

The Kurdish Question and Turkey: Future Challenges and Prospects for a Solution

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Summary

Will the Turkish political system be able to address the challenges of the Kurdish problem and find a “solution”? How will Turkey deal with the PKK and its incursions? How might the emergence of a Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq impact on the aspirations of Kurds in Turkey? What might be the role of the EU?

These are the questions addressed in four different sections. The first one evaluates the political developments in Turkey in the course of the last two years when a rise in both Kurdish and Turkish nationalism was observed. The second one analyzes the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections, focusing on the Kurdish question. The third section takes a closer look at the Kurdish vote and the approach of the AK Party government to the Kurdish question. Lastly, the paper develops two scenarios in respect to the future course of politics surrounding the Kurdish problem.

The paper concludes by arguing that the current government seems committed to achieve some progress in addressing Kurdish grievances and concerns. However, it will face numerous challenges in doing that.

*Introduction*¹

As a result of the parliamentary elections of 22 July 2007, from which the governing Justice and Development Party (AK Party) emerged as the unequivocal winner, and the election of Abdullah Gül late in August as the 11th President, Turkey is trying to come out of a politically very difficult period. The country had been experiencing considerable political instability during the preceding couple of months. The instability turned into a state of crisis when the Turkish military in April mounted what has come to be referred to as an “e-coup” (elektronik muhtıra). The “e-coup” came immediately on the heels of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s, announcement that Gül, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, would be the AK Party’s candidate for the upcoming presidential elections. In a thinly veiled manner the military threatened to intervene if a candidate that they suspected would endanger Turkey’s secular credentials were to be elected. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) had long been attacking the AK Party for allegedly having a hidden Islamist agenda. This was also accompanied by public demonstrations attended by men, women and children in their hundred thousands chanting slogans in defense of the secular nature of Turkey. At the same time there was also a constitutional-procedural crisis at the Parliament over the size of the quorum that would be necessary to get the presidential election process started. The heightened tension and deep sense of crisis was finally diffused with the government’s decision early in May to call for an early election in July rather than in November.

There were other factors that contributed to the climate of instability and sense of crisis during the course of the first half of 2007. One of these factors was clearly related to the Kurdish problem. During the course of at least two past years Turkey had been experiencing a distinct rise in both Turkish as well as Kurdish nationalism. Most importantly, the last two years saw the periodic increase in violent PKK attacks on civilian and military targets accompanied by emotional funerals held for the victims. The ability of the PKK to operate from northern Iraq with impunity aggravated the situation. This led to urgent and often unequivocal demands from the opposition as well as the military to mount a military intervention in northern Iraq. The level of tension created by these calls was further aggravated by a nationalist and confrontationist discourse adopted by some Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq. This in turn exacerbated the debate over the status of the city of Kerkük. Turkish nationalist circles went as far as advocating a military intervention to pre-empt the incorporation of Kerkük into the Kurdish federated state. The back-sliding in the reform process that was particularly visible with respect to freedom of expression saw, for example, the opening of court cases against numerous individuals for the alleged inappropriate use of the Kurdish language and expression of views threatening to the unity of the country. Even the Prime Minister saw himself being bitterly criticized and indicted for having referred to Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, as “Sayın Öcalan” (Mr. Öcalan), a title in Turkish employed when attributing respect to a person. The common practice for many in Turkey is to use the populist title “teroristbaşı”, Chief of terrorists.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the help of Özlem Aslan, research assistant at the Department of Political Science, Boğaziçi University. The analysis in this report covers the period up to September 2007. The subsequent events up to late November have been covered in a “postscript” at the end of the report.

These developments were of course in stark contrast to the climate that prevailed during the period when Turkey was engaged in the reform process to meet the Copenhagen political criteria. Undoubtedly, the ambiguity in the EU over Turkey's future membership prospects not to mention the denigrating discourse adopted by some of the leading European politicians contributed to Turkey's drift into a more nationalist mood and state of instability. Nevertheless, the result of the elections in July and the resolution of the crisis around the election of a new President are likely to reinvigorate the reform process in Turkey and may also favor the emergence of a more conducive environment to address the Kurdish problem. The results of the election with its high level of participation, in spite of being held right in the middle of the vacation season, and the overwhelming manner in which the electorate rewarded the governing party may be crucial to bringing this about.

Almost half of the electorate voted for the governing party, clearly demonstrating a preference for more democracy, reform and continuation of current economic programs. In contrast political parties such as the CHP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which emphasized a more nationalist and anti-EU discourse, received less than a third of the votes. The governing party was also the only party that succeeded in getting votes from across the whole country, including Kurdish populated regions of Turkey. Interestingly, the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) lost votes to the AK Party suggesting some preference among the Kurdish voters to shy away from the nationalist agenda of the DTP and its predecessor, the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP). The new Parliament is considered one of the most representative parliaments in Turkey since 1983. It allows for the representation of approximately 85 per cent of the electorate compared to 54 per cent for the previous Parliament. During the 2002 elections more than 40 per cent of the electorate in Kurdish populated provinces had voted for the DEHAP, the then pro-Kurdish political party. However, because the votes of DEHAP amounted to only just over 6 per cent of all the votes cast in Turkey, it failed to meet the 10 per cent national threshold to qualify for seats in the Parliament. Ironically the Turkish nationalist party, which had resisted the EU reform process while in government, had also failed to pass this national threshold when it received 8,3 per cent of the overall votes.

In the current Parliament there are two political parties with almost diametrically opposed views on the Kurdish problem. The MHP still calls for the execution of Abdullah Öcalan for the crimes he was convicted of and continues to deny the existence of a separate Kurdish identity. The DTP on the other hand is closely associated with the PKK, which technically still maintains a separatist agenda, and seeks the liberation of Abdullah Öcalan. This may at first hand suggest serious trouble and confrontation. Yet, at the opening of the new Parliament the leadership of both parties have been very careful to emphasize the importance they will attribute to dialogue and to the need to avoid violence. The Turkish public was very impressed to see Ahmet Türk, a long-standing nationalist Kurdish politician from the DTP, walk up to the leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, at the Parliament plenary hall and shake his hand. Furthermore, the members of DTP paid particular attention not to repeat the provocative behavior of Leyla Zana during the opening of the new Parliament in December 1991.

Zana at the time was among a group of Kurdish nationalist politicians who had entered the Parliament on the ticket of the then social democratic party, Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP). The SHP leadership at the time had hoped that by bringing Kurdish nationalists into the Parliament it might actually be possible to start a dialogue to address the Kurdish problem. These hopes were precipitously dashed when Zana acted in a very provocative manner as she threw political slogans in Kurdish and displayed the flag of the PKK during the swearing-in session of the new Parliament. The political tension that followed played a role in the aggravation of the Kurdish problem and the rise of violence in Turkey. Eventually, Zana and a number of her Kurdish friends from the Parliament were sacked and then imprisoned. It would not be until 2004 that Zana and her friends would be released. In contrast, the DTP members were very conscious of not repeating Zana's behavior and instead stressed the importance they attribute to looking for a solution through dialogue and parliamentary democracy.

What will these developments mean for the Kurdish question in Turkey? Will the Turkish political system finally be able to address the challenges surrounding the Kurdish problem and find a "solution"? Is there actually a "solution" to the Kurdish problem? What form might that "solution" take? How will Turkey deal with the PKK and its incursions from the territories under the control of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq? How might the emergence of a Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq impact on the aspirations of Kurds in Turkey? What might be the role of the EU in meeting these challenges? These are the questions that this paper aims to address. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section evaluates the political developments in Turkey in the course of approximately the last two years during which a rise in both Kurdish and Turkish nationalism was observed. The second section offers an analysis of the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections with a particular focus on the Kurdish question. The third section takes a closer look at the Kurdish vote and the approach of the AK Party government to the Kurdish question. Lastly, the paper develops two scenarios in respect to the future course of politics surrounding the Kurdish problem. The paper will conclude by arguing that the current government seems committed to achieve some progress in addressing Kurdish grievances and concerns. However, it will face numerous challenges in doing that. The coming years may also see a healthy debate on what might constitute a solution of the Kurdish problem. Yet, it would be unrealistic to expect a consensus to emerge that is satisfactory to all in Turkey. In the long run, if Turkey does indeed become a member of the EU and succeeds in arriving at the same level of economic and political development as Spain, it might be possible to envisage a Turkey that might then be confident, secure and stable enough to square up to the problem.

1. Rise of Kurdish and Turkish nationalism

The PKK has a long reputation for declaring cease-fires periodically. Subsequent to the capture of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, it had entered a long period of internal struggles. During this period by and large it did not mount violent attacks in Turkey. This coincided also with a period when numerous reforms were adopted that brought a visible relaxation of the tension in Kurdish populated areas of the country. There were even major improvements especially in respect to cultural rights and public expressions

of Kurdish identity. However, this climate was shattered by the announcement in June 2004 that the PKK was ending its unilaterally declared cease-fire followed by the explosion of a bomb in August 2004 in a minibus in the highly popular Aegean tourist resort of Kuşadası. This came as a shock to the public and a reminder of the violence of the 1990s at a time when stability and economic growth was just beginning to be taken for granted. This initial act of violence was then followed by bolder ones including PKK attacks on the military in especially Kurdish populated areas neighboring northern Iraq. These attacks as well as the mines planted by the PKK took the lives of an increasing number of especially young conscripts. As of early June there were 50 military personnel and 15 civilians who had died as a result of direct PKK attacks during the course of 2007. These numbers continued to increase through the summer and early autumn. The accompanying funerals became populist manifestations of a rising tide in Turkish nationalism and growing demands for a military intervention in northern Iraq.

This growing wave of Turkish nationalism was fueled by two additional related developments. The first one is the rise of Kurdish nationalism itself. Traditionally the two nationalisms have often influenced each other. Manifestation of one has usually helped to fuel the other one and of course vice versa. More recently the source provoking Turkish nationalism can be linked to developments in northern Iraq. It is difficult to identify a particular date or event but the gradual emergence and consolidation of the Kurdish federated state and the growing prospects that the city of Kerkük would be incorporated into this state played a critical role. Many in Turkey have perceived a potential threat to Turkish territorial integrity from this state often aggravated by statements and discourse employed by leading Kurdish figures. A case in point, reported in April 2007, was the remark by Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and President of the Kurdish regional government of Iraq, that "Turkey is not allowed to intervene in the Kerkük issue and if it does, we will interfere in Diyarbakır's issues and other cities in Turkey". The fact that these statements came to the attention of the Turkish public at a time when there already was considerable tension resulting from PKK incursions and widespread rioting in Diyarbakır did not help. Barzani was referring to the pending referendum in Kerkük and arguing that Turkey was intervening in the domestic affairs of Iraq. Turkish governmental and often emotional public opposition to the referendum was made on the grounds that the Kurdish dominated administration in Kerkük was manipulating the demographic balances and forcing the Türkmen population together with the Arab one out of the city. Turkish nationalists have always considered Kerkük to be a primarily Türkmen city and argued that it was unjustly incorporated into the British mandate in Iraq after the end of the First World War.

