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### ***Kurdish Separatism in Turkey: The PKK's Changing Strategy***

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**Abstract:**

The current peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has come about following a lengthy process of political change not only within the Turkish state but within the PKK itself. The group has moved from a strategy based on military strength, attacks on military and civilian targets both within Turkey and abroad, foreign support and various other illegal activities to a more political approach. Through analysis of speeches of PKK leaders and figures, Turkish politicians, media reports, statistics and recent events, this paper shows the actions taken by the PKK and its leader with this goal of becoming a political partner. Additionally, the paper analyzes the results of the change of strategy, from the 'Oslo process' to the stalled Kurdish or Democratic Initiative of the Erdoğan government, today's negotiations and the difficulties which lie ahead.

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## **Introduction**

The capture of the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in 1999 was considered by many in Turkey to be a serious blow to the organization. Since the early 1980s the PKK had engaged the Turkish state in a bloody

conflict. Over the years the conflict has led to the deaths of more than 30,000 people: PKK militants, Turkish security forces personnel and civilians. A General Election took place shortly following the operation in 1999 and brought parties of both the left and the right into power. A coalition government was formed and a platform which focused on European Union accession and reform was adopted. Over the next few years this government would take moves to abolish the death penalty, allow by law for the first time broadcasts in ‘mother tongue’ languages such as Kurdish and begin to crack down on torture within the security services – something which had been a stain on EU aspirant Turkey’s record. Many may have thought that Turkey was turning a corner in its long running battle against terrorism and the EU perspective gave reason to believe that the Kurdish issue could be solved through legal and political reforms. The lifting of a state of emergency – known by its Turkish acronym OHAL (Olağanüstü Hâl) – was seen as a watershed moment on the path to normalization. There was a heightened sense of international support for counter-terrorism measures following 9/11 and a rapprochement with Syria which had backed the PKK prior to Öcalan's capture also gave rise to hopes that the PKK could finally be defeated.

According to Turkish Armed Forces sources, 13 years later the number of PKK militants is roughly the same as it was in the 1990s . A PKK ceasefire, declared in 1999 was portrayed as a sign of weakness by the Turkish government and the PKK itself attempted to rebrand itself as an organization seeking autonomy and cultural rights as opposed to its previous goal of full independence. The declaration of the ceasefire, the announcement of the formation of the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) and Kongra-Gel were rejected by the Turkish government which saw such steps as

propaganda. Since 2005, the organization under its original name of the PKK, has become increasingly active in the field through a heightened frequency of attacks – particularly on security targets. At the same time, the PKK is involved in politics through the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which has circumvented an electoral barrage to become the fourth largest party in the Grand National Assembly. In the 14 months before August 2012, 700 people have died, making the latest spate of violence the most intense in the past 13 years. The organization has also returned to a number of tactics from the 1990s including abductions. In August PKK members abducted a Kurdish deputy from the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the province of Tunceli. Abductions of teachers, normally for a number of hours for propaganda purposes, have also occurred.

### **Changed Political Landscape**

The election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to government in 2002 as a single ruling party and its subsequent strengthening of electoral support in the two general elections since have drastically altered the political map in Turkey. In the last election, the party was able to garner 49.9% of the vote – an extremely impressive figure for a third term election. The party's popularity in the mostly Kurdish South East of the country has forced the PKK into making various changes to its strategy. The organization over the past 10 years has placed more emphasis on maintaining a sense of hegemony in its heartlands. In the 1990s the group had to contend with a Kurdish Hezbollah which carried out brutal attacks on PKK members with alleged tacit approval from elements deep within the Turkish state. Today the organization has to compete with AKP

politicians who promise well-funded and well run local municipalities, economic development and incremental democratic reforms. In the 2004 local elections the AKP candidate for mayor in the city of Diyarbakir – the most populated and traditionally radical of the Kurdish cities – garnered 35.2% of the vote while the party was able to gain an even more impressive 40% of the vote in the 2007 general elections. It was in the 2007 elections that the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), widely believed by many to be the political wing of the PKK, circumvented the electoral barrage of 10% for representation in parliament by running its candidates as independents. The results were mixed but allowed Kurdish politicians to gain a foothold in parliament for the first time since 1994. In that year several deputies, among them Leyla Zana who had dared to speak Kurdish during an oath taking ceremony and wore a headband featuring the colors of the PKK flag, had their immunity stripped and were sent to prison for sedition. The DTP was closed by judicial ruling, accused of threatening Turkey's territorial unity. The party then reappeared quickly under the guise of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

