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The Kurdish Factor in Turkey-Syria Relations (2012-2013)

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Abstract. The current research investigates the influence of the Kurdish factor on Turkey-Syria relations, making an emphasis on the events taken place in 2012-2013. The research aims at investigating the background of the Kurdish factor on Turkey-Syria relations, evaluating the role that Kurdish factor played/plays in the formation of the Turkish stance on the Syrian conflict, as well as composing a scientific research that can serve as a primary source for the further researches concerning both Turkey-Syria relations and the Syrian conflict.

By comparative and analytical methods of scientific research the current article promotes the following thesis: the Kurdish factor has a serious influence on the interstate relations between Turkey and Syria and it can condition the content of those relations.

Analysing the military and political situation in the northern parts of Syria (mostly inhabited by Kurds) in the context of the Syrian crisis in 2012-2013, the author shows that since July of 2012, when the Syrian governmental troops were withdrawn from the above mentioned places, which then consequently passed under the control of the Syrian Kurdish PYD forces, Turkey is highly anxious about the self-activity of the Syrian Kurds and tries to prevent the creation of a statelike unit in the north of Syria by means of practicing the checks and balances mechanism on micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

1. Introduction

Throughout the modern history, the national and political aspirations of the Kurdish people and their actions stipulated by those goals have been one of the influential factors in the Middle East geopolitics. According to the different statistical data, there are approximately 12-20 million Kurds (on average) residing in The Republic of Turkey. They have waged an organized armed campaign for an autonomy/independence in the current territory of The Republic of Turkey and since the 1980s that struggle entered a new historical phase. The Syrian conflict politically activated the Syrian Kurds. According to different statistical data Kurds comprise some 9-12% of the Syrian population and overwhelmingly reside in the northern and northeastern parts of Syria, adjacent to The Republic of Turkey. In 2006 the Syrian Kurdish parties even claimed that over 2.5 million Kurds reside in Syria [1]. A significant part of the Syrian Kurds has moved to Aleppo, Damascus, Latakia to overcome economic hardship they had been facing in the north [2].

2. Historical Background

2.1 Turkey-Syria Relations: conflict and cooperation

Because of the colonial past, as well as disputes between the two sides, interstate relations of Turkey

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and Syria, as relations between former dominant/dominated nations, have always been tense. Since 1938, the territorial dispute over the former Ottoman sanjak of Alexandretta, has always been a major cause of conflict between the two states. In 1939, following the expiration of the French mandate over Alexandretta, Hatay was proclaimed an independent state. Turkey managed to create an ethnic Turkish majority over the Alevi Arabs and the Armenians in Alexandretta, who together formed the majority of the sanjak, step by step deporting these ethnic groups from the sanjak and replacing them by Turks. Due to this ethnic expansion, the ethnographic composition of the region was changed, which led to the accession of Hatay to The Republic of Turkey under the 1939 referendum results. In the Hatay case Turkey was obviously supported by France: the aim of the latter was preventing Turkey from joining the alliance of the Axis [3]. Syria rejected to recognize the annexation of the province and continued printing maps depicting the province in its borders [4,5].

One of the other major problems between the two countries is water disputes. As a part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project, Turkey has built several dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers flowing through Turkey, Syria and Iraq. The construction of dams entailed less amounts of water flowing to Syria, as well as Iraq [6]. Scholars claim that depriving the Arabs of water resources is in thorough correspondence with the Turkish state ideology derived from the hatred towards the Arabs. The quintessence of that ideology is the national slogan *"How happy is the one who says "I am Turkish""* which itself indicates the subordinate position of non-Turks [3].

These issues mainly created a confrontational basis in Turkey-Syria relations which caused Syria's support to the Turkish Kurds in their anti-Turkish struggle. Moreover, since May 1979 Syria provided shelter for some of prominent leaders of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*PKK*), including Abdullah Öcalan. In October 1998 Turkey concentrated armed forces of approximately 80,000 men on the Syrian border, threatening a war unless Syria extradited Öcalan and closed PKK camps on its territory. The Syrian then-president Hafez al-Assad who was trying to avoid a large-scale war against Turkey (*i.e.* against NATO), deported Öcalan from the country, however without extraditing him to Turkey [7].

