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Middle East

Turkey lost its 'big brother' role in region

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Gilbert Achcar told *Today's Zaman* that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's misguided policy of engaging with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has led to Turkey losing its status as a role model in the region, simply becoming another common player. Achcar underlined the importance of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), a branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) based in northern Syria, calling it "much more progressive" than other groups in the region. Dismissing claims that the map of the Middle East might be redrawn, Achcar stated, however, that this might be possible only in the case of the Kurdish nation. [**Today's Zaman**]

Professor Achcar, the international community is face-to-face with the threat of the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL), and some claim that IS is the product of the big powers such as the US and Israel.

No, this is conspiracy theory. If one means by that that the US is behind the creation of al-Qaeda or IS, it is quite absurd. But if what is meant by that is that the actions of the United States, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, created the ground for the development of al-Qaeda and the IS, then that is true.

How is Turkey seen in the region?

Erdogan went to Cairo at the beginning of the whole upheaval in the region. He made a statement defending secularism and at that time it shocked the Muslim Brotherhood. He was projecting a line that could have been attractive there: Turkey could have appeared as a model for a secular democracy which would be respectful of people's religious practices but with basically democratic institutions. This has been jeopardized by the support of Turkey to the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood does not support secularism but is very much in favor of religion-based institutions, with Shariah integrated in laws and constitutions. This is not the image that was projected by Turkey initially. Instead of being a big brother in the region, Turkey is just seen now as one player among others in this ongoing conflict.

As you mentioned in your book "The Middle East is Boiling," there are claims that the map of the region might change. How do you assess this claim?

I don't think that the map of the region is now in the process of being redrawn, with one exception. The exception is the Kurdish nation. The Kurdish nation is the only major nation that was not given any form of sovereignty, even partial sovereignty by the Western powers at the time of World War I. The Kurdish nation was divided into minority sections of larger national ensembles. They were deprived of sovereignty and this, of course, has already been changing. The first major change in this regard was the emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan as a de facto autonomous state entity.

For all intents and purposes, Iraqi Kurdistan is in fact acting as an independent or autonomous state that is in a kind of confederation with the rest of Iraq. This was a major shift. Then it has been followed with the condition created in Syria by the civil war leading to the autonomization of Syrian Kurdistan, the Kurdish region in Syria, the one where fighting is taking place today with the offensive by IS to take Kobani and the rest. This of course has been seen as an alarming development by Turkey because of the sensitivity of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. All the more in that the PYD in Syrian Kurdistan is closely allied or linked to the PKK in Turkish Kurdistan. That's the real reason of Turkey's reluctance to allow for support be given to PYD fighters in Kobani.

Kurds claim they have set up a more progressive movement against the old regime and also IS in the region. What can you say on this specific issue?

No doubt that compared to IS on one hand and the [Bashar al-Assad] regime on the other hand, the Kurdish forces in the Syrian part of Kurdistan or Kurdish part of Syria are much more progressive. I think there should not be any doubt that the PYD is much more progressive than IS. In that sense, it is a bulwark against IS. I think that any progressive democratic views should be supportive of Kurdish resistance to IS. This should be obvious. And the statements by Erdoğan himself that the PYD are equal to IS and that the PKK and IS are equally terrorist are, I believe, unacceptable and untrue, especially speaking for PYD in Syria. No one can call PYD a terrorist organization.

Are you hopeful for the future of the region, then?

It was a long revolutionary process, and as every revolutionary process in history it has moments of revolution and faces counter-revolution in other moments. We are now presently going through a phase of counter-revolution when you look at what happened in Egypt and the kind of development that you have in Syria. But this is not the end of the story. This is just a phase and the transition is quite rapid. So I think that the situation is quite open. There will be further changes and the region will remain in a state of turmoil for several years, if not actually several decades. All will depend ultimately on whether the progressive forces in the Arab countries manage really to organize themselves as an alternative both to the old regime and to Islamic reactionary forces.

[Today's Zaman](#) 4 November 2014.