albeit repeatedly illegalized, was reinforced during the 2000s with the local development of a Kurdish civil society, both drawing its inspiration from and also acting as human resource for the PKK. In the municipalities, strong relationships and cooperation were fostered between the legal party officials, their administrations, and various NGOs and local entrepreneurs. These regional developments did not go unnoticed by state officials or the current governing party, however. Already at the very beginning of the Kurdish movement's re-orientation towards a primarily political struggle, the Turkish establishment and the Turkish Armed Forces had exhibited great concern about what was observed as a "revival and restructuring of the separatist movement through political means."<sup>22</sup> In fact, what was being effected was not so much a move to separation as to local autonomy. Alongside the DTP/BDP engagement with conventional local and national politics, this move to autonomy was facilitated through the KCK, following the realignment of PKK ideology and organizational structure established by Öcalan at the beginning of the decade.

The PKK was established as a leftist political party in 1978 with the classical organizational structure of communist parties, including a General Secretary as the leading party official and an Executive Committee responsible for direct operations.<sup>23</sup> Today, the organization has grown into a complex of parties and organizations, of which the KCK is one, with the PKK as the ideological center. Founded in 2005 as the KKK (*Koma Komalen Kurdistan*), the KCK can be regarded as a political project that builds "on the self-government of local communities ... organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses."<sup>24</sup> As an organization within the PKK complex, the KCK is formally headed by Murat Karayılan, with decision-making councils composed of representatives from the different parts of the Kurdistan region and the Kurdish Diaspora in Western Europe.<sup>25</sup>

The KCK in Turkey is active in several spheres of public life. It has a legal committee, which is involved in the establishment of local councils (at village, quarter, and city level), "people's courts", a committee for civil society organizations that implements projects to activate civil society, and a language and education committee responsible for implementing projects to develop the usage of Kurdish as a written language. An important concept in the KCK is that of the "free citizen" (*özgür*

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<sup>19</sup> Ismet Imset, *The PKK: A Report on Separatist Violence in Turkey (1973-1992)* (Ankara: Turkish Daily News Publications, 1992); David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Jongerden, *Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*.

<sup>20</sup> Nicole F. Watts, "Activists in Office: Pro-Kurdish Contentious Politics in Turkey," *Ethnopolitics*, 5 (2006): 134.

<sup>21</sup> See Marlies Casier, "The Politics of Solidarity. The Kurdish Question in the European Parliament", in Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, eds., *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 199-121; Marlies Casier, "Turkey's Kurds and the Quest for Recognition: Transnational Politics and the EU-Turkey Accession Negotiations," *Ethnicities*, 10:1 (2010): 3-25.

<sup>22</sup> As quoted from the Chief of Staff's General Secretary's report "Evaluation of Internal Security Operations in 2000," cited in Ersel Aydın, "Decoding Turkey's Struggle with the PKK," *Security Dialogue* 33 (2002): 215.

<sup>23</sup> Akkaya and Jongerden, "PKK in the 2000s."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. See also Akkaya and Jongerden's contribution in this volume.

<sup>25</sup> "Koma Komalen Kurdistan Sözleşmesi," *Kongre Belgeleri Dizisi IV* (Wesanen Serxwebun, 2005).

*yurttaş*). The free citizen concept includes basic civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech and organization, but also freedom of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic identity, and the freedom to develop a cultural and national identity.<sup>26</sup>

Taking the concept of free citizen as a starting point, the KCK is considered to be the architect of the free municipality model (*özgür belediyeçilik modeli*). Adopted by the DTP at a three-day conference in February 2008, it aims to realize a bottom-up participative democracy, from local to provincial levels.<sup>27</sup> The KCK and the free municipality model are both to be understood in terms of the “democratic triangle” concept developed by Öcalan. Outlined from his island jail through his lawyers, this democratic triangle is intended to function as a “strategic dispositive”, as institutional and ideological capability—that is, to orient and organize Kurdish political demands (and thereby resolve the problem in Turkey’s Southeast). According to this ideology, the democratic triangle should be composed of three interrelated projects: the democratic republic, democratic autonomy, and democratic confederalism.<sup>28</sup>

### Government Response: The Kurdish Opening

Contrary to views supportive of government policy,<sup>29</sup> the Kurdish initiative always seemed much more like an *ad hoc* process of politicking than the considered culmination of years or at least months of preparation.<sup>30</sup> The best AKP revisionist apology was for the initiative in historical terms to go back to a few comments made by Erdoğan in support of the Kurdish cause in Diyarbakır, in 2005. The fact that these were not followed up until two years later, however—not, that is, until after the DTP election victory—rather gives the lie to that argument.<sup>31</sup> Thus, divested of the politicking, exactly what the Kurdish initiative was intended to achieve remains unclear, leading to discussions over whether there actually ever was a clear plan.<sup>32</sup> This fudging lends support to the Kurdish claim that it was they who were determining the political discourse, and the AKP primarily reacting—which would be no shame at all in a genuinely pluralistic democracy able to embrace an internal ethno-nationalist cause, but is not something that the AKP has appeared very willing or able to accept.

