



Some Recommendations Concerning the Role Played by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Solving the PKK/Kurdish Problem

Cevdet Aşkın

January 9, 2009

This Policy Brief emphasizes the necessity for Turkey to normalize its relations with the Regional Administration in Northern Iraq in order to “eliminate” PKK. Despite the numerous and intense military operations by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) towards domestic and/or cross-border targets, PKK still preserves its operational capacity. The study does not touch upon the other factors that necessitate the normalization of relations with the Regional Administration but it contends that the Regional Administration will play a critical role for the resolution of the problem.

Turkey’s most important problem is the Kurdish problem, and it coincides with the dissolution of the PKK. What is meant here by dissolution is the disarmament of the organization. Viewing the PKK as an outcome of the Kurdish problem, the author -while cautious to stay objective- formulates the role to be played by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in bringing the organization’s activities in northern Iraq to an end, and enumerates some recommendations. The article consists of four sections; “Defining the Problem”, “Historical Evolution”, “The Situation Today”, and “Suggestions for a Resolution”.

1 - Defining the Problem

For 25 years, the Republic of Turkey has been faced with the PKK and its violent politics. The armed organization, which initially emerged as a guerilla movement with limited caliber, has by now morphed into a political entity resting on a grassroots mass base that is spread across Turkey, European countries, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Iran, Syria, and Northern Iraq. Today the issue Turkey is faced with is the elimination of this organization, whose birth and evolution is a consequence of the denial of a Kurdish problem almost to this day, which itself is a

result of the main paradigm of Turkey's "republic" system. Due to the "cause and effect" relationship between the Kurdish problem and the PKK, as well as to the present conditions, the disarmament process of the organization proves to be parallel to the solving of the Kurdish problem.

2 - Historical Evolution

The 85-year young history of the Turkish Republic could be read as a history of civil war. The manner in which Kurdish uprisings were suppressed starting with the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925, as well as the state's almost retributive investment and administrative policies in the region during the periods of non-violence, combined with the denial of the Kurdish population's existence prepared the base on which the PKK would flourish. The continuum of Kurdish uprisings began to exhibit an ideological, political and organizational unity with the attacks on the Erzurum and Şemdinli provinces by the PKK after a long interval on August 15, 1984.

The PKK, which in early 1990s aimed to establish an independent state in the predominantly Kurdish regions of Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia, was forced to seek negotiations with the Turkish Republic especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and to this end unilaterally declared ceasefire a number of times. Following the handing in of its founding leader Abdullah

Öcalan to Turkey in 1999, the PKK moved all of its forces beyond Turkey's borders on his orders. Modifying its military strategy and switching from armed struggle as a fundamental policy to a defensive position, the organization focused on the process of politicization.

Giving up the goal of independence as well, the PKK adopted the "Democratic confederacy" and "Democratic sovereignty" programs formulated by Öcalan in 2005. With this the aim was self-governance and realization of their ethnic identity by the Kurds within a structure of local administrations, while maintaining the state's unitary character.

After spending the period from 1999 to 2005 in a unilateral ceasefire, the PKK switched back to armed struggle on the grounds that Ankara did not take any steps towards solving the Kurdish problem.

In order to eradicate the threat posed by the PKK, whose preferred tactic for eliminating security forces was to use remote-controlled mines, Turkey formed an international alliance in the fall of 2007 with the aim of ending the organization's existence in Northern Iraq. Especially the United States (US), but also Iran, Iraq, Syria, and to a certain extent the European Union and the KRG in Northern Iraq lent their support. The meeting between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and US President George W. Bush on November 7th

2007 provided the critical point in this alliance. One of the outcomes of the meeting was that the US would provide Turkey with instant intelligence. Adding this advantage to their own means, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) carried out intense airborne operations against PKK targets in Northern Iraq beginning on December 16th 2007. Between 21st and 29th of February in 2008, a ground incursion took place in the Zap region, where PKK's main base was located. Throughout the spring, summer and fall of that year, military pressure was kept on PKK targets both within and outside the country.

During this process and in coordination with the TAF, Iran kept shelling the Kandil region as well.