The second and related one was the way in which EU-Turkish relations deteriorated and a powerful sense of being let down by the EU developed among the Turkish public. The nature of the debate on possible Turkish membership in Europe during the summer of 2005, the actual details of the Negotiation Framework adopted for Turkey in October 2005 and even the manner in which the EU meeting dragged into the small hours of the night received great attention in Turkey. Opponents of the EU in Turkey were skillfully able to exploit these developments to revive as well as aggravate Turkish prejudice and fears against Europe and the West. They were also able to link the

negative attitude towards Turkey in Europe to growing PKK attacks by arguing that the reform process had been imposed on Turkey with the purpose of weakening Turkey's internal cohesion and territorial integrity. The reluctance or inability of the US administration and occupation forces in Iraq to cooperate with Turkey to prevent PKK incursions from northern Iraq made matters worse. The fear about Iraq's disintegration and the emergence of an independent Kurdish state was extensively exploited in Turkey and linked to the wider efforts to undermine Turkey attributed to both the US and the EU. The resentment felt toward the EU and the USA was very much reflected in the series of large public demonstrations that were held in April and May 2007. The meetings were characterized by a flood of Turkish flags that are regarded to have become a conspicuous symbol of the rise of Turkish nationalism.

The rise of nationalism was certainly not limited to just Kurdish related issues. It manifested itself in numerous ways. One case in point was the murder in January 2007 of Hrant Dink, a very prominent intellectual and journalist of Armenian origin. Dink was a public figure engaged in efforts to reconcile Armenian and Turkish views in relation to the fate of the hundreds of thousands of Armenians that had perished during the First World War in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. Dink's efforts and the lively debate over the fate of the Armenians in Turkey in 2004-2005 very much reflected the freer climate that the reforms had created. However, this climate very quickly eroded when court cases were opened against not only Dink but many others for allegedly violating the infamous Article 301 of the new Turkish Penal Code. The Article, an ambiguous and rather vaguely worded article, penalizes acts and statements injuring or offensive to "Turkishness". A nationalist lawyer and the Chairman of an ultra-right wing Turkish lawyers association (Büyük Hukukçular Birliği), Kemal Kerişsiz, became a celebrity by demanding from prosecutors that investigations and court cases be opened against many public personalities. Those cases that indeed reached the courts often became public occasions for the display of nationalist slogans. The Nobel Prize winner in literature, Orhan Pamuk, faced a similar fate when a court case was opened against him and the supporters of Kerişsiz turned his court appearances into major manifestations of Turkish nationalism.

The attitude and position taken by the government and state institutions played a role in exacerbating the situation. The government remained paralyzed and failed to adopt legislation to narrow down the scope of Article 301 or rescind it. Many in Turkey have argued that governmental reluctance to reform Article 301 and take a much more principled stand against attacks on the freedom of expression and liberal intellectuals was an important factor that helped to create an environment conducive to the assassination of Dink. This reluctance was also complicated by the fact that the President of Turkey, Ahmet Sezer, refused to congratulate Orhan Pamuk on his Nobel Prize, adding legitimacy to nationalist arguments that this Prize had been given to him on political grounds. The government also seemed to be reluctant or slow to clamp down on the excesses of nationalist groups. It took a while before the nationalist lawyers' activities were finally stopped and investigations opened against a number of ultra-nationalist groups including ones composed of former army officers and bureaucrats. One such group, Kuvayi Milliye Derneği, appears to have been involved in a number of violent and provocative incidents. Investigations were finally opened

against it after an arms-cache was found in the house of one of its members in Istanbul in June 2007.

Similar observations can also be made about the Şemdinli affair. In November 2005 a bomb exploded in a book-store in the Kurdish town of Şemdinli and the perpetrators were actually captured by the public red handed. They turned out to be persons associated with a special unit of the Gendarmerie. The evidence seemed to suggest that elements from within the state had been involved in the explosion. In spite of the Prime Minister's promise that clues would be followed wherever they might lead many have argued that the government failed to ensure a thorough investigation. The remark by the military's second in command and today the current Chief of Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, that he knew the perpetrators as "good soldiers" complicated matters. The government failed to prevent the removal of the prosecutor in charge of investigating the case after he included the Chief of Staff among the people to be indicted. Many saw this incident as a sign of the limits that the government faced in respect to the military or the security establishment in Turkey.

The government's position was somewhat surprising because not only had the AK government successfully seen through a long series of major reforms that benefited the Kurds, but Erdoğan had become one of the rare Prime Ministers in Turkey to address the Kurdish problem publicly. In August 2005, together with a large delegation of Ministers from his cabinet he visited Diyarbakır, the largest Kurdish populated city in Turkey whose inhabitants had greatly suffered from the violence of the 1990s, and acknowledged that mistakes had been made in the past by the Turkish state. This was an unprecedented gesture towards reconciliation. He recognized the existence of a "Kurdish problem" and argued that the solution lay in more democracy, more rule of law and economic prosperity. It was against this background that he had promised to get to the bottom of the Şemdinli affair. However, he too was adversely affected by the rise of nationalism in Turkey and the growing criticism, sometimes coming from within his own party ranks, directed at his government for its failure to curb PKK terrorism. His position was also aggravated by the deteriorating EU-Turkish relations. It was not surprising that almost exactly a year after his speech in Diyarbakır he had made a complete u-turn and barely employed the word "Kurd" during his address to the local AK Party congress in August 2006.

His drift towards or flirtation with a Turkish nationalist discourse reached a symbolic peak in September 2006 at a ceremony in the small Anatolian town of Bilecik commemorating the establishment of the Ottoman principality at the end of the 13th century. During his speech at the ceremony he adopted a blatantly nationalist rhetoric. However, he was badly shaken when he found himself facing virulent protest from MHP youth present at the ceremony. His physical safety came under threat and he had to leave the location precipitously. It appears that the incident led to considerable soul searching among the AK Party leadership, eventually leading to a conscious decision to avoid nationalist rhetoric in favor of the party's traditional reformist and pluralist position.

This oscillation on the part of the government coincided with a period when the country increasingly began to focus on the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in 2007. Political parties had started to jockey for position to increase their

constituencies and where possible attract votes. Nationalist discourse very quickly became a tool in the effort to enlarge the potential base of voters. The fact that PKK violence was on the rise and the developments in northern Iraq were attracting greater attention and resentment among the public, as well as the growing distance between the EU and Turkey, made the government increasingly vulnerable to criticism from the opposition. The main opposition party in the Parliament, CHP, adopted a strategy based on nationalism and the politics of "fear". The CHP leadership argued that the territorial integrity and national unity of Turkey was under severe threat because of erroneous AK Party government policies. The discourse that emerged made it very difficult for many to distinguish a supposedly social democrat CHP from the more traditional right wing nationalist MHP. The position of the two parties on the Kurdish problem and relations with northern Iraq were for all intents and purposes indistinguishable.

Simultaneously the CHP also virulently questioned the government and AK Party's secular credentials. In the context of the debate over who would become the government's candidate for the presidential election in May 2007, the CHP argued that if the new President of Turkey were to be from the AK Party, Turkey's secularism would be seriously undermined. The CHP forged a grand alliance composed of the military and a diversity of civil society groups, ranging from the Federation of Atatürk Thought Associations to the Association to Support Contemporary Living as well as a range of women's rights organizations, to weaken the hand of the government. This alliance played a critical role in precipitating the holding of large meetings in support of secularism in April and May 2007. The role of the military deserves to be highlighted too. The military traditionally had always made its position very clear as the guarantor of secularism and Turkish territorial as well as national unity. The EU reforms had been successful in subduing their influence on Turkish politics. However, the rise of PKK incursions from northern Iraq accompanied by the rising death toll that the PKK inflicted especially on the military itself led to growing pressure on the government to authorize intervention against the PKK in Iraq. The government consistently resisted such an intervention.

It is possible to argue that the CHP's and the military's interests overlapped for different reasons. The CHP hoped to create an environment that would weaken the AK Party and increase its own chances to win the parliamentary elections. The military on the other hand aspired to regain its influence on Turkish politics and also address real or imaginary threats to secularism and national unity. The infamous "e-coup" of late April 2007 was preceded by the Chief of Staff's speeches announcing that military intervention against the PKK in northern Iraq was an utmost "necessity" and loudly urging the government to authorize it. In these speeches, in a striking manner, EU membership was described as a threat to Turkish national unity on the grounds that the EU under the pretext of protecting minority rights aimed to undermine Turkey's territorial integrity. It was also accompanied by a thinly veiled allegation that the EU supported Kurdish separatism and by corollary PKK terrorism.

Here it might be possible to argue that as the presidential and parliamentary elections approached a game of "politics within politics" occurred. There was an attempt to put as much pressure on the government and the AK Party as possible, to force it to adopt policies such as an intervention in northern Iraq that risked undermining the economy

and its popularity. Clearly, the aim here was to weaken as much as possible the chances of the AK Party winning the parliamentary elections and prevent them from getting their candidate elected. The same dynamics applied to the presidential elections too. The rise of Turkish nationalism and its consequences in terms of the Kurdish problem in Turkey needs to be seen with this notion of "politics within politics". However, clearly the strategy that brought the CHP and the military so close to each other failed when the government was able to keep its cool with respect to a military intervention in northern Iraq as well as draw the appropriate lessons from the "e-coup" and the series of demonstrations to steer the country to early elections in July 2007.

2. The July 2007 elections

The July 2007 elections were exceptional on a number of grounds. Firstly, they came after a tense period of crisis when the political agenda was very much dominated by the Kurdish issue and the issue of whether Turkey's secularism was under threat or not. There had been a series of huge public demonstrations in support of secularism. Turkey had never experienced such demonstrations and amazingly in spite of tension in the air and the actual size of the demonstrations no violence had erupted. Secondly, a constitutional crisis erupted over the election of a new President. The opposition, in an effort to preempt the election of Abdullah Gül, argued that a two-thirds majority, a few seats more than what the AK Party controlled in the Parliament, would be necessary to start the voting process. This would be a practice that had never been demanded or sought in previous elections. The CHP applied to the Constitutional Court and the court ruled, right in the midst of the voting process that had already started, upholding the CHP's position. The election process was discontinued and the government called for an early election. Thirdly, the election was exceptional because in spite of the fact that large parts of the urban population had moved to coastal areas for the summer vacation, the electorate returned to their regular places of residence to be able to cast their vote. An impressive participation rate of more than 84 per cent was achieved, a rate higher than the previous elections held in November 2002. The rate on that occasion was just over 79 per cent. Lastly, a minor change in the electoral law made it possible for the pro-Kurdish party, DTP, to circumvent the 10 per cent national threshold requirement by fielding independent candidates rather than run them on a party ticket. Subsequent to their election they were then able to form a party group in the Parliament.