Retrospectively, in terms of substance, it appears that the Kurdish Opening comprised measures promoted towards 1) ending some restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language (such as on Kurdish Studies departments at universities and Kurdish place-name signs)—but without allowing for Kurdish to achieve the status of an official language (thus failing to decriminalize and enable its use in state institutions, such as in courts, local council service provision, or as a medium for education at schools); 2) the establishment of a state-run Kurdish language television channel (*TRT-Şêx*)—but without permitting the private TV station rights enjoyed by Turkish language operators (and thus enabling manipulation of the media to government ends); 3) the “surrender” (return) of PKK fighters—but without guarantees of immunity from prosecution (and without consideration of the fate of Öcalan); and 4) a revival of economic investment in the region through the longstanding GAP project<sup>33</sup>—although without any review of the historical efficacy of this approach, or consideration of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “DTP’de hedef 100 belediye.”

<http://www.aktuelbakis.com/Politika/6656.html>.

<sup>28</sup> See Akkaya and Jongerden, “PKK in the 2000s.”

<sup>29</sup> E.g. İhsan Bal, “The Intraparty Clash of Pro-Kurdish DTP,” USAK articles-analyses (online), May 7, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> As a critique of administrative amateurism, or just plain incompetence, it should be noted, this is a charge leveled at the AKP government generally, not just in relation to the Kurdish issue.

<sup>31</sup> More reasonably, the changing situation in northern Iraq was exposing the bankruptcy of Turkey’s Kurdish policy, which the AKP recognized without being sufficiently motivated to go much beyond economic initiatives in dealing with this.

<sup>32</sup> For arguments against the existence of a plan, see Marlies Casier, Andy Hilton, and Joost Jongerden, “Road Maps and Roadblocks in Turkey’s Southeast,” Middle East Report Online (October 30, 2009); for a different argument, see Cengiz Çandar, “The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the ‘Opening,’” *Insight Turkey*, 11 (2009): 13-19.

<sup>33</sup> Launched with the construction of the Keban Dam in 1975, GAP is now a multi-sector and integrated regional development project spread over more than 75,000 km<sup>2</sup> to serve 1.7 million hectares of arable land in nine provinces in the Southeast of Turkey through the construction of 22 dams, 19 power plants and hundreds of kilometers of irrigation canals; it also seems to be being made to serve anti-PKK ends with dam designs and

similarly scaled alternatives (or also, for that matter, addressing compensation for villagers or the return to and reconstruction of their 3000+ villages and hamlets emptied and left to ruin by the military during its counter-insurgency operations).

In terms of style or method, no formal organizational structure to prepare for and execute the Kurdish or Democratic or National Unity and Brotherhood Opening or Project was ever created; the consultation period was unclear and seemed to be composed of initially fertile but ultimately rather limited face-to-face meetings between government ministers and interested parties (as determined by the ministers), together with public discussion through the media; and no clear-cut policy document was ever published, or even mentioned. This process was conducted alongside the secretly held talks between officials and Öcalan, mediated by Sweden, and now known as the “Oslo Process,” efforts that dried up during 2010, with the process withering rather than unfolding as the opening itself closed (above, footnote 6). Throughout all this, so far as one can ascertain, the representatives from Turkey had no mandate to negotiate a political solution.

The government has repeatedly flip-flopped in its commitment to Kurdish rights, at times giving positive signals, such as agreeing to collaborate with the DTP/BDP in parliament and to work on more reforms, while at others appearing intent on crushing the PKK militarily, openly showing its deep distrust of the Kurdish movement, and supporting the arrest of thousands of non-violent activists. Overall, as the 2011 Human Rights Watch country report on Turkey summarized, “The government made little concrete progress towards realizing its 2009 plan to improve the human rights of Kurds in Turkey.”

