

Erdogan, the Kurds, and the Turkish Elections: What Next?

Prof. Ofra Bengio, Senior Research Associate, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University | No. 1735 | June 6, 2023

The general elections in Turkey in May 2023 once again confronted the Turkish regime with the Kurdish problem. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan regards the three parts of Kurdistan (excluding the one located within Iran) as a Turkish “Lebensraum,” reflecting his expansionist neo-Ottomanist tendencies as well as the general threat perception regarding the Kurds. While in the recent election campaign Erdogan managed to maneuver and prevent the Kurdish party from tipping the scale – which thereby decided the elections in his favor – the Kurds once again failed to read the map correctly, and are likely to pay the price.

Erdogan’s Strategy

In his approach toward the Kurdish issue, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has demonstrated initiative and versatility, displaying openness on the one hand and an iron fist on the other. Since he regards the Kurdish region as a borderless sphere, his actions extend beyond Turkey’s borders. In his view, there is a synergy between all parts, which function as “communicating vessels,” and should be treated accordingly. This approach has produced three integrated strategies that vary according to threat perception or emerging opportunities:

- A peace process with the Kurds in Turkey, that became an all-out war in 2016.
- Soft power in Iraqi Kurdistan, which has evolved over time into a strategic bond, with mutual trade reaching an annual average of \$14 billion.
- Military involvement in Syrian Kurdistan, which began in 2016 and has continued since.

During the first thirteen years of his rule, Erdogan pursued a conciliatory policy toward the Kurds in Turkey (who constitute about 20 percent of the population), which included the launch of a peace process with the Kurdish leadership, including with the PKK guerilla movement. What prompted this initial policy, and what led him to change course and subsequently strike the Kurds with an iron fist? Erdogan's initial conciliatory policy had five primary motives. The first, and the most important, was his desire to distance the military from the political scene: in order to weaken the military, he had to quiet the Kurdish issue, pulling the rug out from under the army's feet. A second important motive was the attempt to facilitate Turkey's admission into the European Union, by exhibiting a facade of a liberal and democratic regime that grants civil rights to ethnic minorities. The third motive was his hope to gain the support of Kurdish voters in various election campaigns. Fourth was the desire to strengthen the economy in light of the heavy expenditures associated with maintaining the military and fighting the PKK. Fifth was Erdogan's desire to promote Turkey's relations with the Kurdish region of Iraq, which has become part of the Turkish sphere of influence since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. In doing so, Erdogan used the Iraqi Kurdish leadership as a means of promoting electoral interests among the Kurds in Turkey .

As early as 2006, Turkey launched what is known as the "secret Oslo process" with the PKK, which went on until 2011. In parallel, in 2009 it initiated an open peace process that lasted until 2015 and brought about cultural and economic benefits that the Kurds had never enjoyed before. This served as the background for the strengthening of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). The secret talks were leaked in 2011, which paradoxically led to the acceleration of the open negotiations with the PKK as well. While in prison, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan announced on March 21, 2013 a unilateral ceasefire and called upon PKK fighters to withdraw from Turkey to Iraq. Erdogan's designated negotiator for this phase of the talks was the HDP leader, Selahattin Demirtaş.

However, relations have deteriorated since 2015, due mainly to the “over success” of the Kurds, who began to pose a threat to Erdogan. Demirtaş challenged Erdogan in the 2014 presidential election and won 10 percent of the votes. Despite his negligible share compared to Erdogan, who won more than 50 percent, the very candidacy and the image of the charismatic Demirtaş as the “Kurdish Obama” raised the concerns of the undisputed leader. Another reason for the deterioration was the growing power of the PKK in Syria: in July 2014,

ISIS launched attacks against the city of Kobani, which marked a turning point in the consolidation of the PKK’s influence in the Kurdish region of Syria. The war against ISIS was waged by Syrian Kurdish forces – the YPG – which was in fact a branch of the PKK. Approximately 50 percent of the force consisted of PKK fighters, who had arrived from their bases in Iraq. United States involvement in support of the Kurds only added fuel to the fire and increased Erdogan’s fears.

The last straw was the parliamentary elections held in June 2015. The ruling party, the AKP, failed to win the majority required in order to change the system of government, from parliamentary to presidential. The much needed votes were “stolen” by the Kurdish HDP party, which celebrated an unprecedented achievement, having won 13 percent of the votes and 80 seats in parliament. Erdogan’s attempts to form a coalition with the HDP did not bear fruit, and this in turn drove him into the arms of extremist nationalist party, the MHP.

