

Opening, Solution, Despair: Why Turkey Still Faces a Kurdish Question

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By
Nesi Altaras

Thesis Committee:
Professor Malik Mufti
Professor Paul Joseph

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Introduction

In 2009 the government of Turkey, led by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, proclaimed the beginning of a peace and reconciliation process with the parallel goals of legally and socially normalizing Kurdish identity in Turkey and ending the guerilla war with the violent Kurdistan Worker's Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* or PKK). After being renamed a number of times, this initiative settled into the public consciousness as the Kurdish Opening (*Kürt açılımı*). This opening did not produce the maximal results expected and after a bloody intermission, the same government began a second attempt that was called the Solution Process (*Çözüm süreci*). These were two distinct attempts, 2009-2011 and 2012-2015, punctuated by the most violent year in the conflict since the 1990s when the government of Turkey tried to solve the Kurdish question peacefully. The term Kurdish question is understood in various ways including the intentional underdevelopment of Kurdish areas of Turkey, a problem of cultural discrimination and forced assimilation in Turkey, or the lack of self-determination of a distinct Kurdish nation whose homeland spans multiple countries. I hold that all of these aspects, among others, contribute to what the Kurdish question is that the *açılım* and *çözüm* set out to solve. Every single one of these conceptions is based in truth about the multifaceted issue and thus I will not define the question as simply one or the other. However, the arguments made here will highlight that the Kurdish question is a question of political identity, an issue that Turkey has yet to deal with on multiple fronts.

Despite initial symbolic changes and hopeful rhetoric from both attempts, there was neither peace nor reconciliation. Why did these processes end? What actions of Turkish and Kurdish actors led to the failure of the solution effort and caused the resumption of violence? To answer these questions, we must investigate the various actors involved on the Kurdish and Turkish political

scenes, as well as the dynamic linkages with the Kurds of Iraq and to the Kurds of Syria, especially in light of the war in Syria.

The Kurdish question figured heavily in Prime Minister Erdoğan's agenda because of the political and electoral importance of this issue to his voter base and to his power and foreign policy goals. Why do Kurds take up such a critical position in Turkey's politics: who are they? The Kurds are an ethnolinguistic minority group that constitutes nearly twenty percent of Turkey's population¹ and they have been violently oppressed throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey through forced migration, assimilationist policies, and massacres. Kurds live in their historic homeland called Kurdistan, which is a mountainous region spanning Southeastern Turkey, Northern Syria, Northern Iraq, and Northwestern Iran. The Kurdish region of Turkey, variably defined to include 12 to 15 of Turkey's 81 provinces, is the largest and most populous part of historic Kurdistan. This area is also the poorest and least developed part of Turkey. Throughout this thesis, I will reference Kurdistan generally to mean this area; what is sometimes known as North (*Bakuri*) Kurdistan. While an overwhelming majority of this region is Kurdish, Kurds have also migrated to all of Turkey's major cities, moving the boundaries of the Kurdish question from Kurdistan to encompass all of Turkey.

Kurds are not a monolith. In Turkey, those who self-identify as Kurds speak Zazaki² or Kurmanci, believe in Alevism or Sunni Islam, within Sunni Islam they subscribe either to the Shafi (the majority of Kurds) or Hanefi (the majority in Turkey) school, are separated by socioeconomic class and level of religiosity. While these differences are significant and will be discussed in more

¹ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 3.

² There is some debate as to whether Zazaki speakers are Kurds. I reject this notion and choose to rely on the self-definition of ethnic identity. Most Zazaki speakers identify as Kurds and so it would be best to treat them as such. See Servet Mutlu, "Ethnic Kurds in Turkey: A Demographic Study," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28:4, (Nov 1996): 519.

detail, the social and political cleavage between Turkish and Kurdish citizens of Turkey generally takes precedence in countrywide politics. The Turk-Kurd division is one of the two most significant divisions in modern Turkey, the other being secularism and religiosity.³ This issue shapes Turkish involvement in Iraq, Syria, looms over relations with the US, Europe, and Russia, and is hotly contested in the domestic politics. The existence of a large, territorially dominant Kurdish population questions the *raison d'être* of Turkey: is it for and by Turks or are their more peoples who live in these lands who have legitimate cultural, political, and even self-determination demands?

Erdoğan attempted this fundamental questioning as leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was founded by the younger, more reformist wing of the Turkish Islamist movement in 2002.⁴ He led the party first as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014 and since then as President of the Republic. Having an Islamic background, the AKP was a rare Turkish party that was not anti-Kurd by default, as it did not have the baggage of Turkish nationalism in its left- or right-wing incarnations.⁵ The main problem when the AKP took power was its fear of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). The military has long set the boundaries of Turkey's politics and intervened with coups when its red lines have been crossed. The peculiarity of the TAF is that it ultimately hands power back to civilians: its objective is course correction and sustaining a sort of democracy consistent with the framework of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic. This situation has been described as military tutelage over Turkey's multi-party democratic system. The military's Kemalist framework is built on the myth that all citizens of Turkey are Turks. Hence, even admitting the existence of Kurds and their language is an issue for the TAF. However,

³ Gül Arıkan Akdağ, "Rational political parties and electoral games: the AKP's strategic move for the Kurdish vote in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 17:1, (2016): 126-154.

⁴ This split was arguably so that reformists expand Islamist appeal to center-right voters and repeat Özal's success.

⁵ Özal's Homeland Party (ANAP) was an oddity as well. The leader was conciliatory while its MPs were anti-Kurd.

the more obvious issue separating the AKP and the TAF was the other axis of Turkish politics: religion. The Islamist movement the AKP broke away from had been the target of a “soft coup” in 1997 and was under pressure from the TAF as well as the secular state elite that dominated the bureaucracy and the courts. The TAF was suspicious of this supposedly moderate Islamic party from the moment it came to power. The AKP’s religious worldview challenged the principle of secularism⁶ that the military holds in high regard. Contradicting the military on both secularism and the Kurdish question was a massive challenge and a danger to the continuation of the AKP government. Thus, “until 2005, the AKP government did not refer to the Kurdish question publicly”⁷ and Prime Minister Erdoğan waited until he had consolidated control of state institutions and broken the military’s stranglehold on power to address the Kurdish question.

As voters demanding systemic change, the Kurds often picked Islamists who also challenged the basic paradigms of Turkey.⁸ Turkey’s Kurdish population is mostly Sunni and religious, providing the AKP with a reliable voter base since the first election it contested in 2002. However, as ethnic consciousness increased, and Kurdish identity became more politicized, the vote shares of Kurdish nationalists kept rising consistently since the 1990s. The rising political power of Kurds and their desire to wield that power themselves as opposed to delegating it to the AKP was a major factor in both starting and ending the process. As Kurdish concerns came to the fore, AKP could no longer take those voters for granted and had to compete with the parties of the Kurdish national movement, beyond just using clientelism.⁹ AKP was challenged among the

⁶ On Turkey’s assertive secularism see Kuru, Ahmet, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*, (New York: Cambridge UP 2009).

⁷ Elçin Aktoprak, “The Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform: Is there any Progress?” *The European Yearbook of Minority Issues* Vol. 9, 2010: 652.

⁸ There are some scholars who defend the idea that Kurds often voted for Islamists as protest votes. See Henri J. Barkey, “The people’s democracy party (HADEP): the travails of a legal Kurdish party in Turkey,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18:1, (1998): 132.

⁹ Aktoprak, “The Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 652.

Kurdish electorate by various parties of the Kurdish national movement. The movement can be described as a culmination of civilian and armed, legal and illegal groups and organizations spread across Kurdistan, Turkey, and a diaspora that seeks improvement to the conditions of Kurds, be that in the form of cultural rights or independence. The movement, due to its historical development, is left-wing and became a mass movement with majority support in Kurdistan with the beginning of the PKK's guerilla war in 1984. The PKK adopted the Marxist-Leninist label for many reasons, but the potential appeal and eventual material support from the USSR cannot be overlooked, especially in the earlier stages of violent action. In the 1990s, the movement began to see the Turkish political arena as a method to achieve its aims and set up a political party. However, for the Turkish state elite, the military included, the presence of Kurds as Kurds in the legislature, attempting to take the oath of office in Kurdish, using the word Kurdistan, or making demands that undermined Turkey's "Turkish" character, was unacceptable. I say "Kurds as Kurds" because Kemalist Turkish nationalism that the state is founded on is oddly accepting of any ethnic background under certain conditions. A Kurd can become a Turk and live as an equal, first-class citizen as long he abandons his mother tongue to take Turkish as his first language, is a Sunni Muslim (without being too outwardly religious) and does not mention his Kurdishness. Members of the Kurdish national movement reject this assimilation and thus Kurdish political parties consistently get banned by courts. As soon as one Kurdish party got banned, another would appear with much of the same cadres. This successive line of parties can be grouped under the banner of the Kurdish national movement, culminating in the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP),¹⁰ which is active today.

¹⁰ Even the name of this party contradicts the official ideology as it implies the existence of multiple peoples.

Kurds were a marginalized force and had long been aligned with others that had been alienated from the political mainstream: socialists and leftist. Some have argued this alliance came about because the natural leadership of Kurdistan, its traditional elite, was successfully co-opted by the Turkish state, leaving more radical elements of Kurdish society to lead the national movement, unlike in Iraq where traditional elites have been leading a more right-leaning Kurdish national movement.¹¹ The Kurdish national movement in Turkey has a vision for Turkey that redefines what it means to be a citizen along lines that would include Kurds. It is also a movement that seeks to draw power away from the state and decentralize the country. These principles have been most clearly put to practice with the most recent Kurdish-founded party: The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which is a left-wing rainbow coalition of socialists, various religious and ethnic minorities, feminists, environmentalists, and LGBTQ activists. The crux of the HDP's redefinition is civic nationalism: a conception that argues a state is a collection of all those who live within its borders regardless of identity. The HDP promulgates the concept of *Türkiyeli* (of Turkey)¹² that would encompass all citizens of the country and implicitly acknowledges that Turkey is more than a country of Turks.

How does the identity of *Türk* (Turk/Turkish), the official demonym, differ from *Türkiyeli*? *Türk* was defined during the struggle for independence initially as a combination of the various Islamic elements of Anatolia. *Türk* would not only encompass ethnic Turks but also Balkan and Caucasian Muslim refugees and immigrants, as well as Arabs and Kurds in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia. *Türk* was an identity open to all who agreed to assimilate. As described above, the only prerequisites were learning Turkish as a first language and being a nominal Sunni

¹¹ Cemil Gündoğan, *Kürt Hareketinde Türkiyelileşme Kimin Günahı, Kimin Sevabı?* (Istanbul: Vate Yayınevi 2016), 55-56.

¹² *Türkiyeli* could also be translated as Turkeyian or Turkeyite but I prefer “of Turkey” to these more clunky terms.

Muslim. There was initially no ethnic dimension to this *Türk* nationalism: a first-generation Tatar immigrant or Bosnian refugee was as *Türk* as the long-time residents of Anatolia as long as they spoke fluent Turkish at home and were Sunni. This understanding of national identity is also referred to as Atatürk nationalism, after the republic's founder, and thus can be defined as the Kemalist conception of Turkey. In a speech to the first assembly, Atatürk clearly stated his position: "The nation that we are here to preserve and defend is, of course, not only comprised of one element. It is composed of various Muslim elements. . . . We have repeated and confirmed, and altogether accepted with sincerity, that [each and every element that has created this collective] are citizens who respect each other and each other's racial, social, geographic rights. Therefore, we share the same interests. The unity that we seek to achieve is not only of Turks or of Çerkes, but of Muslim elements that include all of these."¹³ However, as the Islamic aspect of the republic got toned down and the Turkish aspect took precedence, the already tenuous connection of the Kurds to this conception started to wither. Shared religious identity and opposition to "infidel" foreign powers seeking to invade the country united the Kurds and Turks at the time.¹⁴ The increased secularism of the new regime and the end of the foreign threat obscured that unity.

Simultaneously, there was an increased awareness of Kurdish identity. Islamic and Kurdish intersections combined to cause a series of serious rebellions to the central authority of the young republic. These rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s were put down with considerable effort. The Republic used draconian assimilation policies and violence to force Kurds into the *Türk* paradigm. Kurds were much more resistant to this imposition because unlike all the other non-Turkish

¹³Ayşe Gül Altınay, *The Myth of the Military-Nation: Militarism, Gender, and Education in Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 85.

¹⁴ A similar concern for infidels also led to Kurdish-Turkish cooperation during the Armenian Genocide. In many of the Kurdish provinces today, Armenians were actually the largest demographic but orders from Turkish leaders, implemented by local Kurds, led to the destruction of these Armenian communities.

Muslim elements of Anatolia, they were an overwhelming majority in their land. The Kurds were the only Muslim group to pose a self-determination threat to the Turks. For example, the Circassian language, unlike Kurdish, did not pose a political threat to Turkey as did Kurdish; it had no grounds or resources for a political or territorial challenge to Turkish authority.

The concept of *Türkiyeli* was born in opposition to this *Türk* paradigm; to supersede and replace it as the supra-identity of Turkey. The *Türkiyeli* idea innately argues that Turkey is a collection that includes many non-Turks (some of whom are non-Muslims¹⁵). This term was adopted by the Kurdish national movement as it moved away from demands for independence and towards a solution to the Kurdish question within the confines of Turkey. Its more Turkey-centric demands included democratization and stronger local governance. The movement started to conceive itself not only as Kurdish but also as *Türkiyeli*, doubling down on an inherent link to Turkey as a homeland, a place to lay claim to; not to dismantle but to have a say in.

The AKP, like Islamists parties before it, also attempted to redefine Turkey's identity. The *Türk* conception of the republic has a distinct issue with Islam: while those included must be nominally Muslim, a Republican *Türk* must also adhere to laicity. "Although officially secular, the state privileged Sunni Islam as a marker of Turkish nationality [...] in Kemalist Turkey, one was judged not so much by which religion one practiced – since piety was considered a clear sign of backwardness and superstition – but rather by which religious heritage one rejected."¹⁶ Nominal Sunni Muslims who lead secular lifestyles are the desired *Türk*, while those who exhibit religiosity are perceived as a threat to the secular republican order. The AKP's vision is of a Sunni Muslim, or a neo-Ottoman Turkey that is in contradiction with the *Türk* identity. However, their vision

¹⁵ As the author, I feel compelled to disclose that as a Jew from Turkey, excluded from the *Türk* paradigm and included by the *Türkiyeli* idea, it is difficult to feel sympathy for the former and avoid sympathy for the latter.

¹⁶ Charles King, *Midnight at Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 187.

divides Kurds along Sunni/Alevi lines. The Alevi are a heterodox religious group that split off from mainstream Islam and is deemed heretical by the Sunni majority, especially by Islamists like the AKP.¹⁷ Kurdish leadership harshly learned the lessons of splitting along the Alevi/Sunni cleavage in the first two decades of the Republic. Many of the massive Kurdish uprisings failed because they alienated the other religious community and could not incorporate both in a joint Kurdish struggle. Whenever one Kurdish religious community rose up, the other collaborated with the Turkish state against them or simply looked the other way.¹⁸ An Islamist identification was difficult for the Kurdish national movement for two reasons: it would alienate the Kurdish Alevis and the movement's Turkish allies on the left by eschewing the secular state.

The ideological clash between the conceptions of *Türk*, *Türkiyeli*, and Muslim/Neo-Ottoman came to the fore in the Kurdish Opening of 2009-2011 and the Solution Process of 2012-2015. Both processes failed for a variety of distinct reasons. The 2009-2015 era in Turkey also saw the tension between democratization and authoritarianism, decentralization and centralization, Turkish nationalism and Kurdish nationalism, as well as tensions over Syria at the international level. These dynamics combined to bring peace attempts to a halt. In Chapter 1, I explain why the AKP was well-placed to make these attempts because of political changes in Turkey that had long been developing. In Chapter 2, I analyze the Kurdish Opening and elucidate the reasons for its failure. In Chapter 3, I go through the Solution Process and conclude with the future of the Kurdish question.

¹⁷ Alevi people have been perceived for centuries as heretical and since their existence as a community required religious practice, it also was outside of the Kemalist *Türk* paradigm.

¹⁸ David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006), 28-29, 64, 104, 106-107.

Chapter 1: What Changed?

There have been many studies analyzing the consequential changes to Turkey's political culture and system since the AKP took power. The Kurdish question is a foundational issue that permeates other debates surrounding foreign policy, democratization, a new constitution, and citizenship and so it constitutes a large part of the analysis of this period. Multiple interconnected changes to the status quo, which had prevailed since the beginning of the armed conflict with the PKK, created the opportunity for a solution attempt. There were changes both within the Turkish state and the Kurdish national movement.

