

# THE KURDISH PEACE PROCESS AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY

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Policy Brief for the Global Europe Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

*August 2014*

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It has been almost 30 years since the violent conflict between the PKK<sup>i</sup> (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and Turkey began. Since 1984, the conflict has undergone various processes. For a long time, Turkey treated the conflict as “attacks carried out by a group of terrorists” or, in military terms, “low intensity conflict.” In the 1990s, when the clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK increased and thousands of Kurdish citizens joined the PKK, the conflict was dubbed the “Kurdish Question”. Recognition of Kurdish identity as a different ethnicity and the independence of Kurdistan were the basic goals of the Kurdish movement in those years. However, according to the Turkish government, there were different reasons for the conflict: those rebels were not Kurds, they did not represent Kurdish society; they were agents of “external forces” working to separate Kurds from Turkey. The main reason of joining to the PKK was the socio-economic backwardness of the Kurdish regions. These arguments were both supported and rejected by both parties. To overcome the issue, the Turkish governments in the 1990s followed different strategies. Kurdish society faced increasing state oppression, many Kurdish villages were evacuated, millions of Kurdish citizens had to immigrate to other cities, and thousands of them were arrested. In the violent conflict around 40,000 people, including civilians, lost their lives.

Before the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured and brought to Turkey, the PKK drafted a new paradigm. It was a major policy shift, which proposed a democratic autonomy model for the Kurds and gave up the idea of independence.<sup>ii</sup> The security-first structure of Turkish politics utilized the Kurdish problem to escalate the enemy-threat chain in domestic politics and preserve the limited boundaries of political system as such. As a late reflection of this old habit, in 2009 a wave of imprisonment started and hundreds of pro-Kurdish BDP<sup>iii</sup> (Peace and Democracy Party) members were arrested in the “KCK Case.”<sup>iv</sup>

### **Peace Process**

The notion of peace rarely has the same meaning to the conflicting parties. It changes according to their needs, expectations and positions, etc. This notion becomes more complex when there are also ethnic, political, ideological, and economic issues involved in the conflict. For the PKK and Öcalan, the root of the conflict was the nondemocratic system in Turkey that assimilated minorities, polarized the society by favoring Muslim-Sunni Turkish identity, did not embrace a multicultural population, and violated basic human rights. Thus, a peace process needed to deal with these basic issues. The PKK also demanded the freedom of Abdullah Öcalan and democratic autonomy in Kurdish regions of Turkey.<sup>v</sup>

On the other hand, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) seems to have quite a different perspective on peace. To them, Turkey is at a critical juncture in regards to strengthening the domestic front and its regional role. From this perspective, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is making a significant strategic change in Turkey's foreign and domestic policy: solving the Kurdish issue. Peace is

the only path towards achieving political stability, fulfilling Turkey's democratization, and enhancing its regional role. Erdoğan's key assets in this strategic pivot are easily identifiable. Hakan Fidan, Turkey's head of the National Intelligence Organization (MİT), leads negotiations with jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is the man behind Turkey's regional and global strategic orientation. Both are trusted aides -- Fidan having served as deputy undersecretary and Davutoğlu as chief advisor in the Office of the Prime Ministry -- and were utilized as special envoys for critical issues at the prime minister's behest. Pessimists claim that Erdoğan is "walking on eggshells" and using the peace process to preserve his hold on power.<sup>vi</sup> As such, Erdoğan's strategy has two meanings: (1) to remind the people that the AKP is still willing to solve the conflict and (2) if Erdoğan is not supported in the elections, those who may take office will not continue the process.

From the AKP's perspective, Öcalan's freedom and the autonomy of Kurdistan are not even negotiable and never have been negotiated during meetings with the PKK. Öcalan decided to not to confront the AKP on this issue and shifted the burden to the pro-Kurdish BDP party to prepare Kurds and take care of necessary preparation for democratic autonomy on their own.<sup>vii</sup> Erdoğan and the AKP favor "one nation, one state, one flag, one language and one land." The AKP formed the Wise People Commission—consisting of celebrities, authors, NGO representatives, journalists, and business people—to inform the general public and collect their feedback on the process in order to create a mechanism of interaction with the masses. The reports coming from Kurdish regions indicate support for the PKK's demands, while in some other regions people support Erdoğan's views. These different perspectives do discredit the process, but rather help people better understand each other.

