

## Analysis

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**Summary:** The government's recent direct talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the call by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, for the PKK's withdrawal from Turkey are a turning point in the history of Turkey's Kurdish problem. How did it become possible to initiate such a risky process? Three circumstances have made the negotiations with the PKK possible. One is war fatigue. Another is the military stalemate between the Turkish army and the PKK. The third is Ankara's apparent conclusion that the international setting has made the solution of the PKK problem an urgent "must-do." If it ends in serious success, the peace process will definitely have created a new Turkey.

## Turkey's Negotiations with the PKK: Contents, Dynamics, Risks, and Possible Outcomes

by *Gökhan Bacik*

### **The End of a State-Tradition and a Return to the Ottoman Compromise-Based Model?**

The government's recent direct talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the call by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, for the PKK's withdrawal from Turkey are indeed a turning point in the history of Turkey's Kurdish problem.

The state tradition up to this point has no instance of talks with insurgent groups. Since 1923, Turkey has instead reacted to insurgency with heavy military force. For example, the governments of the early period of the Republic suppressed all insurgencies, as witnessed by the destruction of the Nestorian insurgency of 1924, the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925, the Ağrı Rebellions of 1926, and the Dersim Rebellions of 1937. The Turkish republican tradition has evolved as a compromise-eschewing model that brooks no opposition from marginal elements. Ethnic demands were suppressed by the military, and dissenting parties were abolished by the courts. Consistent with this, Turkey's reaction to the PKK problem was to resort to quell ethnic problems with military power.

The direct talks with the PKK that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government is conducting in an effort to solve the Kurdish problem are a serious attempt to break with republican state tradition. They are strongly reminiscent of the Ottoman compromise model, where the ruling power did not hesitate to bargain with insurgents.

### **The *Raison D'être* of the Talks with the PKK**

On all counts, the government's negotiations deserve to be labeled "a unique case." How did it become possible to initiate such a risky process? It should be kept in mind that negotiating with the PKK is "a dirty business" for the sizeable sector of Turkish society that is composed of nationalists and Kemalists. To that sector, Öcalan, is a "baby murderer." Thus, the whole process of direct talks with the PKK is not risk-free. Indeed, it could turn out to become the self-destruction process of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Three circumstances have made the negotiations with the PKK possible. One is war fatigue. It is beyond doubt

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that the Turkish public has tired of the Kurdish problem, now stretching for more than 30 years. There is a feeling in society of the total loss of trust in any military solution. The decades-long Kurdish problem, which has cost thousands of lives and billions of dollars has led people to the conclusion that military methods are no longer a viable strategy. In fact, the negotiation-with-the-enemy strategy is not unique to Turkey: Long ethnic hostilities have generated war fatigue in many countries, and peaceful negotiations have followed.

Another enabling circumstance is the military stalemate between the Turkish army and the PKK. After 30 years of intense military struggle, both sides seem to have reached similar conclusions. Ankara realized that it is not possible to annihilate the PKK completely by military methods, and the PKK saw that it cannot realize its goal of an independent Kurdish state with military tactics. (It seems that the PKK has also given up its goal of independent Kurdistan, which was proclaimed in its 1977 party congress.)

The third enabling circumstance is Ankara's apparent conclusion that the international setting has made the solution of the PKK problem an urgent "must-do." Ankara has some deep fears about recent regional activism, particularly in Syria. Syrian chaos may end up with the recognition of another autonomous or semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the Middle East, which can quickly bring Turkey's Kurdish problem to a new phase. An autonomous Kurdish regions in Syria and another in Iraq, Ankara's traditional suggestions for a solution within the unitary Turkish state may have acquired an irrelevant ring.

The Syrian crisis has produced yet another fear: The Öcalan-linked Kurdish political networks are not officially

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recognized in any other state. However, should the Syrian crisis end up with a kind of federalist solution, a path may well open within a new Syrian constitutional system to the nation-wide recognition of the Kurdish Democratic Union of Syria (PYD), an organization known for its close contacts with the Turkish PKK. Delay may further complicate the Kurdish problem, particularly given the emerging Kurdish political reality in northern Syria. Thus, Ankara is under regional pressure for a quick solution to the PKK problem, lest the Syrian situation dictate its own dynamics.

### What is Being Negotiated?

As it is to be expected, the negotiations between the government and the PKK are a highly secretive process. Since many similar attempts have failed in the past, the government is wary of a fiasco that could easily reduce, or even wipe out, the social legitimacy of its current strategy on the Kurdish issue.

Meanwhile, many issues, including the status of Öcalan (e.g., whether he will be released from jail) have quickly come to dominate the public debate about the government's ongoing negotiations. However, given the issues at hand and some comparative analysis of similar processes in different countries, these negotiations are reasonably expected to center on three major issues:

1. **The solution that the government will offer the PKK.** This is the most important issue of the negotiations. Implicit in negotiation is reward for abandonment of intransigence. It comes at the end point of the negotiation process. Will the government offer a kind of autonomy? Or will the government convince the PKK of the imminent advent of an all-resolving, strong democratization to be achieved by trenchant reforms? The gist of the ongoing negotiations is the government's proposal. For the PKK, the timbre of the proposal is more important than any other issue, including the status of their jailed leader.
2. **The technical aspects (disarmament, demobilization, general amnesty).** These issues are of primary importance for the PKK, because for them, the prerequisite of an effective peace process is a strong guarantee mechanism. If the PKK does not find the proposed technical agenda satisfactory, it may suspend, or even stop, the



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process. Thus, certain questions, such as whether the government will offer a general amnesty, are important.

- 3. The status of Öcalan.** This is also a serious issue. Öcalan is the undisputable leader of the Kurdish political movement. He is also the most important actor in persuading of the Kurdish political movement of the efficacy of a peace agenda. As a matter of fact, he has played a key role in the ongoing negotiations, which will require a radical change in his position. That Öcalan is a key partner now makes it almost impossible to keep him in jail. Even some more lenient alternative, such as house arrest, seems unsatisfactory, given the high caliber of his participation in the process.

### Risks and Deficits

Certain risks do attend the peace process. The process itself is subject to risk that might arise either for societal reasons, or from technical deficits. Various previous peaceful attempts to put an end to PKK terrorism have foundered because of mismanagement of the process or intemperate social expectations.

War fatigue, referred to above as one of the *raisons d'être* of the process, is itself a risk factor. The Turkish public supports the peace process almost *en masse*. However, public support that stems from war fatigue is very fragile, as it can easily turn into frustration. It is negative endorsement, more a product of desperation than a consciousness political standpoint. So the government should not let public optimism about the imminent success of this process become inflated. Yet it is important to sustain the public legitimacy of the peace process, and this entails the need

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to keep alive a realistic public optimism, which is alert to the fact that even a small glitch can destabilize the whole process.

Overlooking items of the detail of the technical aspects also poses certain risks to the peace process. The many foregoing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) cases between other states have proved that the technical aspects are vitally important, and therefore forbid the entrusting of the peace process to an extant mutual accord, or to social support that stems from war fatigue. Ankara should be mindful of this, and invest heavily in technical aspects like cantonment and in other details of the reintegration phase.

The technical aspects of the current peace process need to be enhanced. They consist almost entirely of the mutual readiness of the Turkish and the Kurdish sides for dialogue, and on the dedication of both sides. Meanwhile, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) appears to have established a strong and trust-filled dialogue with the higher echelons of the PKK, including Öcalan. Indeed, such dialogues are important, but hardly adequate as the guarantee of the whole process. The government should not continue to manage the whole process only as a productive dialogue with the PKK leadership. One should not forget that the disposition of the leaders in DDR is the easy side of the process. More difficult is the disposition of the large-group members, in this case, the PKK foot soldiers. They will not be convinced that the peace process is in their interest simply because their leaders are in dialogue. Rather, they look with interest to the technical guarantees that the process is offering them. Confirming this, in a recent interview, the leader of the military wing of the PKK, Murat Karayılan, reminded readers of the critical position of those fighters.<sup>1</sup>

### Possible Outcomes

If it ends in serious success, the peace process will definitely have created a new Turkey. Indeed, a success of that magnitude will take Erdoğan's political career to an unrepeatable level. As the lead actor of the coup that bridged the deep division between Turk and Kurd, he could be hailed as the nation's "second Atatürk." Even so, a successful peace

<sup>1</sup> Hasan Cemal, T24, March 24, 2013, <http://t24.com.tr/yazi/karayilan-geri-cekilme-sonbahara-sarkar-kalici-baris-aponun-ozgurlugunden-gecer/6390>



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process will bring some of the welcome structural outcomes that the DDRs of various other countries have delivered:

1. A successful peace process with the PKK will hasten a redefinition of “nationhood” in Turkey. This could be a redefinition that captures a “two-in-one” concept like “one country; two nations,” or that articulates a new supreme identity, which transcends Turkish, Kurdish, or any other ethnic identity. In any case, after the peace process, assuming its success, it will hardly be possible to maintain “Turk” as the supreme identity label of all citizens of Turkey.
2. Similarly, a successful peace process will have the potential of changing the administrative character of the Turkish political system. Any kind of solution that could persuade the PKK requires some level of local autonomy for Kurds. General democratic reforms will no longer satisfy the Kurdish political movement. It is yet to be clarified how the government will approach this issue. Will it give some degree of autonomy to the Kurdish cities? Or will Ankara offer a less unitary system that subsumes all regions, including the Kurdish dominated south-east Anatolia? Though such questions have no firm answers yet, it is clear that the peace process has a great potential for changing the administrative character of the existing regime in Turkey.

### Conclusion

Erdoğan should be given credit for initiating direct talks with the PKK. Erdoğan himself is the main actor in this process, and has the capacity to persuade people. Many skeptics are silent, thanks to Erdoğan’s public credit. Equally important is the management of the public expectation and psychology in Turkey, particularly in its western regions. So far, no voices have been raised in opposition to the peace process. We do not even know what such voices might say. But Erdoğan must realize that it is vital to reassert the ongoing peace negotiations as a process that is a Turkish-Kurdish dialogue, not a dialogue between the Turkish Intelligence Service and the PKK.

### About the Author

Gökhan Bacik is an associate professor of political science at Zirve University. Bacik also taught in different European Universities as Erasmus Visiting Professor. He is the author of *September 11 and World Politics* (2004) and *Modern International System: Genealogy, Teleology and the Expansion* (2007). He also published in many scholarly journals such as *Middle East Policy*, *International Review of Sociology*, *The Muslim World*, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *Peace Review*, *Turkish Studies*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Terrorism and Political Violence*. His most recent book is *Hybrid Sovereignty in the Arab Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008). He also writes weekly columns for *Today’s Zaman*. Bacik is the head of the Middle East Research Center at Zirve University, and was recently elected as an associate member to the Academy of Sciences of Turkey.

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