Chronologically, the first change happened within the Kurdish national movement. Güneş explains that "1992 onwards, the PKK started to face significant military difficulties"¹⁹ and thus realized that it was going to be difficult to achieve their maximalist goal, namely Kurdish independence, through armed struggle. With the end of the Cold War and the rising difficulty with armed action, the Kurdish national movement moved away from the militant revolutionary message and towards "a comprehensive democratic discourse, which significantly altered the movement's long-term objectives and political demands for the Kurds."²⁰ The shift away from independence was gradual and began in the 1990s as the first legal Kurdish parties appeared.²¹ The leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, and legal political actors like the HADEP, the legal Kurdish party formed in 1994, played a major role in this transformation within the Kurdish national movement. Güneş says that the HADEP ran on a platform of constitutional citizenship (a precursor

¹⁹ Cengiz Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, (New York: Routledge, 2012) 124.

²⁰ Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, 124.

²¹ Henri J. Barkey, "The people's democracy party (HADEP): the travails of a legal Kurdish party in Turkey," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18:1, (1998): 130. The *Halkın Emek Partisi* (HEP) or The People's Labor Party was the first legal Kurdish party, founded in June 1990. A chain of parties of the Kurdish national movement was formed, shut down by courts, the next one formed with the same cadres, and then shut down again in rapid succession. These parties stretch from the HEP to the DEP, HADEP, DEHAP, DTP, BDP, and finally the HDP.

to the more detailed *Türkiyeli* civic nationalism), rather than ethnic or religious identity. Its platform included removing bans on non-Turkish names, Kurdish broadcasting and education, land reform, and a development plan for the Kurdish provinces.²² Leadership from the HADEP, and Kurdish parties that succeeded it takes pains to make clear that “HADEP is *not* a separatist party,”²³ it aims for a settlement of the Kurdish question within the framework of the Republic of Turkey; a framework it seeks to modify. Barkey remarks that “beyond these immediate goals, the HADEP does envisage a redefinition of the Turkish state so as to be more accommodating of Kurdish cultural and ethnic demands.”²⁴

A corollary change was the diversification within the Kurdish national movement. Demands had changed as well as methods. A line of political parties running from the HADEP in 1994 to the HDP at present was formed. These legal and unarmed parties have had various relations with the PKK, but they are clearly differentiated entities within the movement.²⁵ The relationship is not as direct as a terrorist group and its legal front. It is more complex and dynamic; there is a difference between the HADEP-PKK and the HDP-PKK relationships. While the party and the armed group share many goals, the members of the party are defined by a desire for a peaceful resolution. If they believed an armed struggle to be a more effective or agreeable method, they would have joined the PKK. The fact that they chose to be involved with a legal political party as opposed to the PKK makes the distinction clear. Within the PKK, the change was led by Abdullah Öcalan and was apparent in his 1998 demands for peace, a year before he was captured by the Turkish government. He called for the following:²⁶

²² Aylin Güney, “The People's Democracy Party,” *Turkish Studies* 3:1, (2002): 129.

²³ Güney, “The People's Democracy Party,” 130.

²⁴ Barkey, “The people's democracy party (HADEP),” 131.

²⁵ *Ibid* 136.

²⁶ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 145.

1. End of military operations in Kurdistan
2. Return of displaced refugees to Kurdistan
3. Ending the village guard system
4. Regional autonomy for Kurdistan
5. Kurdish equality within Turkey's democracy
6. Recognition of the culture, language, and identity of Kurds
7. Freedom of religion and pluralism in Turkey

While the first two demands are straightforward in the case of any national minority demanding self-determination, the third demand is particular to this case. The village guard system was a tactic of the Turkish government against the PKK. The government was not able to patrol every village in the mountainous region and began hiring and arming local villagers to stand guard against the PKK in their own communities for extremely high pay for the standards of this underdeveloped rural area. However, the system backfired as these guards were often extremely brutal to the population and became targets for the PKK themselves. Furthermore, because they had one of the best-paid jobs in Kurdistan, they had the perverse incentive of wanting the conflict to go on. The village guard system was so hated that its removal became a central demand.

Fourth to the seventh demands illustrate what has been called the “Turkeyization” (*Türkiyelileşme*) of the Kurdish national movement. Underlying this process is what Güney refers to as “constitutional citizenship.” This transformation was only accelerated with the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, after which he remained the PKK leader and became increasingly committed to a peaceful resolution. The movement pioneered the term *Türkiyeli* (of Turkey) as a new supra-identity and it was taken up by various minorities and leftist who clash with the dominant Turkish-Sunni identity. Notably, these demands are not unforeseen or particularly

radical: “the list of measures put forward in the Democratic Autonomy Project are not too dissimilar to the demands made by other national minorities in multinational states.”²⁷ In his comparison, Özkırmılı mentions minority movements in Canada, Belgium, the UK, and Spain (specifically the Basque case that the Kurdish national movement compares itself to most often), where the list of demands, much like the Kurdish one,

“include a combination of the following six elements: federal or quasi-federal territorial autonomy; official language status, either in the region or nationally; guarantees of representation in the central government or in Constitutional Court; public funding of minority language universities, schools and media; constitutional or parliamentary affirmation of “multinationalism”; [and the] according of international personality.”²⁸

Thus, the demands illustrate both the Turkeyization and the “normalization” of the Kurdish national movement: its demands are generally what national minorities want and have wanted.

The second change of this era was the gradual shift in the government’s approach to the Kurdish issue. This was true not only of the civilian administration but even within the bureaucracy and military to some extent. According to the Copenhagen School, securitization is the process through which “a state labels something only as a security issue, it gives it a sense of urgency that justifies extraordinary measures to deal with it outside the political arena.”²⁹ Since the founding of the republic, the Kurdish question had been thoroughly securitized: the state decided it could end Kurdish will for cultural rights and self-determination solely through military means and imposing martial law led by super-governors with extraordinary powers. Many Kurdish provinces were in a

²⁷ Umut Özkırmılı, “Multiculturalism, recognition and the “Kurdish question” in Turkey: the outline of a normative framework,” *Democratization* 21:6, (2014): 1059.

²⁸ Özkırmılı, “Multiculturalism, recognition and the “Kurdish question” in Turkey,” 1059.

²⁹ Maurizio Geri, “The Securitization of the Kurdish Minority in Turkey: Ontological Insecurity and Elite’s Power Struggle as Reasons of the Recent Re-Securitization,” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 26:1 (2016): 190.

constant state of emergency and had no rule of law. Torture was rampant. Even proposing new development infrastructures, such as better hospitals and dams, or increased investment in the region could bring charges of separatism, hence the connection to intentional underdevelopment. According to Efeğil, “The governments continuously described the uprisings in the region as a public security question, preferring to delegate responsibility to the General Staff”³⁰ and the first politician to break from this mold was Turgut Özal in the early 1990s. However, just as the PKK realized that military means were insufficient, the Turkish state eventually arrived at the same conclusion as well. Aktoprak says that “After 26 years of struggle, the Turkish state, including the military has realized that defeating the PKK and solving the Kurdish question by military means is not possible”³¹ and in the early 2000s, and even more with the AKP, the state began to view the Kurdish question as a political, increasingly desecuritized problem.³²

While there were practical military reasons for reluctant desecuritization, one major factor amply discussed in the literature is the EU accession process and the related harmonization packages. These significantly altered Turkey’s legal framework on Kurdish cultural rights and military control over Kurdish provinces. İkizer argues that while “there was no direct effect of European Union [on the Kurdish Opening], it is difficult to deny the indirect effect of the EU.”³³ İkizer explains pre-accession funds (and eventual membership) were conditional on the fulfillment of the Copenhagen Criteria, which were:

“democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces.”³⁴

³⁰ Ertan Efeğil, “Analysis of the AKP Government’s Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue,” *Turkish Studies* 12:1, (2011): 30.

³¹ Aktoprak, “Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 657.

³² Geri, “The Securitization of the Kurdish Minority in Turkey,” 189.

³³ İhsan İkizer, “The EU Conditionality and Some Reforms Concerning Turkey’s Kurdish Question,” *Journal of Economic and Social Research* 13:1 (2011): 1.

³⁴ İkizer, “The EU Conditionality and Some Reforms Concerning Turkey’s Kurdish Question,” 12.

Besides market reform, all criteria related to the Kurdish question, which is why former Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz remarked that “the road to the EU passes through Diyarbakır,”³⁵ the largest city and de facto capital³⁶ of Kurdistan. Kirişçi claims that “the decision of the EU to grant Turkey the prospects of membership helped to empower a liberal approach on the Kurdish question. The traditional [securitized] hardline approach that had long denied the existence of a Kurdish question in Turkey had been under challenge.”³⁷

The concrete impact of the EU harmonization packages was the creation of legal grounding for later reforms that came with the opening such as “broadcasting and education rights for the Kurds, abolition of death penalty, greater freedom of expression, reform in the National Security Council”³⁸ as well as “the abolishment of the [...] state security courts.”³⁹ Within the EU framework, one of the first actions of the AKP was “ending of emergency rule over the last two of the 13 Kurdish-populated provinces of Turkey.”⁴⁰ The EU process also brought about the decline, if not the end, of widespread use of torture in Turkey’s prisons and police stations.⁴¹ This EU-prodded foray both restricted the military pressure and took first steps for the incoming AKP government to take even larger strides. Kirişçi is correct in arguing that there was a backlash to these first reforms, as PKK violence still continued,⁴² and that EU-sponsored reform has limits. However, statements such as “[the EU accession process] fell well short of ‘solving’ the Kurdish

³⁵ Ibid 13.

³⁶ Diyarbakır, as the largest city, has long been the center of the Kurdish national movement. It became even larger and more radical as Kurdish villagers whose villages the government burned and evacuated filled the city. The name of this province is a political issue in its own right. Diyarbakır is the Turkified version of the Arabic name for the city, Diyarbekir. The city is also called Digranakerd by Western Armenians who had a large presence in the city. Most residents today are Kurds who call it Amed. This name was suppressed, and its more recent intentional use has been a political tool against the erasure of Kurdish history in the region.

³⁷ Kemal Kirişçi, “The Kurdish Issue in Turkey: Limits of European Union Reform,” *South European Society and Politics* 16:2 (2011): 336.

³⁸ İkizer, “The EU Conditionality and Some Reforms Concerning Turkey’s Kurdish Question,” 14.

³⁹ Kemal Kirişçi, “The Kurdish Issue in Turkey,” 335.

⁴⁰ Ibid 340.

⁴¹ Unfortunately, torture has allegedly made a comeback in Turkey after the 2016 coup attempt.

⁴² Kemal Kirişçi, “The Kurdish Issue in Turkey,” 340.

problem in Turkey”⁴³ ignore the reality of what the accession process was. The goal of EU accession was not to solve the Kurdish question and thus it is not surprising that it fell short of something it did not necessarily aim. The notion that any amount of foreign pressure could instigate massive legal, political, and social change in Turkey without the determination of the state and societal actors is incorrect. Thus, the EU process was a start, creating cracks in Kemalist taboos about Kurds. However, real change could only come from popular domestic actors.

Hence, the third major change was the AKP’s sweep into government. After winning almost two-thirds of parliamentary seats in the first election in the party’s history, the AKP wanted to bring serious change. It was a successor to the Islamist movement and was willing to shatter taboos on Islam and Kurds. While the Kurdish national movement wanted to upend the Kemalist “Turkey belongs to Turks” (“*Türkiye Türklerindir*”) vision to bring about a *Türkiyeli* paradigm, the AKP had a vision centering Sunni Muslim identity. Their vision would include most Kurds while excluding Alevis (a religious identity that includes both Turks and Kurds) and other religious minorities. The exclusion of Alevis is significant as the Kurdish population of Turkey is estimated to be 30% Alevi.⁴⁴ Kurdish aspirations had suffered intensely by splitting along sectarian lines in during the infancy of Kurdish nationalism when Kurdish Alevi rebels were betrayed by Sunni Kurdish tribes who worked with the state to suppress or let them be slaughtered by the state.⁴⁵ The leader of the Turkish state, Atatürk, masterfully exploited the Alevi-Sunni divide in the early Kurdish movement,⁴⁶ and thus doomed these uprisings to failure.

⁴³ Ibid 346.

⁴⁴ Peter Andrews, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, (Wiesbaden: TAVO, 2002), 116.

⁴⁵ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 28-31, 34. See Romano for a detailed discussion of the intra-Kurdish Alevi-Sunni tension and its contribution to the failure of the various Kurdish rebellions against the nascent Turkish state in the early republican period including the Koçgiri, Dersim, Şeyh Said, and Ararat rebellions.

⁴⁶ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 64.

AKP was the reformist wing of a movement that had previously peaked with the Welfare Party in the 1990s. The twin goals of the WP were “to restore Islamic identity and to save the integrity of [the] Turkish state, [the party] strives both to 'transform' and 'strengthen' the Turkish political system.”⁴⁷ Duran contends that the anti-system drive within Turkish political Islam drew Kurdish voters who were searching for alternatives to the Kemalist mentality. The WP, and later the AKP, capitalized on the Kurdish desire for systemic change by gesturing their desire to improve the standing of Kurds. Duran illustrates that WP showed this through its speeches and publications that separated the military and political problems, accepted “that speaking, broadcasting and education in [the] Kurdish language are the natural rights of Kurdish”⁴⁸ people, recognizing the national identity of Kurds as a people,⁴⁹ and even proposing decentralization through “a system of provinces [that] amount to some autonomy for all regions of the country”⁵⁰ not specifically for Kurdistan. While the proposals meet some of the Kurdish national movement’s demands, the “WP, in its quest for a reconstruction of national identity along Islamic lines, vehemently opposes both the creation of a new Kurdish nation-state and the option of federalism.”⁵¹ Here the distinction is that while federalism implies a Kurdish entity that is part of a larger Turkish entity, the devolution proposal the WP endorses is similar to the French system of departments or the Spanish decentralization regime, where every region has the same decentralized authority regardless of cultural difference.

The AKP’s continuity from the WP on this question is unmistakable as the AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the main author of one of the monumental party reports during his

⁴⁷ Burhanettin Duran, “Approaching the Kurdish question via *adil düzen*: an Islamist formula of the Welfare Party for ethnic coexistence,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18:1, (1998): 113.

⁴⁸ Duran, “Approaching the Kurdish question via *adil düzen*,” 116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 117.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 117.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 114.

time as the WP mayor of Istanbul.⁵² The AKP did indeed begin discussing the Kurdish question with similar proposals on language rights when it first waded into this issue in 2005. The empowerment of the AKP, which came out of the Turkish political Islamist tradition, gave hope to many Kurds and earned the AKP millions of Kurdish votes, which was a major motivator for the party to act on this issue. From its first success onwards, the AKP began a process of becoming the dominant party nationally, is a party that has an overwhelming lead over its closest competitor.⁵³ The AKP's usual, approximately fifteen-point lead on the main opposition CHP illustrates its dominance. On the other hand, the party system in the Kurdish provinces became a two-party set-up where the AKP closely competed with the party of the Kurdish national movement; in this region, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and Turkish fascist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) did show tangible presence.⁵⁴

However, the military was standing in the civilian government's way on this issue and while the influence of the TAF had been decreased by EU reforms, giving civilian officials more power, the *Balyoz* (Sledgehammer) and *Ergenekon* mass trials truly broke the back of the institution. Özpek comments that it was "the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* cases that pushed the military out of the political realm"⁵⁵ with formal indictments of almost 200 current or retired officers over alleged coup plans against the AKP government. This fear was genuine and understandable at the outset of the AKP's tenure since the last Islamist party to take power, the WP, was taken down by military intervention. Thus, the AKP did not have a free hand to pursue its agenda regarding Islam or Kurdish rights as these challenges to Kemalist orthodoxy were strongly opposed by the military.

⁵² Ertan Efeğil, "Analysis of the AKP Government's Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue," 30.

⁵³ Ali Çarkoğlu, "Turkey's 2011 General Elections: Towards a Dominant Party System?" *Insight Turkey* 13:3, (2011): 44.

⁵⁴ Gül Arıkan Akdağ, *Ethnicity and Elections in Turkey: Party Politics and the Mobilization of Swing Voters*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 33.

⁵⁵ Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones'," *Middle East Critique* 27:1 (2018): 49.

From the 1990s to the mid-2000s, the Kurdish national movement became more integrated to Turkey (*Türkiyelileşmek*) and civilianized (without ending guerilla military action), the state began desecuritizing its approach, important steps were taken in the conditional EU process, a party envisioning systemic change came to power, and the influence of the zealously Kemalist and interventionist military waned. These conditions created fertile ground for a genuine attempt at solving the Kurdish question. Hakyemez identifies three critical conditions for the AKP-led sea-change in the Kurdish policy of Turkey: end of military tutelage over politics, AKP's absolute control of parliament, and PKK's move away from independence and Pan-Kurdish nationalism towards autonomy within Turkey.⁵⁶ While Hakyemez is correct in stressing the uniqueness of AKP's parliamentary chokehold after more than a decade of no party securing a majority of seats, the EU process should not be discounted as a significant factor. In addition, Hakyemez only mentions the change from Pan-Kurdish nationalism to Kurdish nationalism within Turkey without highlighting the *Türkiyeli* paradigm, which is more than just seeking Kurdish autonomy in Turkey for Kurdish provinces. Öcalan's demands illustrate that the Turkeyizing Kurdish movement has more to say about Turkey and its democracy than simply Kurdish autonomy. The demands are cognizant of the fact that since the 1990s, Kurds have moved to every major city of Turkey, with Istanbul becoming the city with the most Kurds in the world,⁵⁷ and thus the Kurdish national movement must also struggle for their rights to culture, language, free speech, and equal citizenship.