Since then, the bilateral relations underwent a thawing period. The Adana Agreement signed on 20 October, 1998 was a substantial turning point in the bilateral relations. Under the first article of the agreement Syria was obliged to prevent any kind of activity from its territory that could harm the Turkish security [8]. The agreement stipulated a joint campaign against the PKK activities, thus creating favorable conditions for the further development of the bilateral relations in different fields [9]. Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that under the provision of the second article of the agreement, Syria recognized PKK as a terrorist organization.

Since 2002, when the Islamic "Justice and Development Party" came to power in Turkey, proclaiming the principles of the co-existence of Islamic postulates and democracy, as well as of terminating problems with neighbors, a new platform was created for the development of the bilateral relations. During the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 Turkey declined to provide its territory as a bridge-head to the U.S. armed forces for infiltrating into northern Iraq. Such an independent step by Turkey, as a NATO member, made it more respectable in the Arab world creating an image of a country capable of making sovereign decisions [10]. During the above-mentioned period some political and economic reasons made the Turkey-Syria rapprochement possible: *a)* as a result of the American military operations in Iraq, Iraqi and Iranian markets started weakening and were respectively replaced by Turkish and Syrian markets for each other [11]; *b)* in consequence of the American invasion of Iraq, a Kurdish federal entity was created in northern Iraq. In this context, it is remarkable that the growth of the Kurdish military and political potential in the Middle East is anyhow in contradiction with the national interests of Iraq, Iran and Syria. Thus, it can generate a collaborative atmosphere in the relations of these countries.

Coming to conclusion, it is to be stated, that the Kurdish threat along with the regional instability made a ground for the multifaceted cooperation of Turkey and Syria. Since 2004, during the

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presidency of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Free Trade Agreement was signed between the two countries, visa regime was bilaterally abolished, joint energetic projects, as well as military exercises were launched [12,13].

2.2 Kurds and the Kurdish issue in Syria

Kurds have constantly been subject to discrimination in Syria, devoid of some basic rights, such as civil rights, right to property; marriage; education etc. For years the Syrian authorities had adopted a policy of arabizing the Kurds and the Kurdish toponyms. In March 1986, when thousands of Kurds tried to celebrate Newruz in the Kurdish part of Damascus, the Syrian authorities strictly warned that using the Kurdish dress as well as the Kurdish flag was banned. As a result of police firing on the crowd, one Kurd was dead. His funeral in Qamishli was attended by approximately 40,000 Kurdish compatriots [14]. In 2004, after an incident in a football stadium between Kurd and Arab supporters in Qamishli, 65 Kurds were reportedly dead with more than 100 Kurds being either injured or constrained and tortured [15].

In the context of the "Arab Spring", during the first phase of the Syrian civil war, the rebel forces attained a partial success in the northern part of Syria. This compelled the government to grant citizenship to more than 200,000 apatride Kurds, thus aiming at preventing the Kurds from joining the armed opposition. The government mainly succeeded in it [16]. The loyal stance of the Syrian Kurds was also ideologically conditioned by the fact that the Syrian armed opposition was comprehensively backed by Turkey [17]. Kurds became eager to exterminate the segregated and outcast state they had lived in during the presidency of the ruling al-Assad family. Moreover, the Syrian Kurdish political circles were nursing the hope to shape a decentralized autonomy, like the Kurds in northern Iraq, as soon as the war ended [18].

The increased activity of the Syrian Kurds, and the activation of the Syrian Kurdish factor in general, came after the governmental armed forces deliberately withdrew from the northern and northeastern regions of Syria (except for Qamishli) [19], which allowed the Kurds to strengthen their own political and military positions in those regions. [20].