The government’s prevarication in its Kurdish opening speaks of a complex combination of motivations on part of the AKP. With a strong base in the Kurdish and Southeastern electorate, it clearly is open and sensitive to Kurdish claims and grievances. Also, one might suggest that the AKP is, or at least has been, a possible ally for Kurdish aspirations, insofar as Kurds and Islamists have both been defined as the Other of the Republican hegemony of Turkish secularism, as extra-state to Kemalist statism, and denied political space in the narrative of modernity—Kurds due to their so-called “backward” culture and feudalistic tribal organization, Islamists because of their assumed pre-scientific religiosity and pre-nationalist social organization.

The prime objective of the AKP government in its Kurdish initiative, therefore, may be understood as aiming to combat the PKK at the ideological level. This is a battle for “hearts and minds” and, indeed, for “souls.” The AKP has strong support (at least in terms of votes) in the Southeast,<sup>34</sup> and did not want to lose this to the Kurdish movement which, by its very foregrounding of ethnicity, denies the political primacy of Islam. References from leading government figures to “our Kurdish brothers” (*Kürt kardeşlerimiz*) typifies the AKP refashioning of an old discourse to frame this matter—that is, invoking the religious claim to unity, but with the modern slant of a stated ethnicity.<sup>35</sup>

The official AKP position, as declared by Erdoğan, acknowledges the Kurds as a distinct ethnicity, but harbors this under the roof of Turkishness. Erdoğan’s dual identity concept has an overriding Turkish identity (*üst kimlik*) common to all by virtue of being citizens, and a sub-identity (*alt kimlik*) defined by, for example, ethnicity, which manifestly does assume the nationalist narrative: it is clearly a reconceptualization of the paradoxical republican concept of citizenship, supposedly devoid of ethnic reference yet generally constructed around a spatially determined ethno-nationalism. In the case of Turkey—and under the AKP no differently—this translates as a single official language, one history (dictated at school), army (and military service), currency (bearing the portrait of Atatürk),

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placements that act as natural barriers to cross-border human movement. Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, “‘Social Development’ as a Governmental Strategy in the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP),” unpublished Master thesis (Atatürk Institute for Modern History, Boğazici University, Istanbul, 2004; and Joost Jongerden “Crafting Space, Making People: The Spatial Design of Nation in Modern Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 10 (2009).

<sup>34</sup> The AKP’s predecessor, Refah, was also successful in the Southeast in the 1990s.

<sup>35</sup> The PKK, it might be noted, has also reached out to Islam in the past, with attempts to incorporate more religious-inspired figures into its movement, and with Öcalan’s writings that sought to appease the more pious Kurdish constituents in face of the regional electoral competition with Refah. See Burhanettin Duran, “Approaching the Kurdish Question via Adil Düzen: An Islamist Formula of the Welfare Party for Ethnic Coexistence,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18 (1998): 111-126.

and national flag, all very much *not* Kurdish.<sup>36</sup> The approach of the AKP ultimately assumes a statist discourse, just like the other main parties—that is, as a *sine qua non* of Turkish politics.

### AKP Versus The Kurdish Movement

It is true that the AKP government has faced fierce opposition to the idea of negotiation with the PKK—the “code” of staying in power, which meant avoiding conflict with the secular bloc led by the military and the judiciary<sup>37</sup>—but these considerations are not sufficient to explain the AKP’s approach to the Kurdish question. The party had become so dominant in Turkish politics by 2009, occupying the center ground of moderate religious conservatism and commanding such a large parliamentary majority, that it not only had the power to instigate an initiative addressing the issue in the Southeast, but also to go to quite radical lengths to solve it. And this notwithstanding its difficulties with the courts and military. The more fundamental explanation, we contend, involved the relationship between the AKP and the Kurdish movement, and the (self-proclaimed) conservative nature of the AKP itself.

There has never been a cooperative relationship between the ruling party and the Kurdish movement, irrespective of calls both in Turkey and from the EU for the two to join forces in order to advance political change in the country. The reasons for the ongoing distrust are various. Of course, the AKP, with many Turkish nationalists among its ranks, has had difficulties in coming to terms with the Kurdish issue, but on more than one front the AKP and the Kurdish movement are also direct competitors, with a parallel yet opposed history during the last ten to fifteen years of their integration into the country’s political landscape.

