



# Kobani, Turkey's Kurds, and the 2015 Turkish Parliamentary Elections

By Esra Sardag March 12, 2015

Kobani—a previously anonymous Syrian border town thrust into prominence after surviving a siege by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS—has become a symbolic point of dispute in Turkish domestic politics. The Turkish government's initial refusal to allow aid to reach Syrian Kurdish forces who were defending Kobani as the ISIS offensive intensified in September 2014—and the subsequent tight controls on assistance to the town—sparked protests across Turkey on October 6–7<sup>1</sup> that highlighted the enduring importance of the “Kurdish issue”<sup>2</sup> in Turkish politics. The protests also illustrated the extent to which Turkey's domestic politics have become caught up in the wider regional turmoil.

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## Turkey's changing political dynamics

Of course, Kurds have always been an important part of Turkish society: Approximately 13 million Kurds reside in Turkey today, constituting about 18 percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> Historically, most Turkish Kurds have lived in southeastern Anatolia, close to the Syrian and Iraqi borders. In a 2010–2013 survey, Turkish public opinion research company Konda found that 56 percent of children born in this region were Kurdish.<sup>4</sup> However, urbanization and ongoing migration have brought millions of Kurds to Turkey's western regions—provinces such as Istanbul, İzmir, Bursa, İzmit, and Ankara—which has shifted political dynamics in these areas.

In 2013, Siyasal ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi, or SAMER—a political and social research organization in Diyarbakır, southeastern Turkey's second-largest city and home to the largest Kurdish population in Turkey—conducted a survey to determine how many Kurds had migrated from eastern provinces<sup>5</sup> to western Turkey<sup>6</sup> at least once in their lifetimes. The survey showed that more than 4 million<sup>7</sup> self-identified Kurds had migrated to the west.<sup>8</sup> Considering that Turkey's total population was 76 million people in 2013 and that 13 million of these people self-identified as Kurdish,<sup>9</sup> this means that roughly 30 percent<sup>10</sup> of Turkish Kurds reported migrating at least once—a remarkable level of mobility. Although migration from the majority-Kurdish regions to western Turkey is not a new phenomenon, this shift in Kurdish demography underpins the group's importance.

## The Kurdish political landscape

Ethnic relations in Turkey have historically been fraught with tension, particularly since the emergence of the aggressive state-driven nationalism that animated the early Turkish republic in the 1920s and 1930s. This approach to state building was an outgrowth of the ideology that came to be known as “Kemalism,” which sought to build a secular nation-state with little room for religious or ethnic diversity.<sup>11</sup> Religious groups and ethnic minorities, including Kurds, were regarded by the Kemalist elite as potentially disloyal, and these groups faced government pressure to assimilate and hostility toward any efforts to organize politically. The Kurdish language was banned, and many politically active Kurds were accused of separatism and arrested, tortured, or killed by the military regime in the early 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

These grievances fed a rebellion of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK—a militant group that has waged an intermittent, decades-long war against the Turkish state in pursuit of Kurdish independence and, since 1993, autonomy.<sup>13</sup> As part of its efforts to fight the PKK, Turkey’s government forcibly emptied many Kurdish villages in the southeastern Anatolian region in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup> This forced many Kurds to migrate to Diyarbakır—generally viewed as the region’s major Kurdish city—or to cities in western Turkey. The regime tortured many Kurdish villagers, and many Kurdish businessmen who were suspected of supporting the PKK were found dead, their killers never identified.<sup>15</sup> For its part, the PKK killed thousands of Turkish troops and threatened and killed thousands of civilians, often alleging their collaboration with the Turkish state.<sup>16</sup> While the PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by many governments today, some Kurds reject this label and consider it a legitimate organization.