Since the 1990s, PKK executives and Turkish State officials have met several times. The meetings started again in 2008 in Oslo and continued for a few years.<sup>viii</sup> There has been contradictory information about what the parties negotiated, whether there was an agreement and why they left the table. After the meetings ended and were publicized in 2012, each party blamed the other for not reaching an agreement. However, one could argue that negotiators were familiar enough with each other to foresee how the outcome might be viewed by the general public

On December 28, 2012, Erdoğan reported that meetings with Öcalan had begun. This was a new phase in the conflict because it was the first time that a top official had announced the meetings. According to Öcalan's prison writings, previous governments also sent representatives to negotiate with him, yet none of them were publicized and the government even rejected claims about having such meetings. According to them, a state must never negotiate with "terrorist organizations" and, despite having the meetings from 2008-2012, the same idea was extensively propagated by Erdoğan. With regards to the government's efforts towards resolving the Kurdish issue, Erdogan's policies may not often have been expressed in

words, but more importantly demonstrated in action as in the case of negotiations.

### **Initial Phase of the Peace Process**

Before the process started, the conflict encountered a stalemate in July and August 2011. Thousands of Kurdish political prisoners started a hunger strike to protest the isolation<sup>ix</sup> of Öcalan, the KCK Cases, and the ban on the use of the Kurdish language in official institutions. Despite the AKP asking the prisoners to end the strike, it continued for 68 days and was ended only after Öcalan told the prisoners that their protest was successful and that their message was received by the state.<sup>x</sup> This certainly strengthened Öcalan's position ahead of the negotiations – it sent the message that the PKK was still behind him and that he was integral to reaching a peaceful resolution. Such dynamics were important for the mobilization of Kurdish society in Turkey. Meanwhile, Kurds in Rojava (a Kurdish region in Northern Syria) gained control of the cities in the region in 2012. Kurdish politicians believed that Rojava became an important catalyst for the Turkish government to start negotiations with the PKK. In the Kurdish community, the common view was that, for Turkey, providing border security and preventing “possible attacks” by Kurds in Syria were the main motivations behind the meetings. Despite early reluctance, the Turkish government contacted the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and opened a channel for dialogue. However, the lack of confidence on both sides has not yet disappeared.

Political cadres in Rojava and in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (KRG) support the peace process, albeit for different reasons. Rojava always backed Öcalan and called upon Erdoğan's government for cooperation to help Syrians solve their conflict, allowing humanitarian aid into Rojava and providing security at the border.<sup>xi</sup> From this perspective, Rojava is a stake-holder in the Kurdish peace process in Turkey since forward progress would positively affect relations between Rojava and Turkey. The KRG, on the other hand, sided with Erdoğan and desired a KRG-like structure in Rojava to ensure KRG's President Massoud Barzani's king-maker role among the Kurds. Ongoing threats from the Islamic State (IS) in Mosul and Kirkuk seem to make the conflicting parties cooperate, but the main ideological and political issues still remain unresolved.

### **Opportunities**

The negotiations started in the last week of 2012 and it was the first time that Kurdish members of parliament (MPs) were given permission to meet Öcalan on İmralı Island. In addition, Fidan served as Erdoğan's representative in the process. The MPs carried messages from Öcalan to PKK cadres, and, in certain cases, also met with government officials. The publicized meetings revealed some important facts about the conflict. First, the state changed its understanding of the role of Kurdish politics and Öcalan in the “Kurdish Question.” The fear that society would not accept negotiations with Öcalan was mostly

overcome. In a very short time, surveys suggested that the vast majority of society supported the process. Even though the leadership of Turkey's two largest opposition parties – the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and the CHP (People's Republican Party) -- opposed and denounced the meetings, there was no decrease in public support. The PKK and its leadership became less “dangerous” or more “legitimate” in the eyes of Turkish society.