Most obviously, in the Southeast as well as in the western metropolises where many Kurds live, both sides have sought to obtain the votes of the same electorate. They have also employed fairly similar means to achieve this, such as the emphasis on local service provisions, and the establishment of relationships between politicized civil society associations and party-friendly entrepreneurs, on the one hand, and the constituents on the other. Just as and when the Kurdish movement emerged as an institutionalized political force in the Southeast, so too did the AKP and Islamist movement, each developing its own (equally exclusive) networks of cooperation with the local civil society actors in the municipalities under its own ruling.<sup>38</sup> The AKP’s organizational network, of course, was able to enjoy state patronage, unlike that of the Kurdish movement party engaged in contentious politics, which was instead subject to state pressure.<sup>39</sup> In fact, over the course of the decade, the Turkish judiciary launched literally hundreds of investigations into the activities and speeches of the local Kurdish actors.<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly, both the AKP and the PKK have claimed to be the architects of Turkish democratization and consequently determining the future resolution of the Kurdish question: the AKP from Ankara through the Kurdish/Democratic initiative, the PKK from the Southeast through the democratic triangle concept. Neither happily tolerates the other’s claim to authorship of democratic

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<sup>36</sup> As do the conventional notions of “Kurdistan,” for that matter. For a defense of this concept by academics in Turkey, see Metin Heper, *The State and the Kurds in Turkey. The Question of Assimilation* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For a problematization, see Baskın Oran and Ibrahim Kaboğlu’s Minority Report, which gave rise to their prosecution under Articles 216 and 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, on charges of insulting “Turkishness.”

<http://baskinoran.com/makale/Minorityreportaffair-RegentJournal.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Ümit Cizre, “The Emergence of the ‘Government’s Perspective’ on the Kurdish issue,” *Insight Turkey*, 11 (2009): 1–12.

<sup>38</sup> Equating to the KCK, one might argue, Islamic organizations like the Fetullah Gülen Movement and Kurdish Hezbollah also increased their presence in the region (providing social services such as education and charitable support for the urban poor). See: International Crisis Group, “Turkey’s Kurdish Impasse: The View from Diyarbakir.” ICG Europe Report No. 222 (November 30, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> The term “contentious politics” (Tilly, 2003) refers to representative contention, where the relationship between the state and office-holders is characterized as adversarial and the office-holder remains under threat while challenging the “rules of the game”—as demonstrated in the case of the DTP by Nicole F. Watts, “Activists in Office”. For Tilly see, Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Nicole F. Watts, “The Missing Moderate: Legitimacy Resources and Pro-Kurdish Party Politics in Turkey,” in *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, eds. Richard Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (London: Chatham House, 2010): 97–115.

improvements. Undoubtedly this constitutes an obstacle for any kind of negotiations between these political actors, and yet, plainly, no solution is currently foreseeable that does not involve them both, importantly working together.

Crucially, important as this struggle for authority between the political actors is in terms of practical politics, even more significant is the difference in *how* the two sides wish to achieve political change. Both the Kurdish movement and the conservative democrats of the AKP seek to transform socio-political life by engaging in the transformation of the individual and society. A better society is sought through change at several levels, including the most intimate level of the lives of their supporters. However, whereas AKP supporters are called upon to meet their individual responsibilities as devout Muslims displaying piety, the PKK ultimately seeks change through the personal transformation of its followers into “new men/women”—that is, men and women dedicated to the PKK’s “revolution” for liberty and socialism, for whom following the PKK’s ideology is considered the means to free themselves from their subordinate position.<sup>41</sup>

“Born from the left”, the Kurdish movement has conceived of itself from the outset as a modern and revolutionary force for change, intent on doing away with traditional structures of socio-political organization.<sup>42</sup> The conservative AKP constitutes a threat to this transformational project.<sup>43</sup> This goes to the heart of the very real gulf that exists between the competing forces, beyond differences of emphasis or orientation, or the power politics of a turf war for electoral votes. Very much like the (Kemalist and liberal) secularist opposition to the current trends in Turkey’s social and political life, the Kurdish movement as a whole is deeply suspicious of and opposed to the basic direction of cultural change in the country, and the sociopolitical direction in which the government is going.

### **The AKP and Containment through Counter-Terrorism**

Although having pushed for reforms, the way in which the AKP framed these reforms has complicated its own capacity to transform Turkey’s political system. Indeed, the AKP’s signature achievement of the series of reforms enabling Turkey to meet the Copenhagen Criteria and thus be formally deemed a candidate member of the European Union (EU) has been undermined by the government’s own autocratic style of governance—not least, but not only, in respect of the Kurdish issue.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the AKP presented itself as the party protecting democracy, and not necessarily as the party transforming the political system in the direction of a pluralistic, liberal democracy. In other words, the AKP framed its policies in a technocratic way, defending them with reference to the EU, and not based on a deepening of the awareness that the political system in Turkey truly needed a radical overhaul. This “anti-political agenda of political reform” means that the party is not able to “pursue consistently a reformist agenda”.<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, it is rather difficult to argue that it any longer has one—primarily, it would appear, because its position is safe and it is inherently unmotivated to move beyond its conservative stance.