However, it is important to keep in mind that while the Kurdish national movement was changing, the PKK did not readily end its violence. Hakyemez points out that after Öcalan's

⁵⁶ Serra Hakyemez, "Turkey's Failed Peace Process with the Kurds: A Different Explanation," *Middle East Brief* No. 111, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, (June 2017): 3-4.

⁵⁷ Mirella Galletti, "The Kurdish issue in Turkey," *The International Spectator* 34:1, (1999): 123.

capture and PKK's unilateral ceasefire in 1999, "the PKK was reorganized within five years and resumed guerrilla warfare in 2004."⁵⁸ The resurgence in violence was arguably what engendered the AKP's first foray in 2005. In his iconic 2005 Diyarbakır speech then Prime Minister Erdoğan said that there was a Kurdish question that Turkey had to deal with. Efeğil's statement that Erdoğan merely "argued for giving more democratic rights to the Kurdish people"⁵⁹ does not capture the gravity of this moment. Erdoğan's statement that not only are there Kurds in Turkey but also that they have legitimate grievances with the Turkish state is profound. A mere 26 years prior, the statement of one MP that "There are Kurds in Turkey. In fact, I am a Kurd too" caused a political crisis and that sent that individual to prison.⁶⁰ The Prime Minister's speech was a milestone.

However, Kirişçi rightfully points out that "just about a year later, he made a complete U-turn"⁶¹ and claimed, "there is no Kurdish question."⁶² Why the change? The two likely culprits are anti-Kurd public opinion created through years of media equating Kurds with terrorists, and pressure from the military.⁶³ By 2009, "trials sidelined the top-brass and led to a major political restructuring within the two key institutions of the state, namely the civilian and military bureaucracy,"⁶⁴ which "tipped Turkey's domestic balance of power in political Islamists' favor."⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Hakyemez, "Turkey's Failed Peace Process with the Kurds," 3.

⁵⁹ Efeğil, "Analysis of the AKP Government's Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue," 28.

⁶⁰ Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, 44.

⁶¹ Kirişçi, "The Kurdish Issue in Turkey," 346.

⁶² Aktoprak, "Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform," 652.

⁶³ These same reasons kept Özal in 1991 and later Erbakan from acting despite ideological and pragmatic leanings. It was more the military leverage over civilian politicians, but anti-Kurd public opinion cannot be discounted.

⁶⁴ Tuncay Kardaş and Ali Balcı, "Inter-societal security trilemma in Turkey: understanding the failure of the 2009 Kurdish Opening," *Turkish Studies* 17:1, (2016): 175-6.

⁶⁵ Kardaş and Balcı, "Inter-societal security trilemma in Turkey," 175.

Chapter 2: Testing the Waters (2009-2011)

Turkey under early AKP rule was sustaining high growth rates and not experiencing high inflation. For the first time in years, the country was not facing any acute national crisis except the violent guerilla war in Kurdistan. The AKP wanted to deal with the Kurdish problem for a plethora of reasons including ideological, foreign policy, and electoral. On the ideological level, the Sunni-Islamic Neo-Ottoman identity underlying the AKP's vision for Turkey necessitated ending the Kurdish issue as Turks and Kurds were equal as Sunni Muslims.⁶⁶ While the strength of the commitment to this worldview of Erdoğan has been debated, it is nevertheless the outlook that has been in the background. Such an ideological restructuring on the domestic front would also allow Turkey to better practice its activist, neo-Ottoman foreign policy strategy. The AKP foreign policy strategy was centered on Turkish power projection through its former imperium as a unifying force and aspirational model of Muslim democracy. Aktoprak identifies the problem with precision that “without solving its Kurdish question, Turkey's ambitious policy in the region and its problem-solving claims would not be convincing and would be an Achilles heel.”⁶⁷ A major flashpoint here is the relationship Turkey cultivated with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq under AKP leadership. Turkey had been utterly opposed to the creation of this autonomous Kurdish entity after the first Gulf War. However, the KRG only strengthened and became more entrenched after the US invasion in 2003. Yet, in the Neo-Ottoman outlook, the KRG presented a perfect partner: it was historically tied to Turkey, in need of capital, and landlocked with a disagreeable central Iraq to its south. Turkey also presented a desirable partner for the KRG as a potential buyer for oil and an enemy of the PKK. Kurdish political movements did not always cooperate across state boundaries. In fact, the PKK was a rival and headache for KRG President

⁶⁶ Aktoprak, “Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 652.

⁶⁷ Ibid 655.

Massoud Barzani, whose party and armed militia, respectively the KDP and the peshmerga, often clashed with the PKK, both politically and physically. The PKK had armed bases within the region where Barzani is supposed to have the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. The PKK leaders often blatantly flaunted Barzani's authority, making a cooperation with Turkey desirable for Barzani. There are also the electoral considerations of the AKP, which achieved great results in Kurdistan in Turkey's July 2007 general election. To increase its power, the AKP needed to hold on to this electorate and possibly even expand it, as Kurdistan increasingly became a two-part system between AKP and the party of the Kurdish national movement. These three factors and the reactions of the Kurdish national movement, the fourth factor, shaped the reconciliation attempt that came to be known as the Kurdish Opening.

Acute violence triggered an even more fervent desire to act. The constant news of dying soldiers and their public, emotional funerals⁶⁸ soured public opinion on the ruling party. Violence projected the image that the AKP was unable to protect Turkey. Countering this narrative was a major motivator and "the ruling party [AKP] had pulled up its sleeves to do something about the Kurdish issue in the wake of the PKK's (The Kurdistan Workers' Party) attack on Dağlica on 21 October, 2007."⁶⁹ Thirteen Turkish soldiers were killed and eight were kidnapped by the PKK, which "came as a blow for Turkish public opinion and reactions were strong enough to influence the government's policy. [Deputy Prime Minister] Ali Babacan also confirmed this change in policy."⁷⁰

The coalition that the AKP attracted was beyond just Islamists and this was the source of its strength. The AKP had broken the mold of the previous Islamist parties founded by Erdoğan's

⁶⁸ Halil M. Karaveli, "Reconciling Statism with Freedom: Turkey's Kurdish Opening." *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, Silk Road Paper, (October 2010): 14.

⁶⁹ Ruşen Çakır, "Kurdish Political Movement and the "Democratic Opening"," *Insight Turkey* 12:2 (2010): 180.

⁷⁰ Aktoprak, "Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform," 653.

mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, by combining the religious-conservative base with the center-right, some Kurds, and some liberals with its pro-EU positioning. The AKP sought to address the Kurdish question to hold on to these Kurdish votes. However, it had to woo Kurds without making too many concessions that would alienate conservative Turkish voters in the center-right, as they could be pushed towards the Turkish fascist MHP.⁷¹ This balancing act was becoming more difficult as the Kurdish national party was increasing its effectiveness in the region. In the March 2009 local elections, the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi* or DTP) “won 99 municipalities in the elections while the share of the votes for the AK Party in the Kurdish electorate decreased,”⁷² and 8 of those municipalities were on the provincial level. AKP nationally only received 38.8% of the vote⁷³ and felt an urgent need to make up ground in Kurdistan ahead of the 2011 general election.

For these reasons, the AKP acted. The delay from its jolt to action in 2007 after the Dağlica attack to 2009 was because the military and state elite were still powerful.⁷⁴ “In 2009 [...] Turkey’s governing AK Party finally wrested control of the state’s Kurdish and Iraqi policies from the armed forces,”⁷⁵ and the military’s influence on politics fully ended by 2011.⁷⁶ Following encouraging rhetoric from President Abdullah Gül, in July 2009 Minister of the Interior Beşir Atalay finally declared that the government would attempt a solution. From this point onwards, the Kurdish question was the most dominant issue on the political agenda. Minister Atalay declared that this would be an *açılım* (opening). This was an odd and uncommon word; what the process would open

⁷¹ Michael M. Gunter, “The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process Stalled in Neutral,” *Insight Turkey* 16:1, (2014): 19.

⁷² Cengiz Çandar, “The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the ‘Opening’,” *Insight Turkey* 11:4, (2009): 16.

⁷³ Fuat Keyman, “The CHP and the “Democratic Opening”: Reactions to AK Party’s Electoral Hegemony,” *Insight Turkey* 12:2, (2010): 101.

⁷⁴ Kardaş and Balcı, “Inter-societal security trilemma in Turkey,” 165.

⁷⁵ Malik Mufti, “Turkey’s Choice,” *Insight Turkey* 19:1, (2017): 72.

⁷⁶ Kardaş and Balcı, “Inter-societal security trilemma in Turkey,” 175.

was not clear. It is revealing of the extreme Kurdophobia engrained in Turkish society that government officials even avoided the word “Kurd” when discussing the *açılım*, initially saying *demokratik açılım* or Democratic Opening. Even after adopting the name *Kürt açılımı* or Kurdish Opening, the government retreated by calling the process “the National Brotherhood and Unity Project,” supposedly since they were also planning openings with non-Muslim, Romani, Alevi, and other oppressed groups but these never got off the ground.⁷⁷ The obvious reason for the successive renaming was to avoid the word Kurd.⁷⁸ In his often-repeated stump speech, Prime Minister Erdoğan referred to various (Muslim) peoples that live in Turkey in peace and refused that Turkey could be divided over ethnic tensions. In his laundry list of peoples, the many Balkan and Caucasian groups of Muslim and/or Turkic refugees would drown out the centrality and the self-determination aspect of the Turkish-Kurdish tension in the Republic of Turkey.

It was unclear exactly what this *açılım* was. However, it was clear that the AKP was acknowledging Kurdish demands and expressed a willingness to address them to some extent. The issue now was what that extent would include ranging from broadcasting, education, and publishing in Kurdish⁷⁹ to an autonomous region or even the release of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. While it is extremely unfair for Akdağ to deem the Kurdish Opening “stillborn,”⁸⁰ there was confusion within the AKP and thus in public discourse. Çakır expresses surprise “that AKP started this process quite unprepared.”⁸¹ There is a widespread opinion that the AKP government did not enter this process with a determined agenda. The *açılım* has been described by various

⁷⁷ Keyman, “The CHP and the “Democratic Opening,”” 92.

⁷⁸ Aktoprak, “Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 658.

⁷⁹ Throughout this study, and in the literature, there is often reference to the Kurdish language. This is misleading as there is no unified Kurdish language. The Kurds of Turkey speak two, mostly mutually unintelligible languages: Kurmanji and Zazaki. In the literature, most references to Kurdish generally refer to Kurmanji, the more widely used and standardized dialect. However, all language rights would apply to both, making the question of using “Kurdish” as a language of instruction more difficult.

⁸⁰ Akdağ, *Ethnicity and Elections in Turkey: Party Politics and the Mobilization of Swing Voters*, 24.

⁸¹ Çakır, “Kurdish Political Movement and the “Democratic Opening,”” 180.

commentators as “ambiguous,”⁸² “amorphous,”⁸³ and “unspecified.”⁸⁴ The government pretended that it was exploring what the Kurdish population needed to feel belonging and what would bring armed action to an end. This was a sheer pretension since the demands of the Kurdish national movement had been made exceedingly clear since the mid-1990s. The same demands had been repeated by various actors,⁸⁵ armed and unarmed, and received overwhelming popular support in opinion polls conducted in Kurdistan. According to a large-scale representative survey of Kurdistan voters,⁸⁶ more than 85% support constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity (including 62% of AKP voters in the region) and almost 90% support the right to education in one’s mother tongue (again a similar percentage of AKP voters in Kurdistan).⁸⁷ Support for demands more controversial for Turks is also quite high: over 75% support amnesty for imprisoned PKK militants, almost 75% are in favor of lifting the 10% threshold and giving former PKK members legal political representation, almost 70% support the release of Abdullah Öcalan, and around 74% support the demand for more local autonomy.⁸⁸ The Kurdish public still living in the East and Southeast is clearly strongly supportive of the entire policy package promulgated by the Kurdish national movement and enumerated in the previous chapter. It is also very noteworthy that another highly supported demand (over 85%) was the government apologizing to Kurds for previous maltreatment.⁸⁹ In light of data, the AKP’s indecisive opening becomes more obviously an act of political expediency. Every single demand is a political non-starter for the Turkish public

⁸² Ödül Celep, “Turkey’s Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue: The MHP’s Reaction to the “Democratic Opening”.” *Insight Turkey* 12:2, (2010):126.

⁸³ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 41.

⁸⁴ Efeğil, “Analysis of the AKP Government’s Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue,” 32.

⁸⁵ Aktoprak, “Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 663.

⁸⁶ Kurdistan meaning all voters in majority Kurdish areas including Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and others. “Support” is defined as the combination of those who said they fully or partially support the policy.

⁸⁷ Mesut Yeğen, Uğraş Ulaş Tol, Mehmet Ali Çalışkan, *Kürtler Ne İstiyor? Kürdistan’da Etnik Kimlik, Dindarlık, Sınıf ve Seçimler*, (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), 128-129.

⁸⁸ Yeğen, Tol, Çalışkan, *Kürtler Ne İstiyor?* 129-131.

⁸⁹ Ibid 130.

at large, especially because a strong majority of Turks, in every available survey, continue to disagree with basic reality: Most Turks reject the fact that there was ever discrimination or mistreatment of Kurds.⁹⁰ This fundamental difference was the tightrope that the AKP was trying to walk during the opening.

In August 2009, the government held a workshop mainly for journalists, asking: “On what kind of political, societal, and international bases could the solution be found?” and “What kind of a method and manner should be followed in this process?”⁹¹ It was not necessarily negative that the AKP did not have a set plan, and it was quite positive that it was willing to communicate with interested parties. However, as Çakır points out, not all “interested parties” were welcome. At the workshop in question, there were no Kurds in attendance.⁹² This fact is quite revealing of the AKP’s general approach: because of its dominance over Turkey’s political life and media narrative, AKP operated under the assumption that it could address the Kurdish question unilaterally. The essentially internal dialogue between pro-government think tanks, press members, and ministers combined with the undefined program of the *açılım*, “was an expression of overconfidence”⁹³ of the AKP.

The government was having this internal dialogue and denying clarity on its policy preferences because it did not want to commit to any of the Kurdish demands. It did not bring a program about the *açılım* to parliament, where it had an absolute majority.⁹⁴ During these initial stages, Atalay said that everything was being considered, including amendments to the constitution,⁹⁵ and AKP MP Bahçekapılı went even further by supporting the removal of ethnic

⁹⁰ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 38.

⁹¹ Çakır, “Kurdish Political Movement and the “Democratic Opening,”” 180.

⁹² Çakır, “Kurdish Political Movement and the “Democratic Opening,”” 179.

⁹³ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 21.

⁹⁴ Büşra Ersanlı and Günay Göksu Özdoğan, “Obstacles and opportunities: recent Kurdish struggles for political representation and participation in Turkey,” *Southeastern Europe* 35, (2011): 89.

⁹⁵ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 26.

references from the constitution or recognition of Kurds as a legitimate, co-equal people, comments that the party later walked back.⁹⁶ The intentional vagueness of the government opened it up to criticism from all sides as being too much or too little in either direction. This was perhaps the first tactical mistake of the government in the *açılım*. Because “everything was on the table” at first, the Turkish opposition parties railed heavily against the *açılım*. While the CHP is nominally center-left and the MHP far-right, they are both explicitly nationalist and employed nationalist rhetoric. The CHP, and parties from a similar left-Kemalist tradition had been the most conciliatory on the Kurdish question in the 1990⁹⁷ and its base was, in fact, less opposed to the opening than the AKP base, which was the revolutionary actor in 2009.⁹⁸ Despite this fact, “the CHP took a very reactionary position on the initiative, refusing even to deliberate on it, and dismissed it totally.”⁹⁹ On any policy specifics, the CHP was extremely clear: strongly rejecting the removal of “Turkishness” from the constitution or the recognition of the Kurdish language in any official capacity.¹⁰⁰ Keyman suggests that the CHP could not let AKP solve the pivotal Kurdish question because doing so would only cement AKP’s electoral hegemony. While electoral expediency clearly entered into the CHP calculus, the role of the *ulusalçı*¹⁰¹ (neo-nationalist) ideology on CHP policy is undeniable. CHP leadership “shied from recognizing that the Kurdish issue is about the affirmation of an identity, indeed never even pronouncing the word Kurd in his public speeches, preferring to seek refuge in conventional Turkish nationalist wishful thinking.”¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Ibid 77.

⁹⁷ Keyman, “The CHP and the “Democratic Opening,”” 93.

⁹⁸ KONDA Araştırma, *Kürt Meselesinde Algılar ve Beklentiler*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), 18.

⁹⁹ Keyman, “The CHP and the “Democratic Opening,”” 99.

¹⁰⁰ Efeğil, “Analysis of the AKP Government's Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue,” 35.