Since then, the first prominent step towards the political unification of the Syrian Kurds, which led to the further increasing of their strategic role, was taken on July 12, 2012 in Erbil. Under the auspices of the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (*IKR*) Masoud Barzani, an agreement was signed between the two major Syrian Kurdish fractions – Democratic Union Party (*PYD*) and Kurdish National Council (*KNC*) [21]. As a result of the agreement, the Kurdish Supreme Committee (*KSC*) was established, having an equal representation of both sides. It is worth mentioning that before the agreement, during the military and political vacuumization in the Kurdish regions of Syria, PYD was refusing any kind of cooperation with KNC. That was sometimes leading to sporadic fighting between the two sides. However, Barzani managed to pressure and convince the two sides of the importance of the Kurdish solidarity. Thus, the major part of the Syrian Kurds, disillusioned with the Assad's unaccomplished promises, gathered around Barzani [22]. Popular Protection Units (*YPG*), created earlier in 2004 after the Qamishli riots, became the armed wing of the KSC [23]. An agreement was made that cities subdued under the Kurdish control would later be governed on a joint basis, till there would be a chance to conduct elections.

It is not of the least importance to state, that the Erbil Agreement did not ultimately iron out the differences between the Kurdish parties, and still disagreement and conflict erupted [24]. One of the causes of these internal conflicts are the fact that PYD is the only armed group among the Kurdish parties [25,26], and is regarded to be the Syrian wing of PKK.

3. The policy of Turkey during the new phase of the Syrian Kurdish issue

As we see, jihadist attacks helped PYD unite with its former Kurdish rivals. According to Michael D. Weiss, a columnist for *"NOW Lebanon"*, this was al-Qaeda's greatest strategic blunder [27].

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Moreover, the Syrian Kurdish issue was internationalizing, which was *"Turkey's worst nightmare"* as described by a veteran Kurdish activist and writer Fehim Isik [27]. The point is that Turkey, as a legal successor of a former empire, has a "sensitive state perception" of any action taking effect around its borders, especially when it is associated with the Kurdish factor. The latter is not only of foreign and regional significance for Turkey, but also carries some domestic impact. That is the reason that shortly after the Erbil Agreement, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu hurried to IKR with a general intention to cut the rise of the Kurdish potential in the region.

That visit took place on August 1, 2012 [28]. The next day FM paid a visit to the city of Kirkuk. Since the visit of Tevfik Rüştü in 1937, it was the first visit by a Turkish top official to Kirkuk, which witnessed the relevance Turkey gave to IKR in the Kurdish conflict case [29,30].

During the four-hour meeting with Barzani, Davutoğlu reiterated Turkey's demands. Giving a proper support to the Syrian armed opposition and not giving support to PYD were the essential parts of those demands. Davutoğlu aired Turkey's concerns, that PYD is the Syrian wing of the Turkey-based PKK [31,28]. In his turn, Barzani condemned the terrorism in Syria, however reaffirmed that he protects the Kurds all over the world, and the Syrian Kurds are not an exception [31]. After the meeting a joint statement was made, which encompassed mutually acceptable points regarding the territorial integrity and national solidarity of Syria, as well as proposing obligations for the two sides not to support the Syrian terrorists. From one side, Turkey succeeded in including the following part in the statement: *"… also emphasized* (the two sides – E.E.) *that any attempt to exploit the power vacuum by any violent group or organization will be considered as a common threat, which should be jointly addressed"* [32]. On the other side, however, it was for Barzani's benefit, that there was neither any indirect hint nor a direct reference to the Syrian Kurdish forces and their activities.

It is very important to mention that before heading for Erbil, Davutoğlu had granted a comprehensive TV interview to "Kanal 24" regarding the Syrian issue. He had asserted that in accordance with the idea of the free will of the Syrian people, free elections were to be held there, as it was done in Tunis, Egypt and Libya [33,34]. As for Syrian Kurds, Davutoğlu had confirmed that after the restoration of the sound state system in Syria, Turkey *"would support the Syrian Kurds to retain the constitutionally guaranteed rights"*. However, amidst this seemingly amicable and pacifist statements, Turkish FM did not hesitate to reiterate Turkey's stance, that it would not be in two minds about striking Syria unless it stopped backing secessionist Kurds in Turkey – PKK [35].