Second, the chance for a political solution to the Kurdish problem seems higher than ever in the history of the Turkish Republic. For the first time, state officials openly stated that the conflict could not be solved through military interventions. Since the HDP (People's Democratic Party) MPs were involved in the meetings and carrying messages from Öcalan to PKK executives, the role of political parties grew more visible. Third, the PKK's announcement of a ceasefire and the withdrawal of its armed forces at Öcalan's urging were viewed as important steps showing its willingness to seek a non-violent solution to the conflict. In that sense, the peace process could mean “a period of normalization” during which violence stopped, and the parties negotiated and created room for politicians to deal with the issues.

Aside from public support, many NGOs—including business associations—declared they are ready to help the parties advance the process.<sup>xiii</sup> Some proposed new projects to employ individuals in financially disadvantaged regions. This support highlights several important points: (1) the parties' efforts for peace is reinforced and encouraged, (2) the process is multidimensional, allowing civic engagement at various levels, (3) it promises development and prosperity for Kurdish regions and the Turkish economy, and (4) civil society makes solidarity investments in the peace process.

The KRG's President Massoud Barzanî came to Diyarbakir to attend Erdoğan's meeting and declare his support for the parties in the process in November 2013. Barzani's visit was an indication of the changing mood in Turkish politics, a desire for close ties with regional Kurds, and recognition of the support for the peace process at home. Shortly after this visit, the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Turkey (PDK-T) was established officially -- breaking another taboo in Turkey by having Kurdistan in its name.

### **Challenges**

However, as may happen in all negotiation processes, Turkey's “peace process” encountered serious problems. First, Öcalan, the PKK and Kurdish society were unhappy about the government's pace in the process and said that it had not taken the “required” steps. As a result, the PKK stated that the withdrawal that had started on May 8, 2013 would stop if the government did not make constitutional regulations, release Kurdish political prisoners, decrease the election threshold, and provide education in the Kurdish language. The withdrawal was halted by the PKK on September 9, 2013, yet the ceasefire remains in place. Another problem was that Turkey continued building new patrols in Kurdish regions. The PKK and

Öcalan stated that “building the new patrols shows that the government does not want to solve the conflict but pave way for a new war.”<sup>xiii</sup> Three Kurdish citizens were killed during the protests against construction of new patrols. The PKK threatened to end the ceasefire and called on the protestors to change their way of action against the patrols and to avoid any acts that could provoke the state.

In his 2014 Newroz letter, Öcalan reiterated his support for the process and urged parties to maintain their belief and will to move towards a comprehensive peace.<sup>xiv</sup> However, problems between the Fetullah Gülen Movement and Erdoğan’s government temporarily hindered progress in the meetings. Both Erdoğan and Öcalan believed that political warfare prevented the achievement of a democratic and political solution to the “Kurdish Question.” Gülen, in some of his statements on the peace process, supported those attempting to solve the conflict and criticized the state’s approach towards the discriminated societies.<sup>xv</sup> His followers established schools in Kurdish regions and they were proud of protecting young Kurds from falling into control of the PKK. Starting in December 2013, the government diverted its attention from the process for a while to deal with the tense political situation and municipal elections in March 2014. Despite the complaints of Kurdish politicians about slowing down the process, for the government officials the peace process was still alive and the government would continue presenting legal amendments.

### **Attempts to Move Forward**

On October 1, 2013, the government announced the “democratization package” proposing education in the Kurdish language, decreasing the election threshold, recognizing letters used in the Kurdish alphabet, and returning Kurdish names to cities and villages. In addition, the package included some social regulations not directly related to the conflict. However, the package did not satisfy the Kurds because the education in Kurdish was given only in private schools, and election threshold was not decreased nor were the prisoners were released. The government presented this package as the first act of a new era in Turkey and promised to propose new democratic regulations. Öcalan, in his messages to the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır, insisted that the conflict must be solved through political means and called on both parties (the PKK and the Turkish government) to avoid any attack that might lead to armed conflict.