¹⁰¹ *Ulusalcı* is distinct from *milliyetçi*, which also means nationalist and is in the name of the far-right MHP. The distinction has to be with the former’s extreme secularism and particular aversion to Western influence. For a thorough review of this ideology, see Emrullah Uslu, “Ulusalcılık: The Neo-nationalist Resurgence in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 9:1, (March 2008): 73–97.

¹⁰² Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 32.

Opposition to solving the Kurdish question has been one of the central pillars of MHP policy as a Turkish ultra-nationalist party. Thus, its position on the *açılım* was not surprising. The MHP subscribes to the “Turk-Islam Synthesis,” which argues that these identities are the basis of Turkey, making the MHP “not only a Turkist party but also a Muslim party.”¹⁰³ Thus, the MHP is not in direct antagonism with the AKP, leading to an overlapping electoral base, but it is strictly opposed to the reconceptualization of Islam as a supra-identity.¹⁰⁴ Such a project would place Islam above Turkishness and put the majority ethnicity on equal footing as Kurdishness. For the same reason, a Neo-Ottoman,¹⁰⁵ Sunni Islam-based, identity is also anathema to the MHP’s core mission of preserving Turkish supremacy over Turkey. Echoing a large part of the Turkish public, “MHP does not accept the idea that the Turkish state may have committed wrongdoings,”¹⁰⁶ making any attempt at “reconciliation” a non-starter. As soon as the *açılım* began, MHP branded it as a “terrorist” or “PKK opening,”¹⁰⁷ doing away with any distinction between Kurdish and “terrorist,” an association readily accepted by many Turks. These Turkish opposition parties pounced on every opportunity to paint the government as traitors and terrorism cooperators, which strained public support for the *açılım*.

The government’s relations were also not smooth with the only remaining major party, that of the Kurdish national movement. The government wanted to go through the *açılım* unilaterally; facing Kurdish voters directly as not only representative of Turks but also of Kurds. “The AKP’s popularity both in Turkish and Kurdish constituencies” was undeniable but the popularity of the

¹⁰³ Celep, “Turkey’s Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue,” 131.

¹⁰⁴ Cuma Çiçek, “The Pro-Islamic Challenge for the Kurdish Movement,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 37, (2013): 160.

¹⁰⁵ Malik Mufti, “The AK Party’s Islamic Realist Political Vision: Theory and Practice,” *Politics and Governance* 2:2, (2014): 30-31, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Celep, “Turkey’s Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue,” 136.

¹⁰⁷ Özlem Kayhan Pusane, “Turkey’s Kurdish Opening: Long Awaited Achievements and Failed Expectations,” *Turkish Studies* 15:1, (2014): 89.

Kurdish national movement was just as tangible despite PKK violence.¹⁰⁸ Thus, unilateralism was an unrealistic approach to solving the Kurdish question. Excluding the highly developed, sophisticated, and popular political organizations of Kurdistan made the process more difficult. These organizations included the armed and illegal PKK, both its armed leadership in the Kandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and its titular head Abdullah Öcalan, in Turkish captivity on the prison island of Imrali since 1999, and the unarmed and legal Kurdish party, which was the DTP in July 2009.¹⁰⁹ Barkey remarks on the relations between the legal and the illegal by saying “they share a common base of supporters, in other words, many HADEP supporters—although not all—are also PKK supporters.”¹¹⁰ Because of this overlap, and because the PKK preceded all legal Kurdish parties, DTP did not believe itself to be in a position to represent the Kurdish people. According to Çandar, “The DTP was established under the instructions of Abdullah Öcalan and was controlled mainly by the PKK leadership. It had no tradition or experience of formulating policies on its own.”¹¹¹ Such a sweeping statement is ignorant of the political experience of Kurdish parties since 1990 but it does contain a certain reality. The PKK, especially the more hardline Kandil faction, put pressure on and threatened violent retaliation to the DTP and its civilian politicians to “follow the organization’s position and stay away from independent action.”¹¹² Partly for these reasons, the DTP refused to be the Kurdish interlocutor of the *açılım*. In 2010, when the DTP was shut down by courts and replaced by the BDP, party co-leader “Demirtaş was explicit about the matter, telling [Karaveli] that “the PKK and Öcalan somehow have to be involved,” as they were “the natural interlocutors of any dialogue and negotiation.””¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Galletti, “The Kurdish issue in Turkey,” 125.

¹⁰⁹ A fourth actor on the Kurdish side is the Kurdish parliament in exile or the Kurdish nationalists in Europe generally, but this group was not a major independent actor. See Galletti, “The Kurdish issue in Turkey,” 125.

¹¹⁰ Barkey, “The people’s democracy party (HADEP),” 135.

¹¹¹ Çandar, “The Kurdish Question,” 18.

¹¹² Pusane, “Turkey’s Kurdish Opening,” 92.

¹¹³ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 34.

Thus, the legal political actors consistently refused responsibility and “pointed to Öcalan as the main interlocutor [...]. This position kept the pro-Kurdish political parties out of the dialogue between the state and the PKK.”¹¹⁴ By taking itself out of the equation, the DTP (and then BDP) forced the government to confront the PKK directly. Thus, there was no publicly acceptable entity to conduct an opening towards. A direct and public dialogue with the PKK, or even the possibility, gave Turkish opposition parties the evidence they needed to say the government was collaborating with terrorists.

However, this is only a partial reason why the *açılım* failed to bring in the DTP as a partner. There was also the unwillingness of the AKP to have a partner. The government demanded that the DTP totally condemn the PKK, knowing that the PKK pressure on the DTP made such announcements impossible. Not only would such a disavowal be politically damaging, but it would also put DTP members in physical danger.¹¹⁵ The DTP did not issue a condemnation.¹¹⁶ It was “unwilling, and in fact unable, to be the ‘agent’ or a mediator between the state and the PKK.”¹¹⁷ This was a calculated action by the government: the AKP never wanted a Kurdish counterpart in this process, it wanted to be the sole decisionmaker and problem-solver. However, it also did not want to give off the image that it was a totally unilateral actor ignoring legitimate Kurdish representatives. It made sense for the AKP to push the DTP into this corner from which there was no escape. The government did not want a partnership because a major motivating reason for the *açılım* was its competition with the DTP itself for votes in Kurdish provinces. There was huge political risk involved for the AKP and there would be no electoral gain in Kurdistan if it shared

¹¹⁴ Pusane, “Turkey's Kurdish Opening,” 91.

¹¹⁵ International Crisis Group, “Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement,” *ICG Europe Report* no. 219, (September 2012): 9.

¹¹⁶ Michael M. Gunter, “Reopening Turkey’s Closed Kurdish Opening?” *Middle East Policy* 20:2, (Summer 2013): 89.

¹¹⁷ Çandar, “The Kurdish Question,” 18.

the solution with the DTP while also losing Turkish conservative-nationalist voters. The AKP condemnation ultimatum was a calculated move to create a unilateral AKP initiative. The DTP's non-involvement was thus caused by the PKK pressure on the party in conjunction with the AKP calculation.

It is easy to claim that the AKP conducted the *açılım* unilaterally in order to weaken the DTP politically, but the interlocutor issue alone is not enough proof that one of the hidden goals of the *açılım* was to marginalize the Kurdish national movement and solidify Kurdish voter support for the AKP. However, there is more evidence to support this idea. The investigation against the *Koma Civaken Kurdistan* (KCK), an illegal political umbrella organization following Abdullah Öcalan that brought together various Kurdish groups in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, is one such example. The series of arrests and trials of non-violent Kurdish activists "affiliated" with the KCK began in April 2009, before the *açılım* but right after the local elections, though it picked up pace during the *açılım*. The government was supposedly in the process of lifting restrictions on the expression of Kurdish identity and allowing cultural rights but simultaneously it was arresting high-profile members of the Kurdish community whose actual connection to the KCK ranged from obvious to non-existent.¹¹⁸

The AKP was without any Kurdish or Turkish partners in the *açılım* and attempted to carry it forward alone. The AKP's difficult position was proven with the Habur incident that took place on the 18th and 19th of October 2009, which AKP Interior Minister Atalay infamously called a "road accident."¹¹⁹ After four months of public discussions since the *açılım* began in early July, the AKP finally proposed policy and began implementing it. The government insisted that PKK militants, who were almost exclusively Kurds of Turkey, must re-enter Turkey from their camps

¹¹⁸ Gunter, "Reopening Turkey's Closed Kurdish Opening?" 92.

¹¹⁹ Karaveli, "Reconciling Statism with Freedom: Turkey's Kurdish Opening," 20.

in Iraqi Kurdistan unarmed and surrender to Turkish authorities. In return, in a secret arrangement with Öcalan,¹²⁰ the government agreed to give practical amnesty to these former militants. The first time this policy was implemented was Habur, a border crossing between Turkey and Iraq. 34 people came to the gate; 8 were PKK militants in uniform¹²¹ and the other 26 were refugees from the Makhmur Refugee Camp.¹²² After being questioned and processed, these citizens entered their home country. At the gate, both government officials and members of the DTP were waiting to greet the 34 returnees. While “the presence of official representatives of the state created the impression that the Kurdish militants were being bestowed the welcome indeed even the benediction, of the state,”¹²³ the presence of DTP MPs provided fodder to the narrative that the party was simply a front for terrorists. The video of DTP leaders hugging people in PKK uniforms did lasting damage to the perception of the Kurdish party but the real “road accident” occurred when the returnees were taken to Diyarbakır and “greeted as heroes by tens if not hundreds of thousands of jubilant Kurds.”¹²⁴

To many Turks, this was “some sort of PKK victory parade”¹²⁵ that was happening with tacit government approval. The *açılım* was meant to bolster support for the AKP but Habur, the first concrete step in the *açılım*, was seen as a win for the Kurdish national movement while pulling down the AKP support among Turks. “While public support [for the *açılım*] was 45.6 percent on the initial days of the opening, this support declined to 32.1 percent in the immediate aftermath of the PKK militants’ entrance in Turkey and even to 27.1 percent in December 2009.”¹²⁶ This posed a public opinion issue for the AKP, which was laying the groundwork for the 2011 general election.

¹²⁰ Ibid 19.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Aktoprak, “Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 660.

¹²³ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom: Turkey’s Kurdish Opening,” 19.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Gunter, “Reopening Turkey’s Closed Kurdish Opening?” 89.

¹²⁶ Pusane, “Turkey’s Kurdish Opening,” 89.

The AKP's ideological standing or foreign policy doctrine remained the same, but its electoral calculus was rapidly changing. The DTP's gloating was damaging. Thus, while the first two factors were constant, the latter two were undermining the viability of the *açılım*.

The opposition further intensified after a PKK attack in Reşadiye, Tokat province, that left 7 soldiers dead in early December 2009.¹²⁷ To recover the Turkish public, AKP scaled back its rhetoric and used this as a pretense to intensify its marginalization of the DTP. The downturn in public opinion coincided with an increase in prosecutions under the KCK investigation that had started in April. On December 11th, the DTP was shut down by the Constitutional Court for ties to terrorism.¹²⁸ Its two leaders were banned from politics. There was a party ready to take the DTP's place as had been done before: the *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi* (Peace and Democracy Party or BDP) became the new party of the Kurdish national movement. As soon as former DTP cadres switched to the BDP, "1,083 politicians were held in custody. It was like a confirmation of the suspicions of the BDP; under the guise of an Opening the AKP was seeking to eradicate the rival political force among the Kurdish population."¹²⁹

However, these measures were not enough to quell the public pressure and finally Prime Minister Erdoğan gave a concrete answer to what the *açılım* would or would not seek to achieve. He disavowed the demand for education in Kurdish.¹³⁰ With the Habur debacle and the Reşadiye attack, the government was compelled to publish an official, defensive brochure in which it declared: "Turkish is the language of education, and will so remain. There are no preparations undertaken within the process of the Democratic opening to make the different languages spoken

¹²⁷ Karaveli, "Reconciling Statism with Freedom," 12, alleges that this attack, despite having been claimed by the PKK, might have been done by members of the TAF trying to spoil the *açılım*.

¹²⁸ Gunter, "Reopening Turkey's Closed Kurdish Opening?" 89.

¹²⁹ Aktoprak, "Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform," 661.

¹³⁰ Erdoğan had already rejected this demand before the *açılım* had started but due to his fickle approach to the Kurdish issue, and to policy in general, everything was back on the table after July 2009.

in Turkey languages of education.”¹³¹ AKP had already backed away from any political demands, from lowering the electoral threshold to empowering local government, but it was now also rejecting cultural demands. The changes the AKP were offering were now mostly symbolic: starting Kurdish departments in a handful of universities or starting the Kurdish-language state TV channel TRT 6. Kurds were especially not impressed by the latter move and many Kurdish nationalists perceived it to be a site of government indoctrination; “while 24.6 percent of Kurds kept watching ROJ TV [a Kurdish channel broadcast from Denmark], only 4.4 watch TRT 6.”¹³²

These cosmetic changes and the AKP’s brochure denying its previous statements that “everything is on the table” demonstrate the fundamental problem of the *açılım*. The AKP was seeking a solution to a systemic problem without proposing systemic change. It was not prepared to undertake a systemic change on the Kurdish question. Despite Karaveli’s claim¹³³ to the contrary, preserving the Kemalist *Türk* unitary state and solving the Kurdish question are contradictory goals.¹³⁴ Not only did AKP seem merely amenable to cultural rights, but also only open to “individual cultural rights.”¹³⁵ This was a massive difference that the AKP was proposing; ignoring the collective cultural demands that are vital to the existence of Kurds as a people. This highlights the main division: disagreement on the fact that Kurds as a people, a distinct group, are worthy of rights as such. In the extant Turkish citizenship paradigm, Muslim minorities¹³⁶ cannot have group rights that deviate from the official *Türk* identity.

¹³¹ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 78.

¹³² KONDA Araştırma, *Kürt Meselesinde Algılar ve Beklentiler*, 129. PKK supporters have also taken to calling the channel TRT Jash (as opposed to the official TRT Shash) after the Kurdish word traitor, as they perceive the channel to be a Turkish indoctrination instrument.

¹³³ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 78.

¹³⁴ While Spain solved its Basque question and remained “unitary” it devolved significant powers, remaining only nominally centralized.

¹³⁵ Çiçek, “The Pro-Islamic Challenge for the Kurdish Movement,” 160.

¹³⁶ Non-Muslim minorities do possess collective cultural rights even though their practice is often stifled.

After December 2009, the government rectified at least one issue of the *açılım*: it fleshed out what it was and was not willing to do. It was not willing to make any systemic changes or commit to future changes; it demanded disarmament and an end to violence without concessions on Kurdish demands. Kardaş and Balcı are correct that “the AKP [had] to step back and stall the opening,”¹³⁷ though did not necessarily end it. This point was not the end because Erdoğan still signaled that he and he alone could make revolutionary changes if he wanted to and that he could be persuaded to do so. Some in the Kurdish national movement such as Leyla Zana, a well-respected MP who spent time in prison for her politics, believed that Erdoğan indeed could be the revolutionary actor to solve the Kurdish question. Others held that the disavowal of mother tongue education in particular, and collective cultural rights in general, meant a deal would not be worth it. Kurds would receive so little after fighting and sacrificing for so long. This was essentially the position Öcalan articulated. Even after the rejection of mother tongue education, Habur, Reşadiye, the DTP closure, and widespread KCK arrests, contact with the PKK was ongoing. This contact between the government and the PKK was the unspoken and invisible centerpiece of the opening. It was also the link between the armed conflict and minority rights aspects of the Kurdish question. With the *açılım*, the AKP aspired to solve the former, which would receive approval from all segments of society, without making commitments on the latter, which would be more controversial. Such an approach was clearly in denial of the basic facts underlying the bloody PKK insurgency. The PKK communicated to the government that there was to be no disarmament without changes to the status quo on Kurdish rights; individual cultural rights were necessary but not at all sufficient.

¹³⁷ Kardaş and Balcı, “Inter-societal security trilemma in Turkey,” 173.

There are two interrelated issues nestled within the *açılım* due to the multilayered nature of the Kurdish question. On one hand, there are the legitimate grievances of the Kurdish people in Turkey. On the other hand, there is the terrorism emanating from a group that claims to address those grievances. One of the worries of the government is that the PKK might not disarm even after achieving some of their aims and make more maximalist demands. This view is based on an internal dynamic of the PKK. The organization clearly has factions of hardliners who are still committed to a military victory and another faction, which includes Öcalan, that is aware of the impossibility to achieve any goals without a political solution.¹³⁸ The fact is, with its few thousand committed fighters, however well-armed and highly motivated, the PKK can only cause constant pain to the Republic of Turkey. It cannot triumph over Turkey in war. The state, with one of the largest economies, militaries, and populations in the world, is simply orders of magnitude stronger than the PKK. During the *açılım*, the state focused on the contact with the PKK over and above the addressing of grievances. The legislative changes that were being proposed, even in limited form, were not to right previous maltreatment (to put it lightly) but to use as instruments to herd the PKK out of camps in Iraqi Kurdistan and end armed violence.

