



BULLETIN

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Turkey's Peace Process with the PKK Faltering

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The peace negotiations between Turkey and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) will enter a critical moment prior to Turkey's general elections on 7 June 2015. Despite a mutual commitment to a political solution, the peace process is at risk of failure because it is vulnerable to several factors, including potential rifts within the PKK leadership, the threat of ISIS on the Turkish border and the upcoming elections, which the government wants to go ahead undisturbed. While cooperating in the fight against ISIS, the EU and the U.S. should support the peace process while also emphasising to Kurdish forces their commitment to the territorial integrity of the region.

A Fragile Peace Process. In 2012, the Turkish government started a new round of negotiations with the PKK's jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan at the centre of the talks. His messages are communicated to the PKK through the People's Democratic Party (HDP).¹ The PKK has been the foremost terrorist group in Turkey and the conflict has taken the lives of up to 40,000 people and cost the economy some \$435 billion. In addition, Turkish foreign policy has felt pressured at times when instrumentalised by various foreign actors. The Turkish army's recognition in 2008 that military means would not solve the problem and the PKK's withdrawal of its ambitions for independence were turning points for the start of a political solution to resolve the 30-year conflict.

While the peace negotiations between the Turkish government and Ocalan continue, there has been a worrying escalation in violence in recent months. Some 47 people were killed on 6–7 October 2014 in clashes between different Kurdish groups and Turkish security forces during protests against the government's stance on Kobane, Syria, where Kurdish forces were defending the town from ISIS.

However, the government and Ocalan declared their commitment to a political solution. The government has recently taken a few initiatives (set up a legal framework, established 11 commissions to deal with the next steps of the process, and allowed the teaching of the Kurdish language to be an option in schools). But the slow pace of the process and the weaknesses of its procedural standards have prevented building mutual trust and made the process vulnerable to incidents and developments in the region, which as a result might have weakened Ocalan's authority. A peace deal therefore risks not providing the expected stability.

On the other hand, the PKK has raised expectations for autonomy among its supporters. It benefited from the ceasefire and has built quasi-state structures in southeastern Turkey (including "courts," "tax" collection, and recruitment of militants) and enlarged its insurgency capacity to cities via its Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDGH). With these actions it has failed to build trust with the broader public. In addition, other Kurdish groups, in particular the religious HudaPar, the legal branch of Kurdish Hizbollah (no connection to the Lebanese organisation), which cooperated tactically with the state in the fight against the PKK in the 1990s, also wants to be included in the talks. Many of the victims of the 6–7 October riots were killed as a result of clashes between the PKK and HudaPar. Ankara, too, has failed to provide confidence or to respect the rule of law, including reportedly having police patrol with vehicles lacking proper registration plates. The existing mechanisms might not be sufficient if there is a further increase in tensions.

The PKK threatens to resume its fight if no concrete steps towards peace are taken before the elections. The government's immediate interest is to prevent any conflict until then, and in the longer term to resolve the problem,

¹ P. Elman, K. Rękawek, "Endgame in Sight for the Conflict between Turkey and the PKK?," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 17 (470), 18 February 2013.

not least to safeguard its big energy transit projects. However, and despite the HDP having successfully attracted a diverse range of the electorate by widening its rhetoric beyond its former, limited Kurdish-focus, it still risks remaining outside parliament if it does not attain the 10% threshold. Under the current circumstances in which the negotiating sides have limited control on local actors, such a scenario would endanger the peace process.

The Regional Context and ISIS. The war in Syria and Iraq has emerged as a real threat to Turkey as well as to the peace process. PKK's sister organisation in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has seen an opportunity to declare de facto Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria, in the "Rojava Canton." The viability of this self-declared autonomy is questionable due to the group's lack of reliability to everyone and refusal to join the mainstream Syrian opposition.

However, mostly by defending Kobane, the Kurdish forces that include the PYD have emerged as efficient fighters against ISIS. The international community, which does not want to intervene with their own ground forces, in turn has benefited from the PYD's capabilities to prevent a further land-grab by ISIS. As a result, and despite PYD being recognised as a terror organisation, the U.S. has supplied it with some armaments.