However, there were at least three other striking aspects of the election that may have very serious implication in terms of the future of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Firstly, the AK Party won an unequivocal victory. As can be seen from Table 1, it increased its votes from just over 34 per cent in 2002 to just about 47 per cent, a more than ten point increase that even the party leadership had not predicted. The number of AK Party seats decreased from 363 to 341 but that was a result of the entry into Parliament of two additional political parties. The CHP's performance was no less than dismal. The leadership was expecting to win the elections on the basis of the large public meetings that had displayed slogans reflecting the political position of the party. It pursued what many believed was a campaign based on fear. This politics was characterized by arguments that the AK Party was about to undermine Turkey's secularism as well as

national unity. The CHP's percentage of the votes increased only a little more than a point from just over 19 to just under 21 per cent, while the number of its seats shrank significantly from 178 to 112. The MHP's return to Parliament was very much expected in the light of the rise of nationalism in Turkey. Terrorism and resentment against PKK violence had played a significant role in the MHP's successful performance at the 1999 elections. It was a member of the coalition government that was formed after those elections too. However, in the subsequent elections the electorate punished the MHP with all the other parties in Parliament for their failure to be more forthcoming on EU reforms. Furthermore, the absence of terrorism and violence preceding the 2002 elections was another significant factor undermining the MHP's performance. Its ability to win just over 14 per cent of the votes and get 70 seats is a significant success that will inevitably influence parliamentary politics, especially on the Kurdish question.

Table 1: Distribution of votes and seats at the Parliament across political parties after the 2002 and 2007 elections

PARTY	VOTES %		SEATS	
	2002	2007	2002	2007
AK Party	34	47	363	341
CHP	19	21	178	112
MHP	8	14	0	70
DEHAP/DTP	6	4	0	20

The second important aspect of the elections is the return of a pro-Kurdish party to the Parliament. The DTP was able to enter the Parliament with 20 seats, receiving almost 4 per cent of the national votes. This is the first time that openly pro-Kurdish politicians have made it into Parliament since their predecessors from DEP were ejected in 1994. In 1991 there were 22 pro-Kurdish politicians who were elected on a SHP ticket. Subsequently, 13 of them saw their immunities from prosecution removed by the rest of the Parliament on the grounds that they were advocating secession and maintained organic ties with the PKK. Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, Selim Sadak, Ahmet Türk and Leyla Zana were sentenced to varying prison terms. Their conviction soured Turkey's relations with the EU and remained a major obstacle to Turkey's membership aspirations. However, it is possible to argue that current DTP members of Parliament advocate views on the Kurdish problem that are not significantly different than their DEP colleagues. They do not openly advocate secession but they do talk about the idea of a federal or bi-national state. These are two ideas very much alien to the broader Turkish public, not to mention the military. The significant difference is that since the EU reforms, advocating such ideas (as long as it is done peacefully) does not constitute a criminal offense. Furthermore, DTP politicians like their Turkish counterparts have become much more at ease with pluralism. Zana and her colleagues were notorious for their bitter criticism of Kurds who held views different to them or for that matter to the PKK. Until a few years ago it was not unusual for the PKK to

assassinate Kurds who were critical of it or advocated moderate views that fell short of its idea of self-determination and armed struggle. Again unlike Kurdish nationalist politicians of the 1990s, DTP deputies seem much more open to dialogue and to the democratic process. Yet like their predecessors they refuse to openly condemn terrorism and distance themselves from the PKK.

Table 2: Distribution of votes across political parties after the 2002 and 2007 elections in major Kurdish populated provinces

	2007				2002			
	AK PARTY	CHP	MHP	DTP	AK PARTY	CHP	MHP	DEHAP
AĞRI	63	3	4	23	18	10	5	35
BATMAN	46	4	1	39	21	7	2	47
BİTLİS	59	9	6	16	18	5	7	30
DİYARBAKIR	41	2	2	43	16	6	2	57
HAKKARİ	33	4	2	49	7	8	4	45
İĞDIR	29	8	15	27	7	15	13	33
MARDİN	44	7	1	34	15	12	3	40
MUŞ	39	3	2	34	17	6	3	38
SİİRT	49	3	3	25	17	9	7	32
ŞIRNAK	27	7	3	51	14	5	3	46
TUNCELİ	12	17	6	27	7	25	10	33
VAN	53	4	3	30	26	5	3	41
Averages	41	6	4	33	15	9	5	40

The third important aspect of the election is the way in which the AK Party was able to win significant levels of the Kurdish vote. Kurds have traditionally lived in the eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey. Large numbers of them, for economic as well as political reasons, have moved to urban centers such as Adana, Antalya, İstanbul, İzmir and Mersin. The violence of the 1990s and the practice of forced evacuations of villages and hamlets by security forces led to a major movement of people from rural areas to the cities in the Kurdish populated areas of Turkey. In the course of the past couple of national elections Kurds had tended to vote for Kurdish nationalist parties such as the DEP, HADEP and DEHAP even if there were also those who would vote for other political parties. The most striking election was the one in 2002 when DEHAP

received just under 40 per cent of the votes in 12 major Kurdish populated provinces. As can be seen from Table 2 there were provinces such as Diyarbakır and Batman where DEHAP received as high percentages as 57 and 47 per cent respectively. At the time, because DEHAP could not pass the 10 per cent national threshold it was unable to send any of its candidates to the Turkish National Assembly. Instead the AK Party, the second best performer, with only 15 per cent of the votes received 33 seats at the Parliament. These deputies were mostly local but clearly did not have a nationalist agenda. Among them there were a number who served in the cabinet, including the Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu and the Minister for Education Hüseyin Çelik.

In the recent elections the picture changed considerably. As Table 2 shows, the AK Party increased its votes in these 12 provinces from approximately 15 per cent to 41 per cent in 2007, while the DTP received 33 per cent of the votes compared to the approximately 40 per cent that DEHAP had received in 2002. In this way the AK Party has 33 of its deputies elected from these provinces against 20 from DTP while the CHP and MHP have no deputies elected from these 12 provinces. Most probably, CHP and MHP received votes from “ethnic” Turks and Kurds serving as village guards on the payroll of the state.

3. The Kurdish vote and the Kurdish question under AK Party government

How can one explain the success of the AK Party and what might this mean in terms of the Kurdish question in Turkey? There are a number of factors that can be cited.

Foremost is the fact that the AK Party unlike the CHP and MHP did not employ a blatantly Turkish nationalist discourse and instead put the accent on dialogue, further democracy and reforms. Many Kurds were also very conscious of the fact that many of the improvements that took place with respect to their cultural rights occurred during the reign of the AK Party government. Secondly, the government’s success in respect to the economy and the expectation that this would continue if the AK Party is reelected influenced Kurdish votes as much as it did the rest of Turkey. Thirdly, according to a prominent Kurdish politician and member of the DTP Orhan Miroğlu during the run up to the elections the government was able to win over “hearts and minds” by attending to immediate needs of especially poor households by distributing coal and basic food stuff provisions as well as enable many Kurds to purchase homes at low interest from the Turkish Mass Housing Authority (TOKİ). Furthermore, the government channeled important levels of agricultural subsidies as well as funds into the health sector of the region. Lastly, a conviction that the DTP may not after all be able to address and resolve the day to day problems of Kurds, ranging for example from employment, health services and to basic urban infrastructures, is likely to have played a role too.

It is also possible to talk about an important additional factor. Kurdish society, especially in major urban centers, is becoming much more plural and assertive. A couple of years ago this could not have been imagined. Economic liberalism has enabled businesses to develop in the area. Kurdish business interests represented by local chambers of commerce such as the Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce (DTCO) have advocated much more moderate views on the Kurdish problem and emphasized the importance of creating a stable environment for economic growth and employment.

This has led them to openly criticize the PKK and the use of violence as sources of instability undermining prospects of economic growth. They have argued that violence has been one of the key factors causing unemployment, poverty and prostitution in the region. The former President of the Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce ran in the last elections on an AK Party ticket and was elected as a Deputy. Similar developments can be observed with respect to the broader civil society in the region. A case in point is the women's rights organization known as the Women's Center (KAMER). KAMER is very active in the whole region with projects in a number of Kurdish cities as well as rural areas aiming to improve the condition of women in the region but also combat honor killings. The leader of KAMER, a highly respected Kurdish woman with once a nationalist background, has distanced herself from the PKK on the grounds that the PKK demands that women's rights be subordinated to the "struggle for self-determination".

These developments are very significant in terms of the evolution of the Kurdish problem in Turkey and are clearly a function of a Turkey that is becoming more plural and democratic. Kurdish civil society in the past had been squeezed between the repression of the state on the one hand and the PKK on the other hand. One of the critical tests of local civil society beginning to distance itself were manifested in the internal elections of professional organizations representing architects, engineers and doctors as well as the bar associations. These elections became more competitive compared to the past when often they were dominated by PKK authorized candidates. Furthermore, increasingly the leadership of these civil society groups became advocates of more moderate views and democratic dialogue. Another significant test came early in 2006 subsequent to the destructive rioting that took place in Diyarbakır at the instigation of the PKK. More than thirty civil society organizations, after a long internal debate, were able to come together and make a public declaration against terrorism and the use of violence. They called for a democratic dialogue in addressing the Kurdish problem. This group reiterated their position in September the same year when a bomb went off by a recreation park killing innocent civilians most of them children. These developments are in stark contrast to the days back in especially the first half of the 1990s, when the PKK literally ruled Diyarbakır and other major cities preventing even the sale of newspapers in Turkish, not to mention the running of its own court and collecting taxes. This was a period during which no Kurd would have dared to hold and for that matter express views independent of the PKK.

One other important development that needs to be highlighted in terms of the Kurdish problem in Turkey is that Kurds who have migrated to urban centers in western parts of Turkey, by and large, have integrated. These Kurds tend to hold much more moderate views even if among the youth there are those who are radical and indeed close to the PKK. There has not been any systematic study examining this situation and election results have to be interpreted very cautiously as there are no exact figures on the proportion of Kurdish votes in the general electorate in these cities. However, some general observations can be drawn comparing results from the last two elections. The voting pattern seems to suggest a trend away from pro-Kurdish political parties towards the AK Party. This trend may well suggest also a trend in moderation. Table 3 suggests two trends in this direction. Firstly, unlike in the provinces of east and southeastern Turkey, in western cities DTP candidates have not fared as well as DEHAP candidates

had done in 2002. The only two cities where DTP candidates did a little better were Adana and Mersin; however even there compared to DEHAP in 2002 they lost votes. These are two cities relatively close to traditionally Kurdish populated areas. The Kurdish population in relation to the rest of the population is relatively higher and these are also two cities where integration problems are highest including high levels of unemployment and very poor housing conditions. These are also two cities where the influence of the PKK can be felt and tension exists between Kurds and the locals. This is clearly reflected in the percentages of votes that the MHP received. Actually, these are among only a handful of provinces where the MHP was ahead of the CHP. The second trend is the manner in which the AK Party has swept a very significant proportion of the votes in spite of these cities being two cities where the CHP and MHP performed relatively well.