Turkey’s long and bloody history with the PKK has underpinned much of the nation’s politics, particularly the Kurdish issue. It has shaped the political views of many Kurds, Turkish nationalists, and Turkey observers and experts. While the PKK has softened its demands over time—from independence to autonomy and cultural rights—and has largely upheld a unilateral ceasefire for the past two years,<sup>17</sup> many Turks still see it as a terrorist organization that wants to break up their country. This has made it hard for Turkey’s primary Kurdish political party, the Peace and Democracy Party, or BDP,<sup>18</sup> to win the support of ethnic Turks, who see the party as a political extension of the PKK. Thus, the BDP—focused primarily on equal rights for the Kurdish minority—has so far been unable to win more than 6 percent of the vote in national elections.<sup>19</sup>

## Reframing the struggle for Kurdish rights

Recognizing that the BDP could not increase its electoral share if it appealed exclusively to Kurds, party leaders established the Peoples’ Democratic Party, or HDP, a sister party designed to attract non-Kurds—particularly urban liberals—with a broader message that reframed the struggle for Kurdish rights as essential to the provision of equal rights and basic freedoms for all of Turkey’s citizens.<sup>20</sup> The HDP chose Selahattin Demirtaş,

the party's young and charismatic co-chair, to be its candidate in the August 2014 presidential election, with the goal of surpassing the 6 percent mark that the BDP and other Kurdish parties had achieved in previous parliamentary and local elections.<sup>21</sup> Demirtaş' campaign slogan, "Call for a New Life," reflected his promise to reduce state influence on private life, ensure freedom of expression, and include citizens facing ethnic, religious, gender, or class discrimination in the political process.<sup>22</sup>

Demirtaş was helped by the decision of the main opposition—the Republican People's Party, or CHP—to back Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, who many CHP loyalists considered an unappealing compromise candidate, in conjunction with the Nationalist Movement Party. In this context, Demirtaş' vision appeared to win over many non-Kurdish, liberal, secular Turks in western Turkey who did not identify with İhsanoğlu and who saw no other social democratic alternative. By de-emphasizing the ethnic distinctions that had held back the BDP, Demirtaş and the HDP won 9.8 percent of the vote.<sup>23</sup> While still drawing the lion's share of its votes from the Kurdish southeast—as the BDP and other pro-Kurdish predecessors had done—the HDP managed to win votes in the west as well.<sup>24</sup> With this broadened outreach, the HDP significantly improved on the BDP's recent electoral performances and came close to the 10 percent constitutional threshold needed to gain party representation in parliament—an unprecedented achievement for a Kurdish-dominated party.<sup>25</sup> This performance led to speculation that the HDP may run as a party in the June 2015 parliamentary elections rather than field independent candidates as it has done in previous elections.<sup>26</sup>

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## A new political party

If the HDP enters the spring election as a party rather than through independent candidates—as it has said that it will—the stakes will be high. In the current parliament, the HDP has 27 members who were all elected as independents and subsequently united as a parliamentary bloc under the HDP banner.<sup>27</sup> The safest path to parliament for the HDP would be to repeat this formula. But at least for now, the HDP's success seems to hinge on its ability to surpass the 10 percent threshold. As recently as January 14, 2015, Demirtaş said that the HDP's internal debate about in what form it would enter the June elections was over:

*We are determined to go to the polls as a party. ... There is nothing to discuss on this issue. ... Surveys show that our vote is at around 9.5 percent today and we have not launched an election campaign yet. ... Turkey will be introduced to a new HDP.*<sup>28</sup>

At his party's group meeting in the Turkish parliament on February 3, Demirtaş reinforced that the HDP would enter the elections as a party and pass the 10 percent threshold.<sup>29</sup> However, the Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey, or YSK, announced a March 14 deadline for candidates to declare their candidacy for the parliamentary election and their party affiliation. This will be the real deadline for the HDP to decide whether to run as a party or to field independent candidates.<sup>30</sup>