The state institutions, still dominated by hard-line Kemalists—such as public prosecutors, the military, and the higher echelons of civilian bureaucracy—continue to perceive the Kurdish issue primarily in terms of terrorism and respond by means of a “hard politics”.<sup>46</sup> And by a gradual process of osmosis, the AKP moved to this position too. The 2011 election was regarded by many as a final

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<sup>41</sup> For a more detailed account, see Olivier Grojean, “La production de l’Homme nouveau au sein du PKK,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Thematic Issue No. 8 “Surveiller, normaliser, réprimer,” (2008).

<sup>42</sup> Akkaya and Jongerden, *PKK in the 2000s*.

<sup>43</sup> In fact, the one area in which the ruling party does appear to be unequivocally “progressive,” in its whole-hearted embrace of neo-liberalism, is the one area where the Kurdish movement favors a more traditional, leftist approach—especially since the recent and ongoing neo-liberal fuelled economic surge in Turkey reaches its relatively undeveloped and impoverished southeast last and least, leaving the Kurdish workforce particularly vulnerable.

<sup>44</sup> Criticism in this respect, international as well as national, focuses personally on the authoritarian style of the AKP leader himself. E.g. “Erdogan, Justice and the Rule of Law,” *Financial Times*, Jan. 10 2012. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/46463fa0-3b8e-11e1-bb39-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2H1CuXWwh>.

<sup>45</sup> Menderes Çınar, “Turkey’s Present Ancien Régime and the Justice and Development Party,” in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, eds. Casier and Jongerden, 13, 22..

<sup>46</sup> Ersel Aydınli, “Decoding Turkey’s Struggle with the PKK.” *Security Dialogue* 33 (2002): 209–225.

public vote on the AKP's struggle with the old order, and the government victory as effectively giving the green light to the continuation and conclusion of the massive Sledgehammer (*Balyoz*) and Ergenekon court cases focused on hundreds of the country's military leaders and the recent and past histories of coups, coup attempts, and "deep state" activities. And yet the government seems increasingly indistinguishable from the order it was to have removed. In order to achieve real security, the AKP had to effect its own coup, to capture the state;<sup>47</sup> but in so doing, it had to embody it, to become its own perceived enemy. This is evident also in its failure to bring Kurdish demands into the dismal progress on revision of the constitution, or properly revise the Anti-Terror Law so used and abused by the courts.<sup>48</sup>

The terrorism-defined response to the progress of the Kurdish movement is essentially an extension of the "oxymoron of a military solution".<sup>49</sup> There is a clear continuation here of the establishment's earlier positioning vis-à-vis the political struggle of the Kurdish movement, which relates to the "national security syndrome" embedded in the Turkish political system. It leaves the political elite—which now includes and is significantly determined by the AKP—conceiving of itself as both guarantor of the country's national security and promoter of liberalization, consequently leading it to undermine democracy in the name of security.<sup>50</sup>

According to the simple imperative of fighting terrorism, it is in the interest of all the branches and bodies of the state to undermine the strength of the local Kurdish party-led municipalities. This has been visible not only in high-profile judicial decisions, such as the DTP ban, but also in local ones, such as the Diyarbakır court decision to ban one of the main associations lending support to the poor in the city.<sup>51</sup> The security analysis has the KCK depicted as a modernized urban expression of terrorism, clandestinely spreading fear through the region's local authorities, hospitals, universities, and the like.<sup>52</sup> It entails the policy that has been sustained by the governing party, the opposition parties, and the military and judiciary alike, a politics of containment that aims to roll back the PKK presence in social and political, primarily urban life, but without offering a constructive alternative by addressing the reasons that led to this in the first place.

### Responses Ongoing

What the government has designated as counter-terrorism operations mainly figure in the Kurdish imagination as just anti-Kurdish operations. Images of handcuffed mayors became iconic in the Kurdish media, while the closure of the DTP and later arrests were quickly seized on by both the PKK and the DTP/BDP to mobilize and increase support, with the crackdowns on public demonstrations yet further fuelling distrust and anger amongst its sympathizers. The recent repression is understood to have been caused by the AKP government. Supporters of the Kurdish movement share a deepening sense of hostility towards the ruling party.