Table 3: Distribution of votes across political parties after the 2002 and 2007 elections in electoral districts in provinces that have received large levels of Kurdish migration

	2007				2002			
	AK PARTY	CHP	MHP	DTP	AK PARTY	CHP	MHP	DEHAP
ADANA	37	23	23	5	27	21	11	9
ANKARA 1 ST E. DISTRICT	43	32	15	1	33	32	9	3
ANKARA 2 ND E. DISTRICT	52	24	15	0,5	43	24	8	0,2
ANTALYA	34	29	20	2	21	31	10	3
İSTANBUL 1 ST E. DISTRICT	44	30	10	4	36	27	5	5
İSTANBUL 2 ND E. DISTRICT	46	25	10	3	37	22	5	5
İSTANBUL 3 RD E. DISTRICT	46	25	12	5	38	22	6	7
İZMİR 1 ST E. DISTRICT	32	35	14	3	18	29	8	6
İZMİR 2 ND E. DISTRICT	29	36	14	2	17	29	8	4
KOCAELİ	49	19	10	0,04	43	19	6	4
MERSİN	27	25	31	6	18	25	18	10
AVERAGES	40	27	16	3	30	26	9	5

The above factors have benefited the AK Party and by receiving large amounts of Kurdish votes Erdoğan was rightly able to claim immediately after the elections were over that the AK had become a political party representing the whole of Turkey. In his speech he pledged to continue economic and democratic reforms as well as respect pluralism, an indirect recognition of Kurdish identity. This is in stark contrast to the CHP and MHP. Clearly, the AK Party's broad basis of representation adds significantly to its ability to address the Kurdish problem. However, a number of major challenges still remain. The vote that went to the AK Party instead of the DTP does not necessarily mean a complete distancing from the discourse and objectives of DTP on the part of the Kurdish electorate. Likewise, it does not mean a categorical shying away from the PKK. It only seems to suggest that Kurds are ready to operate in a more pluralist environment in the hope that their problems in general and foremost economic problems will actually be addressed. The list of problems is an extensive one. These problems range from the adverse cultural, legal, social and economic consequences of the massive displacement that took place during the course of 1980s and 1990s to problems to do with identity and matters of representation. It is estimated that 2 to 3 million Kurds were in one way or the other displaced, often forcefully, from their habitual areas of residence.

The return process has been slow. The "village guard system", a state sponsored militia, is composed of members of Kurdish tribes whose members at times continue to harass villages deemed as pro-PKK. There is also the problem of mines, economic underdevelopment and the rising tension resulting from confrontation between the PKK and security forces, factors that have prevented a full scale return. An additional problem that is central to today's Kurdish question is that the massive suffering that the Kurds went through as a result of the violence and dislocation of the 1990s has not received much public recognition. Most importantly, the EU reforms that brought cultural rights to Kurds either have not been properly implemented or for many Kurds have fallen short of resolving their grievances and concerns. Furthermore, the rise of PKK violence during the course of the last two years has strained relations between Kurds and Turks in general and has led to ordinary Kurds being attacked in a number of western or northern cities of Turkey. This is an occurrence that had not been experienced widely in the past. There are also reports from Kurdish populated areas about a rise in human rights violations since the government increased the powers of the police.

There are also challenges to do with the establishment in Turkey represented by hard-liners from the military-bureaucratic elite and the CHP. Such hard-liners have repeatedly stressed their intention to prevent any reforms that may undermine the unitary nature of the Turkish state and its unitary national identity. What exactly is meant by such reforms is not very clear. However, one thing that is certain is that hard-liners consider any attempt to address the identity and representation dimension of the Kurdish problem as threatening to Turkish national security. Traditionally, the hard-line approach, very briefly, is the one that argues that there is no Kurdish problem, but a problem of terror, aggravated by the economic and social problems of southeastern Turkey and the support given to the PKK by the international community. This way of thinking was for a long time supported by the military as well as the governments of the 1990s. The advocates of this hard-line approach have argued that once terrorism is

eradicated, then economic and social programs associated with the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) would resolve the problems of the region. Immediately after Öcalan's capture, this position was reinforced. Süleyman Demirel, a former Prime Minister and the 9th President of Turkey, in an interview with the Turkish daily *Milliyet* in February 1999, dismissed the possibility of any cultural rights or reforms for Kurds, arguing that Turkey had one official language. He had added that in Turkey there were many ethnic groups with their own languages, and that the only way to protect the unity of the country was with one language; he added that he was against broadcasting in Kurdish. Nevertheless, today it is possible to argue that further to the reforms adopted on the cultural rights of Kurds, the hard-line approach has somewhat reconciled itself to accept a "cultural" Kurdish identity even if the advocates of this approach continue to strictly oppose any notion of an ethnic or for that matter political Kurdish identity. Similarly, any mention of the idea of "group minority rights" for Kurds continues to be seen as offensive and unacceptable. Advocates of the hard-line approach are also virulently against the notion of a debate on "how to solve the Kurdish problem" and the idea of the presence of a Kurdish political party in the Parliament.

What will be the position of the hard-liners in the future and will the AK Party be able to overcome their opposition is a question that will be addressed in the following section. The decisive victory obtained by the AK Party and the stress that it put on the idea of "more democracy and reforms" may well open some space for the government to address the Kurdish question. The hard-liners on the Kurdish question are usually also the ones that take a very strict position on Turkey's secularism and accuse the government and AK Party of a hidden agenda. Two prominent names in this respect have been a retired three-star General Hurşit Tolun and the outgoing President of Turkey, Ahmet Sezer. General Tolun was actually one of the instigators of the large anti-government and pro-secularism rallies in April and May. In the past he has also accused reformists and advocates of EU membership of being outright traitors. Interestingly, soon after the elections he did not hide his dismay and was quoted in the media saying that he was surprised by the results of the elections. However, he did also add that in a democracy one had to respect the results of an election. These remarks were in line with Ahmet Sezer's. He too had been very virulently against the government accusing them of undermining secularism and the national unity of Turkey. However, after the election he quickly came out to express the need to respect the election results. These remarks may suggest that the AK Party may be able to put forward more liberal policies on the Kurdish question.

The more liberal approach to the Kurdish problem is a product of increasing demands by Kurds to express their cultural and ethnic identity and the inability of Turkey to adjust to these demands. After a decades-old policy of denial of Kurdish identity, this new approach first officially surfaced in the late 1980s under Turgut Özal's presidency. He made it known that he was partly of Kurdish descent and initiated contacts with the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq, just before the refugee crisis of April 1991. He also played a critical role in seeing through the adoption of legislation that rescinded the law that had banned the public use of the Kurdish language. Following the December 1991 national elections, Süleyman Demirel, the new Prime Minister and leader of the True Path Party (DYP), in the company of his coalition partner, Erdal İnönü, leader of the SHP, made what at the time was considered to be a historic speech. Demirel argued

that Turkey had to recognize the Kurdish reality and could not continue to pretend that Kurds were Turks who had originally come from Central Asia. The speech and the program of the newly formed coalition seemed to be offering the possibility of introducing measures that would eventually enable the Kurds in Turkey to maintain their Kurdish ethnic and cultural identity as Turkish citizens. However, as it has already been mentioned the radical nationalist rhetoric adopted by Leyla Zana and her colleagues from the DEP provoked the hard-liners in the Parliament into action. The DEP was shut down, and this action was followed by the sentencing of DEP members of Parliament. This development signaled the fall of the more liberal approach from favor. Subsequently, many intellectuals, many members of civil society, as well as some politicians and members of government, continued to express support for this approach, but rather meekly and intermittently.

For all intents and purposes, the liberal approach remained very much in the background until the end of the 1990s. Mesut Yılmaz, the leader of ANAP, and Deputy Prime Minister at the time together with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, İsmail Cem, member of DSP led by Bülent Ecevit, gave the first signals of the gradual return of the liberal approach. This approach received a significant symbolic boost when the Chief judge of the High Court of Appeals (Yargıtay), Sami Selçuk, made a historic speech in September 1999. In his speech he stated that the current Constitution had lost its legitimacy. He advocated a constitution and legal system that would open the way to a truly democratic and pluralist society with complete freedom of expression. Although he did not refer to the Kurdish problem directly, he did not leave any room for doubt as to where he thought the ideal solution lay when he maintained that individuals should be able to express their cultural identity freely. The Chief judge's speech marks the beginning of a period during which an increasing number of politicians and members of the government energetically called for political reforms in support of greater democracy and pluralism.

It was the constitutional reforms of October 2001 that ushered in a new era with respect to the Kurdish problem in Turkey when the possibility of the public use of languages other than Turkish was opened. Subsequently, a massive debate on broadcasting and education in Kurdish started that at times became very acrimonious. Ultimately, the moderate approach prevailed and the Parliament adopted a series of specific reforms in August 2002 to meet the requirements to respect cultural rights of minorities in an attempt to meet the Copenhagen criteria of the EU. The Parliament was also able to rise above the populist calls of the MHP to prevent the lifting of the death penalty too. Undoubtedly, Turkey's aspirations to become a member of the European Union and the pressing need to start negotiations for accession played a critical role in the political transformation of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. This helped the moderate approach to prevail over the hard-line one. The reform process also enabled the emergence of a more pluralist civil society in the region. Economic considerations also assisted this process as liberal market policies in Turkey helped to boost growth and raise the legitimacy of reforms. Nevertheless, currently this moderate liberal approach in Turkey is under siege from two directions. One is the rise of nationalism and tension in the country that has created a climate much more difficult for moderation than was the case only a year or two ago. The other one is product of a recognition that the introduction of cultural rights for Kurds has fallen short of solving

the “Kurdish question”. The challenge for the future now remains in initiating an open debate to find an acceptable political agenda to address and hopefully start resolving some of the many aspects of the Kurdish problem. Will the AK Party government be able to achieve this?

4. The future

The new Parliament is characterized as one of the most representative parliaments so far in terms of the range of constituencies and political views it houses. This could forecast good as well as bad for the future of the Kurdish problem. The Parliament on the one hand houses 70 members from the MHP at one extreme and 20 members from the DTP on the other hand. Will it be possible to reconcile these two extremes? Beyond the very civil gestures that leading politicians from both sides have extended to each other at the opening of the new Parliament they clearly hold opposite and pretty much mutually exclusive views. The MHP continues to demand the execution of Öcalan and does not appear to have changed its position on the reforms of August 2002 that had brought considerable improvement to the cultural rights of Kurds. At the time their opposition had precipitated a government crisis leading to the early elections that saw the MHP, as well as all the other parties that made up the coalition, left outside the Parliament. The electorate had punished the coalition parties including the MHP decisively. Did the MHP draw lessons from this experience? It is very difficult to tell. However, the rise of Turkish nationalism has clearly helped the MHP to return to the Parliament. Nevertheless, many argue that it is much better to have the MHP in Parliament than outside because this is likely to have a moderating impact on its policies. Devlet Bahçeli has already been praised publicly on a number of occasions, including by members of the DTP, for diffusing crises between MHP supporters and Kurdish activists on a number of occasions. This may help to reinforce the MHP leadership’s commitments to seek solutions to problems within the Parliament through dialogue.