Thus, it can be concluded, that after the start of the Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria, two major priorities were becoming vital for Turkey over the Syrian issue – keeping Syria territorially integral and bringing the weakened country under the Turkish influence in the future. During the interview, Davutoğlu expanded on the above mentioned thesis by saying: *"Currently Turkey is the main actor settling the Syrian fate. As for the others (other countries – E.E.), then Syria is merely a diplomatic cause. In contrast with them, Turkey is Syria's neighbor, and like two timber houses standing alongside, the fire inflamed in the first one, may spread into the second one too"* [34]. Thus, it will be right to postulate that Turkey regards the strengthening Kurdish factor as the main *"fire"* in the Syrian issue.

During the autumn of 2012 and beginning of 2013 severe fighting took place between the Kurdish forces and jihadist extremist groups ("Al-Nusra Front", "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant") in the northern parts of Syria, mainly in Aleppo and borderline town of Ras al-Ayn. The essential goal was obtaining control over those oil-rich areas [36]. Scrutinizing the interests and motivations of the fighting sides, we are to state that there is a fundamental discrepancy between the very goals the sides fight for. Kurds are fighting for a substantial living space for their future state. That area is supposed to border with Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey; contain Kurdish-populated areas of Syria, including oil-rich ones. This is an objective of long-term prospect in contrast with the different jihadist groups, being led either by religious ideology or narrow clan interests. Moreover, the jihadist groups are being

sponsored by different countries of the West and the Islamic World and this factor also stipulates the disagreement between those groups.

Since July 16, 2013 the Kurdish parties attained an essential success in the Ras al-Ayn front which is of primary importance in the north. It stabilized the Syrian Kurds positions in terms of both military and geostrategic aspects.

In July 23, Barzani convened a Kurdish national conference in Erbil. The conference was later characterized by journalists as being overwhelmed with the spirit of pan-Kurdish solidarity and unity. Barzani even "prayed Allah for Öcalan to get free" [37]. During the conference in Erbil, Turkish representatives invited PYD leader Salih Muslim to Ankara. The Turkish media signed that the initiative was launched by Turkish PM Erdoğan's order given to FM Davutoğlu and National Intelligence Organization's undersecretary Hakan Fidan to *"meet the PYD leaders in person, express their (Republic of Turkey – E.E.) respect, negotiate with them, learn about their concerns"* [38]. Subsequently, during the visit, the Turkish authorities made their three main demands to Muslim – not supporting the Syrian governmental forces; not threatening the Turkish national interests; not taking a state-building step until a pan-Syrian parliament was convoked [39].

Muslim's visit to Ankara prompted the Western and Turkish think-tanks and analysts to develop the idea that Turkey had made a so-called U-turn in the Kurdish issue. They were explaining it as a result of Kurdish recent military success as well as Turkey-Turkish Kurds rapprochement, taken place due to the ceasefire with PKK in March 2013 [40,26]. One more important reason was also being circulated, explaining Muslim's visit as an endeavor by Turkey to keep PYD controllable under the Turkish observation. Thus, Turkey was trying to take PYD away from the Barzani protectorate, igniting them to fight against Assad. Meanwhile, they were pledging to guarantee their constitutional rights in the post-Assad Syria. Besides this, there was yet another crucial point explaining the Turkish seeming U-turn. That was the geostrategic dilemma Turkey faced in late summer, 2013: to have a border region with Syria either under the extremists' rule or under the Kurdish de-facto autonomy? The Western researchers generally concluded that Turkey had opted for Kurds [41]. However, our research comes to prove that the quintessence of the Turkish policy was comprised of protecting the Syrian territorial integrity, as well as maintaining the balance of power between the confronting sides. The system of the balance of power is three-level: balance between the Arabs and the Kurds of Syria at micro-level; balance between Turkey, Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran at meso-level; balance between Turkey, Syria, USA, Iran, Russia and China at macro-level. The Turkish Syrian Kurdish policy was designated to make the country a balance keeping power at the all three levels. That was the reason that Ankara decided to establish semi-official ties with the PYD leader Salih Muslim. The latter, by the way, has graduated in Turkey, thus PYD-Turkey relations theoretically could also undermine the reputation of PYD among the Syrian Kurds.