The centering of the PKK contact is apparent from the continuous, though secret Oslo meetings between members of the government and the PKK. The meetings initially began in 2005, years before the public announcement, with assistance from British intelligence and became much more frequent and detailed with the *açılım* process in 2009.¹³⁹ This negotiation was the platform for the agreement for Habur. The reality that the *açılım* did not end with the downturn in public opinion is confirmed by the continuation of these negotiations in Oslo, led by Turkish intelligence chief and Erdoğan confidante Hakan Fidan. While rejecting the premise of any contact with the

¹³⁸ International Crisis Group, "Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement," 11.

¹³⁹ International Crisis Group, "Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement," 3.

terrorist group, the AKP was actually in constant communication with the PKK and continued it for months, even after violence slowly restarted in December 2009. Even after that point, the AKP introduced the small legislative changes that it could easily pass such as legalizing the use of Kurdish in prison visits and allowing for the establishment of Kurdish departments in universities. However, the public reconciliation drive slowed significantly in 2010. The PKK recognized there was not going to be a satisfactory deal. Throughout the first 6 months of 2010, government rhetoric became defensive, hence the release of the official brochure discussed above. The nationalist opposition of the CHP and the MHP ratcheted up their rhetoric: the MHP organized a massive Ankara protest¹⁴⁰ while both parties accused the government of either collaborating with or being terrorists trying to divide the country.¹⁴¹ Due to the AKP's intransigence, the PKK ended its ceasefire (which it had already violated) and "declared a new offensive against the Turkish army in May 2010."¹⁴² This was the official end of a ceasefire that had been in place since March 2009. Even then, the PKK-AKP meetings continued, such that the PKK announced a temporary ceasefire in August 2010, which its members claimed were due to an AKP request, a claim denied by Erdoğan.¹⁴³ The AKP wanted the ceasefire in August because it had called a constitutional referendum for September 2010. Once again, this confirms the view that electoral considerations were paramount for the AKP.

Outside of the Kurdish question, the AKP was planning for its third general election in June 2011, after which Erdoğan wanted to consolidate more power through constitutional changes.

¹⁴⁰ Celep, "Turkey's Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue," 137-8.

¹⁴¹ The issue of dividing or separating Turkey (separationist or *bölücü*) is a major rallying cry as many citizens believe there is and has been a foreign plot to take lands away from Turkey ever since World War I, when the UK, France, Italy, and Greece did attempt to do just that but were defeated. This phenomenon, and the fear of *bölücü* activity it inspired, is called the Sevres Syndrome after the unimplemented treaty that partitioned Turkey. Recently, the Sevres Syndrome has been projected onto the Kurdish movement. Those demanding rights for Kurds were branded as separatists. This perception did not change after the PKK abandoned the idea of independent Kurdistan.

¹⁴² Karaveli, "Reconciling Statism with Freedom," 12.

¹⁴³ Ibid 35.

These required referendum approvals, which was also going to be a poll on the performance of the AKP. Since the last general election in 2007, the AKP had been focused heavily on the *açılım* so it was a major point of contention in the referendum campaign. However, none of the proposed constitutional amendments related to the Kurdish question or the demands that Erdoğan had refused to meet. In May 2010, the AKP introduced and passed constitutional changes on various topics. This package was a mixed bag as it allowed for prosecution of coup-makers from the 1980s, expanded some labor rights surrounding collective bargaining and union participation, while also increasing executive control over the judicial system. The changes passed parliament without the 2/3 majority necessary for their direct implementation and had to be voted on in a referendum held on September 12, 2010, 30 years to the day after the 1980 coup. The new Kurdish party, the BDP, which replaced the DTP after its closure, called for a boycott of the 2010 referendum. Their reason was that none of the Kurdish demands were included in the package of constitutional amendments. The BDP declared that it would end its boycott and campaign for a yes vote if five of its demands were met. The demands were:

“A new constitution in which a new citizenship would be defined without referring to ethnicity; Stop the operations against the PKK; The release of KCK prisoners; The lift of the 10% threshold; Negotiations for a political solution.”¹⁴⁴

The PKK ceasefire was also an attempt to give the government breathing room to include some of these demands in the referendum.

However, the AKP ignored this call. It was worried that the *açılım* had done too much damage among Turkish conservative-nationalist voters who could switch to the opposition camp and follow the MHP. It did not consider any of the demands and still, the AKP managed to emerge

¹⁴⁴ Aktoprak, “Kurdish Opening and the Constitutional Reform,” 663-664.

victorious from the referendum with a 58% majority that was largely seen as a vote of confidence for the government and the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This demonstrated to Erdoğan that he had not lost his appeal with the Kurdish Opening and could implement policy without too much pushback from the public. However, the referendum, while a display of Erdoğan's popularity, also showed the power of the BDP. The boycott call led to a much lower voter turnout than usual,¹⁴⁵ especially in the Kurdish provinces. "The Mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman Baydemir, [of the BDP] said he would resign if the turnout in the referendum exceeded 51% in his town. However, at the end of the referendum, the turnout in Diyarbakır was 35.2%; it was also under 40% in other southeastern cities like Batman, Hakkari and Şırnak." In Hakkari, only a mere 9% voted, showing the dominance of the Kurdish national movement in the region. This dynamic of AKP dominance in Turkey's politics alongside growing Kurdish political power in Kurdistan was proven once more in the 2011 general election, in which the AKP campaign tacked away from the *açılım*. Both parties achieved their best results: AKP received almost 50% of votes, an unprecedented rate for any party for decades, while BDP got 36 MPs elected by using independent candidates to bypass the 10% electoral threshold.

With Erdoğan's strong electoral victories, he had a lot of political capital, yet he steered away from the Kurdish question. This confirms the theory that Erdoğan believed the *açılım* was not electorally advantageous, despite its ideological and foreign policy fit. For him, electoral victories in the referendum and the general election showed that moving away from reconciliation after having made grand pronouncements was a useful strategy. Moreover, putting state pressure and political pressure on the Kurdish national movement party was the best way to suppress it. If

¹⁴⁵ The turnout of almost 74% was low; general elections usually get 10 points higher turnout. The most recent general and presidential elections in June 2018 saw 86% turnout while general elections of Nov. 2015 got 85%, June 2015 got 84%, 2011 got 83%, 2007 got 84%, the 2017 referendum saw 85%. Only the 2014 presidential election, when Erdoğan's victory was perceived to be a foregone conclusion, was turnout at a comparably low level.

the 10% threshold were removed, the BDP would have taken many seats from the AKP, but this tool meant that the AKP still won most of the seats in Kurdistan.

Hakyemez identifies that the true end of the *açılım*¹⁴⁶ came shortly after the election, in September 2011,¹⁴⁷ when an audio recording of the negotiations between some PKK leaders and the national intelligence chief Hakan Fidan was leaked to the press. Erdoğan had vigorously denied any contact between the PKK and the government, or the state, or his party, or any entity he could influence. Caught in a blatant lie with strong evidence suggesting a continuous dialogue with the PKK, Erdoğan decided any further negotiations would harm his prospects for power consolidation, outweighing the potential benefit to him of ending the violent conflict. The *açılım* began for many reasons but its definite end came out of electoral concern.

The *açılım*, despite its modest symbolic reforms on individual Kurdish cultural rights, did have major consequences. There was a subsequent sea change in perceptions of Kurds. The process destigmatized the word Kurd and the Kurdish language to extent unforeseen since the early 1930s such that many people felt comfortable enough for the first time to declare their ethnic identity. The end of the taboo created a groundswell of civil society activity around Kurdish culture. Following the *açılım*, it has become normal to hear the phrase “the Kurdish provinces” (*Kürt illeri*) in mainstream media, unthinkable before the initiative. Until the *açılım*, both the state and the public perceived “the Kurdish question” solely as a problem of terrorism and denied any legitimate grievance behind it. This began to change, including within the CHP. The CHP clearly evolved: it promoted Sezgin Tanrıkulu, the former head of the Diyarbakır bar association and a Kurd, to its leadership and started making more conciliatory statements. Another major consequence was the

¹⁴⁶ Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process with the Kurds,” 4.

¹⁴⁷ Pusane, “Turkey’s Kurdish Opening,” 86-7.

establishment of a framework for communication between the PKK and the government, which was created over rounds of negotiations.

While these results should not be ignored, the *açılım* demonstrated the weaknesses of various actors and these ultimately were the reasons for failure. The unilateral process highlighted the need for a legal Kurdish interlocutor that was independent of PKK pressure, especially from physical threats from the hardliners. This actor, unlike the DTP/BDP of this era, had to take on the responsibility of being the interlocutor and could not pass the buck off to Öcalan or the PKK. However, for this to be effective, the AKP must accept such a partner in peace, which was not the case during the *açılım*. In fact, the *açılım* was used to paper over the suppression of exactly such an actor through thousands of KCK arrests.

Another major change was the Kurdish national movement's increased understanding of the serious challenge posed by Islamic conservatism. This led the movement to develop new tactics to more directly challenge the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. The movement took the position that the Islam promoted by the state and the AKP was alien to the Kurdish tradition of Islam. The main vehicle for this was demonstrations called civilian Fridays whereby *meles* (Kurdish imams) would conduct Friday prayers and give sermons in Kurdish in public squares across Kurdistan in the face of state-appointed imams who refused to give sermons in the local language. While the *açılım* brought dynamism to the party of the Kurdish national movement, it showed the static nature of the Turkish fascist. The MHP did not budge an inch over this process. It refused all change and contested the reasons given for proposed changes. The *açılım* made clear that there could be no progress on the Kurdish question with MHP involvement. The MHP's ability to capture AKP votes was a major factor going into the failure of the process. The MHP accusations of Erdoğan as a terrorist collaborator hurt AKP poll results, leading the party to step back.

The *açılım* perhaps most obviously demonstrated the naivete, overconfidence, or unpreparedness of the AKP to solve the Kurdish question. This question brings to the fore the question “what is Turkey?” and AKP showed it was not ready to answer it despite having the ideological and foreign policy motivations. Karaveli suggests that since coming to power, the AKP over time morphed into a systemic actor that became unwilling to challenge the Kemalist *Türk* paradigm. The AKP clearly did not change its ideology or foreign policy orientation in the 2009-2011 period, thus it was electoral expediency and the reactions or actions of the Kurdish movement, such as the celebratory environment after Habur or the Reşadiye attack, that contributed to the end of the *açılım*. The AKP clearly had a rude awakening that showed that a more successful process would have to be more open, detailed, and aimed at convincing the public. The opacity strategy did not fool the nationalists, in fact, it led them to assume the worst. It did not placate the Kurds either. The AKP tried to avoid these mistakes in the future, but it was facing a new more confident Kurdish national movement.

Chapter 3: A New Approach (2012-2015)

The end of the *açılım* brought the bloodiest year in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict since the 1990s. There was “a tremendous peak in violence from mid-2011-2012.”¹⁴⁸ The Turkish public was rocked by constant news of terrorism and martyrdoms. The AKP once again initiated a change after the bout of violence. This new approach was called the *çözüm süreci* (solution process). Both the government and the Kurdish national movement took some lessons from the failure of the *açılım* but many of the initial sticking points continued on the government side while external dynamics changed the outlook of the PKK. There were 4 domestic dynamics that shaped the political scene during the solution process: (1) the rising political power of Kurds and their refusal to delegate that power to Turkish actors as they did before; (2) Erdoğan’s desire for power consolidation through the creation of an executive presidency; (3) the struggle between Erdoğan and the Gülen Movement, his former *de facto* coalition partner, on how to divide control of state institutions and the corruption scandals that this conflict bore and; (4) the Gezi uprising, which was the largest political mass mobilization in Turkey. It began as an environmental protest but ballooned into an anti-authoritarian movement encompassing different segments of society.

These four dynamics manifested their effects in the series of elections in the 2012-2015 window, which included local, presidential, and legislative elections. To maximize the political use of any reconciliation project, the AKP timed the reboot to be useful in the elections of 2014.¹⁴⁹ March 2014 was the local elections that occur simultaneously around the country and at every level: all positions from village headmen to provincial mayors of major metropolises are up for election. The last time a local election occurred, in March 2009, the Kurdish national movement

¹⁴⁸ Ana Vilellas, “New Peace Talks in Turkey: Opportunities and Challenges in Conflict Resolution,” *Insight Turkey* 15:2, (Spring 2013): 19.

¹⁴⁹ F. Stephen Larrabee, “Turkey's New Kurdish Opening,” *Survival* 55:5, (2013): 136.

had received its best result yet, winning control of 99 municipalities. This success was a major contributing factor to the *açılım*; Erdoğan wanted to prove to voters in Kurdistan that AKP would deliver them better services and economic development. Ever since the creation of the first legal Kurdish party, every election saw increases in municipalities, MPs, and vote share. Erdoğan's abortive attempt at reconciliation with the *açılım* was not able to stem the trend of increasing Kurdish political power and the wave continued and reached a peak during the solution process. Geri identifies this rising power as a reason for the end of the peace process, because "the growing power of Kurdish political representation, both abroad (in particular in Syria) and domestically (with the HDP party) [...] [presents a] threat to the ontological security and the elites power." Kurds' unwillingness to delegate their power was apparent from the increasing popularity of pro-Kurdish parties. This change did not go unnoticed: "the increasing popularity of the HDP among voters also alarmed AKP."¹⁵⁰ In fact, I would argue that the *açılım* process, and its failure, contributed to this power growth by further politicizing the ethnolinguistic identity of many Kurds who did not previously associate with the demands of the Kurdish national movement. This is because the process and its failure further demonstrated to these non-politicized Kurds that even while living assimilated lives, the Turkish public and state was unwilling to recognize them as Kurds, would degrade them in public discourse, and always perceive them to be "less-than" regardless of their level of assimilation.

Erdoğan, after having served as Prime Minister for 3 terms, was determined to change the structure of the state such that both legislative and executive leadership would be the purview of the President, who would also appoint the judiciary. This president would be directly elected by voters. In an open election, if no candidate wins a simple majority of votes there would be a second

¹⁵⁰ Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds," 54.

round, as in the French presidential elections. The president would be elected to a 5-year term with a chance at reelection but would be barred from seeking a third term. These changes were unpopular, even with AKP voters but Erdoğan was determined to implement them gradually. In his drive to outflank opponents within AKP ranks, he made sure President Abdullah Gül would be ineligible to run again in the new 2-term of 5 years system after serving his single 7-year term under the old system that barred reelection. The end of Gül's term was the main reason why these changes had to be rushed but not all of the constitutional changes could be implemented right away, creating a confusing period where the new directly elected executive president and the prime minister coexisted. This the window between 2014 and 2017 that began with the first direct election of Turkey's president for a single 7-year term under the old system but with many of the abilities of the consolidated presidency and ended with the 2017 referendum that codified the new system.

The first direct presidential election in the history of Turkey took place in August 2014. Turkey had a parliamentary system where the head of government was the Prime Minister, a position without a term limit, and the President was a largely ceremonial position. Until Özal in 1989, all presidents had been high-ranking military officers. Özal was the first civilian politician to take on the role and he pushed strongly to make it a more executive position. When he became president, he used his party's parliamentary majority to install Mesut Yılmaz as Prime Minister, a notoriously inept party functionary without much political clout. Through Yılmaz and his party majority, he could virtually act as an executive president. While Özal was pushing the boundaries of the presidency, he died in office and was replaced by the elder statesman of Turkish politics

Süleyman Demirel,¹⁵¹ who moved the position back to its previous parameters.¹⁵² After Demirel, the staunch secularist leader of the High Court Ahmet Necdet Sezer took the mantle, who was followed in 2007 by the first AKP president: Abdullah Gül. His ascension to the presidency had been contentious due to strong opposition by the military, which still attempted to exercised heavy-handed control over civilian politics. The main issue the military took with Gül was his religious conservatism and much was made about that fact that his wife wore a veil. However, Gül was eventually elected and turned out to be a status quo preserving president in most respects. Prime Minister Erdoğan was the head of government; under this system, the president has *de jure* veto power on legislation, but it is rarely used unless there is a problem of constitutional scale. Like all previous presidents, Gül was elected to a non-renewable 7-year term by parliament. The Prime Minister brings a nomination forward and parliament seeks a supermajority on the first ballot, then dropping the expectation to a simple majority in subsequent rounds. Presidential politics was influencing Erdoğan's decisions on all fronts, including the Kurdish question.

Consistent with the unilateral tone of the *açılım*, the AKP regime was becoming increasingly authoritarian. This impact was strongly felt by Kurds, almost 8,000 of whom were imprisoned over KCK trials, but it also affected freedoms of the press and expression, access to abortion, environmental rights, ramping up of Islamist rhetoric, and other critical areas of human rights. Erdoğan had publicly declared before that “The base of the AKP is not a base that says “no”

¹⁵¹ Demirel had led various centre-right parties and rightist coalitions and became Prime Minister 7 times. He was Prime Minister during the 1971 and 1980 coups and was banned from politics at various times. He was a child of the Republic (*Cumhuriyet çocuğu*) whose devotion to Kemalist principles were unquestionable, regardless of his politically expedient rhetoric. Thus, his presidency was the reassertion of the status quo ante in all facets, including on Kurdish policy, which Özal had tried hard to reform.

