

## Barzani and Erdogan Meet in Diyarbakir: A Historical Day

*Mehmet Ümit Necef*

On 16th November 2013, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a mass meeting in Diyarbakir, the biggest city in Turkish Kurdistan, with the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government Masoud Barzani. While many political analysts hailed the meeting as historical, the opposition and a number of commentators attacked Erdogan for abandoning Turkey's traditional policies towards Kurds in general, and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq in particular. Especially the fact that Erdogan addressed Barzani with his official title: "The President of the Kurdistan Regional Government", and his reference to the Kurdish populated area in Northern Iraq as "Kurdistan" was seen as a radical break from traditional state policy towards the Kurds. The present news analysis argues that the "Diyarbakir Meeting" was indeed a break with traditional Turkish state policies towards the Kurds and possibly an important step on the road to full recognition and equality between Kurds and Turks in Turkey.

Vahap Coskun, Professor of Law at the University of Tigris in Diyarbakir, observed that in Turkey there is a tendency among political analysts to call any event that an author finds important “historical” (Coskun 2013). “However”, he added, “what we have seen in Diyarbakir this weekend was truly historical”.<sup>1</sup> He stated that the meeting of the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government Masoud Barzani on 16<sup>th</sup> November was historical. The media reported hundreds of thousands present at the mass meeting, in which Erdogan and Barzani appeared hand in hand on the podium to declare “the brotherhood of Turks and Kurds”.

Nearly all the political commentators and politicians agreed one way or other with Professor Coskun on the historical character of the “Diyarbakir Meeting” as the Turkish press named the event. Many analysts, not only those pro-government, but also those who often criticize the AKP government from a liberal democratic point of view, lauded Erdogans’ invitation of Barzani to Diyarbakir, the largest city in Turkish Kurdistan. One of those who acclaimed the meeting, Cengiz Candar, who tends to be critical of the Turkish Prime Minister – not least regarding the way he administers the peace negotiations with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) – stated unreservedly: “The Diyarbakir meeting was indeed historical. It has started an irreversible process. It was as if a ‘Journey of Hope’ had started”.<sup>2</sup> Another political analyst, similarly critical of Erdogan’s alleged lack of respect for democratic values and principles, Hasan Cemal, wrote: “We have witnessed a historical day in Diyarbakir. It was a historical day in the name of peace, in the name of brotherhood between Kurds and Turks and in the name of democracy”.

Commentators and politicians, who were negative against Barzani’s visit in Diyarbakir, were also of the opinion that the meeting was “historical”, but for diametrically opposite reasons. Emin Cölasan, the main commentator in the ultranationalist and secular daily *Sözcü*, with the third largest circulation in Turkey, called 16<sup>th</sup> November “The Historical Day of Shame” and wrote, “We have all witnessed the shamelessness and disgracefulness displayed on the soil of the Republic of Turkey. A sworn enemy of our country, the impostor Barzani, was welcomed by enthusiastic crowds waving the flag of Kurdistan. At the Iraqi border he was received by a governor, the head of the

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Turkish to English in this article are done by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Candar is referring to the film *Umuda Yolculuk*, (Reise der Hoffnung, Journey of Hope) directed by Xavier Koller and released in 1990.

local police and members of the parliament from AKP. The tribal chief was greeted as a hero and a savior".<sup>3</sup>

The chairman of the Nationalist Action Party, Devlet Bahçeli's fury was no less than Cölasan's: "The day Erdogan went on stage with the murderer Barzani was truly a day of historical high treason. We Turks have never seen such a betrayal in the history of the Turkish Republic. Those who blindly follow Barzani and who have slavishly handed the halter around their neck to the PKK terrorists can only write the history of treachery".<sup>4</sup> Once again, both Cölasan and Bahçeli were displaying the traditional nationalist contempt for not only Barzani, but also for the Kurds in general.<sup>5</sup>

The main opposition party, The Republican People's Party (CHP), was much less sanguine, but nevertheless negative towards the meeting. The party chairman Kemal Kilicdaroglu attacked both Barzani and Erdogan asserting that Barzani "fell into Erdogan's trap".<sup>6</sup> According to him, Erdogan's sole intention was to bolster his position before the local elections in March 2014 by exploiting Barzani's great popularity among Turkey's Kurds. He claimed that some time ago Erdogan had referred to Barzani "just a tribal chief", and asked, "Isn't it a contradiction that Erdogan is now travelling all the way from Ankara to Diyarbakir to meet Barzani?"