Turkey activated its Syrian policy in the context of possible US strikes against the Syrian governmental military objects, and seemingly had an intention to occupy the north of Syria in case of direct ground attack [42]. The protraction of the US invasion and ultimately the Russia-Iran-USA agreement on the destruction of the Syrian chemical stocks appreciably changed the logic of the Turkish policy making it more moderate and more flexible.

First and foremost, The Republic of Turkey officially hailed the Russian-US agreement and wished it would not remain on paper [43]. Secondly, Turkey started to draw the attention of the international actors to the massacres of the Syrian civilians, marking that it is a source of national bother for Turkey [44,45]. And thirdly, Turkey began to take measures to maintain its own security. The point is that since September, the south of Turkey was turbulent because of the emergence of different suspicious groups, being systematically revealed and neutralized. For instance, the Turkish police stopped a car on September 21 in the city of Malatya and discovered missile parts that contained a form of liquid. The chemical hazard signs on the container immediately alarmed the police who then arrested one Syrian and two Turkish nationals and asked for help from the army to

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identify the nature of the liquid [46,47]. Again on the same day, 21 September, the police station in Ankara was attacked by three unknown men [48]. Consequently, Turkey started building a separating wall on the Syrian border, trying to hinder the entrance of immigrants and terrorists to the country [49]. At the same time, on 3 October, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey prolonged the mandate of the government to dispatch the national armed forces to the foreign countries with the possibility of conducting military operations (in Turkish - *"Suriye Tezkeresi"*) [50].

Touching on the Syrian Kurdish issue, Turkish officials continued urging PYD to side with the anti-Assad forces and not to create a separate state-like unit before the pan-Syrian parliament was convoked. Meanwhile, Ankara made new steps aimed at undermining the PYD's authority. During an interview in late October, FM Ahmet Davutoğlu made a remark that PYD could hardly regard itself as the single power representing the Syrian Kurds, moreover *"recently some groups, concerned about the pressure by PYD, came and resorted to us for support"* [51]. Thus, this is another eloquent testimony of our above mentioned thesis that Turkey used relations with PYD to deteriorate the latter's reputation among the Syrian Kurds. The essential aim was to divide the Syrian Kurds in terms of political unity.

4. Summary

Summarizing the current research, it is to be concluded that: *a)* since the independence of the two states, the Kurdish factor has had an essential influence on Turkey-Syria relations which can directly affect the bilateral relations. In 1998, the anti-Kurdish struggle basis made an opportunity for a thaw in relations between Turkey and Syria. On the contrary, the *"Kurdish fire"* caused enmity in the bilateral relations during the Syrian crisis; *b)* the struggle and political movements of the Syrian Kurds are declared to be issues of Turkish national security in both internal policy and foreign affairs; *c)* in the context of the Syrian crisis Turkey is challenged by a newly emerging issue, connected with the reorganization of a new balance of power in the Near East in accordance with its own interests. At micro- and meso-levels the Syrian Kurdish issue has a huge impact on that balance; *d)* Turkey anticipates controllable and predictable Syria in the postwar period. For that purpose Turkey will either ally with the Syrian authorities or will make a military invasion to the north of Syria, declaring the purpose of protecting the struggle of the Syrian Kurds (less possibly); *e)* regardless of which option from *"d)"* comes true, in the far future the creation of either autonomous or independent Western Kurdistan (in Kurdish - *Rojava*) is contrary to the Turkish national interests.

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