The developments of the past years confirm the views of those PKK militants and sympathizers who are skeptical of ever finding a negotiated settlement of the issue and silence the more moderate voices within the Kurdish movement. In particular, concerns are rising with regards to the radicalization amongst the younger generations in the metropolises, which host large numbers of

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<sup>47</sup> The coup argument, or analogy, is also made by BDP deputy Ertuğrul Kürkçü, as reported in Ekin Karaca, "Ertuğrul Kürkçü Responds to PM Erdoğan: The Government Has Taken Over the Judiciary and Parliament," *Bianet*, Sept. 8, 2012.

<http://bianet.org/english/human-rights/140771-the-government-has-taken-over-the-judiciary-and-parliament>.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g. Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2012: Turkey"; and International Crisis Group, "Turkey's Kurdish Impasse."

<sup>49</sup> Umit Cizre, "The Emergence of the 'Government's Perspective' on the Kurdish Issue," *Insight Turkey*, 11:2 (2009): 1–12.

<sup>50</sup> See also Ümit Sakallıoğlu-Cizre, "Demythologizing the National Security Concept: The Case of Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 57:2 (2003).

<sup>51</sup> This DTP-related poverty-alleviation association (Sarmaşık Derneği) was closed down for failing to have the official status of an association working for the benefit of public welfare, a decision that affected some 15,000 of Diyarbakır's most needy citizens. See also Kerem Öktem, "The Patronising Embrace: Turkey's New Kurdish Strategy," *Occasional Paper* (Stiftung Forschungsstelle Schweiz-Türkei: Basel, February 2008).

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, İhsan Bal, "The Intraparty Clash of Pro-Kurdish DTP," *USAK articles-analyses* (online) (May 7, 2009).

Kurdish migrants and internally displaced people who have joined the ranks of the disenfranchised urban poor following the loss of their homes, lands, and livestock and the destruction of their communities during the forced village evacuations, and the resulting undercurrent of the potential for communal violence that occasionally flares in the larger cities as nationalism—both Turkish and Kurdish—increases. This latter pertains also to the ongoing danger of PKK splinter groups radically opposed to any attempt by its leadership to negotiate with the enemy, an argument for more violence only confirmed by the failed Opening.

Thus the recent analysis by the International Crisis Group reminded of the danger of repeating old policies of denial and oppression, recalling the enduring impact of the tortures in Diyarbakir prison and their significance for support of the insurgency. The ICG analysis specifically warned the government to remain on guard against policies that will create symbols for radical youth protests and the PKK of tomorrow.<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, the most recent Human Rights Watch Report on Turkey points to a range of abuses ranging from torture to censorship. Referring to the “arbitrary imposition of the harshest terrorism charges” against essentially innocent individuals, the report concludes that “The non-resolution of the Kurdish issue remains the single greatest obstacle to progress on human rights in Turkey”.<sup>54</sup>

Born of a sense of desperation and outrage, the use of violence by insurgency groups is generally perceived as a last resort, and is precisely what gives it power, and thus is equally well only given up as a last resort, as part and parcel of a “final” deal: renunciation of violence can generally not be effective as a precondition to settlement, which is generally the demand of the state as claimant to this monopoly (hence the need for preparatory talks to be held in secret). The PKK’s holding on to arms is generally conceived as a means to secure its political survival as well as that of the political struggle with which it is engaged through the KCK and the DTP/BDP. Displaying an ongoing distrust towards the Turkish state apparatus and government of the day, the PKK leadership in the mountains has never ceased to recruit new Kurdish youth into its ranks.<sup>55</sup>

With the unilateral ceasefire allowed to lapse, rural parts of the Kurdish provinces have seen an upsurge in violent clashes between PKK militants and state security forces. Since mid 2011, PKK guerilla forces have re-engaged with the strategic tactic of holding territory inside the country, as it had in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> With over 700 deaths (killings) in these confrontations since the parliamentary elections of 2011, the current rate of loss of life is at its highest since 1999.<sup>57</sup> This stands as a rather damning indictment to the government, because the AKP government has most surely brought this sorry situation upon itself, having sought to embrace the Kurds and the multi-cultural reality of the country while purposefully disregarding the societal and political presence of the Kurdish movement.

Hamstrung in being unable to progress without including the very opposition that it sought to neutralize, the AKP’s Kurdish opening was abandoned, stranded in an impasse and fuelling unrest and violence. And even during this phase of repression, the political problems have continued with every turn of the screw. In arresting and sending to trial the Kurdish party members and movement activists, the Kemalist stance afforded the accused a stage to assert language demands by claiming the right to offer their defense in Kurdish; the courts’ rejection of this just prepared an international stage for condemnation of the government and highlighting the Kurdish cause, when in September, 2012, 65 of the interned protested with a hunger strike,<sup>58</sup> and failure by the government to publicly intervene

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<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement Europe Report No. 219 (September 11, 2012): 26.