¹⁵² The “previous parameters” were breached during the 28th February constitutional crisis, or post-modern coup, in 1997 when the military virtually forced President Demirel to break established norms and give the authority to form a government to the leader of the second largest party in the election instead of the winners, who were from the Islamist party that Erdoğan and AKP founders later broke away from.

to authoritarian rule.”¹⁵³ For him, democracy is merely a means, not an end in and of itself; “he regards it as restricted to the right to vote, while excluding the other conditions of democracy such as freedom of press, freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right to protest”¹⁵⁴ and takes “an instrumental approach to freedom.”¹⁵⁵ The reality of this worldview was confirmed alongside the *açılım*. It became clear that the most important determinant of Turkish policy was Erdoğan’s single-handed control of the country. If a certain policy will lose him public support or allow competing power centers to emerge, it is a non-starter. Within this framework, he was willing to work with the Kurdish national movement to achieve his goal of an executive presidency by trading away some concessions. However, some of the central demands of the Kurdish national movement, such as regional autonomy and increased rights and freedoms for Kurds in the constitution were fundamentally in contradiction to the power centralization and anti-democratic action that Erdoğan was pursuing. Giving Erdoğan more power could potentially leave the Kurdish national movement with a better *de jure* position but not necessarily more power to determine the future of Kurds or Kurdistan.

As power consolidation became Erdoğan’s priority, he recognized that the Kurdish national movement and its supporters were not reliably going to deliver him the executive presidency. With this in mind, his ideological reasoning gradually weakened over the years. While the AKP may have been founded on an Islamic “conservative democrat” conception with a multi-leader structure where Erdoğan was supposed to be merely “first among equals,” it ended up resembling a party of Erdoğan. This party was successful because it united the three strands of the Turkish right: Islamic, conservative, nationalist. Previously, he had been successful with just the first two, in combination

¹⁵³ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 74.

¹⁵⁴ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 51.

¹⁵⁵ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 74.

with some liberals and Kurds. With the latter groups alienated and the conservative (center-right) group constantly being intrigued by the MHP, Erdoğan saw the advantage in employing more nationalist rhetoric. He did not have a nationalist commitment to suppressing Kurds, yet it became an easy method for him to secure conservatives and make inroads with nationalist voters, which seemed to him more valuable as public support for the *açılım* kept falling.

As in his drive to consolidate power, Erdoğan was challenged from different quarters. The biggest challenge came from the Gülen Movement, an Islamic network led by Fethullah Gülen that aims to increase religious influence on state and society through placing its members in key positions and institutions. The movement, which calls itself *Hizmet* (the Service), began a drive to place its members in the government bureaucracy, the military, the police, the judiciary, the universities, and other important positions decades before the AKP got to power. Once a *Hizmet* member attains a position, they hire and promote other members, entrenching the network deeper into the institution. Their recruitment drive was through exam schools, mosques, and charitable organizations and these institutions were powerful forces with ample funds across Turkey (including a strong presence in Kurdistan) and around the world. The chief enemy of the *Hizmet* was the military establishment, ever vigilant against religious influence. This enmity led to cooperation between the movement and the AKP. The two Islamic actors, the former a network with possibly millions of members and the latter a legal party with popular support, cooperated to end military tutelage. However, as the military-approved functionaries, colonels, judges, and police chiefs were pushed out, the *Hizmet* and the AKP started clashing as to who would fill which gap. “Cooperation between the AKP and the Islamic Gülen movement ended, as they competed for more power in the bureaucracy, and in December 2013 the Gülenist public prosecutors initiated

a graft probe against AKP cabinet members.”¹⁵⁶ The graft probe embroiled “four members of the cabinet and Erdoğan’s inner circle, including his own son,”¹⁵⁷ and led to disgraceful resignations of AKP ministers and parliamentarians. The widespread perception of corruption was a danger to Erdoğan’s public standing. He vigorously battled this image in the press, through counter-investigations and by restructuring the state bureaucracy.

While the conflict with Gülen could be described as internal, there was also an external power conflict. Erdoğan had won almost half the vote in the 2011 general election and but the other half the population was opposed to his creeping authoritarianism. Protests began towards the end of May 2013 at Gezi Park, the only green space left in Taksim, a central area of Istanbul. Erdoğan had personally signed off on the building of a mall and a military post in that location. Environmentalist protests began in opposition to the demolition of the park and grew quickly over the harsh treatment of the protestors by the police. The park was occupied, and protest grew until millions of citizens descended on Gezi, protesting not only for the environment but also for democracy, even demanding the resignation of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan. Police brutality continued and during the occupation “six protestors died and 7,822 were injured.”¹⁵⁸ The protests brought together environmentalists, leftist groups, LGBTQ groups, liberals, some Islamists, some from the Kurdish national movement, and others, creating a cooperative political space that had not existed in the Turkish public sphere prior to this event.

These social and political developments coincided with four interconnected continued dynamics that impacted the Kurdish question. The first was expounded above in relation to the 2014 local elections: the growth in Kurdish political power and refusal to delegate it. The second,

¹⁵⁶ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 50.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 50.

which has also been mentioned, is Erdoğan's lack of commitment to democracy and presidential ambition to make himself the sole decisionmaker. Many of the demands of the Kurdish national movement rely on increased freedom in social, economic, and political spheres. These are in contradiction to the direction of travel of the AKP government even while attempting the solution process. During the *açılım*, Erdoğan employed democratization rhetoric as military tutelage still had its last gasp of air but as the solution process began, the AKP dispensed with this pretense. All significant political enemies had been eliminated and it faced feeble parliamentary opposition. The two main threats, the Gülen movement, a former partner, and the Kurdish national movement, which challenged AKP authority in Kurdistan by winning elections and upset the public mood with PKK violence. The former was made into "the parallel state" while the latter is dismissed as "separatist" and "terrorist." Both enemies were more easily targeted by extra-democratic means such as investigations, violent retaliation, and arrests without the need for 'democratic' reforms. In fact, any more such reforms could hinder the efforts to arrest political enemies *en masse*. One example is the call by the Kurdish national movement for the decentralization of Turkey, not just Kurdistan, into more autonomous, locally-empowered regions. This means taking power and authority away from the center, totally anathema to Erdoğan's project. Thus, a central demand of the Kurdish national movement is off the table before any dialogue can even occur. The consolidation drive was not as explicit during the *açılım* when regional empowerment schemes had been floated even by members of the government.

The third dynamic was Erdoğan's refusal to commit to any Kurdish policy. While he was not as vague and unplanned as in the *açılım*, recognizing such an approach made him vulnerable to criticism from all sides, he still refused to state any changes he would make in his attempt for Kurdish reconciliation. A major reason this non-committal approach was balancing nationalists

and Kurds: “he did not take any concrete steps to encourage the Kurds to vote for any party except the AKP and ensured that he did nothing to irritate nationalist voters.”¹⁵⁹ Hence, his electorally expedient strategy was to string along as many Kurds as possible for as long as he can without actually making any changes that would upset nationalists, which would push them to the MHP.

The fourth dynamic, connected with the third, was his ignorance of collective rights, both cultural and political. Erdoğan never outlined what facet or understanding of the ‘Kurdish question’ he was trying to solve. He would not say what his precise solution package included and refused to make any proposals before disarmament of the PKK. This rhetoric ties together different facets of the issue the identity/self-determination aspect and the security/terrorism aspect. Instead of desecuritizing the discourse, Erdoğan’s insistence on no proposals before full disarmament blocks the solution process from advancing just as his disavowal of Kurdish language education was a major hindrance to the *açılım*. Because of this issue, there was no legislative change with regards to the Kurdish question during the solution process. The *açılım*, while there was a similar situation, still saw the passage of some symbolic reforms and local level changes.

While there is plenty of continuity, the solution process was not a simple rehashing of the *açılım*. There were significant developments inside and outside Turkey that redrew the lines of political activity on the Kurdish question. The first change was the most valuable lesson AKP learned from the *açılım*: the most important constituency is the Turkish public. The first initiative failed largely because of public opposition not only from opposition parties but also from AKP voters. The party’s actions were in contradiction to the opinions of almost half of its voters and pushed them towards the MHP, who was the second choice for many of them. Thus, the second process had a large public diplomacy component to convince the Turkish public that there would

¹⁵⁹ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 54.

have to be at least some concessions. The “AKP government [for the first time] carried the negotiations one step further by opening them to public deliberation.”¹⁶⁰ Winning Turkish public approval for the solution process was a Herculean task as this population included the active Turkish fascist movement that got “*açılım değil katliam istiyoruz*” (“we don’t want an opening, we want mass murder”) trending on Twitter during the first initiative.¹⁶¹

The Turkish public feels as though it is must “give” things to the Kurds and resents the fact that the Kurdish national movement has been using violence to extract concessions that are perceived to be undeserved. For the Turkish public, not only is violence wrong, but the cause of the PKK is unjust. This widespread perception is connected to the previously discussed fact that a majority of Turks reject wrongdoing. Because of this rejection of the reality of Turkish state violence and assimilationist policies, Kurds asking for language freedom or political decentralization seems to Turks as though Kurds are seeking privileges that Turks must bestow. To change this narrative, the AKP government recruited different public figures to serve as “*akıl insanlar*” (Wise People), in “a 63-member Wise Men Commission was established from among intellectuals, academics, artists, and NGO representatives [...] expected to serve as a messenger between various social groups and decision-makers.”¹⁶² This outreach to citizens in every region was to convince them that there must be a change and alter the public mood in favor of even a slight compromise. The rallying message was “*analar ağlamasın*” (mothers should not cry anymore) which became a common slogan for Erdoğan. While its impact on public opinion is an open question, the existence of such a public diplomacy effort was a major break from the *açılım*.

¹⁶⁰ Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process with the Kurds,” 7.

¹⁶¹ International Crisis Group, “Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement,” 6.

¹⁶² Yılmaz Ensaroğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Question and the Peace Process,” *Insight Turkey* 15:2 (2013): 15.

The second change was the involvement of a publicly legitimate actor from the Kurdish national movement. One of the major failings of the *açılım* was the lack of a legal interlocutor. The AKP had not wanted such a partner because the rewards from the electorate would be greater if it could solve the issue unilaterally. However, the AKP learned with the *açılım* that it could not be the Turkish and Kurdish side of reconciliation: it was an actor that was enmeshed with the state.¹⁶³ Because of that, in 2012, before the solution process began, Erdoğan said that his party was “ready to do political negotiations. The counterpart is the BDP,”¹⁶⁴ which was subsequently replaced by the HDP. It is noteworthy that while pointing to the BDP as a partner in peace, the government also pushed to marginalize and outlaw it, leading to its replacement by the HDP, the most recent pro-Kurdish party.

Internally, the Kurdish national movement also had a major issue regarding interlocution. In the *açılım*, threats of violence, loss of voters who support the PKK, and the problem of condemnation had pushed the legal party outside the process. The same issues also plagued the solution process. The armed PKK once again could not tolerate any condemnation of itself or its terrorist methods by the legal outfit, the DTP/BDP, while the government insisted that before any negotiation, that the legal party had to “condemn terrorism.”¹⁶⁵ Since PKK sympathizers (or outright supporters) formed a large segment of the party supporters, it was politically difficult for the legal parties to disavow the PKK. It was also physically difficult due to threats of retaliation by the PKK against civilians. The PKK did not want to delegate to the DTP/BDP and thus the legal

¹⁶³ Some activist in the Kurdish national movement, especially hardliners in the PKK, often do not refer to the AKP, or Erdoğan but simply to the state as their enemy using the abbreviation “TC” short for the Republic of Turkey (*Türkiye Cumhuriyeti*). For this worldview, the ideological background of the ruling party is irrelevant and the actions of the TC from the 1920s to present are told as a full narrative of violence against Kurds. Those with this outlook have had the hardest time adjusting to the *Türkiyeli* paradigm as their activism began in opposition to the state itself.

¹⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, “Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement,” 21.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

party was not involved. One argument is that since the legal definition of terrorism in Turkey is so broad, a condemnation of “terrorism” virtually includes all sorts of opposition to the government and “as long as Turkey maintains a very vague legal definition of terrorism and arrests thousands,”¹⁶⁶ there is unlikely to be a condemnation. This line of reasoning seems less potent than the direct threats of violence or alienating a political base but could be a contributing factor.

The end of the *açılım* was largely due to the backlash against the leaked dialogue between the state and the PKK. This debacle demonstrated how unacceptable direct negotiations with the PKK were to the Turkish public, let alone with Abdullah Öcalan, who has been the chief villain of Turkish media ever since PKK violence began. Thus, the need for a legal interlocutor was clear and the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) emerged to fill this role. This new party was set up because the BDP was shut down by the courts, just like every Kurdish party before it. While the government continued to publicly demand condemnations of terrorism, it did engage in dialogue with the HDP even though it did not make such statements. Thus, the condemnation demand was public lip service to avoid the image that the AKP was collaborating with ‘terrorist sympathizers’ or ‘terrorists.’

While there had been many Kurdish parties before, stretching back to 1990, I would categorize the HDP as the first one to supersede the designation of “Kurdish party” and be more of a “pro-Kurdish party.” What does this distinction mean? Unlike its predecessors, the HDP is not only seeking the votes of Kurds, whether in Kurdistan or elsewhere in Turkey, but also seeking to represent all of the progressive and marginalized forces of the country. Its multi-issue platform dates back to previous Kurdish parties but the HDP practices more of what it preaches than its predecessors. The Kurdish national movement in general, and the HDP in particular is committed

¹⁶⁶ International Crisis Group, “Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement,” 21.

to a wide range of left-wing goals such as “labour rights, gender equality, sexuality, the environment, and peace (regionally and internally), most of which had been on the periphery of mainstream political thought in Turkey.”¹⁶⁷ Because of this ideological background, Kurdish parties have consistently had the highest percentage of women mayors, MPs, and candidates for any office among all parties in Turkey. The parties have been led by co-presidents, one man and one woman. The feminist commitment of the Kurdish national movement is not simply a sideshow but a critical part of the movement’s plank. The PKK has had women fighters since its inception and one of its co-founders is a woman. The movement’s commitment to women’s liberation also limits cooperation with the Erdoğan government as he is most certainly not of the same opinion on gender issues.

The seminal event that was the Gezi uprising showed that there was a political will to mass organize a rainbow coalition and the HDP rose to the occasion to fill such a role, which is why some argue that the HDP is a consequence of the Gezi uprising.¹⁶⁸ By “addressing the rights of not only the Kurdish community but also other minority groups in the country, including women and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community,” which no other party had ever publicly supported, the HDP broadened its appeal beyond Kurdistan and Kurdish voters across Turkey. The HDP, unlike the previous Kurdish parties, moved beyond pluralist rhetoric to pluralist practice: it incorporated Armenian, Assyrian, LGBTQ¹⁶⁹, feminist, Turkish leftists, Kurdish Islamist, environmentalist, and other marginalized individuals and institutions to its decision-making apparatus. Non-Kurdish socialist and feminist women like Filiz Kerestecioğlu or

¹⁶⁷ Kathleen Cavanaugh and Edel Hughes, “A Democratic Opening? The AKP and the Kurdish Left,” *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 12:1, (2015): 8.

¹⁶⁸ Cavanaugh and Hughes, “The AKP and the Kurdish Left,” 8.

¹⁶⁹ While the HDP has nominated openly gay candidates for office, they have been to seats that were essentially unwinnable, and these nominations were mostly symbolic. There has still has not been an openly gay Turkish politician at any level.

Armenian community organizer Garo Paylan came to be some of the more recognizable and energetic leaders of the HDP parliamentary group. Hence, the HDP is described as a “mostly Kurdish, pro-minority”¹⁷⁰ party. Because of this change in emphasis, even though its program is largely the same, “it would be myopic to read the HDP as a mere extension of either the BDP or the PKK.”¹⁷¹ This expansion of its base, coupled with the rising power of Kurds and the increasing politicization of Kurdish identity, delivered an expanded voter population and support network to the HDP.

At the same time, the power of the PKK was showing contradictions: while Öcalan still had a large hold and the organization could inflict major harm due to its enhanced position in Syria (which will be discussed in detail), it faced somewhat flagging support among the Kurdistan public. Öcalan’s strength was demonstrated by the massive prison hunger strikes in 2012 when the *açılım* had closed. This was one of the largest hunger strikes in Turkish history, starting in September 2012 with 63 prisoners and ballooning to “682 prisoners by early November. The strikers had three demands: the alleviation of Öcalan’s prison conditions, the right to education in Kurdish and the right to use Kurdish in courts.”¹⁷² The three demands encapsulate the calls for both individual (in courts) and collective (in schools) cultural rights, in addition to the extreme reverence for the leader. Öcalan’s press release calling for the end of the hunger strikes ended them immediately. Öcalan only made such a statement “after the Minister of Justice announced that the government was preparing a new law granting the use of Kurdish in courts.”¹⁷³ This episode, ending in November 2012, showed the power of Öcalan and created a two-fold incentive for the

¹⁷⁰ Eva Maria Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” *Istituto Affari Internazionali IAI Working Papers* 17, (June 2017): 2.