During the meetings, Öcalan insisted on legal regulations to “legitimize and legislate” the peace process by creating a constitutional framework, providing security for the negotiators, and making the return of the PKK fighters both possible and safe. Öcalan also wanted to meet representatives of different parties, NGOs, and communities in order to negotiate a viable solution. In doing so, Öcalan likely sought to expand the scope of the process and impress and include other parties who were hesitant to get involved or simply opposed negotiations. Even though a number of journalists and NGO members have wanted to

meet him, the government has, thus far, not allowed this and only HDP MPs have been permitted to meet him.

In the March 30 local elections, Erdogan's party gained the most votes, while the pro-Kurdish BDP also won in 11 (mostly Kurdish-populated) cities. Executives of both parties stated that by voting for the AKP and the BDP, the public indicated that it still supports negotiations. Some claimed that the AKP and the BDP had an agreement before the election, meaning that the AKP consciously did not actively campaign in Kurdish cities, in order to let the BDP win. Contrary to such claims, the AKP's votes increased in the Kurdish cities of Diyarbakır, Van, and Hakkari. The BDP received the highest number of votes in these cities.

### **Presidential Election and Framework Law**

Soon Turkey will hold presidential elections and Erdoğan, not surprisingly, is one of the candidates. Before he was nominated, some MPs from the two opposition parties (the MHP and the CHP) claimed that Erdoğan reached an agreement with Kurds that they would support Erdoğan in exchange for Öcalan's freedom. Even though the Kurdish party rejected such claims and nominated its popular co-president Selahattin Demirtaş as candidate, the MPs from the MHP & CHP still propagate these allegations in order to denounce the process and reestablish fear of separation in society.

The most important evidence, they claim, is the recent law proposed by the AKP. The law was implemented on July 10, 2014, after long debates between representatives of four parties in the parliament. The so-called "framework law", referring to the framework of the next steps in the peace process, gives wide authority to the government and National Intelligence Service (MİT) and aims to provide a safe return for the PKK affiliates and others forced to emigrate for political reasons. It also provides constitutional security to those who engage in the process. The government was given the authority to contact people and institutions, both in Turkey and elsewhere, for assistance in implementing some policies for return and integration of unarmed PKK members. This law also ensures that the process is transparent. Öcalan, contrary to some objections from the Kurdish MPs, supported the new law and wanted the parties to fulfill their responsibilities and avoid any acts to impede the process. The return of PKK members is currently at the top of the agenda and the first groups are expected to return in a few months.

All of these events occurred just before the presidential election. According to Erdoğan and his deputies, the AKP has always been a party in favor of the peace process and what is proposed by them was already on their agenda; it has nothing with the upcoming elections. However, many opposing parties, including the ones backing the CHP-MHP's joint candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, claim it was a step to secure the

support of the Kurds. The parties who support İhsanoğlu oppose the process and expect him to end the negotiations when he takes office. In such a case, it seems unreasonable to expect Kurds to vote for İhsanoğlu; instead they will vote for Erdoğan or Demirtaş. The majority of recent opinion polls reveal that Erdoğan has a significant chance of winning the election. The AKP cadres seem confident that Erdoğan is going to win in the first round of Presidential Elections on August 10, 2014.

There is no need to state that Kurdish voters' preference will play an important role. From one point of view, the recent framework law allows Erdogan to get enough Kurdish votes to end the election after one round. However, the HDP's candidate Demirtaş will likely receive the majority of the votes of people who will not vote for the AKP. The HDP and Öcalan have not made a statement about the second round yet. In any case, the law has been an important step in the peace process towards finding a solution to the 30-year-long conflict. There are also strong indications that Erdoğan will opt for a Presidential system in Turkey, meaning he will have more authority and can implement new regulations without spending much time in parliament. Considering his personal leverage on the issue, such a position is not likely to be a game changer in the process.

The expansion of IS to Iraq and its advance through Kurdish regions is, on the other hand, likely to change the regional and international contexts. The regional connection brings Kurds and Turks together to deal with the challenges and reap the benefits of regional integration. The PYD and PKK reacted strongly against the IS attacks in Sinjar, a city of the KRG, with a clear message in favor of armed involvement if necessary. Turkey would find itself in a position to support or even defend regional Kurds, as a close ally of Iraqi Kurdistan and a likely one of Rojava. Facing the challenging period ahead requires a more decisive will against possible impediments to the peace process. There is a positive side to all these developments: if successful, the forerunners of the peace process could write a new narrative for Turkey -- one marked by peace for the country and its proud peoples, and with the potential for considerable positive spillover and impact throughout the region.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> PKK was founded on November 27, 1978 and immediately created an armed wing HRK (Kurdistan Liberation Forces) that carried out first attack on Turkish army in August 15, 1984.