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2012: Turkey.”

<sup>55</sup> Güneş M. Tezcür, “When Democratization Radicalizes,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 47 (2010): 775–789.

<sup>56</sup> Murat Karayilan in an interview with Firat News Agency, 3 August 2012, as cited by the International Crisis Group, Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement: 2. On the guerrilla strategy, see Jongerden, *Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds*: 61.

<sup>57</sup> International Crisis Group, Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement: 1.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Noan Chomsky’s Youtube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLbzD9tNnzQ>. The online petition headed by Judith Butler, “Hunger strikers in Turkish prisons: Engage in constructive dialogue with prisoners,” <https://www.change.org/petitions/hunger-strikers-in-turkish-prisons-engage-in-constructive-dialogue-with-prisoners>. Binnaz Saktanber, “Will Erdogan Do Nothing to Save the Lives of Kurdish Hunger Strikers?” *The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2012.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/nov/08/erdogan-kurdish-hunger-strikers>.

prompted hundreds and then thousands of people nationwide to similarly strike and act in solidarity. And this eventually allowed Öcalan to regain a public profile after being effectively silenced for a year and finally reassert his authority by having the strike called off (on day 68)—rather tellingly, moreover, only after his intervention had been sought by state officials.<sup>59</sup>

### **In Conclusion: Future Prospects**

Recognizing that there is a “Kurdish issue” and promising to change some of the conditions that have given rise to it has represented an enormous step forward for Turkey. In this respect, the AKP initiative moved Turkey, however “begrudgingly”, into the third of Yeğen’s three major periods in the state’s perception of the Kurdish issue (pre-denial, denial, and, now, post-denial).<sup>60</sup> The Opening as framed, however, represented an attempt to define this issue very much as previous Turkish governments had done in the 1990s.<sup>61</sup> Therefore it failed from almost all perspectives.

First, the government-initiated reforms did not bring Turkey closer to a peaceful solution of its Kurdish problem, but on the contrary brought more violence. From a humanist perspective, it has been disastrous. Second, the dual strategy of relaxing some anti-Kurdish constrictions and supporting the attempt to crack the PKK (KCK) and DTP (BDP) nexus failed at the polls. The Kurdish opening did not turn the BDP into “a marginal party”.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, more than half of all voters in the Kurdish majority provinces voted for the independent candidates representing BDP in the last election. In fact, measured by the narrowest of AKP goals, electoral success in the Southeast, the Opening may be counted a complete disaster since the Kurdish vote is now basically lost.

Third, and crucially, the central and still determining influence of “İmralı” has not diminished. Just as the Kurdish issue has long been regarded by outsiders as a problem of Turkey’s own making—hence the supportive attitude from the EU until the “Terrorist Group” listings of the “War on Terror” gave the Turkish state its own leverage<sup>63</sup>—so also have the AKP’s failures (to oppose the security response or offer a roadmap going forward) enabled a strengthening of the PKK’s grip on the Kurdish movement, with more people, both sympathizers and non-sympathizers, recognizing the authority that the illegal Kurdish party exerts over the Kurdish region and its politics, especially after the final twists of the hunger strike saga.<sup>64</sup>

In this sense, although the Kurdish movement has made huge strides over the past decade, the hopes that rose with the government’s Kurdish Opening of 2009–10 also peaked then and fell—which makes this particular aspect of the general “Kurdish Spring” more like a Fall. A sense confirmed by the continued AKP failure to develop a political perspective on the Kurdish issue beyond the traditional and dead-end national security politics perspective. As a result, it is argued, the AKP attempt to eliminate the Kurdish movement in Turkey has narrowed rather than facilitated the political arena for pro-Kurdish politics, and thereby opened the door instead to violence.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, the AKP has continued to flip-flop over the whole issue—the Prime Minister giving hope by meeting for a one-on-one with iconic Kurdish activist and MP Leyla Zana, for example, and then dashing it with his quite frivolous and callous attitude to the hunger strike—generally engendering a sense of profound cynicism on the Kurdish side on any pronouncements or moves it makes.

Given the deep, established fault lines between the Kurdish movement and the AKP, the future promises ongoing political-ideological struggles that are constitutive also of the ongoing identity-formation of the followers and converts of the two movements. This “battlefield” could return to a primarily ideological and thus non-violent one of political strife and conflict, fought within the

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<sup>59</sup> Radikal, Nov. 18, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Mesut Yeğen, “The Kurdish Question in Turkey,” in Casier and Jongerden, eds., *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*: 79–80.