### **Ideology and the BDP**

Today the PKK appears to be implementing a more multi-faceted and political campaign than ever before. Öcalan himself has largely abandoned the Marxist ideology which underpinned the PKK since its formation while placing a renewed emphasis on feminism, ecology and above all, 'democratic autonomy'. Violent attacks on Turkish security forces such as the killing of 10 Turkish soldiers in the province of Şırnak on 2 September 2012 have been coupled with a hunger strike attracting widespread media and political

attention. Incidents such as the ‘Uludere airstrike’ which killed at least 34 Kurdish civilians involved in smuggling and mistaken for PKK militants by the Turkish military heightened a sense of victimhood which the PKK has been able to exploit through its media (ROJ TV, Gündem newspaper). Many of the victims were from ‘village guard’ families. Village guards are Kurdish guards in rural areas armed by the state in order to ‘protect’ their own villages but have found themselves on the frontline in battles with the PKK. The PKK has accused the village guard system of being a plot to divide the Kurdish people and following the Uludere incident, it was notable that the coffins of village guard victims were mostly wrapped in PKK flags.

Although it is difficult to prove an ‘organic link’ between the PKK and the BDP, the two share common platforms. The BDP through the PKK linked ROJ TV network and by using its presence in parliament has been able to run an effective political strategy targeting general public opinion and raising issues in the political arena. The presence of PKK supporters on the political scene has allowed the PKK to tighten its stranglehold on its heartlands while also extending its base through the provision of improved municipal services. The BDP has used its electoral successes to push the point that it is the voice of Kurds in the south east and is also the go-between for the government and Abdullah Öcalan. Municipal vehicles are often used to transfer militants’ bodies following clashes with the Turkish army. Meetings between BDP members and the families of PKK militants are common knowledge. ROJ TV and other media services function as a common platform to coordinate protest and direct action activities between PKK elements, BDP members and supporters in the various regions. Such actions include boycotts, sit ins, the closing of stores and organization of politically themed rallies and

concerts. ROJ TV itself was fined in Denmark after a court case found evidence of links between the channel and the PKK.

### **Response to the 'Democratic Initiative'**

Despite losing some electoral support in the region following the 2009 local elections, the AKP government has still attempted to cease the initiative on the Kurdish issue by promoting a 'Democratic Initiative'. The Democratic Initiative, sometimes known as the 'Kurdish Initiative' aimed to end the 'terrorism problem' in Turkey. This was to be achieved through a program of democratic reforms through new legislation, regulation and constitutional amendments. The PKK branded such an initiative a ploy to win more votes and when an agreement was reached to allow a number of PKK militants to return to Turkey through the Harbur border crossing with Iraq as part of a limited amnesty, the crossing of the militants turned into a celebratory show of force reminiscent of a parade. The backlash in the media and public which ensued forced the government to backtrack. The PKK has notably added religion to its strategy. So-called 'civil Friday prayers' - performed on the streets with Kurdish 'imams' not recognized by the state have been supplemented with live broadcasts of religious services with Kurdish language content on ROJ TV. Altan Tan, a former Islamist deputy for the Refah Party in the early 1990s became a deputy for the BDP in the previous elections and this year announced that the BDP would be organizing the first Kurdistan Islamic Conference in which scholars would be invited from several countries to discuss the role of Islam in Kurdish life. This is not just a reaction to the electoral threat of the AKP but also to the intense competition for

young people that the PKK faces not just in Kurdish cities but also on university campuses. The 'cemaat' of Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic network which currently packs much social and economic punch in the country is trying to increase its presence in universities with a high percentage of Kurdish youth. It has also just launched a Kurdish language television station, Turkey's first private one, Dünya TV. The government is also aiming to foster more unity through its conservative program which includes the introduction of optional Qur'an courses in schools and the broadcast of much religious material on the Kurdish language public broadcaster TRT 6.

