

Regional role forces Turkey to revisit Kurdish issues at home

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Until the arrival of the Arab spring, the "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy of Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) seemed to be thriving. There was hope that Turkey could play a constructive role in the Middle East.

The "zero problems" policy was founded upon two main premises: that trade and economic development would push long-festering ideological and security conflicts aside, and that Turkey's historical and cultural legacy is a soft-power asset, not a liability.

While the Middle East's autocratic regimes were stable, both premises seemed to hold true. Turkey appeared to uphold democracy and human rights without having to choose between democratic ideals and material interests, or reform its own flawed democracy. It also managed to remain mostly neutral in ethnic and religious matters across the Middle East.

But both premises came under pressure when Middle Eastern peoples rose against their oppressors. When persuasion failed first in Libya and then in Syria, Turkey sacrificed its immediate economic interests to support the uprisings.

As Shia-Sunni and Arab-Kurdish schisms widened in Iraq and Syria, and Iran's regional influence grew, Turkish neutrality vis-à-vis different ethnic and religious groupings became more difficult to maintain.

Now it is dawning on Turkey that it must become a full democracy at home or else may be compelled to return to its military and security-based policies of previous decades.

This is especially true in Turkey's relations with the Kurds.

After Turkey began to support the Syrian opposition, the Damascus regime sought an alliance with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish party associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that has been fighting Turkey and pro-government Turkish Kurds for three decades.

Last month, it appears, several Syrian towns and border posts were ceded to PYD fighters. The sight of PKK flags and posters of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, so close to Turkish soil, shocked mainstream public opinion in Turkey. Meanwhile, PKK attacks inside Turkey increased.

Reportedly, the Turkish army needed last-minute intelligence and a pre-emptive battle to foil a PKK plan to start an insurgency in Semdinli, a Turkish town in the sensitive wedge where Iraq, Iran and Turkey meet. Then, nine people including four children were killed last week by a car bomb blamed on the PKK in the city of Gaziantep near the border with Syria.

Relations with Iran have been deteriorating rapidly since Syria's troubles began. Iran's army chief of staff, Gen Hassan Firouzabadi, recently warned Turkey that it would be next if it continued to support western (ie, anti-Iran) policies in Syria.

While the Semdinli fighting continued, the PKK killed two Turkish soldiers in the Aegean town of Foca and then kidnapped a prominent politician from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP).

Turkey had long feared that Kurdish nationalism in its neighbourhood would stir ethnic trouble at home, but now religious tensions may also be at risk. Domestic politics have been increasingly preoccupied with cleavages between Turkish Sunnis and Alevis, and many interpret Turkey's Syrian policy as a US-Israeli plot to strike Shia Iran by using "Sunni Turkey".

Because external and domestic troubles are linked, Turkey has been trying to redefine its external policies towards Kurds. It used its clout with the Syrian National Council to persuade them to elect a Kurdish leader. Its good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq have helped to contain the PYD in Syria.

In mid-July, President Massoud Barzani of Iraq's Kurdish region brokered a deal between the PYD and other Syrian Kurds to form a joint Supreme Kurdish Council; the PYD supposedly agreed to not support PKK operations in Turkey. And in July, Turkey's National Security Council said it would not oppose democratically determined Kurdish rights and autonomy in the region. The new red line is a Kurdish entity controlled by PKK or other anti-Turkish forces.

Efforts like these can produce results only if Turkey can also fundamentally redesign its domestic policies about its own Kurds. Since 2007, Turkey has developed cooperation with Iraq's Kurdish region, but ultimately Turkey cannot rely on Mr Barzani to contain the PKK.

To prevent the radicalisation of its own Kurds, Turkey must make them feel that they enjoy individual and cultural freedoms.

The current Turkish process for writing a new constitution - through a multi-party parliamentary commission including most political forces - provides an opportunity to reconfigure the status of Kurds and other groups.

The only red line on Kurdish rights should be that Turkey remains one political nation, which is necessary for ethnic peace and territorial integrity. Reforms such as administrative decentralisation, devolution of powers, cultural and educational rights, and the recognition of Kurds and other groups as cultural nations or nationalities should be open to discussion.

The government may choose to continue its unofficial negotiations with the PKK for the sake of peace. The parliamentary process should not be hostage to the PKK, which is not likely to be accommodating because it thinks it is growing stronger given events in Syria. But most

importantly, securing Kurdish rights based on democratic institutions serves Turkey's interests. Ultimately, that is the only way to win the war against the PKK.

The seeds of Turkey's Kurdish question were sown in the 1920s, when Turkey paid a heavy price for consolidating a secular state by depriving Kurds of a voice and fair representation. Today, Turkey is an overconfident nation state and a flawed yet stable democracy. And, compared to the 1990s, Kurdish cultural identity is freely expressed and no longer a taboo.

Only by addressing domestic Kurdish questions and resolving other democratic deficits can Turkey play a constructive role and claim to be an example for the region.

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