¹⁷¹ Cavanaugh and Hughes, “The AKP and the Kurdish Left,” 8.

¹⁷² Dilek Kurban, “To Europe and Back: The Three Decades of Kurdish Struggle in Turkey,” *Global Turkey in Europe Policy Brief* 7, (March 2013): 4.

¹⁷³ Kurban, “To Europe and Back,” 4.

government: to restart negotiations and to include Öcalan within them in some way without alienating the public. The solution to the latter predicament was using the HDP MPs as a go-between. This framework was termed ‘the Imrali process’ after the prison island where Öcalan is held.¹⁷⁴

However, the PKK and Öcalan lacked the same support they had in the early 1990s when they pulled off an intifada-style public uprising called the *Serhildan*.¹⁷⁵ “In March 1990, a burgeoning civil resistance called Serhildan, considered the Kurdish Intifada in which more than 100 people were killed, took place in many Kurdish cities.”¹⁷⁶ There was an attempt to cause another *Serhildan* in 2012 but Öcalan/PKK influence was not strong enough to initiate mass public mobilization at that point. Thus, “by the end of 2012, the PKK had failed to initiate its “People's Revolutionary War” while the state proved unable to eliminate the organization.”¹⁷⁷ This state of affairs brought the PKK to the table. The public support for the PKK was flagging and over time, especially with the *açılım*, many Kurds were moving away from the justifications for violence and legitimacy in Kurdistan was shifting from the PKK to the HDP.¹⁷⁸ However, changes in Syria altered this course as PKK confidence rose and the group started planning an urban guerilla strategy, which will be discussed below.

While making overtures to domestic Kurdish actors, the AKP still wanted to use the reconciliation process to defang its Kurdish opposition. Cutting support for the Kurdish national movement was one of the core aims of the AKP. Realizing the strong linkages that exist among Kurds in different countries, Erdoğan attempted to use Iraqi Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani

¹⁷⁴ Ensaroğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Question and the Peace Process,” 14.

¹⁷⁵ *Serhildan* is the Kurdish word for “uprising.” It literally means “head raising” similar to *başkaldırı* in Turkish.

¹⁷⁶ Galletti, “The Kurdish issue in Turkey,” 125.

¹⁷⁷ Ensaroğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Question and the Peace Process,” 13.

¹⁷⁸ This description should not be taken to as a sea change: the PKK was still in quite well-liked amongst the Kurdistan public, just not enough for mass mobilization. A strong majority believed that Öcalan must be released and that the state was to blame for the war.

as a partner in the solution process. This was a rational choice as the Iraqi Kurdish economy was heavily dependent on Turkey: “after 2007, there developed a noteworthy economic and political cooperation between the KRG and the AKP government.”¹⁷⁹ Under the AKP, Turkey became the Kurdish Regional Government’s (KRG) most important partner. Interacting with the KRG was a boon to both the Turkish economy, which is in constant need of imported oil, and fit well with the neo-Ottoman (or supposedly liberal) foreign policy orientation that the AKP government was pursuing. Barzani and his conservative Kurdish nationalist party, the KDP, have also been rivals with Öcalan’s PKK, a Marxist-Leninist group with military bases in a region Barzani has *de jure* control, as explained above. Hence, Barzani’s open cooperation with Erdoğan is unsurprising. However, Erdoğan’s attempt to replace Turkey’s Kurdish actors with the Iraqi Kurdish president was unsustainable. Turkey is home to a much larger Kurdish region and population and the local Kurdish national movement is heavily supported. Erdoğan’s attempt to incorporate Barzani into the process was most apparent when he brought Barzani, along with famous Kurdish musician Şivan Perwer, to Diyarbakır in November 2013.¹⁸⁰ While this event was welcomed by Kurds, it was not politically impactful: Turkey’s Kurds were simply unmoved by the legitimacy Barzani could provide to Erdoğan. And so, “grudgingly, the AKP government has come around to accepting the Kurdish movement, [...] as a legitimate interlocutor.”¹⁸¹ The new push, especially after 2013, “included Kurdish legal representatives of the mostly Kurdish, pro-minority Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) as well as the leadership of the PKK.”¹⁸²

The final major change was the war in Syria. In histories of the Kurdish people or Kurdish national movements, the stories of Syrian Kurds are often overlooked and not examined in as much

¹⁷⁹ Cuma Çiçek, *Ulus Din Sınıf: Türkiye’de Kürt Mutabakatının İnşası*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2015): 57.

¹⁸⁰ Gunter, “The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process Stalled in Neutral,” 23.

¹⁸¹ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 83.

¹⁸² Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 2.

detail as the larger Kurdish communities of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. However, the Kurds of Northern Syria, living in Western Kurdistan (or *Rojava* in Kurdish as it has come to be known) constitute around 10% of the Syrian population¹⁸³ and a majority of their region. They have also faced discrimination and suppression as non-Arab citizens of the authoritarian Syrian Arab Republic, though not to the scale of the actions of the Republic of Turkey. Syrian Kurds appeared on the international scene with the 2011 uprising in Syria and their actions heavily impacted the solution process. Both actors, the AKP government and the Kurdish national movement, believed they could use the situation in Syria to gain leverage over the other in Turkey.

Initially, both sides of the solution process were anti-Assad. The AKP government's Arab Spring policy was universally supportive of the uprisings, even against friendly regimes like the Syrian Assad government. However, the AKP was betting on the success of Islamic forces like the Muslim Brotherhood parties across the region to succeed in initial elections and create fertile ground for Neo-Ottoman influence from Turkey to spread. In this effort, the Kurdish conflict was a thorn on Turkey's side because it was posturing as a supporter of democratization while suppressing the legal Kurdish movement and actively fighting a guerilla war. The aspiration to a democratic leadership position in the region also contributed to the decision to restart an initiative. For the PKK, opposing Assad was an obvious choice. Both Bashar and Hafez Al-Assad had suppressed Kurds in Syrian society and the Kurds of Northern Syria were organized to take advantage of any weakness in Damascus. The most organized armed group was the PYD (Democratic Union Party),¹⁸⁴ the PKK affiliate in Syria, or "sister organization"¹⁸⁵ according to

¹⁸³ International Crisis Group, "Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement," 15.

¹⁸⁴ The PYD is an organization with different wings that enlarge the alphabet soup of Kurdish groups that have already been discussed. As this thesis does not concern itself within the intra-PYD differences, there will not be distinctions made between the overarching PYD, its main armed wing the YPG or the HPG.

¹⁸⁵ International Crisis Group, "Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement," 15.

the International Crisis Group. As the Assad regime lost its hold on northern areas, the PYD seized the opportunity for self-government. The organic links between the PYD and the PKK are undeniable: they are practically different branches of one tree. The “PYD’s local power, activism and experience helped make it powerful enough to be first to raise its flags in Kobane and Afrin [and soon after in Jazeera] when the regime’s authority collapsed there in July 2012,”¹⁸⁶ and this situation created fear in the AKP and self-confidence in the PKK. The AKP was afraid of the emergence of a Kurdish zone along its southern border controlled by a PKK affiliate that could serve as a base for cross-border PKK attacks at the height of the violence. Hence, “the PYD’s gains initially seemed to accelerate the Turkish government’s search for a solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey.”¹⁸⁷

The PKK takeaway was quite the opposite: some hardline PKK leaders were returning to the possibility of a military solution. The PYD illustrated to them that it was indeed possible for a Kurdish insurgency to win and if the PYD could take over Rojava by force with such ease, maybe the PKK could finally take over Kurdistan in Turkey? While the PKK came to the negotiating table, its hand was strengthened by the PYD’s performance and it was even less willing than before to compromise on key demands. “Some argued that the swift turn of events for Syrian Kurds convinced the PKK that it would be more likely to gain autonomy for Turkish Kurds through urban warfare. The deployment of urban militias in Turkey’s Kurdish region during the peace process is offered as evidence of the PKK’s preparation for war.”¹⁸⁸ This urban warfare idea might have contributed to the PKK playing along to the slow solution process as it was rebuilding a fighting infrastructure for a new type of guerilla warfare.

¹⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, “Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement,” 16.

¹⁸⁷ Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 7-8.

¹⁸⁸ Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process with the Kurds,” 3.

Through the initial stages of the solution process, in 2013 and most of 2014, the AKP was focused on preserving its base among Kurds. The AKP had been rattled by the Gezi protests and the corruption cases, but Erdoğan managed to handily win the presidential election while the AKP managed a good result in the local elections despite another strong performance by the Kurdish national movement in Kurdistan. The problem in 2014 was that negotiations still had not produced tangible legislative results even though the AKP controlled the legislature and the executive.¹⁸⁹ As the Syrian uprising transformed into a war, ISIS appeared as a prominent force and occupied positions along Turkey's border, making Turkey's southern neighbors the PYD and ISIS. Mufti describes the situation by saying that "Turkey found itself confronting an array of hostile forces to its south."¹⁹⁰ Within this framework, the main Turkish objective in Syria began to shift away from a desire to topple Assad and towards containing the immediate threat from the PYD. The focus on installing allies in Damascus had changed as Turkey realized that ISIS had sidelined "radical Islamist rivals and [...] Turkish-backed Syrian Muslim Brotherhood."¹⁹¹ While ISIS was not an ally, it was not the first order threat for Turkey, which was more concerned with containing the PYD and weakening the PKK's hand in negotiations. The threat ranking remained unchanged even as ISIS conducted a blitzkrieg through the border areas of Iraq and Syria, committing atrocities. This was in direct contradiction to priorities of the US, Turkey's NATO ally, for whom defeating ISIS was of paramount importance, followed by the Assad regime, whereas the PYD did not even register as a threat; it is, in fact, an ally in the fight against ISIS.

These tensions between Kurdish groups, Turkey, ISIS, and the US came to a head in September 2014 when ISIS laid siege to a Kurdish town on the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian

¹⁸⁹ The AKP also mostly controlled the judiciary. Its domination of the courts allowed it to punish enemies in show trials or politically motivated arrests such as the KCK wave.

¹⁹⁰ Mufti, "Turkey's Choice," 75.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

border. The town of Kobane was so close to the Turkish border that the events were visible from Turkish outposts. Kobane was the sight of the “PYD’s unexpectedly effective defense”¹⁹² and its resistance to ISIS, the main villain of international news coverage, earned the PYD global sympathy. For the Kurds of Turkey, this was a valiant effort by their relatives across the border where the Turkish government refused to do anything to help save Kobane from ISIS. This image hurt Turkey immensely and fed the perception among the Kurdish public that Turkey was against Kurds; in Syria and at home. The PYD, for its part, did not want Turkey to intervene at all: such an intervention would mean the end of self-government as Turkey would enmesh itself in local affairs and try to control large parts of the new cantons using its larger and more sophisticated military presence. A successful Turkish intervention would thus decrease the power of the PKK in negotiations both because of the loss of a foothold on the border and because it could possibly improve the AKP’s image among Kurdish voters. Hence, Turkey was stuck. Any intervention was opposed by the PYD, which would resist Turkey and possibly lead to scenes of Turkish soldiers attacking fighters trying to hold off ISIS.¹⁹³ On the other hand, non-intervention would either lead to deaths and an ISIS success, which would end the PYD presence in that area but it would also fuel the idea that Turkey was tacitly pro-ISIS against the PYD.¹⁹⁴ The AKP did not really consider a PYD victory a possibility, which would cement the group’s position in Syria and empower the PKK against Turkey.

While the siege wore on, the HDP wanted the government to support the resistance to ISIS by letting PYD forces travel through Turkey to help Kobane. The PYD controlled three areas that it called cantons, but these were initially disconnected from one another. To move fighters

¹⁹² Mufti, “Turkey’s Choice,” 75.

¹⁹³ Ibid 76.

¹⁹⁴ Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 9.

from one to the other, the PYD had to go in and out of Turkey. However, the government did not agree to such a request that would enhance the power of the PYD and so the “HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş on October 6, called on people to come out in the streets to protest the government’s “blockade” of Kobani and its defenders.”¹⁹⁵ The riots that ensued claimed 51 lives¹⁹⁶ while demonstrating how much “Kobani excited the imaginations of Kurds.”¹⁹⁷ This episode also reflected the degree of influence the HDP leadership exercised over public opinion in Kurdistan. Resch calls Kobane “a sort of Stalingrad for Kurds of all countries”¹⁹⁸ as this became a pivotal moment in the narrative of the Kurdish nation. When Kobane was freed in February 2015, the Kurdish public was enraged that Erdoğan had allowed the siege to go on as Turkish tanks and armed forces sat within eyesight. This became the breaking point for many Kurds in Turkey. “Kobane demonstrated that the ongoing peace process had not yet built the needed trust between the Turkish government and the leadership of the Kurdish community in the country.”¹⁹⁹ For years, the Kurdish parties had been gaining ground as Kurdish identity became increasingly politicized and trust in Erdoğan was declining after the failure of the *açılım*. Any goodwill he had generated in the solution process from 2013 to 2014 using appearances with Barzani²⁰⁰ or the Wise People Commission faded quickly after Kobane.

Closed-door negotiations began earlier and as soon as they started, violence came to an abrupt end: there were no deaths in the Kurdish conflict “during the ceasefire period between January 2013 and July 2015.”²⁰¹ Öcalan’s influence was paramount in pausing the conflict: his

¹⁹⁵ Mufti, “Turkey’s Choice,” 76.

¹⁹⁶ Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 9.

¹⁹⁷ Mufti, “Turkey’s Choice,” 75.

¹⁹⁸ Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 10.

¹⁹⁹ Resch, “Syria’s Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 8.

²⁰⁰ Kerem Öktem, “The Nation-State’s Blurred Borders: Erdoğan And the Emergence of Kurdistan In Turkey,” *IPC-Mercator Policy Brief* (January 2014): 6.

²⁰¹ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 57.

2013 Newroz letter was the public starting point for the new discussions. Newroz (literally new day) is a harvest festival for the coming of spring celebrated by various regional cultures. Over the last few decades, it has become the Kurdish national holiday.²⁰² The Newroz celebration in Diyarbakır is a massive event and government approval for it is a tricky issue every year. In 2013, Öcalan's letter was read aloud from the stage at the massive Diyarbakır celebration:

"We have now reached a point where **guns must go silent** and ideas and politics must speak. We will unite in the face of those who try to split us. From now on, a new period begins when politics, not guns, will come to the fore. It is now time for armed elements to withdraw outside the country."²⁰³ (emphasis added)

"The PKK leadership on Mount Qandil responded positively to Öcalan's message and declared ceasefire only days after their announcement of loyalty."²⁰⁴ This provided a roadmap for future negotiations. Shortly after Öcalan's letter, Erdoğan used the word 'Kurdistan' for the first time in public,²⁰⁵ referring to the Kurdish areas of Turkey. Until then, Kurdistan had ever only been used by a government official in reference to Iraqi Kurdistan, which had been a major milestone in its own right. These overtures from both sides raised expectations, despite the growing confidence of the PKK arising out of the empowered PYD position in Syria.

Throughout this bloodless period after spring 2013, political results were mixed as Erdoğan did win the presidency in August 2014 despite the HDP successes in the March 2014 local elections and more surprisingly in the presidential elections that Erdoğan ultimately won with 52% in the first round against the HDP candidate and a political novice supported jointly by the CHP and

²⁰² While Newroz is also celebrated by other cultures in the same region, especially by Persians who call the holiday "Persian New Year," it has been transformed into a major celebration of Kurdish national identity and its celebration has thus become a political issue in Turkey.

²⁰³ Ensaroğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish Question and the Peace Process," 15.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Öktem, "Erdoğan And the Emergence of Kurdistan In Turkey," 2.

MHP without representing either. The no-name compromise candidate scored an abysmal 38%; taking virtually no votes from Erdoğan. The HDP candidate for president was Selahattin Demirtaş, who won 9.76% of the vote. This was unexpectedly close to the 10% electoral threshold on legislative elections, even though Erdoğan's victory in this election was thought to have been a foregone conclusion. This result increased the HDP's confidence that it could beat the threshold if it were to enter elections as a full-fledged party, abandoning its previous strategy of running as independent candidates who later form a parliamentary group. Being a full party contesting the election would mean each vote would be more effective and translate into more seats as the party-list system in Turkey favors large parties over independent candidates. Due to the seat allocation arithmetic of Turkey's electoral system, the party that comes in first in a province, even if its lead over the second party is small, has a huge advantage and takes the lion share of seats. This method, while generally unfair to smaller parties, would empower the HDP, which shows dominance in Kurdish provinces and a smaller presence in most provinces. The AKP had historically been the first party in Kurdish provinces, winning many seats from the region, despite the popularity of Kurdish independents. If it were to lose its first-party position in too many Kurdish provinces, its majority would shrink dramatically. The HDP clearing the threshold could even deny the AKP majority in parliament for the first time in over a decade. This prospect gave the HDP a powerful bargaining position: respond to Kurdish demands or we will take away your majority.

