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Bülent Uçar

Another hot summer in the Middle East... Tens of thousands of Syrians continue to flee the violence inflicted upon them by Bashar Assad's regime by seeking refuge in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Now desperate, the regime is using its airplanes to punish the opposition in Aleppo and other cities of Syria, and is threatening to use its chemical weapons.

The events in Syria have reached a point where it is not hard to see the end of the Assad regime. The real challenge though for the actors of a new Syria will start after the downfall of the Baath regime. What will determine the future of Syria is whether the actors of change will be able to establish a pluralistic, representative and democratic regime, which is a prerequisite to satisfy its diverse ethnic and religious nationals.

In this issue of *Insight Turkey*, which deals with Iraqi Kurdistan, the very title of Burak Bilgehan Özpek's article sums up the options that the ethnically and religiously diverse post-Arab Spring Middle Eastern states have: democracy or partition. As an authoritarian state in Baghdad alienates the Kurds in Erbil, an undemocratic Damascus cannot keep the Alawites, Christians and Kurds together with Sunni Arabs.

Already various scenarios are being talked about concerning the division of Syria into at least two areas. Firstly, it is expected that an Alawite-Christian state in the north-west of the country will emerge where the supporters of the Assad regime and those Alawites and Christians fearful of a Sunni-dominated Syria would gather. In the remaining areas, it is speculated that the opposition forces, mainly Sunni Arabs, will set up their own government. Yet there has emerged a third actor in north-eastern Syria: the Kurds who make up around 10 percent of the population and live mainly in the northern provinces and rural areas.

This development would likely complicate the situation in Syria even further as Turkey would not welcome another Kurdish entity on its southern borders in addition to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Moreover, the emergence of a Kurdish dimension in the Syrian crisis would also have repercussion on Turkey's Kurdish question as the PKK has great prestige and power among Syria's Kurdish groups.

In addition, if the Kurdish groups take control of the north, Turkey's recently improving relations with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq would

be at risk. Reports that the KRG is encouraging the Syrian Kurdish groups that took control of several towns in the north have caused anxiety in Turkey. At a time when Turkey has finally come to terms with the KRG's existence, and has started to develop comprehensive projects of cooperation with the KRG, the "least hostile Middle Eastern neighbor Turkey has" according to Bill Park who contributes to this current issue of *Insight Turkey*, such a new issue would be unfortunate.

I would guess that the Iraqi Kurdish leaders would also regard this development as potentially problematic to their continuing rapprochement with Turkey. For the KRG, Turkey's friendship and cooperation is invaluable as it tries to counter ever increasing pressures and bullying from Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki.

Related to this is of course the presence of the PKK in KRG-controlled territory. It is a constant source of irritation in Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurdish administration. Kurdistan Regional Government President Massoud Barzani seems to regard the PKK as a burden on the future of the Iraqi Kurds. For Barzani, his priority has been to enhance stability and peace in the Kurdish region in order to speed up the institutionalization and to enhance the legitimacy of the regional government. He is not expected to risk the Iraqi Kurds' achievements by harboring the PKK.

In an official visit to Ankara in April of this year, Barzani called on the PKK to "lay down its arms," adding that they "won't get anywhere with weapons" and that he "will not let the PKK prevail in northern Iraq."

With his influence on the Kurds, and with the trust of the Turkish government, Barzani was even expected to mediate a peace deal between the Turkish state and the PKK by persuading the latter to lay down its arms.

Currently the situation is shaky. The Kurdish dimension of the Syrian crisis may harm the mutual trust that has been recently established between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish administration. It seems that the Kurdish question is becoming truly transnational in the region. A deeper analysis of the new Kurdish geopolitics and other issues, such as the presidential election in Egypt, the relevance of the Turkish model for Islamists in the Arab world, and the current state of EU-Turkey relations, are all covered in this issue of *Insight Turkey*. I hope you enjoy reading them.