



BULLETIN

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Endgame in Sight for the Conflict between Turkey and the PKK?

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After more than 28 years of conflict, Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) could be preparing for peace as both sides are entering direct talks. Given Turkey's internal political considerations and the fragile situation in the region, these talks stand a chance of producing a lasting settlement to one of Europe's last violent conflicts. The EU should aim to use this occasion to reinvigorate its links and ties with Turkey and lend its expertise in conflict resolution to the government in Ankara while trying to mitigate potential negative outcomes of the process.

For more than 40 years Turkey has been involved in a prolonged struggle with various types of terrorism perpetrated by domestic and international terrorist organisations. Between 1970 and 2011, the country saw more than 2,800 terrorist incidents. In the last 30 years, the main focus of Turkish counter-terrorist efforts has been on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Turkey's Conflict with the PKK. In 1984, the PKK began an armed insurgency aimed at the establishment of an independent, socialist state (Kurdistan) for the 25-30 million Kurds that inhabit mostly Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The organisation developed a transnational apparatus in the region, operating under various names in different countries, with logistical and organisational support from members of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. Throughout the years, the PKK has become almost synonymous with the cause of the Kurds. The PKK's charismatic founder and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured in 1999, but that did nothing to abate the organisation's long-term zeal, and the insurgency regained impetus in 2011.

In the 28 years of PKK activity, between 30,000 and 40,000 people have been killed. In that time, nothing has succeeded in resolving the situation—not the PKK's decision to drop the goal of an independent state for the Kurds from its programme in 1993 (replacing it with decentralisation and “democratic autonomy” for the Kurds in Turkey), not Turkey's legalisation of the Kurdish, PKK-linked Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), and not the three consecutive parliamentary victories by the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), a party which has tried to woo Turkey's Kurds as potential voters.

Turkey-PKK Negotiations. Despite setbacks and an intensification of PKK activities from 2011 onwards, the Turkish government publicly authorised the start of new talks with the jailed Öcalan in December 2012. This latest round of talks comes on top of unsuccessful, serious discussions in 1993, 1996, 1997–2001, 2002–2005 and 2009–2011, which all faltered due to the government's reluctance to solve the Kurdish issue on a purely political level and the PKK's unwillingness to negotiate with Turkey's elected representatives.

This time, signs of an agreement between the two sides looks promising. Unlike in 2009 when Turkey attempted to solve the Kurdish issue without negotiating with Öcalan, it acknowledged that the PKK was key to ending the conflict. The Turkish government is now ready to empower the BDP in the process as it seems likely to be the outlet for the demobilisation and politicisation of the PKK cadres. The AKP, keen on governing Turkey through 2023 when the centenary of the republic will be celebrated, is determined to remove the Kurdish issue as a potential destabilising threat to its political dominance over Turkey.

Motivations for Dialogue. Today, Turkey needs to secure internal peace in order to minimise threats emanating from the conflict in Syria. Clashes between the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which

supports the Assad regime and Arab opposition groups are becoming regular at Turkey's southern flank. In this context, the Turkish authorities no longer perceive the domestic Kurdish issue as a threat but rather as an opportunity to bolster Turkey's interests in its neighbourhood. Ankara has already developed good political and economic relations with the Kurdish authorities in Northern Iraq, and has prepared for widening this cooperation to other Kurdish populated areas in the region. Conscious of this opportunity, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also aims to become the political leader who solved the "Kurdish Problem" in order to secure his chances to become the country's first popularly elected president in 2014.

For his part, Öcalan has declared his wish to put an end to the conflict should Turkey guarantee "greater cultural and constitutional rights" for "all citizens of Turkey". There is now a good opportunity for meeting his demands as a new constitution is being drafted by a multiparty commission, including members of the BDP. The constitution will replace the previous one from 1982, which came into force following the 1980 military coup. It is expected to recognise further democratic rights and civic freedoms for all citizens, which can bring serious benefits for Kurds. There are also prospects for strengthening local governments by adopting the "European Charter of Local Self-Government", also to the potential benefit of the Kurds.

Challenges to the Talks. The success of the talks between the government and the jailed Öcalan might depend on actors or events beyond the control of the two sides. It remains to be seen if Öcalan retains his authority over the more radical segments of the PKK and the Kurdish diaspora. The shooting of three PKK activists in Paris in January 2013 has been interpreted as an attempt by PKK hardliners to derail the negotiations. Moreover, the PKK will be closely watching the developments in Syria. If PYD achieves its political aims with the use of armed force, the PKK might question the rationale of decommissioning weapons and abandoning armed struggle within Turkey.

Even if the negotiations should succeed in resolving the status of the Kurds in Turkey, the Turkish-Kurdish talks may have negative consequences. Discussions about the new Turkish constitution are taking place at the same time as the dialogue. The Turkish prime minister seeks a strong presidential system, but that has been rejected by all opposition parties, including the BDP. However, the AKP is now preparing to negotiate with BDP on the presidential system in exchange for recognising further rights for the Kurdish minority. Should both parties agree, the new constitution could undermine the separation of powers.

Recommendations. In 2002–2005, the Turkish AKP government, intent on starting accession negotiations with the EU, was keen on improving the situation of the Kurds in Turkey. Nowadays, it seems the AKP government is far less interested in developing amicable relations with the EU, but nonetheless, for various, domestic and political reasons, including the desire to reach consensus with BDP over the new Turkish constitution, has returned to the Kurdish issue. This moment could be used by Brussels to reignite the dormant EU–Turkey relations. Although the EU looks favourably on the new Turkish constitution, it should, nonetheless, impress upon the Turkish government that failure to introduce democratic standards of government and civil liberties in the constitution could further postpone the already distant chances of Ankara's EU integration.

Simultaneously, Turkey could be invited to explore the EU's vast experience with conflict resolution, especially in Ireland, Spain and the UK, which could prove useful in informing the talks and their subsequent transformation into a meaningful peace process. The transformation experiences of the post-communist EU Member States could be in turn utilised as a reference point during the process of writing the new Turkish constitution.

The EU Member States could also influence the Kurdish side during the negotiations, as elements of the PKK support infrastructure are based on EU territory. Serious political engagement with members of the Kurdish diaspora not exclusively loyal to the PKK and a thorough investigation of any illicit activities could also please Turkey and help democratise internal Kurdish politics, which in the long term must devolve from the PKK's monopoly.