With the prospect of the HDP fully contesting the upcoming legislative elections in June 2015, the devastating turn of events in Kobane, and the possible loss of its legislative majority, the AKP government had to act. It could either come up with a rapid solution that would capture its Kurdish voters once again or turn around completely to focus on the AKP-MHP cross-over voters. In the run-up to the election, the AKP tried to use both strategies at once. Erdoğan began a steady

stream of increasingly nationalist rhetoric to court MHP voters, whose second-choice party had been the AKP. He heavily relied on the “Kurds are terrorists” idea that had become commonplace in Turkey and equated the HDP with the PKK. On the other hand, high-level AKP representatives were meeting with HDP interlocutors and communicating with Öcalan through HDP MPs in order to come to a deal. A draft roadmap was reached shortly before the election on February 28th, 2015.²⁰⁶ This breakthrough was termed the *Dolmabahçe Mutabakatı* (Dolmabahçe Agreement) after the former palace where it was proclaimed to the press by senior AKP and HDP officials. The 10-point plan revealed once more that the HDP was not willing to forsake its wide agenda for a narrow return on limited autonomy in Kurdistan. The first four points concerned the quality of democracy, the local and national dimensions of democratization, freedom, and the strengthening of democratic institutions while the sixth point concerned the freedom-security balance. These meant that the HDP demands increased democratic control not only in Kurdistan but across Turkey. This position is sensible with the framework that Kurds all over Turkey, as well as other oppressed groups, are the base of this party. The HDP was also able to include assurances for women’s and environmental issues as a point. The fourth point touched on socioeconomic aspects of the solution, which would address the wide economic disparity between the rest of Turkey and Kurdistan, its poorest region. Points 8 and 9 referred to changes in the identity of the state and the constitution while the final point called for an entirely new constitution. This last point was crucial to Erdoğan as his idea for a new constitution was the implementation of his consolidated presidential ambition.²⁰⁷ This proclamation was the closest point to a solution that Turkey has ever experienced in the decades-long conflict.

²⁰⁶ Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process with the Kurds,” 7.

²⁰⁷ Al Jazeera Turk, “Ortak Açıklamanın Tam Metni,” *Al Jazeera Turk*, February 28, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/ortak-aciklamamin-tam-metni>

Dolmabahçe was to form the basis of long negotiations that would follow the election, which Erdoğan's AKP would presumably win by getting some support from nationalists and Kurds. However, after having said that this call for peace had long been needed²⁰⁸, Erdoğan changed his tune a mere two weeks later. On March 15th he declared that there was no such thing as a “Kurdish question” in Turkey.²⁰⁹ Two days after Erdoğan's shocking statement abandoning the solution process, the HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş gave one of the most iconic speeches in Turkish parliamentary history. He simply repeated the same sentence three times: “we will not make you the president”, referring to Erdoğan and his planned constitutional reform, making the hashtag “#SeniBaşkanYaptırmayacağız” a worldwide trend.²¹⁰ The slogan, better translated as “we will not let you be president,”²¹¹ subsequently became the campaign slogan of the HDP.

There are various speculative explanations of what happened between February 28th and March 15th such that Erdoğan changed course completely. While this study cannot settle that debate, the electoral considerations appear to be paramount as this is only two months before possibly the most contested election the AKP had faced in over a decade. Erdoğan famously reads opinion poll results every day and it is possible that he decided from poll returns that the image of AKP officials sitting next to HDP members reading a laundry list of progressive priorities pushed enough nationalist voters away to the MHP, or it did not produce the requisite jump in Kurdish support for the AKP to make political risk worthwhile, instead putting the HDP close to passing the threshold and wrecking his majority as the HDP reaped the rewards of Dolmabahçe. The latter

²⁰⁸ Demokrat Haber, “Erdoğan: Dolmabahçe Toplantısı Yanlıştı, 10 Maddeye De Karşıyım,” *Demokrat Haber*, March 22, 2015, <https://www.demokrathaber.org/siyaset/erdogan-dolmabahce-toplantisi-yanlisti-10-maddeye-de-karsiyim-h46542.html>

²⁰⁹ Resch, “Syria's Impact on the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey,” 10.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ *Seni Başkan Yaptırmayacağız* could be more precisely translated as “we will not let you be made president.” The translation above simply implies “we will not help” whereas the true meaning is “we will be actively resisting the effort to make you president.”

seems like a stronger explanation as there already was a trend of Kurdish voter allegiances shifting away from the AKP towards Kurdish parties, especially more recently under the HDP. This trend existed in Kurdish communities in every city but was particularly apparent in Kurdistan and it is likely that Dolmabahçe was not able to stem that tide in Erdoğan's favor. To make up the difference, Erdoğan had to turn to the nationalists, whom while he is not ideologically bound to, he falls back on quite often.²¹² It has also been said that Erdoğan wanted this agreement to include a commitment to disarmament. In his initial statement on Dolmabahçe, he expressed chagrin that his expectation for a call to disarmament was not fulfilled,²¹³ but was generally pleased with the declaration and welcomed the agreement.²¹⁴ Anonymous reports have claimed that a process of disarmament was included in the agreement but that it was kept out of the public declaration.²¹⁵ It appears that Erdoğan found this manner of disarmament not politically useful enough that he dismissed the entire process two weeks later.

After this reciprocal dismissal, the HDP campaign focused on denying Erdoğan the majority. It saw a resounding success in the June 7th, 2015 election, receiving 13% support, comfortably above the 10% electoral threshold. The “AKP's vote share fell from 50 percent in 2011 to 40 percent,” in addition to losing the parliamentary majority. Despite the AKP's completely nationalist and securitized anti-HDP campaign, the fascist MHP “raised its share of votes to 16 percent.”²¹⁶ These results led to the most diverse parliament with the highest female representation in Turkish history. This was mostly due to the HDP gaining 80 seats,²¹⁷ which made

²¹² Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 67.

²¹³ Sözcü, “Erdoğan Dolmabahçe Mutabakatı için Ne Demişti?” *Sözcü*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2016/gundem/erdogan-dolmabahce-mutabakati-icin-ne-demisti-1200821/>

²¹⁴ Sözcü, “Erdoğan Dolmabahçe Mutabakatı için Ne Demişti?” *Sözcü*.

²¹⁵ Ayşe Sayın, “Erdoğan Masayı Neden Devirdi?” *Cumhuriyet*, September 18, 2015, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/371753/Erdogan_masayi_neden_devirdi_.html

²¹⁶ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 55.

²¹⁷ Mufti, “Turkey's Choice,” 77.

it the third largest parliamentary group, leapfrogging in front of the MHP by one seat. The HDP has more seats than the MHP, despite the latter's larger vote share, because the MHP was the second or third party in many provinces while the HDP showed dominance in a smaller number of provinces where it came in first, which is better rewarded by Turkey's electoral system.

While the solution process abruptly ended with Erdoğan's repudiation of Dolmabahçe, the new powerful position of the HDP in parliament and expectations of a coalition government raised the prospect of positive change. The old system was still not fully phased out and thus Erdoğan had to rely on his parliamentary majority to act as if he was the executive president, exercising power through his loyal appointed Prime Minister Davutoğlu. With the majority gone, Erdoğan had to go through the process of giving the leader of the largest party, Davutoğlu of the AKP, the authority to form a government that could garner a parliamentary majority. Davutoğlu set out to conduct exploratory discussions with the CHP for a German-style 'grand coalition' of the supposed center-right and center-left parties, though the analogy is quite misleading. Some also floated the idea of an AKP-HDP coalition that could enact mutually agreed upon demands to solve the Kurdish question. Iraqi Kurdistan President and notable Erdoğan ally Barzani said that "at that time, I thought that the [AKP] wasn't accepting HDP to be part of the coalition government, but later I heard from the people within HDP that it was they who didn't want to be part of the coalition. I think this was a big mistake."²¹⁸ Barzani, a stranger to democratic elections, does not appreciate is the political bind of the HDP. The gains from working with the AKP were low as it could not expect to receive any democratization, women's rights, environmental policy, collective cultural rights, or other political priorities. Moreover, any deal with Erdoğan would require an agreement to support his executive presidency plan – opposition to this plan had been the crux of the HDP

²¹⁸ Mufti, "Turkey's Choice," 77.

campaign. It was impossible for HDP to make a coalition or minority government agreement with the AKP that would give a major enough concession to retain political legitimacy for the next election. The HDP was also aware that Erdoğan was constantly thinking of the next election when he could easily turn on the HDP and push it out of power.

Moreover, this discussion assumes that Erdoğan even considered a coalition with the HDP, which is not too likely. It quickly became clear that Erdoğan was not interested in parliamentary deal-making that would give even an iota of authority to another person. In his role as president, he worked to block a workable coalition and refused to give authority to the leader of the CHP to form a government after Davutoğlu could not form a coalition, likely due to explicit direction from Erdoğan. He took these steps in order to call a snap election as soon as possible. He believed he could change the results by employing even more nationalist rhetoric that he could also support with action over the coming months. To avoid a repeat of the June result, he resolved to ramp up attacks on Kurds, both physically and rhetorically. His aim was to capture more nationalist votes and even possibly push the MHP below the electoral threshold, which had happened before in recent history. The “AKP radically changed its attitude toward the Kurdish question and followed a nationalist and militarist agenda in order to secure nationalist votes.”²¹⁹

Because of these plans, the hopeful atmosphere of June dissipated quickly as the summer of 2015 became a violent time. It began “on July 20, when 32 pro-Kurdish activists heading to Kobani were killed in Suruç by an [alleged] ISIS suicide bomber. According to the PKK, not only ISIS but also the Turkish government was responsible for the Suruç attack.”²²⁰ The activists were a leftist youth group on their way to deliver toys to refugee children. Blaming the government,

²¹⁹ Özpek, “Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds,” 55.

²²⁰ Ibid.

“the PKK killed two policemen in Şanlıurfa on July 22,”²²¹ and thus began a re-escalation of the conflict punctuated by major bombing attacks in cities throughout Turkey. The brunt of the violence was once again concentrated in Kurdistan.

“Ramping up both the nationalist rhetoric and the military campaign against the PKK,”²²² paid off for Erdoğan as his party narrowly retook the majority in the snap election that he forced the country into in November 2015. While the HDP was again able to pass the 10% threshold, its influence had diminished in this one-party majority parliament. At the same time, “the PKK [was] escalating its urban combat operations.”²²³ The former’s plans had purportedly been in motion since before the election. The PKK line of reasoning was that the process was not going to deliver results that it wanted because Erdoğan did not want to make any commitments and any democratization within the Republic of Turkey was unimaginable. Thus, the PKK believed it could only achieve results through military means. It had also been further strengthened by the enhanced position of the PYD along the border: “in mid-June 2015, PYD forces captured the town of Tal Abyad from ISIS [...] [and] united the two eastern Kurdish cantons of Kobani and Jazira.” This threatened the AKP further and escalated hostilities.

The AKP’s reliance on nationalist voters, as opposed to previously reliable Kurdish voters, changed the AKP from what had been “a fundamentally post-national”²²⁴ (Sunni-Muslim or Neo-Ottoman) actor to a Turkish nationalist one. Its vision of a “new Turkey” that was challenging the Kemalist *Türk* citizenship paradigm had endeared it to Kurds but it had been abandoned and replaced by the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, a marriage of the Islamist and Turkish nationalist ideologies that had been potent on the Turkish right since the 1980s. After Erdoğan retook the

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Mufti, “Turkey’s Choice,” 77.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Karaveli, “Reconciling Statism with Freedom,” 63.

majority in November 2015 using nationalist votes, the solution process that had effectively ended with his refusal of Dolmabahçe, ended for good. With increased cooperation between the AKP and the MHP that was later formalized into an electoral pact, any progress on the Kurdish question became impossible. Unlike the *açılım*, the solution process did not suffer from as much from opposition spoiling, vague proposals, divisions within the Kurdish movement, the AKP's ineptitude or naiveté about the gravity of the issue. This second process was more a victim of the AKP's refusal of collective rights, unwillingness for systemic change or democratic reform, and Erdoğan's singular drive for creating a consolidated, unchecked presidency.

Conclusion

To understand why Turkey still faces a Kurdish question, we must understand what the question is and what previous attempts were made. Kurds in Turkey face a multifaceted problem: cultural, political, social, and economic. Kurds have a distinct culture and language, without a solution, their languages and culture are under threat. A shrinking percentage of younger Kurds speak Kurdish as their first language. Even among those still living in Kurdistan, assimilation to the nationally dominant Turkish culture and language is ongoing. Politically, the issue is Turkish denial of the existence of Kurds as a people, outside the bounds of Turkishness. This can be admitted without the independence for Kurdistan. However, multiculturalism is not acceptable to a large section of the Turkish public. Socially, Kurds are maligned: mistreated from the justice system to the employment sector. People do not want them as neighbors or in-laws. In 2019, a man and his son were murdered in a Western Turkish city for speaking Kurdish on a bus. Economically, Kurdistan is still by far the poorest and least developed region of Turkey.

After the 2009-2015 period that contained two distinct attempts at a solution, Kurds are not better off on any of these fronts. Overall, Turkey has moved from partial freedom to unfreedom. There is no toleration of any difference. Discussions of a new constitution ended when Erdoğan achieved his new executive presidency and wrested back the parliamentary majority. The leaders, MPs, mayors, and other members of the HDP have been in prison since the fall of 2016. Despite his arrest, Selahattin Demirtaş remains one of the most popular politicians in Turkey. With Turkey's invasion of Syrian Kurdistan, Kurds have once again been cast as the enemy and equated with terrorism. The PKK for its part tried, to capitalize on this and began urban guerilla warfare across Kurdistan. Its strategy did not lead to any gains, but it did cost the lives of hundreds of young Kurds. PKK fighters, as well as a radical splinter group called the TAK, brought the conflict

to the major cities of Turkey by bombing civilian targets: for the first time, the guerilla war came to the doorstep of a large part of the Turkish public.

In hindsight, the 2009-2015 period seems calm. What has followed has not been peace or reconciliation. It has been acute violence, increasing poverty, and autocracy. Immediately following the end of the solution process, Turkey had its worst years of terrorism in major cities with threats from both Kurdish groups and ISIS. It also invaded Northern Syria, first in a limited capacity, then expanding its invasion to fully taking de facto control of public services and local governance. It is unclear what the ultimate Turkish plan is for this area. The Turkish economy has weakened due to mismanagement, corruption, and a worsening political environment. As the country became poorer, the already struggling Kurdish provinces were hit the hardest. President Erdoğan finally consolidated all power, sidelining rivals within his party, purging the *Hizmet* movement from the military and state system following a coup attempt in July 2016. Turkey has become the top jailer of journalists, both total and per capita.

What is necessary for the solution are popular actors with a robust commitment to solving the Kurdish question. These actors must conduct a public campaign to arrive at a solution that will address Kurdish needs on political and cultural levels. It is simply inconceivable that any Turkish actor could accept letting Öcalan out of prison, but some demands, especially those relating to language, will have to be met. Turkey will also have to decentralize: it is still one of the most centralized states in the world despite its large population. President Erdoğan proved time and time again that while he had the power, popularity, and amenable ideological and foreign policy orientations to be such an actor, he did not have a commitment to peace. His main goal in the opening and the solution process was not peace; it was his drive for power, which always preceded peace.

When apportioning blame for the failures of these attempts, we must not forget the inherent power imbalance between the two sides. The Kurdish national movement is both politically and militarily outmatched by leaps and bounds by the Turkish state and its current master, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However much the HDP tries, its activity is at the mercy of the state: if it is dissatisfied, it can lock up popular politicians, as has been the case including co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş. The HDP can win and work the local level as much as it wants; once Erdoğan is displeased he simply throws the mayors in jail and appoints one from his party. He moves around ballot boxes to make it harder for Kurds to vote. Full towns were leveled as the government tried to battle the urban guerilla violence and they have still not recovered, with tens of thousands still internally displaced. Even when the PKK initiated urban trench warfare in 2015-2016, its power is simply a fraction of the Turkish Armed Forces with its fighter jets and tanks. The PKK's "power" is how much of a bug it can be to the giant that is the state of Turkey. Thus, when it comes to solutions, the powerful side holds more sway. The truth is that currently, Erdoğan is the state and he is not interested in peace. The reforms necessary for peace do not serve the essential goal of ensuring and prolonging his rule. Of course, the PKK has grown more confident, includes factions wishing to fight until their maximal demands are met, and it did develop an urban guerilla strategy. It is a violent terrorist group that engages in murder. However, these factions and actions within the PKK would be irrelevant without the support of the Kurdistani public. If the wildly popular demands of the Kurdish national movement were met to a large extent, public support for the PKK would melt away. The Basque case that former PKK members refer to illustrates this: once Spain became a democracy and Basques got autonomous government, people started to resent ETA for its violence and extortion and the group faded away. This is possible in Turkey but Erdoğan is unwilling to implement any cultural or political rights, least of all transition to democracy.

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