The KRG, on the other hand, kept its silence at the military operations in Northern Iraq with the exception of the ground incursion, while maintaining a "pro dialogue and peaceful resolution" attitude and not putting much pressure on the PKK.

3 - The Situation Today

Despite the TAF's intense operations on targets both within and outside the country, the PKK maintained its central structure, chain of command, and operational capacity. While the Turkish General Staff stated in its assessment of 2008 that Northern Iraq is no longer a safe haven for the PKK, the fact that the organization was

able to hold its vitally important "10th Congress" for a full week in August showed that airborne operations and the power of intelligence have their limits.

Since it is impossible to independently verify the completely contradictory claims made by the TAF and the PKK regarding the damage caused to one another, it could be assumed that with new recruitments, the organization has maintained its usual numbers of militants, which is estimated to be 3-4 thousand.

While the year long military campaign proved Turkey's political will in the conflict, its effect on the PKK, which, having faced an entity much powerful than itself came through this period virtually intact, was that of increased self-confidence. The high-up officers of the organizations were able to closely follow the developments in Turkey and give frequent interviews and situation analyses to their own media channels.

Having identified 2009 as the year to set Öcalan free and solve the Kurdish problem, the organization's attention is now directed at İmralı. In other words, 10 years spent in İmralı's conditions has not taken away from Öcalan's authority over the organization. Through the statements that come out from his weekly meetings with his lawyers, he is at times able to set the agenda in Turkey and provide his followers with political perspective. Öcalan's agreeable attitude is striking; by now he has made numerous

offers in order to end the armed conflict and solve the Kurdish problem.

The organization thinks that unless it receives a heavy blow until local elections - scheduled for March of 2009- are held, the process for the solution of the Kurdish problem will begin. Ankara, for its part, is continuing military pressure on the PKK on the one hand, while transferring prisoners to İmralı to relieve the tension that rose at the claim that Öcalan was mistreated there, establishing the Kurdish TRT 6 channel, and announcing the establishment of Kurdish Language and Literature departments in universities on the other, thereby employing the “carrots and sticks” strategy.

4 - Suggestions for a Solution

While dubious in practical terms, considering that in theory the Kurdish problem will continue to exist even if the PKK’s military power is destroyed, it is vitally important to design a process that will result in the elimination of the organization.

In other words, a mediation effort that takes into account certain sensitivities is much needed between Ankara, which perceives steps towards the resolution of the problem while the PKK continues its military existence and attacks as “submission to terrorism” and the organization, which perceives giving up arms before the problem is solved as “surrendering.”

In present conditions, the KRG in Northern Iraq is the most suitable candidate to design and carry out this critical process to end the armed conflict.

That Öcalan has requested Jalal Talabani, the President of Iraq, to interfere for peace, is clear indication that the organization is ready for such mediation.

As for Ankara, allowing the KRG to become the “legitimate” authority to perform this function, it should:

1. Refrain from pressuring Erbil to take a stance against PKK members in Northern Iraq
2. Suspend air and ground operations and bombardment in Northern Iraq
3. Elevate the relations with Northern Iraq to an “official” position by opening a consulate in Erbil and inviting Massoud Barzani to Ankara.

If these conditions are met, it will be possible for the KRG to materialize its plan towards disarmament while taking into account Turkey’s “state” and the PKK’s “organization” sensitivities.

The successful completion of this process will enable Turkey and the KRG to overcome the mutual historic mistrust and for the parties to feel more powerful in an unstable Middle East.

Ahmet Cevdet Aşkın was born in 1959. A graduate of İTÜ Mechanical Engineering Department, Aşkın started his profession as a journalist in 1994. He has worked in Foreign News sections of different newspapers. Since the establishment of Referans Newspaper, he has been employed as the desk editor and since October 2007, he is analyzing the recent developments with respect to PKK and the Kurdish question in his column Northern Iraq Diary. He speaks English, German, French and Spanish. Cevdet Aşkın is married and has one daughter.

About GPoT

Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) was established as a research unit under the auspices of Istanbul Kultur University in 2008.

GPoT Center aims to produce innovative and distinctive policy recommendations by analyzing the contemporary trends in regional and international politics.

**The opinions and conclusion expressed herein are those of the individual author and does not necessarily reflect the views of GPoT or Istanbul Kultur University.*