So, what made this meeting so "historical" – regardless of the value added to this term – in the eyes of so many analysts? In short, it was yet another, but the most radical by far, break with the traditional line of the Republic on the Kurdish issue. Let us begin with the semantics. Although the word "Kurdistan" has been one of the taboo concepts in the Turkish official parlance (Hür 2013), the Turkish Prime Minister used the K-word (twice even!) in his speech at the mass meeting: He referred to the Kurdish area in Northern Iraq as "The Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq" and to Barzani as "The President of the Kurdistan regional Government", thus, he used the official name of the region and the title of the region's president respectively.<sup>7</sup>

As Erdogan pointed out in the press conference held the day after the meeting in Diyarbakir, the word Kurdistan was used by the Ottoman state to designate the parts of the Ottoman Empire, where the Kurds constituted the majority of the population. This geographical area is a large part of the eastern and the whole of the southeastern of today's Republic of Turkey. Erdogan also reminded the public that the founder and the national hero of modern Turkey, Atatürk, used the word in his speeches and writ-

<sup>3</sup> Cölasan, Emin: Tayyibin Kolunda bir Katil: BARZANI! Sözcü.

<sup>4</sup> <http://t24.com.tr/haber/bahceliden-erdogana-madem-ahmet-kaya-hayranisin-anitini-dik-ve-izle/244315>

<sup>5</sup> For the nationalist stance on the Kurdish question see Satana 2012: 183.

<sup>6</sup> Barzani tuzaga düştü. <http://www.kanalb.com.tr/haber.php?HaberNo=52505>

<sup>7</sup> *Radikal*, 17, 2013.

ings up until the middle of the 1920's. After the Kurdish uprising in 1925, the term Kurdistan was purged totally from official and daily language and forbidden. Anybody who used the term risked being indicted for breaching Paragraph 302 of the Turkish Penal Code, which bans "carrying out activities with the aim of destroying the unity of the state and inciting separatism".<sup>8</sup>

At the press conference, Erdogan tried to give an indirect answer to a written interpellation from the Vice Chairman of The Republican People's Party, Umut Oran, who following the meeting did not miss the opportunity to attack Erdogan and to question his allegiance to the official parlance. With barely concealed contempt, Oran asked the Prime Minister, "What is the reason for the usage of the expression 'The Kurdish Region in northern Iraq'? Is there actually a state called Kurdistan?" In contrast, Oran employed himself the title "The regional Kurdish leadership in Northern Iraq". Thus, Oran implied that it was a mistake to use the word Kurdistan.<sup>9</sup>

The Kurdish-American sociologist, Mücahit Bilici, observed that Erdogan's referring to Kurdistan as "Kurdistan" was the end of the Turkish state's traditional policy towards the Kurds (i.e. denial of the existence of Kurdistan). According to him, Erdogan, by using the controversial term for the first time since the middle of the twenties, signaled that "the cliché of 'brotherhood between Turks and Kurds' is now evolving towards a new and palpable 'contract of brotherhood'".

In his speech to the enthusiastic crowd on Diyarbakir's Kantar Square, Erdogan declared, "Everybody will come down from the mountains, and the prisons will be emptied", thus declaring his aim of disarming the PKK guerrillas in the mountains and reintegrating them into the mainstream society, and hinting that his government has plans for granting a general amnesty. Keeping in mind that there are thousands of prisoners accused of being members of the PKK in the so-called KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan - Group of Communities in Kurdistan) trial, and that the leader of PKK Abdullah Öcalan is in prison, Erdogan's hint about a general amnesty created great excitement and high expectations among the Kurds. Commenting on Erdogan's statements on the guerillas and a general amnesty, the political scientist Koray Caliskan commented that "now, the genie is out of the bottle, and it is very difficult for Erdogan to go change his mind concerning his promises" (Caliskan 2013).

Before the mass meeting, Erdogan visited the Mayor of Diyarbakir, Osman Baydemir, AKP's main rival in Turkish Kurdistan. Though Erdogan had never paid a

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<sup>8</sup> The Turkish Penal Code can be seen at this official homepage:

<http://www.devletkanunu.com/node/3795>

<sup>9</sup> CHP'den Başbakan'a Barzani soruları: Kürdistan isimli bir devlet var mı?

[http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/chpden\\_basbakana\\_barzani\\_sorulari\\_kurdistan\\_isimli\\_bir\\_devlet\\_v](http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/chpden_basbakana_barzani_sorulari_kurdistan_isimli_bir_devlet_v)

visit to Diyarbakir's Mayor during his previous visits to the city as a Prime Minister, this time he went to the town hall. This gesture, as many political analysts have observed, will most likely ease the government's relations with the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), which are not always the best, and have a positive effect on the peace negotiations with the PKK.