Such adoption of religious rhetoric is not only aimed at competing with the moderately Islamist government and its allies. Kurdish Hezbollah has traditionally been the PKK's main competitor in the region and although it has been significantly weakened in its ability to carry out acts of terrorism, the group has funneled its efforts into competing with the PKK through a network of NGOs and charities. It can be argued that Hezbollah has adopted this approach in line with the AKP's strength in the country as an Islamic-rooted movement. The Gülen movement, backed by Fethullah Gülen, also has a strong presence in the region particularly in the field of education. Its close ties to both the government and more nationalist Turkish elements harm its ability to expand much further. It is for this reason that Hezbollah backed charities and NGOs are seen by many as the only alternative with a distinctly Kurdish flavor. A show of force in Diyarbakir under the guise of celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday on 18 April 2010 attracted at least 100,000 supporters from across the region. Hezbollah backed NGOs focus their efforts on the poverty stricken rural masses who have moved to slums in the cities

whereas the Gülen ‘cemaat’ focuses on education, social activities and trade, although with a distinctly more conservative flavour than in the west of the country.

### **The KCK arrests and impact of hunger strikes**

There appears to be some overlap between the activities of the PKK, BDP municipalities and a number of NGOs who operate with the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK). In Turkish court documents, the KCK appears to be an umbrella organization based on the PKK’s Kongra-Gel declarations of democratic confederalism which brings together the PKK, PJAN in Iran, the PYD in Syria as armed wings of a state like structure. The Turkish government saw this as an attempt to form a parallel state within Turkey and trials of alleged members are on-going with a number of verdicts sentencing members to prison. The case against the KCK led to some suspects demanding the right to defend themselves using Kurdish in court, initially denied. This in turn sparked a number of hunger strikes by prisoners which eventually grew to several hundred joined by ordinary citizens, political activists and a number of high ranking BDP politicians . The hunger strike dominated the media and the political agenda for weeks. The government stated it would change the law allowing defendants to use their own language in court and on the sixty eighth day of the strike Öcalan himself called on the strikers to end their protest, which they promptly did. The ability to force the government’s hand in changing the law to grant further rights alongside Öcalan's show of authority in ordering the strikes off resulted in a concrete victory for the PKK. The government for its part was able to claim that it acted in order to ensure that there were no deaths.

Indeed Öcalan's position at the top appears to be secure despite occasional internal skirmishes within the organization. Although the BDP insists that it is the voice of many Kurds, it often pronounces that the only path to a solution goes through İmralı – the island on which Öcalan is imprisoned. The fact that the government negotiated with the PKK in Oslo under the supervision of the British government was also seen as something of a victory in the PKK's political strategy which it continues today . It can be argued that the Turkish government believed that by engaging Öcalan they may have been able to stir up divisions within the organization and eventually break it up, but this has not materialized. Media reports of internal splits within the organization have increased markedly in recent years. In 2011 it was reported that a command given by a Syrian PKK member Fehman Huseyin to fight Turkish forces in the Cukurca valley led to the death of hundreds of PKK members and led to divisions within the organization. Despite such reports there is little concrete evidence of a deeper split between top figures.

### **Regional context**

The PKK's strategy with regards to external support and relations with Syria and Iran is also changing. The Turkish government relied on the Turkish-Iranian-Syrian front against the PKK which emerged following the rapprochement with Syria and increasingly cordial relations with Iran following the election of the AKP government. Iran appeared to target PKK backed PJAK rebels in its own country while Syria also had to deal with its own Kurdish issue. The PKK continues to mostly operate out of bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. The

Turkish government enjoys an increasingly close relationship with the autonomous region and Turkey is its number one trade partner, however the administration there is reluctant to act against the PKK for fear of starting a Kurd on Kurd war. Turkey often carries out airstrikes on PKK targets in the region which also draws the ire of the Baghdad government which sees such operations as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Iraqi Kurdistan is not logistically supportive of the PKK but is somewhat tolerant of its presence within its borders; most of the PKK's arms still originate from Russia according to intelligence reports.

With the Syrian regime on the brink of collapse, Kurds in the country have been able to focus more on their own aspirations some say with the tacit support of a Syrian government angry at Turkey's position on the internal conflict. Indeed, the Turkish government itself has pointed the finger at Syrian intelligence services in a number of recent attacks in the country. Öcalan posters have been unfurled in Kurdish areas, with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a party connected to the PKK, having taken over civilian administration in certain areas with little opposition. This has forced Turkey to change its tactics when dealing with the imploding Syrian situation. It can be argued that Turkey's focus is less on the Syrian conflict and more about preventing the emergence of an autonomous PKK friendly Kurdish region within the country. With an increasingly close relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan leadership along with the uncertain situation in Iran, it appears that the PKK is viewing the crisis in Syria as an opportunity to not only revive its bases there but also to directly involve itself once more in local Kurdish politics . The PYD has accused the recently formed coalition of opposition groups in Syria as being a 'proxy of Turkey and Qatar' and has refused to

participate. Although the Kurdish National Council seeks to include all Kurdish political parties in Syria, tensions between it and the PYD have been reported – the Kurdish National Council is backed by Iraqi Kurdistan leader Mesoud Barzani.