<sup>ii</sup> Mustafa Sönmez, "Kürt Siyasetinde Yeni Arayışlar Üstüne..." [Kurdish Movement's Search for New Perspectives...], April 28, 2014, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://mustafasonmez.net/?p=4233>.

<sup>iii</sup> DTP MPs were transferred to BDP (Peace and Democracy Party).

<sup>iv</sup> KCK (Kurdistan Communities' Union) was founded in 2005 as a new system to demand rights of the Kurdish people. BDP's executives and members were accused of adopting this system in Turkey.

<sup>v</sup> Baki Gül, "BDP for an Autonomous Kurdistan, HDP for a Democratic Turkey", *Kurdish Question*, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/analysis/bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey.html>.

<sup>vi</sup> "Aliza Marcus: AKP barış sürecine gerçekten inanmıyor, kalekollar bunun işareti" [Aliza Marcus: AKP does not really believe in peace process, construction of new patrols reveals that], *t24*, July 16, 2014, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/aliza-marcus-akp-baris-surecine-gercekten-inanmiyor-kalekollar-bunun-isareti,264559>.

<sup>vii</sup> Ebru Aydın, "Step by Step towards Kurdish Autonomy", March 7, 2014, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.ankarastrateji.org/en/news/step-by-step-towards-kurdish-autonomy-1200/>.

<sup>viii</sup> "AKP çözüm geliştirmeli" [AKP should develop a solution perspective], *Özgür Gündem*, April 25, 2013, accessed July 29, 2014, [http://www.ozgur-gundem.com/?haberID=71299&haberBaslik=AKP%20%C3%A7%C3%B6z%C3%BCm%20geli%C5%9Ftirmeli&action=haber\\_detay&module=nuce](http://www.ozgur-gundem.com/?haberID=71299&haberBaslik=AKP%20%C3%A7%C3%B6z%C3%BCm%20geli%C5%9Ftirmeli&action=haber_detay&module=nuce).

<sup>ix</sup> His lawyers were not allowed to see him in the prison since July 27, 2011. His family members were also rejected sometimes by the Ministry of Justice or prison management.

<sup>x</sup> "Kurdish prisoners end hunger strike after Ocalan appeal", *BBC*, November 18, 2014, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20386073>.

<sup>xi</sup> Çetin Çeko, "Salih Müslim: Türkiye, 'Kürt' ve 'Kürdistan' fobisinden hala kurtulmuş değil" [Salih Muslim: Turkey still has phobia of 'Kurd and Kurdistan'], *t24*, March 18, 2014, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/cetin-ceko/salih-muslim-turkiye-kurt-ve-kurdistan-fobisinden-hala-kurtulmus-degil,8797>.

<sup>xii</sup> "159 associations support peace", *ANF*, March 4, 2013, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://en.ajansafirat.net/news/news/159-associations-support-peace.htm>.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Savaş hazırlığı durmuyor" [Preparation for war continues], *Yeni Özgür Politika*, April 25, 2014, accessed July 31, 2014, <http://yeniozgunpolitika.eu/index.php?rupel=nuce&id=30153>.

<sup>xiv</sup> "Öcalan's Newroz 2014 message: Time for Negotiations", International Initiative freedom for Öcalan-Peace in Kurdistan, March 21, 2014, accessed July 31, 2014, <http://www.freeocalan.org/?p=699>.

<sup>xv</sup> "Fethullah Gülen Hocaefendi, çözüm süreci hakkında konuştu" [Fethullah Gülen talked on solution process ], *Samanyolu Haber*, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.samanyoluhaber.com/web-tv/fethullah-gulen-hocaefendi-cozum-sureci-hakinda-konustu-1746-video-haberi/>.