Similar observations can be made about the DTP too. The DTP comes from a long tradition of Kurdish nationalist political parties. It has already been mentioned that politicians from DEP had entered the Parliament after the 1991 national elections on the ticket of the social democratic party, SHP. However, the decision of a group of these politicians led by Leyla Zana to carry their radical discourse and actions to the floor of the Parliament had led to dire consequences. There was also HADEP and DEHAP representing the same line of politics as DEP. Subsequent to the crisis provoked by DEP both of these parties failed to make it into the Parliament during national elections in 1995, 1999 and 2002. Both faced closures by courts for their radical discourse and links to the PKK. However, DEHAP having received high levels of the Kurdish votes in 2002 went on to win many mayoral posts during the local elections in 2004. Although both parties were closed down for their radical discourse and close links to the PKK, many mayors from DEHAP did learn to work together with state authorities at the local level or at least co-exist. The reform process in Turkey also played a critical role in encouraging this. The DTP has had also to adjust to a growing Kurdish civil society prepared to distance itself from radical politics and the PKK that has already been highlighted in the previous section. It is possible to argue that the

climate created by the reform process and the weakening of the PKK has helped the emergence of alternative Kurdish voices.

These voices are particularly audible among local business associations but also women's rights groups. The DTP appears to have somewhat adjusted to these developments and tried to curb the more nationalist and confrontationalist Kurdish nationalist discourse. There is an important difference between the language and discourse that for example the current co-leaders of the DTP, Aysel Tuğluk and Ahmet Türk, employ compared to Leyla Zana. Just a few days before the elections Zana called for the need to divide Turkey into provincial states, a thinly veiled way of advocating federalism. In contrast to such disturbing ideas from the perspective of hard-liners and the public in Turkey, Tuğluk and Türk have chosen to emphasize pluralist democracy and dialogue. It is not surprising that the DTP chose to distance itself from Zana by not encouraging her to run in the elections. Yet the DTP leadership has refrained from breaking away itself from the PKK and calling it a terrorist group. Nevertheless, on the surface of it, as in the case of MHP, the DTP also appears committed to the idea of searching for a solution to the Kurdish problem through dialogue and democracy rather than violence. Of course time will actually tell how far both MHP and DTP will be able to distance themselves from slipping back into nationalist discourse and politics not to mention violence.

The second largest political party in the Parliament is the CHP with 112 seats. Until the last two years or so, the CHP had been supportive of the reform process in Turkey and seemed to be willing to recognize cultural diversity in the country. However, more recently this situation appears to have changed and many have remarked that during the run up to the elections, the CHP sounded increasingly like the MHP. It also took an openly confrontationalist attitude toward the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq and saw the developments there as threatening to Turkey's territorial integrity. Deniz Baykal, the leader of the CHP, openly advocated intervention in northern Iraq against the PKK and at times seemed to suggest that the intervention ought also to cover the protection of the Türkmén if Kerkük was to be incorporated into the Kurdish federated state. Many accused the CHP of pursuing a typically nationalist agenda aggravating the public's perception of threats and fears to increase its chances of being elected into government. This kind of discourse was also linked to the CHP's bitter questioning of the AK Party's commitment to secularism in Turkey. Baykal clearly appears to have used an approach on the Kurdish problem closer to the one held by the MHP as a tool to try to weaken the AK Party's prospects of being reelected into government. This accounts for the CHP's failure to win one single seat from Kurdish populated areas. Will the CHP continue a similar attitude in the new Parliament? It is difficult to tell. However, what is indeed clear is that the CHP's nationalist discourse has backfired on it and did not receive an endorsement from the broader electorate. The CHP saw its seats significantly fall compared to 2002. Whether this might lead to a restructuring within the party is difficult to tell at this point in time.

In contrast to the CHP a significant proportion of the general electorate has given the AK Party a resounding victory. This suggests that the more moderate, reformist, pluralist and reconciliatory discourse of the AK Party won decisively over both the CHP and MHP. This is promising. What is also promising is that the AK Party was able to make some inroads into the constituencies of the DTP as explained earlier on. What

would an AK government be able to do about the Kurdish problem? It would be unrealistic to expect major initiatives. However, it is also highly likely that an AK government will attempt to develop policies reflecting the spirit of Erdoğan's August 2005 speech in Diyarbakır. In that speech the emphasis was on the idea of "more democracy" as a cure. This suggests that the broader framework within which the AK Party aims to approach the Kurdish problem will be defined by the EU reforms. The emphasis will be on individual freedoms and the ability to express one's identity culturally rather than politically. It is doubtful whether any policies that could change Turkey's unitary structure would be considered. The AK Party has promised to develop a "civilian" constitution. This may suggest a further opening for addressing the Kurdish problem. However, it would be unrealistic to expect that such an opening would satisfy the demands of the DTP. Allusions to a federal structure to replace the current centralized and unitary nature of the Turkish state or for that matter the idea of bi-national state are well beyond the plausible.

The AK Party government is going to have to work on balancing at least four different sets of competing opinions and interests. Firstly, it will have to balance a wide range of opinion within the Parliament ranging from the DTP to MHP even if it may not necessarily need their support when it comes to policy adoption and implementation. Secondly, it will also need to balance opinion within the political party. The party does have numerous ethnic Kurdish MPs representing their respective constituencies in east and southeastern Turkey. At the same time there are also members of Parliament who represent constituencies sympathetic to Turkish nationalism and the MHP. Thirdly, outside the Parliament, the government is going to have to look over its shoulder to check the military and its hard-line allies. During the course of the first half of 2007 the military in an unequivocal manner demonstrated the extent to which it can still intervene in day-to-day politics. The military has long considered Islamic fundamentalism and Kurdish nationalism as the biggest threats to Turkey. In the eyes of the military the AK Party's secular credentials are suspect, and the military together with their allies are likely to watch very carefully what the government does on the Kurdish question too. They will not shy from stating their red line policy even if the outcome of the latest election will restrain them to a certain extent. Ultimately, the policy on the Kurdish problem will be a function of the interaction between the liberal and the hard-line traditionalist approaches mentioned above.

5. The positive scenario

Against this background it is possible to suggest two basic scenarios for the future. The first one is the positive scenario based on the assumption that after the strong mandate the AK Party received it will indeed be able to consolidate political stability, economic growth and further liberalization in Turkey. What would such a Turkey mean in terms of the Kurdish problem? Most importantly, such a Turkey would be one that would finally start to debate the issue of how to solve the Kurdish problem irrespective of whether there may or may not be an easy solution. Such a Turkey would be one reminiscent of the period when Turkey began to debate its difficult problems ranging from the Armenian question to the issue of honor killings and women's rights. Even if there still is a lot to be done, considerable progress has been achieved on the last two problems

as civil society and the government have been able to work together. However, the lively debate on what happened to the Armenians in Turkey and whether this was or was not genocide, has been stifled by the rise of nationalism and the invoking of Article 301 of the Penal Code.

This issue of debate is very critical. The EU reforms have clearly made Turkey a much more open and plural society. Yet, the issue of how to resolve the Kurdish question remains among a handful sensitive issues that so far have enjoyed a limited and shy debate. Over the last few years there have clearly been a number of openings on the Kurdish question. Through radio and television broadcasting. Kurdish culture in all its forms can be manifested much more easily and openly. However, there are two areas over which progress has been very limited. The first one is the issue not so much of the recognition of Kurdish identity, which has pretty much been accepted even by the military, but the fact that Kurds have suffered throughout Turkish republican history and especially during the 1990s has still not been thoroughly addressed. Back in 1998 a parliamentary commission was indeed set up to study the problems affecting Kurdish populated areas as a result of terrorism and efforts to combat this terrorism. This was very important, as was the adoption of a law aiming to compensate the victims and assist the inhabitants of villages that were forcefully vacated to return to their villages. However, the implementation of this law has fallen short of what needs to be achieved. A report published by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in June 2006, published in English in August 2007, notes the progress but also highlights the difficulties as well as the work that still needs to be done. The report also notes how there is a deep sense of injustice felt among the Kurds of the regions affected by terror and anti-terror policies that needs to be addressed.

The second one concerns precisely the issue of what to do with the Kurdish problem. Recognizing the Kurdish reality in Turkey is one thing, debating what to do about it is a wholly different matter. The latter goes to the very heart of the nature of the Turkish state and society, conceived right from the early days of the republic as a centralized unitary nation-state with one official language and one national identity. Now that Turkey has come to recognize that ethnically and culturally it is a very plural and diverse society and that Kurds constitute the largest minority the big question is: how are Turkish national identity and state structures to be reformed to reflect that diversity? In the aftermath of the EU reforms there was an expectation that the cultural rights and greater democracy offered would be adequate. This has not been the case. Questions over the use of the Kurdish language in the public realm, for example in the context of local government or official state business, the place of the Kurdish language in national education not to mention where to fit the issue of Kurdish experiences in mainstream Turkish history taught in schools have not been addressed and debated at governmental level. Much more difficult to debate has of course been the issue of what form would a "solution" of the Kurdish problem take. The idea that a "solution" could take the form of a federation, bi-national state, territorial autonomy and technically even secession, as long as there is no incitement to violence, should be possible given the new reform laws put into place. Yet there are still provisions in various laws, such as the aforementioned Article 301 of the Penal Code that can criminalize such ideas or their public discussion. Lately, nationalist fervor, the military's interference in politics

and the activities of various nationalist groups have not offered an environment conducive to an open debate.

In the positive scenario it might be possible to envisage that under the AK government a debate on the various aspects of the Kurdish problem and its probable form of solution can be initiated. This will not be easy. Nevertheless, the fact that the AK Party commands a large majority in the Parliament and that it has Kurdish constituencies makes it the best placed party to initiate such a public debate. This may be somewhat facilitated if the DTP is willing to play a constructive role and is willing to yield to the plurality of views among Kurds. Furthermore, for this debate to be able to take place the PKK would have to be curbed and here too a lot would depend on the DTP. In that context the AK Party would have to find ways to put into practice what Mehmet Ađar, a former police Chief and leader of the True Path Party, had in mind when he argued that PKK activists need to be encouraged to renounce arms and join regular politics. His words in September 2006 were not very well received by the military but the AK Party would inevitably have to consider the very difficult and divisive issue of amnesty for PKK activists and supporters who are in jail or at large. This may almost be a *sine qua non* for an effective dialogue to begin.