The stakes are high for the HDP and the wider Kurdish body politic. Should the party cross the 10 percent threshold, its prestige as a parliamentary party and as a peace process interlocutor with the Turkish government will be greatly enhanced. If the HDP runs as a party and breaks the threshold, it could win 20 new seats in parliament, meaning that it would have the potential to grant or deny the governing Justice and Development Party, or AKP, the votes it needs to change the constitution to a presidential system. This would give the HDP tremendous leverage.<sup>31</sup> But the dynamics of a multiparty parliamentary election could prove to be very different from those of the three-person presidential election in which Demirtaş and the HDP approached 10 percent of the vote. Should the HDP fail to reach the 10 percent threshold, it will have no parliamentary representation, which would deprive the parliament of a pro-Kurdish voice, undermine the party’s legitimacy, and complicate the peace process. Additionally, the HDP’s seats would default to the AKP, giving the AKP the ability to enact fundamental constitutional reforms, including the move to a presidential system in which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could further cement control over political decisions—his defining ambition.<sup>32</sup>

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### Kobani highlights the HDP’s balancing act

Demirtaş’ dream of establishing the HDP as an official party bloc in parliament—a potential game changer in Turkish politics—faces serious challenges from the wider regional upheaval, particularly the political fallout of the fighting in Kobani. The Turkish government’s initial refusal to allow military aid to reach the Kurdish forces defending Kobani triggered violent protests in southeastern Turkey that left nearly 40 people dead.<sup>33</sup> The government later allowed 150 Iraqi Kurdish fighters, called the Peshmerga, to cross through Turkey into Kobani,<sup>34</sup> but the protests underscored the fact that the Kurdish question is not strictly a domestic issue. It has become part of a regional dynamic that influences Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy. The protests also showed that the prospect of renewed polarization between Kurds and Turkish nationalists or Islamists cannot be discounted within Turkish society. This reality highlights the importance of the HDP’s attempt to become a multiethnic, democratic political alternative.

However, the HDP’s initial reaction to Kobani poses a challenge to this goal. When the protests first broke out, the HDP’s reaction was more in line with its Kurdish heritage than with the new pluralistic image it presented in the presidential elections. The government portrayed the HDP’s call to Kurdish citizens of Turkey to rally for Kobani as a provocation and a potential threat to the peace process. Press coverage suggests that the HDP’s approach hurt the image the party has begun to build. For example, *Milliyet* columnist Kadri Gürsel wrote that, “HDP’s calls, ‘From now on everywhere is Kobane,’ were a big political mistake. The government and its media used those calls perfectly to blame the violent, bloody protests on HDP.”<sup>35</sup> *Hürriyet Daily News* columnist Ahmet Hakan agreed that the HDP mishandled the anger of many Kurds but questioned: “Had HDP said ‘don’t go out on to the streets, don’t protest ... would the furious crowd have listened?’”<sup>36</sup>

The coverage points to the difficult dilemma the party faces: With Kurds dying in Kobani and PKK hardliners calling for the resumption of the armed struggle against the Turkish state, the HDP is under immense pressure to show it is an effective advocate for Kurds in Turkey and the surrounding region. More cynically, the party leadership may calculate that it can draw voters of Kurdish descent away from the AKP if it turns Kobani into a wedge issue. Giving into this pressure, however, runs counter to the party's goal of becoming a social democratic, multiethnic alternative to the conservative AKP. It also risks alienating many ethnic Turks who were educated in Kemalist schools and who view Kurdish political advocacy with suspicion. Only the party leadership knows the HDP's exact political calculus, but its parliamentary campaign rhetoric will be a good barometer.

To reconcile these seemingly conflicting goals—defending Kurds of the region while appealing to a broader Turkish constituency—the HDP should redouble its efforts to produce concrete steps in the peace process by outlining and advocating for detailed proposals on disarmament, the reintegration of PKK fighters into Turkish society, and the devolution of certain powers to municipal authorities. To stand any chance of selling these ideas to the Turkish electorate and breaking the 10 percent threshold, the HDP must build on the momentum it gained in the presidential elections in order to move beyond its history as an exclusively Kurdish party and become an alternative for all Turkish citizens.

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*Note: All translations of quotes from Turkish news sources are the author's own.*

## Endnotes

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