The developments in favour of PYD have, however, encouraged Kurdish nationalists and the YDGH in Turkey to demand increased autonomy, at best, even though the PKK claims to have limited control over their youth branch. The close ties between the PKK and PYD turns Turkey's peace process into a transnational problem. Indeed while PKK/HDP negotiate the peace process for Turkey's Kurds, they also defend the interests of PYD. Thus, PKK/HDP have linked the peace process to Turkey's support for PYD in Kobane. The negotiations were interrupted after HDP's call for protests over defence of the town turned violent. Turkey refused to show at least the same flexibility in border crossings with Kobane as it does at other crossings with Syria. Also, it hindered efforts to reinforce Kobane with fighters from Turkey and failed to acknowledge the strong links between the Syrian and Turkish Kurds. It mismanaged the situation and as a result not only damaged the peace process but had to watch as PKK received a boost in both its confidence in the negotiations as well as its reputation in the eyes of the U.S., while Turkey's reputation was damaged. Only recently did the Turkish leadership aim to repair this picture: Prime Minister Davutoglu issued a salute on 25 January to the fighters of Kobane as a celebration of their resistance against ISIS.

Turkey does allow Peshmerga forces to transit to Kobane through Turkey. Moreover, it has allowed the use of Incirlik airbase for intelligence-gathering in support of the air campaign against ISIS and accepted 200,000 refugees who fled Kobane. Although ISIS is a threat to Turkish security, its actions to prevent the rise of ISIS remain limited. Turkey has been accused of allowing a proxy war against the Damascus regime and PYD by tactically neglecting the threat of ISIS and other radical groups and their recruitment and financial activities in Turkey as well as by allowing them to transit to Syria across its borders.

Turkey, though, has its own reasons to be cautious. Several groups within Turkey have links to factions fighting against each other in Syria. In addition to the more than 700 of its citizens who have crossed into Syria to join radical groups, another 3,000 related to ISIS fighters are present in Turkey and which now could form "sleeper" cells. Clear Turkish action across the border may trigger terror attacks inside the country similar to the 2003 Istanbul bombings by Al-Qaeda.

Urgency for Peace. Turkey faces threats to its security as a result of its Syria policy as well as the slow pace of its peace process with the PKK. The radical groups have today gained capacity by their presence in the country and being on the doorstep while the peace process enters a critical stage. However, the Turkish leaders have bet too much political capital on regime change in Damascus, which prevents them from reprioritising Turkey's security interests. In turn, Turkey has decreased capacity to negotiate within the anti-ISIS coalition to get support for its demands, such as receiving more support for refugees.

Even if a peace agreement is reached between the PKK and Turkey and despite Kurdish success in Kobane, at least in the medium term, neither is Rojava's autonomy expected to be recognised nor the PKK internationally crossed off the list of terror organisations. The imperative of the territorial integrity of Syria and the PKK's involvement in drug trafficking and other illicit business prevents such a scenario in the short term. Therefore, in their cooperation in the fight against ISIS, the EU and the U.S. should only offer the realistic message to the Kurdish forces that they cannot question the current borders, which also is conducive to the peace process and in preventing the spread of the Syrian conflict to Turkey.

In view of their common interest in stability, Turkey and the PKK have equal responsibility to develop mechanisms to proceed with the peace process and prevent attempts to derail it. Although Ocalan remains the leader of the PKK, there might be limits to his authority. The next steps in the Turkey-PKK deal require more concrete steps, and the leaders will have to spend their political capital to make the peace deal acceptable to the larger public and acknowledge that nobody will reach their maximum aims. For Turkey, the peace process might require going through a transitional justice mechanism that might result in the release of certain PKK prisoners, further decentralisation and preparing the public for these events. For the PKK, this might mean disarmament inside Turkey, untying the peace process from the developments in the region, and decreasing the expected level of decentralisation regardless of the status of Kurds in Syria or Iraq.