## **Competitors**

In short, the changes seen in the PKK's strategy point towards the wish to fulfill several key aims. Chief amongst these is attaining some form of hegemony in the south east. Islamist terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah are militarily much less active and this has given the PKK free reign to enforce a level of control and coercion in Kurdish populated areas. The PKK promotes various boycotts, the closing of businesses in Kurdish areas and the organization of mass events. It is facing stiff competition from both Turkish origin Islamist networks such as the Gülen movement, but also from Hezbollah in the form of its charities and NGOs. The PKK's uses violence, manipulation of current events and aggressive utilization of its media organs to gain an advantage. However, more time is needed to evaluate its recent co-opting of religious themes both through various protests and staged events in Kurdish cities and whether this will be effective in the battle for hearts and minds in the region. The hunger strike was a watershed moment for the use of mass protest in an ultimately successful attempt to influence the agenda and force the government's hand on an important issue.

The BDP, on the other hand, has moved from political boycotts and outright agitation to a much more proactive and organized force. Realizing that it faces a threat from the potential of better-funded and connected AKP municipalities in the South East, its local

mayors have embarked on programs of infrastructure building and provision of improved services while at the same time pushing a distinctly Kurdish nationalist agenda. They do so through the organization of cultural events such as festivals and conferences, as well as through the organization of local, municipality backed (and therefore state funded) branches of education centers, women's social centers and similar activities for youth. The similarity between the alleged structure of the KCK organization and the activities of BDP municipalities is noteworthy. The move from a military strategy and agitation to a more political and social strategy appears to be paying off with Kurdish rights never far from the national agenda and increased electoral strength in the region. At the same time, the PKK's refusal to disband its armed wing allows it to carry out periodic acts of violence which it believes strengthen its hand in any negotiations with Ankara. In a speech in the French city of Marseilles in December 2012, the chairman of KONGRA-GEL Remzi Kartal referred to hunger strikers as 'taking on Ocalan's views as their own'. He stated that it was impossible for there to be peace without Ocalan's freedom and that the 'only road' is negotiations. It remains to be seen if the PKK's strategy will eventually lead to more meaningful negotiations.

### **The Peace Process**

As of March 2013, the Turkish government has been actively involved in negotiations with Öcalan, the PKK and the BDP as part of a new peace process for a number of months. As part of this peace process, teams of BDP politicians have been allowed to visit Öcalan, the government has made more concrete announcements of its intentions

and has sought support from the media and other political leaders. There are two key points which differentiate this peace process from any previous effort through negotiations. The first is that this time around, the government is attempting to act in a more transparent manner, leading to great discussion among politicians and within the media. The second is that the BDP is now much more intimately involved, while Öcalan retains his leader status. Indeed, in an interview with Habertürk on 18 March 2013, former Minister for Culture & Tourism, Ertuğrul Günay, appeared to criticize the fact that Öcalan had been elevated to the status of political figure, stating that he would prefer a solution reached with Kurdish politicians in parliament without the involvement of Öcalan. It seems that the AKP government led by Erdoğan is determined to see the negotiations through and that to this aim, the PKK's change of strategy to a more overtly political one has been a success so far. The release of the hostages led Turkey's Deputy PM Beşir Atalay to refer to the event as 'a gesture of goodwill' adding that the 'peace process was going just fine'.

During 'Newroz' celebrations in Diyarbakir this year, a statement from Öcalan on 21 March 2013 was read out to a crowd of hundreds of thousands in both Kurdish and Turkish. The speech had been hotly anticipated and was broadcast live by all major Turkish news networks. In the statement, Öcalan called for a ceasefire and a 'new era of politics and not guns'. He urged PKK militants to withdraw from Turkey. This was a watershed moment in the conflict and the response of PM Erdoğan was to cautiously welcome the statement, insisting that the Turkish government would not carry out any security operations against withdrawing militants. The peace process and new ceasefire will still be a difficult path, with the PM insisting that militants leave without arms while

the PKK states that such a move is not on its agenda, but it is indisputable that the PKK has now become a political force in Turkey, in line with its strategic ambitions over the past year.