The AK Party appears to be committed to the idea of drawing up a completely new and “civilian” constitution to replace the current one. The current one was originally prepared under military supervision during the early 1980s when the military ruled. The Constitution has been extensively amended to allow for EU reforms but many feel that it still maintains the spirit of the military and falls well short of what a civilian constitution should be like. The work on such a constitution has already started and the importance attached to a new definition of citizenship may well benefit the debate concerning the Kurdish problem. The current definition of citizenship is considered by many to have a more “ethnic” rather than “civic” conception of Turkishness. The development and introduction of such a “civic” definition of citizenship may go a long way not only in encouraging a debate of the Kurdish problem but also meeting the needs of moderate Kurds who may be comfortable with expressing their “Kurdishness” at an individual level in a plural, democratic but unitary Turkey rather than seek group rights. The Chairman of the commission that is drawing up the draft “civilian” constitution is AK Party Deputy President, Dengir Mir Mehmet Fırat. Fırat is a Deputy from Mersin of Kurdish descent and advocates a constitution that emphasizes greater freedoms, greater pluralism and respects cultural diversity.

Beyond these issues the new government would most likely be able to address more pragmatic problems that could significantly improve the day-to-day lives of people in the Kurdish populated areas of Turkey. Top of the list of such issues will be the reactivation of the law aiming to compensate the victims of terrorism and anti-terrorism. The terms of the law have been extended on a number of occasions; however, according to TESEV there still remain Kurds who have not been properly compensated. Similarly, the government might be able to take additional measures to support return to villages or assist the integration of those who choose to remain in the cities and towns of the region they had fled to. An effort to ensure greater respect for human rights and also improve the relationship between local people and the state in the region should not be particularly difficult policies to implement. There are already numerous success stories in this respect, including for example the positive and

constructive attitude of the current governor of Diyarbakır and the case of a former governor of Batman. There is also the case of Gaffar Okan, the police Chief of Diyarbakır, who had won the “hearts” of locals before he was assassinated in January 2001. In the 1990s in general governors and police Chiefs were often part of the problem. Hence, to be able to appoint police Chiefs and governors to Kurdish populated provinces that can develop a good relationship with the locals and win their trust will be critical. Most important among the pragmatic measures would of course be the introduction of specific policies to help to boost the economy of the region. It is likely that those moderate Kurds that have been elected on the AK Party ticket will press hard for such policies especially aiming to decrease unemployment. Measures to support civil society groups addressing problems such as honor killings, women’s rights, illiteracy and support for small scale businesses would make a visible difference.

In the positive scenario one can also envisage the development of a constructive and much more coherent foreign policy towards northern Iraq. The policy in the course of the last year or so has been characterized by a considerable degree of disarray. This disarray became much more visible as PKK incursions into Turkey from northern Iraq increased. The government, and especially Abdullah Gül as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, advocated dialogue with Americans, central Iraqi authorities and representatives of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. The military in stark contrast championed the cause of a military intervention. They openly argued that Americans and the Kurdish administration are openly or indirectly arming and assisting the PKK. The issue of the scale of the intervention has also been a major bone of contention. The military and some nationalist hard-liners have often alluded to a major military intervention against the PKK but also against the Kurdish administration to deter it from incorporating Kerkük and/or declaring an independent Kurdish state. The military and the former President have also blocked any possibility of dialogue with the President of Iraq and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Jalal Talabani. Actually, the policy toward northern Iraq has been a major source of tension between the government and the military. However, the government successfully managed to avoid a military intervention before the elections. In the meantime it appears that a degree of convergence has occurred between the military and the government in favor of a very focused and narrow intervention against PKK bases and hideouts in northern Iraq as an absolute last resort.

The AK government is likely to pursue a policy of dialogue and put pressure on both the regional as well as central government authorities in Iraq to cooperate. The signs in this respect are quite clear. In August the Prime Minister of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki was in Ankara. The government expressed its support for Maliki but at the same time put pressure on Maliki to cooperate against the PKK. Abdullah Gül, as a presidential candidate announced that he would actually change the established policy of not inviting or dealing directly with Talabani. The AK Party is also very conscious of the close economic links between Turkey and northern Iraq and what these links mean in terms of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. The rise of a nationalist discourse in Turkey clouded the significance of these economic links as well as the size and extent of the Turkish economic presence in northern Iraq. A series of articles on northern Iraq run by the Turkish daily *Milliyet* in April was very revealing for the Turkish public. The public was surprised to discover the scale of the presence of Turkish companies in terms of

investments, trade and employment. There were also a number of documentaries run on TV channels that visually demonstrated this reality together with how at least the people interviewed look up to Turkey and did not particularly harbor the kind of feelings of hostility that Turkish nationalists attribute to the Kurds of northern Iraq. It is likely that the AK government will nurture closer economic relations with northern Iraq and seek greater dialogue. The AK Party election manifesto declares the Türkmén, Kurds and Arabs living in the region as relatives (*akraba*) while highlighting that the presence of terrorists in northern Iraq as a complicating factor for developing relations. However, rather than military means the AK government will prefer to use dialogue to resolve its problems with Iraq as well as the Kurdish administration in the north. Such an approach would also fall in line with the AK Party manifesto that emphasizes the determination to improve relations with all neighboring countries. Actually, Ahmet Davutođlu, a senior foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister has long called this “the zero problem neighborhood policy” and it was one of the conspicuous characteristics of the first AK government’s foreign policy.

Clearly, for the government policies seeking the resolution of problems with northern Iraq as well as Kurds in Turkey will depend very much on the position of the Kurds too. In spite of the provocative statements that are frequently associated with Massoud Barzani, the Head of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq, the government and AK Party have maintained close and cooperative relations with Iraqi Kurds in general. The problem is with the PKK. The authorities in northern Iraq are unwilling to do anything against the PKK partly for reasons to do with Kurdish solidarity but also partly for fear of disrupting and undermining the relative peace and stability of the north. Hence, the activities of the PKK always risks taxing the government’s relations with the Kurds of northern Iraq. In the case of Kurds in Turkey the picture is a much more complex one. Compared to the mid-1990s the scene is much more promising in the sense that the grip of the PKK and radical Kurdish nationalism has been weakened. There are alternative Kurdish political voices as well as a Kurdish civil society emerging that seeks to address pragmatic day-to-day problems and seek solutions to these problems from within the system rather than seek ambitious and divisive goals such as independence or territorial autonomy. Where the DTP chooses to position itself will also be extremely critical if the government is able to bring about outcomes associated with a positive scenario. If the DPT succeeds in moving away from maximalist demands associated with radical Kurdish nationalism and instead uses its weight and clout to seek solutions to practical problems the likelihood of the positive scenario materializing will be higher. This would also increase the possibility of the emergence of an environment conducive to debating a “solution” for the Kurdish problem as well as seek policies that could alleviate some of the grievances concerning the Kurdish identity in Turkey.

There is one important factor that will deeply influence whether this “positive scenario” can indeed materialize in full or at least in part and that is the state of EU-Turkish relations. Many have actually established a direct link between the rise of nationalism in Turkey and the growing instability with the deteriorating relations between the two sides. The Turkish public and state institutions have been deeply affected by the growing resistance to Turkish membership to the EU as well as to the manner in which the EU has slowed down accession negotiations. These developments have reinforced

the deeply seated belief that the EU will never admit Turkey as a member because Turkey is a Muslim country. The engagement of the EU was very critical in encouraging the government to pursue the reform process. If the government is going to be able to address as thorny a question as the Kurdish one it will again need the engagement of the EU aiming for a fully-fledged Turkish membership. It is a well established fact that the promise of membership plays a critical role in the transformation of countries. This applies to Turkey as well. The EU however has also a direct role to play with respect to the Kurdish question itself.

Actually, the EU did play this role constructively up to a certain point. It is doubtful whether Turkey would have been able to introduce reforms enabling Kurds to enjoy greater cultural rights and the possibility to express their identity with greater freedom without EU engagement. Furthermore, the EU through the Commissioner for Enlargement, its representative in Ankara and a number of MEPs has indeed tried on numerous occasions to warn Kurdish nationalist politicians, from DEHAP as well as the DTP, and especially the mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman Baydemir, to distance themselves from violence and the PKK. In this respect, the author of this report was told on a number of occasions by members of civil society groups in Diyarbakır of the moderating impact that the speech of Joost Lagendijk, Member of the European Parliament and co-President of the EU-Turkey Parliamentary Committee, in May 2006 made on at least some DEHAP/DTP politicians and Kurds at large. Public opinion surveys in Turkey have repeatedly shown that Kurds support EU membership more than the average level in Turkey. This is usually considered as a sign of how Kurds in Turkey are much keener to be part of a Turkey that would become a member of EU rather than to support a separatist agenda or the idea of a Kurdish state that might emerge from a northern Iraq they subsequently try to join.

The EU engenders a considerable degree of trust among the Kurds. They recognize that in a Turkey engaged by the EU they would stand a much better chance of arriving to an acceptable *modus vivendi* with respect to a “solution” of the Kurdish problem short of exercising self-determination. This encourages many Kurds to distance themselves from a fully fledged nationalist agenda. With respect to the Turkish side the question of trust is more complicated. Public opinion polls indicated a high level of support for membership among the Turkish public too, especially during the period 2003-2005 when relations between the two sides were reasonably positive. However, at the same time these polls also showed that among the public a considerable degree of skepticism existed about the credibility of the EU. The issue of trust and credibility is critical if the EU is going to be able to play a positive and constructive role in addressing the Kurdish problem in Turkey. In that context the military’s perception of the EU and of Turkey’s membership prospects will be of paramount importance. It is interesting to note the remarks of a retired four-star General, Edip Başer, who between September 2006 and May 2007 held the critical task of serving as a coordinator on the issue of PKK terrorism with his American counterpart General Joseph Ralston. At a conference in Ankara in September 2004 on “governance and the military” he remarked that he believed EU membership would constitute an anchor for Turkey’s internal as well as its external security. Such a remark coming from a retired top rank General is of utmost importance and suggests how the military then had begun to see EU membership as a development that would not only help improve Turkey’s external

security but also the domestic one. For the military, beside the protection of secularism, domestic security is closely associated with ensuring Turkey's territorial integrity that they see to be deeply threatened by Kurdish nationalism.

In 2004, the progress of EU-Turkish relations and the prospects of accession negotiations starting had brought the Turkish military to a position that one would have not imagined only a few years earlier. The military was indeed adjusting to the recognition of cultural diversity in Turkey, to civilian contribution to foreign and security policy-making and to the need for democratic accountability. This was being reflected in concrete policy outcomes on "high politics" issues such as the emergence of a more moderate new policy on Cyprus and northern Iraq among others. Aydinli *et al* in a perceptive article in *Foreign Affairs* of January-February 2006 noted that the Turkish military was likely to continue to adjust to a new understanding of national security as long as there was ongoing evidence of progress towards membership and the EU became a new guardian of stability and security. The authors of the article however did note that "further reform may need to see more evidence of progress towards membership". In the course of the last year or so the evidence has not been very promising. Not surprisingly the military has reverted back to a hard-line position on the Kurdish question as well as northern Iraq. The manner in which the government has barely succeeded in preventing a military intervention against the PKK in northern Iraq from taking place has already been highlighted. Much more important however have been the remarks of the Chief of Staff, Yaşar Büyükanıt, about the EU. The General in a speech he delivered in April 2007 at the headquarters of the General Staff in Ankara described the EU as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity pure and simple. He argued that if Turkey were to follow EU requirements on minorities it would be torn apart. This has also been accompanied by frequent accusations by the military that members of the EU are either assisting the PKK or failing to cooperate with Turkey on PKK terrorism.