Another Kurdish move perceived as a serious threat to Turkey was the independence referendum, held in the Kurdish region of Iraq in 2017. Consequently, at various times since 2015 Erdogan has taken a series of steps against the three parts of Kurdistan. In 2016, the Turkish army launched an attack on the entire Kurdish region in Turkey, which led to the death of 6,366 people, most of whom were members of the PKK. The political arm of the party, as well as the Kurdish population as a whole, have been targeted since. The most radical move was Demirtaş’ imprisonment, along with thousands of other Turkish activists. The official reason was

Demirtaş' ties with the PKK, once encouraged by Erdogan himself to be the go between with Öcalan.

At the same time, the Turkish military launched an attack on the Jarablus area in Syria, with the aim of preventing the YPG from taking control of the region, followed by two massive ground attacks in 2018 and 2019. In parallel, Turkey continued its strikes against PKK bases in the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRG), as well as thwarting the latter's efforts to gain independence.

Where did the Kurdish Leaders fail?

The approach and modus operandi of the main Kurdish organization, the underground PKK, founded in the 1970s, are in effect a mirror image of those of Erdogan's. Like him, the organization regards the whole of Kurdistan as its sphere of influence, and therefore, the PKK also operates in all arenas: it has established bases in the Kurdish region of Iraq, as well as organizations of its own, both in Syria (PYD) and Iran (PJAK).

When a civilian Kurdish movement founded in Turkey in the 1990s sought to take part in the general Turkish elections, the PKK sought to impose its own terms upon it, which led to a covert competition between the two movements. Perhaps pressure from the PKK was the reason for the civil leadership's reluctance to support Erdogan and join his coalition in 2015, which drove him into the arms of the extremist nationalist party.

Another grave mistake on the part of the military leadership of the PKK was the establishment of its bases in the heart of the civilian population in southeast Turkey. When the Turkish military ultimately attacked the region in 2016 and 2017, the most severe damage was suffered by the Kurdish population, which included the loss of lives, destruction of homes, and reversal of the many achievements made by the civil arm of the Kurdish party.

The consolidation of the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan has led to the establishment of some 40 Turkish bases in the region and to continued attacks, directed

allegedly against the PKK, but bearing a strong message to the Kurdish leadership in Iraq. The PKK's policy has also created friction between the KRG's leadership and the movement. Another error on the part of the PKK was its insistence on maintaining a high profile in the autonomous Kurdish region of Syria, which resulted in brutal Turkish attacks there as well.

An additional problem faced by all Kurds is the geostrategic and technological map, which has changed considerably since Turkey began developing its own UAVs and various intelligence tools, against which the Kurdish organizations have no adequate response. These innovations refute the Kurdish saying that "the Kurds have no friends but the mountains," as not even the mountains afford them protection against Turkish UAVs attacking all three parts of Kurdistan unhindered. Furthermore, the Kurdish movements operating in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria have failed to join forces and instead have fallen into the "divide and conquer" trap set by Erdogan. Indeed, the Kurdish parties and organizations failed to demonstrate political flexibility and lacked basic diplomatic skills, for which they paid a very heavy price.

Profit and Loss in the Recent Elections

Prior to the 2023 elections, it was expected that Erdogan would intensify the attacks against the Kurds in Syria and other parts of Kurdistan, as part of the fulfilment of his recent threats. Surprisingly, he pursued a reverse policy and significantly reduced the number and intensity of the attacks in all parts of Kurdistan, compared to the previous year. The rationale behind Erdogan's move was his desire not to drive Kurdish voters into the arms of the Kurdish party.

For its part, the HDP changed its name on the eve of the elections and joined another left wing party for fear of being outlawed, as happened eight times before to Kurdish parties. But despite its support of the opposition, led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the HDP did not receive the opposition's endorsement in the run-off, as the latter made nationalist and anti-Kurdish statements in hope of defeating Erdogan. Thus, both sides made the Kurds their punching bag in the second round of the elections, leaving them

completely empty-handed. On the one hand, the Kurds were attacked by Erdogan and the ruling party, who arrested their leadership on the eve of the elections, accusing them of supporting terrorism; on the other hand, the opposition also tried to alienate them in an attempt to win the votes of Turkish nationalists. Upon learning of the results of the elections, Demirtaş announced his retirement from the party, and called for fresh political blood, as well as a revision of the Kurdish party's existing practices.

Looking ahead, Erdogan's victory in the run-off may push him to continue his policies on all three Kurdish fronts: in Syria, he may try to reach an understanding with President Bashar al-Assad in order to eradicate Kurdish autonomy there; extend significantly Turkey's soft power in the KRG; and strive to weaken the Kurdish party in Turkey itself, which has supported the opposition to his regime all along.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen