

## Analysis

May 10, 2013

**Summary:** If all goes to plan, over 29 years of violence in Turkey between government forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has cost over 40,000 lives, will soon come to a close. Past attempts at peace have failed, but there is reason for optimism this time. The most hopeful aspect of the current effort is the regional context in which it is unfolding, including developments in Iraq and Syria. The other cause for optimism is Erdoğan himself. He has staked his political future on the success of the peace process and is therefore unlikely to allow it to fail.

## Kurdish Peace Process Remains on Track

by *Amberin Zaman*

### Background

On May 8, rebels from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were set to begin their withdrawal from Turkey to Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. The move announced last month by Murat Karayilan, the rebels' top commander in the field, fulfills a key demand by Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for the peace process to move forward. If all goes to plan, over 29 years of violence, which has cost over 40,000 lives, will come to a close. The ground for a historic compromise between the Turks and the Kurds will have been laid.

Past attempts at peace have failed and numerous ceasefires have been broken amid a torrent of mutual recriminations. The Kurds have blamed the government, saying it failed to deliver on promises of reform. The government has, in turn, accused the PKK and its allies in the so-called "deep state" of subverting peace in a bid to undermine its power. (For more background on the Kurdish problem, see "Turkey's Second Kurdish Opening" by İltar Turan, April 12, 2013)

The most hopeful aspect of the current effort is the regional context

in which it is unfolding. After decades of hostility, Turkey has embraced the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq in a big way. The Iraqi Kurds have vast energy reserves that can help fuel Turkish growth. A pipeline is currently under construction between the KRG and Turkey (despite stiff warnings from the central government in Baghdad.) Small quantities of Iraqi Kurdish crude are already being carried by subcontractors said to be working for the Turkish businessman and close Erdoğan ally, Ahmet Calik. In short, Ankara can no longer afford to make love with the Iraqi Kurds while making war with its own Kurdish population. Not surprisingly, the Iraqi Kurds are closely involved in the negotiations between Turkey and the PKK.

The crisis in Syria has also forced Erdoğan's hand. The growing influence of the PKK's Syrian offshoot, known as the PYD, in Kurdish-populated areas of northern Syria has set off alarm bells in Ankara. A deal with the PKK would hold the Syrian Kurds at bay. Better still, they can join forces with Syrian rebels fighting to topple President Bashar al-Assad. Regime change in Syria has emerged as one

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of Turkey's top foreign policy goals. (For more on this topic, see "Turkey's Syrian Gamble: Enter the Kurds" by Amberin Zaman, August 24, 2012)

The other cause for optimism is Erdoğan himself. He has staked his political future on the success of the peace process (he wants to be elected president when the job opens next year) and is therefore unlikely to allow it to fail. Opinion polls suggest that Erdoğan commands enough popular support to be able to take the necessary risks. For instance, on May 7 Erdoğan announced the results of a recent opinion poll that gave AKP 52 percent of the national vote. More importantly, he wants to go down in history as the leader who solved Turkey's thorniest problem.

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### Öcalan the Peacemaker?

It has long been argued that dealing with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, is necessary if the Kurdish insurgency is to be brought to an end. The government has come around to this view. Over the past few months, Turkey's national spy agency, known as MIT, has been holding secret talks with Öcalan on his prison island near Istanbul. In late December, Erdoğan went public with the news prompting widespread speculation that a watertight deal had already been struck. Why else would Erdoğan reveal that his government was talking to a man who until recently was branded a "baby killer"? Subsequent developments reinforce this argument. In a landmark call in March, Öcalan declared that it was time for the "guns to fall silent" and for Kurds to pursue their rights through peaceful means. Not only that, he said that the Kurds had abandoned all plans for an independent state. Öcalan's call for a withdrawal were conveyed by members of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), who are being allowed to meet with him on a regular basis. At first, Karayilan resisted, saying the Turkish parliament needed to provide guarantees that Turkish forces would not attack his men as

they pulled out. Erdoğan refused, saying his verbal pledge ought to suffice. A fresh round of instructions from Öcalan prompted Karayilan to back down. He said his men would withdraw without pre-conditions and he called a ceasefire that is being mutually observed.

On the face of things, the peace process is going so smoothly some would even argue that it is almost too good to be true. The murder in January of three PKK activists in Paris failed to make a dent in it. (See "Turkey and the Kurds: The Blood-Stained Path to Peace" by Amberin Zaman, January 15, 2013). Nor have the left wing and nationalist groups, who continue to organize small if noisy demonstrations against reconciliation.

In some instances, members of a government-appointed "council of the wise" who have been touring the country to argue for the benefits of peace have been attacked. Yet, in the fiercely nationalist Black Sea region, council member Yildiray Ogur tweeted that backing for peace was so strong that locals were making plans to spend their holidays in Hakkari, a bastion of Kurdish nationalism on the Iraqi border. There have yet to be any mass protests on either side. PKK leaders assert that there is no real opposition among their ranks, and Erdoğan appears to have rallied his Justice and Development Party (AKP) behind the project despite persistent doubts, especially among nationalist elements. All of this is remarkable considering that talking to the PKK has long been equated with treason, even by Erdoğan himself. Turkey's hawkish generals are playing along. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that scores of meddlesome colleagues are now behind bars facing coup-plotting charges in the Ergenekon case. Save a clutch of shrill anti-Erdoğan outlets, the media has also lent its support. The newly dovish mood was on display last month when hundreds of Turkish journalists showed up for a press conference held by Karayilan to announce the PKK's with-

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drawal scheme. Until recently, interviewing PKK leaders could result in prosecution under Turkey's draconian anti-terror laws.

It was equally remarkable that during his audience with the press, Karayilan pointed the finger of blame at the PKK's long-time mentor, Iran. He claimed that a senior Iranian official had promised the rebels arms and other assistance if they kept up their battle against Turkey. (Turkey and Iran are increasingly at odds over Syria, and there is widespread speculation that Iran is bent on sabotaging the Kurdish opening). In a bizarre aside, Karayilan also claimed that the United States "had a hand" in the December 2011 Turkish air force raid on Kurdish smugglers on the Iraqi Turkish border, which left 34 of them (mostly teenagers) dead. He probably did so to absolve Erdoğan of any blame. Yet until the peace talks were announced, both the PKK and the BDP routinely blamed the Turkish government for the massacre. In a further twist, Karayilan took aim at Turkey's most influential Islamic movement led by the moderate Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen, who lives in self-imposed exile in rural Pennsylvania, claiming that they, too, were seeking to sabotage the peace process. The so-called Gulenists and the government made common cause against the army. But relations have soured over the past year. Erdoğan is said to be worried by the Gulenists' alleged influence over the judiciary and the police force. A recent series of shake-ups in both institutions appears to be designed to weaken their grip.

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Either way, the PKK's change in tone underlines a new convergence between the government and the Kurds on a broad range of issues both domestic and foreign. This is feeding accusations of a Faustian pact whereby the Kurds will support Erdoğan's presidential ambition. In exchange, the government will allegedly grant the Kurds concessions that might lead to the eventual dismemberment of Turkey and allow Öcalan to walk free.

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### A Very Secret Deal

In truth, only a handful of people know what the precise nature of the alleged agreement between the government and Öcalan is. And the government continues to insist there is no deal at all. This lack of transparency is being exploited by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP). They claim that the government is acting out a U.S. plan, which will result in the establishment of an independent Kurdistan.

Such claims are plainly silly. The only concession that the Kurds appear to have wrested so far is the release of several dozen activists and politicians jailed under thinly supported terror charges. Thousands of others remain behind bars. Erdoğan has made it clear that he will not act until the PKK withdraws all its fighters from Turkish soil. The Kurds' demands are well known. These include greater regional autonomy, easing bans on education in the Kurdish language, and scrapping ethnic references to Turkish citizenship. These can, in theory, be addressed in the new democratic constitution Erdoğan has promised to deliver. But the ever obdurate CHP and MHP are blocking progress on a draft that is being debated in a special parliamentary commission. It seems increasingly doubtful that consensus on a final document can be reached. The most likely outcome is that AKP (with the BDP's parliamentary support) will stitch together a constitutional reform package that would address some of the Kurds' grievances.

But there are other practical matters that need solving such as the fate of the PKK rebels. Will they be granted amnesty and permitted to return once they lay down their arms? What of their leaders? And above all, what of Öcalan?



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Karayilan and his fellow commanders insist that his prison conditions need to be improved and that eventually he must be set free. With the presidential elections just around the corner, can Erdoğan risk further alienating nationalists within his party and in the broader electorate by ceding to the Kurds' demands? The conundrum is that unless he gives the Kurds something, Öcalan's credibility will begin to fade and the violence may even resume. The PKK says it will complete its withdrawal by October, before the snow begins to fall. Between now and then, Erdoğan will need to come up with a strategy that will keep both Turks and Kurds on board.

### About the Author

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