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Renewed Negotiations between Turkey and the PKK: Hopes for a Breakthrough?

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The reports of a resumption of negotiations between Turkey and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan represent one of the positive developments of early 2013. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is highly popular among his public, and one of the major expectations of him is that he will be able to achieve a solution to this painful issue, which has already caused the death of 40,000 people in Turkey, including 700 in 2012. While under Erdoğan Turkey has made unprecedented progress towards a solution, recently, however, and especially since the 2011 parliamentary elections, it appeared that the "Kurdish Opening" had come to a halt.

As in the preceding round of talks, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization is in charge of the talks. This time, however, the talks are being publicly acknowledged in their initial stages. In addition to these contacts, two members of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) were authorized to meet with Öcalan. This is a significant development, because over the past 14 years, Öcalan on principle was allowed to meet only with his lawyers and his family, and recently, not even that. In November 2012, when Öcalan ordered an end to the hunger strike of hundreds of Kurdish prisoners in Turkish jails after over two months, rumors circulated that this order was part of a more extensive deal. At the same time, however, there were also alarming signals, when Erdoğan said that a restoration of the death penalty in Turkey should be considered, thereby hinting at the fate of Öcalan, who was already sentenced to death, although in 2002 his sentence was commuted to life in prison (following legislation abolishing the death penalty in Turkey).

The Kurdish question, which constitutes a fundamental problem for Turkey, is significant not only for the internal Turkish political sphere, but for Turkey's relations with its neighbors, including Iraq, Iran, and Syria as well. Turkey's recent relations with these three countries have been rocky, and Turkey fears that these states will use the PKK to promote their anti-Turkish interests. Overall, Turkey has made substantial progress over the past decade in its readiness to discuss the Kurdish question. Formerly a taboo, the

subject is currently debated widely in the media, and innumerable opinion pieces explore the question of how to deal with the issue. This openness is important preparation for the concessions that will be required of both sides for the sake of an historic reconciliation between them.

The upheaval in the Arab world affected the Kurds in Turkey indirectly. It appears that the uprisings encouraged Kurdish demands in Turkey, and the fact that the civil war in Syria engendered hope of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria was perceived as a positive development by Kurds. Nevertheless, while the effect of the "Arab awakening" on the renewal of negotiations with Öcalan should not be underestimated, past experience indicates that whenever Kurdish independence in the neighboring countries seemed more likely, Turkey often responded with repression, not dialogue. Turkey's good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq are also only part of the explanation. Given the tension and instability in Iraq, the KRG is highly dependent on its partnership with Turkey, so its ability to exert pressure is limited.

What has probably already influenced Erdoğan's considerations, and will continue to do so, are the forthcoming 2014 Turkish presidential elections (and local elections before that throughout the country). For the first time in the history of the Turkish republic, the Turkish president will be elected by popular vote, and Erdoğan, who has not denied that he is interested in the job, wants to win enough votes to triumph in the first round. While before the 2011 parliamentary elections Erdoğan tried to increase his support in part by appealing to nationalistic voters, it appears that purpose of the negotiations with Öcalan is to persuade at least some Kurdish voters to support him, and to regain the votes of liberal elements in Turkey.

An encouraging sign of success in the current round of talks with the PKK is the broad support that the negotiations are attracting, ranging from the Republican People's Party, the leading opposition party in Turkey, to strong support from the prominent Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen. The only ones expressing opposition are members of the National Movement Party, but they are the last ones from whom support could be expected on this issue. On the Kurdish side, the situation is somewhat more complicated. Many will follow Öcalan's orders, but the fact that he has been in prison for 14 years has generated new leadership that is more independent in its views. The recent mysterious murders of three PKK members in Paris may be an indication of such an internal rift in the movement.

In the past, Israel was among those who aided Turkey in its struggle against the PKK. When relations between Turkey and Israel deteriorated, this cooperation was discontinued. Nevertheless, over the years (before the downturn in relations, and especially after it), Israel has been accused from time to time of cooperation with the

PKK against Turkey. The Turkish press recently renewed the charge that on the same day the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara* was intercepted on its way to the Gaza Strip, Israel helped the organizers of a PKK terrorist attack against Turkish soldiers. These repeated accusations, despite being based on the flimsiest of evidence, are grounded in traditional Turkish paranoia about foreigners being the main source of strength of the PKK. In any case, such accusations do nothing to alleviate the already tense relations between Israel and Turkey. Fruitful negotiations with the PKK might ease this element of suspicion toward Israel in Turkey. More fundamentally, solving the deep problem of Turkey's relations with its Kurdish minority would help it come closer to the West and also contribute to Turkey's becoming a more relevant model for its neighbors with regard to majority-minority relations.