The EU could play a critical role in increasing the probability that the positive scenario will materialize. However, even then a lot would also depend on the government for the EU to be able to play such a role. General Başer was very correct in his observation. The EU does indeed have a long track record with respect to instilling a sense of security among its members. This lies at the very heart of the European integration project. With respect to the difficult issue of ethnicity and minority rights the track record of the EU has been pretty clear. The EU has tended to limit itself to the protection of human rights and advancement of cultural rights as well as personal freedom. The issue of minority rights has been left to the member states. Furthermore, the EU has shunned violence and the idea of unilateral secession. The best deterrence that the EU has against unilateral secession is that the part of a member country that may secede would be able to become a member of the EU only after a standard accession process and the unanimous agreement of the existing membership including the country from where secession would be taking place. The government would have to explain this very clearly and in a convincing manner to the Turkish public before the EU can indeed play its role to the fullest. Of course it must once more be reiterated that this could only take place if the EU were willing and able to engage Turkey towards membership.

6. The negative scenario

The negative scenario would to an extent resemble what Turkey experienced in the course of the last year or so, characterized by a rise of nationalism, tension, and instability. It has already been mentioned that the AK Party deserves a lot of credit for the democratic reforms in Turkey. While in power the party did try and to a large extent delivered the promises it had made in its election program in 2002. Its 2007 election campaign and election program of stressed further democratization and reform. These themes were regularly emphasized by the leadership during the election campaign and appear to have played an important role in ensuring the party's success. However, the question of how committed the AK Party is to democracy and especially pluralist democracy remains a debated issue in Turkey. Many have argued that against the rise of nationalism and the explosion in the number of court cases invoking Article 301 against numerous intellectuals the government remained indecisive. In spite of calls from within and as well as outside Turkey for rescinding or at least reformulating this article the government did not do much or at best was split within itself. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and even the Prime Minister on a number of occasions hinted at reforming the article while the Minister of Justice Cemil Çiçek openly resisted any change. The problem appeared to be a function of both a fear of losing voters to politicians and political parties fanning the fires of nationalism as well as a conspicuous absence of conviction and political will to push through reforms. The party leadership and the government seemed to prefer to go along with the party rank and file rather than play the kind of leadership they had shown when they led the EU instigated reform process between 2002 and 2004.

Furthermore, there is also ample evidence of occasions when the government wavered in its willingness to meet international standards associated with pluralist democracies. A vivid case in point was when in September 2004 the Prime Minister tried to have adultery criminalized in the new Penal Code. This led to a major crisis domestically as well as in EU-Turkish relations. This was a very telling occasion in terms of the AK Party as well as the Prime Minister in terms of testing the limits of their commitment to a more advanced democracy. Adultery had been decriminalized in Turkey in the mid-1990s. The acceptance of the Prime Minister's initiative would have been a major set back rather than a reform. The AK Party and the Prime Minister have on numerous occasions championed the idea of a plural Turkey in the cultural and political not to mention ethnic sense of the word. The government has been much more at ease with the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey and has developed very close relations especially with their religious leadership. It has already been mentioned that the AK Party and the government developed a much more liberal position on Kurds and their cultural rights than practically all previous governments in Turkey. Yet this liberal approach toward diversity in Turkey comes to a grinding halt in the case of Alevis in Turkey. Alevis belong to a heterodox Muslim sect. Many Alevis and their associates consider themselves to be religiously different from the majority Sunni branch of Islam. However, the Prime Minister and the party insist on seeing them as part and parcel of mainstream Islam refusing to recognize their separate identity. This has very important practical implications but most important does suggest that the commitment to pluralism may be a rather superficial one or have limits.

Compared to past practice the AK government has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness and capability of consulting and seeking the opinion of a diverse range of interest groups. A case in point is the way in which they sought the advice and contribution of a wide range of associations and groups when finalizing the new Penal Code. They were exceptionally cooperative with women's rights group in, for example, criminalizing and defining the scope of honor killings. The same can be said about their current efforts to draw up a new draft constitution. They have publicly announced that once their copy of the draft is ready they will indeed open it to debate and input as widely as possible. Such practice clearly supports the government and AK Party's plural democratic credentials. However, at the same time, there are also occasions when the government and AK Party have insisted on behavior suggesting the a presence of conspicuous streak of a majoritarian understanding of democracy.

The AK Party sees itself as having made a major political and ideological break from its predecessor Refah (Welfare). Refah, led by the long-standing Islamist politician Necmettin Erbakan, is where most of the AK Party leadership made their debut. Erbakan and his political entourage rarely refrained from hiding their instrumentalist and majoritarian view of democracy. They saw democracy as a tool to achieve a "just order" (adil düzen) based on Islam. They advocated and they also believed that democracy entitled the "majority" to adopt and impose policies with disregard to the rest of society. The AK leadership on numerous occasions has painstakingly distanced itself from the legacy of Refah on the grounds that they are committed to secularism and pluralist democracy. As a result some in Europe have even likened the AK Party to Christian Democrat parties. Yet there are occasions when the Prime Minister and party leadership have resorted to arguments and even policies suggesting that a majoritarian view of democracy is still alive.

A recent case in point was the manner in which the Prime Minister handled the selection of the AK Party candidate for the presidential election in April. Against repeated calls and massive public pressure for the need to take a conciliatory approach and nominate a candidate that would have a broad basis of support, the Prime Minister insisted on putting the name of Abdullah Gül forward. His unwillingness to give in played an important role in precipitating a major crisis in April that could only be diffused by calling for early parliamentary elections. The same problem repeated itself when the Prime Minister insisted on keeping Gül's candidacy on the grounds that the massive victory the AK Party had received in the elections entitled them to do so. This was in contrast to the AK Party's handling of the election of the new speaker of the Parliament Köksal Toptan. On this occasion the party leadership heeded calls for selecting a candidate that received support from across the floor of the Parliament. Clearly, the AK Party's past record does manifest a capability to be flexible, ready to seek reconciliation and support pluralist democracy as well as practices that go in the other direction. The danger is that in a crisis situation, whether political or economic there may well be the danger that the AK leadership could sacrifice its commitment to pluralist democracy complicating efforts to address the Kurdish problem.

One of the major successes of the government has been with respect to the performance of the Turkish economy. The government succeeded in reducing budget deficits as well as inflation and most importantly followed economic policies that have ensured the economy would grow at an impressive rate. For the first time in decades

the public has high expectations about the future of the economy. This is reflected in the performance of the Istanbul stock exchange but also in the number of new businesses that are being set up. A survey run by *Milliyet* soon after the elections, whose results were made public late in August, discovered that more than 76 % of the electorate that voted in favor of the AK Party did so on the grounds of the government's economic performance and positive economic expectations. A similar reasoning can be cited for those who voted for the AK Party in the Kurdish populated areas. Many would also argue that the military has been reluctant to mount an open coup fearing the disastrous impact that this would have on the Turkish economy. Similarly, one of the major reasons holding back a military intervention against the PKK in northern Iraq has also had to do with economic considerations.

There is a general recognition that the political reforms of the government played an important role in creating an environment conducive for economic growth. Yet, the opposite can also be argued. An ever stronger economy has also enabled the government to seek the support it needed to push for reforms. The two processes reinforced each other. Hence, any serious deterioration in the performance of the Turkish economy as a result of domestic instability or some exogenous factor could politically undermine the government and its ability to pursue and mobilize support for reforms. This would have a double negative effect on efforts to address the Kurdish problem constructively. It would make the AK Party much more defensive and vulnerable to criticism from opposition parties who would inevitably label any effort to address the demands of Kurds a sign aimed at weakening Turkey's national unity. Furthermore, an economic downturn would also adversely affect the Kurds. The general expectation of many Kurds has been that the AK Party will not only help boost the economy of the regions populated by Kurds but also promote employment. Otherwise, Kurds will increasingly be attracted by developments in northern Iraq as well as fall prey to the propaganda of Kurdish nationalists and the PKK. Such a development would also invariably undermine efforts of reform and stoke up violence.

Another very important factor that could help to bring about the negative scenario is the policies that the major opposition parties, CHP and MHP, will play in the Parliament. It has already been mentioned that the CHP, in contrast to its social democratic origins, has become increasingly nationalistic and adopted a discourse on Kurds that is not very different than that of the nationalist MHP. The seats that the two parties together command would not be enough to block the legislative work of the government. However, the discourse and policies they adopt outside the Parliament could adversely affect the government's policies on the Kurdish problem. The "politics of fear" that the CHP followed during the course of the last year played a very important role in the rise of nationalism but also in the holding of a series of large public demonstrations. On that occasion the government chose not to respond by encouraging its supporters to take to the streets. Had this been the case the country could have easily become deeply polarized. Would the government be able to hold back especially if this time such demonstrations were accompanied by other problems?

Naturally, the position of the military and its allies is very critical too. There was a period when the military seemed to relax its hard-line position on the Kurdish question after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan and the significant fall in PKK violence. This was a period during which the military acquiesced to a string of reforms that granted Kurds

important cultural rights. However, the military's position started to harden again with an increase in PKK terrorism and growing tension with the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. It has already been mentioned that the military did not receive very well the remarks of Ağar of September 2006 advocating amnesty for PKK militants to encourage them to give up violence and instead enter politics. The fact that Ağar was the police Chief in the 1990s who had fought against the PKK with considerable zeal did not prevent the military from publicly and virulently rebuking Ağar. The military's position was a strict "no negotiations" with terrorists and no discussion of a solution of the Kurdish problem beyond a policy focused on crushing terrorism. More recently, the military has been openly critical of the government as well as the EU and accused both of threatening Turkey's unity by "creating" minorities where they do not exist. In April the military's "e-coup" did threaten an intervention if they deemed that the fundamental republican principles of the Constitution, secularism and unitary nature of the Turkish state are at risk. Many have argued that the resounding victory that the AK Party achieved at the parliamentary elections would dilute the military influence over politics. However, the day before Abdullah Gül was elected President by Parliament, the Chief of Staff announced that "there were secret plans being developed to undermine secularism in Turkey and divide up the country".

The announcement by the military coincided with the AK Party's effort to complete a draft new "civilian" constitution. One of the general expectations is that this draft would offer a much more liberal framework for addressing the Kurdish problem. Yet the position of the military and the major opposition party, CHP, suggests that there will be considerable resistance to efforts to develop and adopt such a constitution. Furthermore, the issue of addressing the Kurdish problem will inevitably be tied up with the issue of secularism in Turkey. The military and the CHP as well as their allies in civil society continue to accuse the government as well as the new President of having a "secret Islamist agenda" to undermine secularism in Turkey. The AK Party and the Prime Minister, as well as the new President, have on numerous occasions tried to allay these fears. Yet it is clear that they will face a constant barrage of bickering and political harassment from the military and CHP, not to mention radical Turkish nationalist circles. This will inevitably poison the political climate and complicate efforts to address the Kurdish question and may also aggravate the problem if in the meantime PKK violence continues and the DTP in Parliament adopts an openly Kurdish nationalist agenda. Such developments would complicate the government's relations with the EU. Inevitable EU criticism, without a clear commitment to Turkish membership that would follow these developments, would end up exacerbating the situation.