Erdogan's "Kurdistan"-opening had another unintended consequence: Thousands of people waved both the Turkish and the Kurdish flags during the mass meeting. Many newspapers published the iconic picture of a young Kurdish teenager holding both the Turkish and the Kurdish flag and wearing a t-shirt with the word Kurdistan printed on it.<sup>10</sup> This is the first time in Turkish history, the Kurdish flag with red, green and white stripes and a yellow star in the middle, is being displayed in the public sphere with Turkish political and military authorities present and without the intervention of security forces.

Another aspect which political analysts put forward to stress the historical character of the Diyarbakir meeting, was Sivan Perwer's participation in the mass meeting. The popular Kurdish singer has been in exile in Germany since 1976 due to persecution as a consequence of the political content of his songs. Siwan sang the Kurdish song, *Megri* ("Don't cry"), together with his Kurdish colleague Ibrahim Tatlis, one of Turkey's most popular singers, and conversed with him about unity and peace between the Turks and the Kurds. During this dialog, Perwer and Tatlis shifted effortlessly between Turkish and Kurdish, this demonstrating a lingual symbol of unity and equality between the Turks and the Kurds. In a country where speaking Kurdish in public was legalized as late as 1991, and in which the state is still not allowing Kurdish being taught in public schools, it was indeed significant that two Kurds could sing and converse in Kurdish and Turkish in front of a Prime Minister, 10 cabinet ministers and a number of high level military officers.

Besides the optimists and hard-line nationalists on both the Turkish and the Kurdish sides, there were warnings of caution from political analysts, who still had a positive evaluation of the Diyarbakir Meeting. One of these analysts, Ihsan Dagi, Professor of political science, pointed to the rivalry between the PKK and Barzani's government over the Kurdish populated area in northern Syria, which Kurds call "Rojeva" (Western Kurdistan<sup>11</sup>) (Dagi 2013). The Turkish and the Kurdish government in Northern Iraq see PYD (Democratic Union Party of Syria) as the Syrian branch of PKK, and they are anxious that it will establish an autonomous Kurdish government in Northern Syr-

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ar\_mi-1161473 and <http://t24.com.tr/haber/chpden-basbakana-kurdistan-ismli-bir-devlet-var-mi/244236>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/kurdistan\\_ve\\_turkiye\\_bayraklari\\_beraber\\_dalgalandi-1161230](http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/kurdistan_ve_turkiye_bayraklari_beraber_dalgalandi-1161230)

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.rojevakurdistan.com/>



ia. Dagi was worried that Turkey's warm ties with the Barzani's government may render the PKK apprehensive regarding both Erdogan's and Barzani's intentions, and that the ensuing atmosphere of suspicion may harm the Turkish government's peace process with the PKK.

### Conclusion

The Turkish-Kurdish sociologist Mesut Yegen divides the Turkish state's policy towards its Kurdish minority since 1920 into three major periods: pre-denial (1920-1925), denial (1925-1990) and post-denial (after 1990) (Yegen, 2011 and 2007). During the first period, the state officials, especially Atatürk, declared that they would recognize the Kurds as a separate ethnic group within the national unity and within the territorial integrity of a new Turkey. Beginning from 1925, the state denied the political and cultural rights of the Kurds and the ethnic aspect of what they referred to as "The Eastern problem". Since the 1990s, the state began to concede the ethnic dimension of the Kurdish question and to lift a number of bans on Kurdish language and culture. Yegen states that in the past two decades the state has started to blend the strategies of assimilation and oppression with recognition (Yegen 2011: 67).

In order to fully understand the significance of Erdogan's meeting with Barzani in Diyarbakir and the fact that he was addressed with his official title, it can be useful to remember that one year before the AKP came to power in 2002, the Turkish government led by the social-democrat Bülent Ecevit published a memorandum which announced solemnly that the establishment of a Kurdish state "is a scenario which we can never accept". Moreover, an unmistakable threat was being issued in the document: "The declaration of the Kurdish state is *casus belli* (the reason for war)" (Sezgin & Wall 2005: 793 cite Ergon 2001).

Erdogan's public appearance with Masoud Barzani and Siwan Perwer in the largest city in Turkish Kurdistan in a mass demonstration, where both Turkish and Kurdish flags were waved and where speeches were held and songs sung in both Kurdish and Turkish is likely to be a first, radical step on the way to a new era: Recognition. Turkish state policy has a long way to go yet, before one can talk about complete recognition of the Kurds and equality between Turkish and Kurdish citizens. However, the "Diyarbakir Meeting", in all probability, constitutes a "point of no return".

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## Key Words

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## Author

Mehmet Ümit Necef is associate professor at the Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies at SDU (see [www.sdu.dk/staff/necef](http://www.sdu.dk/staff/necef)). Currently editing a book on multiculturalism.