<sup>61</sup> See Ersel Aydınli, “Decoding Turkey’s Struggle with the PKK.”

<sup>62</sup> Huseyin Çelik, AKP Vice President at the time of the launch of the initiative in an interview with Zaman, January 2010, cited by Jake Hess, “Behind the Kurdish Hunger Strike,” Middle East Report Online, November 8, 2012. [http://www.merip.org/mero/mero110812#\\_5\\_](http://www.merip.org/mero/mero110812#_5_).

<sup>63</sup> See Marlies Casier, “Designated Terrorists: The Kurdistan Workers’ Party and Its Struggle to (Re)gain Political Legitimacy,” *Mediterranean Politics* 15: 3 (2010): 395–415.

<sup>64</sup> International Crisis Group, *Turkey’s Kurdish Impasse*: 7.

<sup>65</sup> Cuma Çiçek, “Elimination or Integration of Pro-Kurdish Politics: Limits of the AKP’s Democratic Initiative,” *Turkish Studies* 12: 1 (2011): 15–26

legitimate arenas of civil society, but such a scenario requires Erdoğan to take the “statesmanlike” lead, as though concerned with his “legacy”, and embark on the radical route forward necessary to bring the PKK down from the mountains.

The ongoing counter-terrorism operations have become very dangerous since they reinforce those voices within the Kurdish movement that would rather fight their way out of the ongoing repression, having lost hope for a political solution and believing that a solution can only be found by means of armed struggle. Political analysts, as well as senior politicians, like ex-DTP leader Ahmet Türk, have warned that the Turkish-Kurdish middle ground is increasingly at risk. They fear that they might be the last generation to have the experience of working side-by-side with Turkish politicians. Having a prime minister defining the Southeast of his country as a “terror region”<sup>66</sup> only heightens the already tense atmosphere. And yet, as Zana implied after her meeting with him (and for which she was criticized as “naïve”), Erdoğan’s AKP remains the least worst possibility.<sup>67</sup>

There is, therefore, a certain sense of urgency, but only if Erdoğan and the AKP government are impelled to sincerely resolve things will this become a genuine “window of opportunity” for Turkey’s Kurds to enhance “their national [sic] cause for self-determination” in the context of the “Kurdish quiet spring”.<sup>68</sup> At the time of the Opening, the attention of commentators was drawn to paralleling the Turkish/Kurdish case with the Irish peace process, and the lack of an “honest broker” to move things forward regretted.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, with the AKP’s sidelining of the Kurdish political party—which had been mooted as an “effective intermediary”, or “interlocutor”<sup>70</sup>—and the West muted by its own “terrorist” stance, there has been none in sight, save Erdoğan. Now, however, the disintegration of the Opening into open conflict combines with events in Syria to provide just such a push.

Facing the prospect of Kurdish autonomous control in two of its three Kurdistan border countries, the AKP knows that the balance of power has tilted dramatically, and unless it wishes to entertain the prospect of another 25 years expenditure of “energy, budget, peace and young people” on its Southeast, it may be well advised to try to settle the issue now. In this sense, the chastening experience of the AKP’s failed Kurdish initiative might yet serve to concentrate minds, and prove retrospectively to have been the opening it promised all along.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Prime Minister Erdoğan on the IMC TV website in an answer to reporters in Pakistan, May 22, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-zana-talks-dismissed-by-pkk.aspx?pageID=238&nID=24523&NewsCatID=338>.

<sup>68</sup> Ofra Bengio, “The Kurdish Quiet Spring,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 3, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Zafer Yörük, “Lessons to Be Learnt from Northern Ireland,” *Bianet.org*, August 19-20, 2009; Ted Smyth, “The Unsung Heroes of the Irish Peace Process,” *World Policy Journal* 22:1 (Spring 2005); and Casier, Hilton and Jongerden (2006), “Road Maps and Roadblocks.”

<sup>70</sup> David L. Philips (National Committee on American Foreign Policy), “Disarming, Demobilizing, and Reintegrating the Kurdistan Workers Party,” October 18, 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Authors’ note: Significant developments since this article was written—including repeated state-sanctioned BDP meetings with Öcalan and the PKK leader’s instruction for its guerrilla to cease fire (again) and withdraw, along with certain aspects of AKP political positioning—seem to indicate this. Together, they combine for a sense of a major move forward and give cause for some optimism.