As in the positive scenario, the role of the EU will be critical in the case of the negative one too. It has already been highlighted that the weakening of the EU's engagement with Turkey contributed adversely to the rise of nationalism and instability in the country. The internal problems, such as enlargement fatigue, the absence of a satisfactory resolution of the constitutional crisis, growing xenophobia against Islam in especially most of the old membership etc..., suggest that the EU as an entity will lack the political will to engage Turkey positively. This will be aggravated by the constant and virulent opposition to Turkish membership in a number of leading member countries such as France and to a certain extent in Germany not to mention Austria,

Denmark and Holland. The new French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, has already started to put his opposition to Turkish membership into practice and blocked the opening of one critical chapter in the accession negotiations. These developments receive wide attention in Turkey and reinforce the deep mistrust towards the EU. This will inevitably complicate efforts to address the Kurdish question constructively provoking a worsening of relations between the EU and Turkey resembling a “vicious circle”: the absence of progress on the Kurdish question in Turkey will lead to EU criticism as well as inevitable abuse by some European politicians and leaders who will argue that Turkey’s treatment of Kurds is yet another piece of evidence demonstrating that Turks are not Europeans, in turn encouraging those very nationalist circles in Turkey to exploit this as a means of furthering their political agenda and complicating the government’s efforts to reform. An AK Party, whose commitments to plural democracy lacks depth, may well find itself having to adopt a nationalist agenda too and distance itself from the EU that it would increasingly introduce as a “Christian Club”. Ironically, this would bring the AK Party in line with the Turkish military that back in April 2002 had argued that “the EU was a Christian Club and would never admit Turkey and that Turkey ought to look for possible alternatives in Iran and Russia”. Clearly, such a strategy would not bode well for Turkey not to mention for Kurds.

7. Conclusion

The “Kurdish question” has been a long-standing problem of the republic since its foundation. Important progress has been achieved in the course of the last decade or so. The EU’s engagement with Turkey has greatly contributed to the reform process. However, in the last two years or so a degree of regression has taken place with respect to the implementation of these reforms and inevitably Kurds in Turkey have suffered the consequences. The decision of the PKK to restart its violent attacks coupled with developments in northern Iraq has stoked the fires of Turkish nationalism. Lastly, the crisis through which Turkey went in the course of last spring aggravated the situation. However, the decisive victory that the AK Party won in the national election of July 2007 together with the resolution of the crisis with the election of the new President in Turkey offers an important opportunity for making progress with respect to the Kurdish question. The gradual emergence of a Kurdish civil society with a much more moderate and pragmatic approach to their problems will assist the hand of the government in addressing the Kurdish problem. Similarly, a willingness on the part of the DTP to distance itself from the traditional outright Kurdish nationalist discourse of its predecessor is an additional positive development. However, these developments must also be weighed against the presence of hard-liners in and outside the Turkish Parliament. The military has been very vocal both on the Kurdish question as well as on northern Iraq. Nevertheless, the AK Party appears determined to achieve some progress on the Kurdish question through greater freedom, greater cultural rights and greater economic prosperity for Kurds. Actually, this is the strategy of the AK Party for the whole country. Will it be able to promote and implement this strategy? In the event of economic and political difficulties, would it maintain a will for such a strategy? Will it be able to overcome the resistance from the hard-liners? What kind of a relationship will it be able to develop with the DTP? Will the DTP be able to maintain its

commitment to addressing the Kurdish question through democracy and dialogue? Will it be able to distance itself from the PKK? Will it be able to withstand the onslaught of Turkish hard-liners? Will it be able to continue to heed moderates' views within Kurdish civil society?

These are difficult questions to answer. However, in the light of the electoral victory that the AK Party won and its commitment to introduce a new "civilian" constitution the prospects that a new era will begin with respect to addressing the Kurdish question is a real one. However, will this resolve the Kurdish question? That too is a tough question. What actually constitutes a "solution" to the Kurdish question is highly contested and so far has not really been openly debated at the governmental level. The likelihood is that the AK Party will initiate such a debate. However, it is highly unlikely that the AK government will entertain any ideas that may suggest structural changes to the nature and governance of the Turkish state. It would be unrealistic to think that the "solution" of the Kurdish problem would take the form of transforming Turkey from a unitary state to a federal one. The same applies to the notion of territorial autonomy or even the notion that Kurdish could become an official language of Turkey. Yet, it is highly likely that a series of practical problems that Kurds in Turkey suffer from, such as economic underdevelopment, unemployment, dislocation etc... will be addressed. Similarly, greater freedom will be achieved for Kurds to express their views as well as their identity. Further progress may also be achieved with respect to education of the Kurdish language and media broadcasting in Kurdish languages. It is also likely that these languages will become publicly much more visible. It is also possible to foresee an important effort to improve governance at the local level and relations between ordinary Kurds and the Turkish state. The government will also show a resolution to combat PKK attacks. However, it is likely that it will emphasize dialogue and economic interdependence with the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq rather than military intervention. Yet, even if a military intervention does become inevitable it will be a strictly limited one.

It goes without saying that the EU's engagement with Turkey will be paramount for the above developments to occur. The EU at a minimum is going to have to make sure that some parity is achieved in the pace and spirit of the accession process with that of Croatia. The Turkish public will seek unequivocal evidence that in return for further reform the EU will come and meet Turkey half way and that with these reforms Turkey will stand a fair chance of membership. EU engagement will not be critical in political terms but also economic ones. Against all odds the Turkish economy is doing well but it is obvious that the performance would become even better if the "market" senses a strong EU commitment. This in turn would strengthen support for reforms on the one hand and have positive repercussions for the economic development of the Kurdish populated areas. The willingness of the EU to continue to support the merging moderate Kurdish civil society and maintain pressure on the DTP to play politics according to the rules of "democratic pluralism" will help. A strong EU engagement would also be a very powerful incentive for Turkey and the government not to drift into an adventure in northern Iraq. An ability on the part of EU member states to take a principled stance against PKK terrorism would crown the process. However, the impact of the EU would only be best felt in the very, very long run. It is only down the line in 15-20 years that one is likely to see a Turkey that resembles Spain. Today, it is an

economically prosperous and politically stable and secure Spain that is courageously addressing the thorny Basque question not to mention the Catalan one. It is able to openly debate the issue of the right of self-determination of the Basques and Catalans. Would Spain be where it is today without the confidence and the sense of security that membership of the EU has given it? If Turkey is gradually going to converge towards a “solution” of the Kurdish problem, in whatever form it takes, it will need this sense of confidence and sense of security. It is no wonder that back in 2004 retired General Başer saw EU membership as the ultimate guarantee of Turkish domestic and external security. Just as today Spain is an unequivocal asset for the EU a Turkey that resembles Spain will be such an asset too in a region that is and will continue to be in dire need of such an asset to address and resolve its multitude problems including the ones resembling the “Kurdish problem”.

Postscript

During the course of October and November the Kurdish problem and PKK terrorism literally completely dominated the political agenda of Turkey. The continued attrition of PKK attacks and the death of young conscripts exacerbated an already agitated public opinion. The pressure on the government to respond militarily mounted. On 17 October the Turkish Parliament adopted with an overwhelming majority a motion authorizing the government to send troops to northern Iraq when it deemed it necessary. The pressures and the calls for implementing this motion reached a crescendo after the PKK managed to ambush a military unit very close to the Iraqi border on the night of 21 October. There were 12 young conscripts killed and eight of them kidnapped. The government came under massive pressure to act amidst considerable acrimony and confusion over the nature of the military intervention. The government was careful to note that the intervention would be limited against the PKK. Yet the opposition and many other circles in Turkey advocated a broader operation to punish Massoud Barzani, the Head of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq. He had been employing a provocative discourse refusing to cooperate with Turkey against the PKK. There also were in Turkey those who went as far as arguing that the operation ought to preempt any effort on the part of Barzani to incorporate Kerkük into the Kurdish federated state. The government engaged itself in frantic international diplomacy and showed strong resolution to intervene against the PKK militarily as an absolutely last resort.

During the widely attended Iraq Conference in Istanbul and the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's meeting George Bush early in November Turkish diplomacy helped to mobilize international support against the PKK. By and large, the international community including the European Union expressed solidarity with Turkey against PKK terrorism and expressed an understanding that Turkey had the right to defend itself militarily. However, many also pointed out that emphasis should be put on dialogue and that if a military intervention is indeed to occur it must be of a strictly limited nature and solely against the PKK. The efforts on the part of the government by late November also began to show some results on the ground. Reports in the Turkish media suggested that the Kurdish administration in the north was indeed taking visible measures to contain the PKK, although there remained disagreements over the extradition of the PKK leadership. These reports were accompanied by news that the US military had started to cooperate very closely with their Turkish counterparts with respect to the sharing of intelligence on the PKK.

As of late November the government appeared to have handled the crisis reasonably well. Beside mobilizing international support, it also succeeded to a large extent in calming public opinion in Turkey and even in developing a smooth relationship with the military. Both the Chief of Staff General Yaşar Büyükanıt and the commander of land forces General İker Başbuğ called on the media to seize provocative coverage of the problem and allow decision makers to do their job. Yet the problem of PKK attacks is obviously far from resolved. The PKK still remains in northern Iraq even if its ability to mount attacks on Turkey seems to be severely constrained. Furthermore, the issue of PKK terrorism is very closely linked to the Kurdish problem and deeply influences the politics around it. The representation of the pro-Kurdish political party, DTP, in the

Parliament was received as a positive development in terms of efforts to address the Kurdish problem democratically. However, the election of a radical Kurdish nationalist, Nurettin Demirtaş as the new party leader early in November and the reluctance of the DTP to unequivocally condemn the PKK and distance itself from terrorism led to the opening of a court case for the closure of the party. The government in general as well as the Prime Minister and the President Abdullah Gül have repeatedly underlined that they are against the closure of political parties. They have also frequently noted that they are determined to deal with terrorism without compromising democracy and reforms in Turkey. Nevertheless, the eventual outcome of the court case against the DTP as well as the issue of PKK attacks will be critical in terms of the future of reforms and democracy in Turkey. The fact that the EU has been repeatedly calling on the DTP to distance itself from the PKK and terrorism accompanied by so far a positive international climate supportive of the government's efforts against the PKK may bode well for Turkish democracy and efforts to address the broader Kurdish problem constructively. This climate may also have been strengthened by the remarks, in a book published in November by a prominent columnist Fikret Bila, of a number of retired Generals including Kenan Evren, the leader of the 1980 military coup, that mistakes had been made towards Kurds in Turkey.