

# Turkey's Kurdish Question and the Peace Process

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**ABSTRACT** *Turkey currently is witnessing a series of events that are most likely to go down in history as truly important milestones. The country is attempting to tackle the age-old Kurdish question. Thus far, the peace process has given rise to more hope than ever. Yet, it has not been devoid of worries and concerns. Hope arises out of the fact that we are witnessing major progress that was unimaginable until a short time ago. However, the shadow of past experiences makes it difficult to overcome reservations.*

**D**espite the lengthy history of the Kurdish question, the persistent coexistence of various political approaches failed to create a mutually acceptable term to describe the issue at hand. Until now, various political groups generated their own terms to describe the problem and developed policies based on these concepts. Various terms including *the Eastern Question, the Eastern Problem, the Southeast Problem, the Terror Problem, the Kurdish Problem, and the Kurdistan Question* all come to mind. There is no question that each term rested on serious political deliberations and certain prejudices. Such terms as *the Eastern Question* referenced geography and essential-

ly rejected the existence of a Kurdish identity. The *Southeast Problem* included references to underdevelopment and inter-regional disparities in addition to geography and implicitly indicated that eliminating economic challenges would automatically resolve the Kurdish question.

In a short time, public opinion referred to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) as "the terrorist organization" due to the organization's adoption of violent means in its struggle and violent attacks that harmed civilians and official targets alike. Following the emergence of the PKK, successive governments conveniently reduced the Kurdish question to a security

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issue and initiated talks focused on a “terror problem.” In response to the PKK’s *terror from below*, the state developed various means to create a *terror from above* campaign that legitimized torture, kidnapping, disappearances, unaccounted murders, and forced migration as counter-terror measures. Simultaneous actions from the PKK and the state created a long-enduring view that there was indeed a “terror problem” in Turkey.

Without a doubt, the first and foremost condition necessary to create a lasting solution is an accurate diagnosis and nomenclature. In order to succeed in these efforts, we must develop a holistic approach to evaluate all aspects of the matter, including its root causes, and distinguish between the issues that gave rise to the problem itself and the set of problems that emerged out of the main problem.

### Root Causes and Relevant Outcomes

The problem that Turkey is attempting to tackle today has a long history. Under Ottoman rule, various communities with distinct languages and religions co-existed within the *millet* system where each group exercised a certain degree of autonomy within its domain. In many areas, each *millet* followed its own set of legal norms. However, the Ottoman Empire adopted measures to strengthen central authority as tensions began to arise between the Kurds and the state. Simply put, it was an administrative issue between the imperial center and local

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powers as opposed to a question of identity.

Having emerged out of the residue of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious empire, the Republic embraced Turkish identity as the primary source of unity and sought to subdue all non-Turkish elements through denial. As a result of these policies, the Republican regime denied all ethnic groups, including the Kurds, banned their native languages and attempted to assimilate them through various channels. An authoritarian brand of secularism that led to the Caliphate’s abolishment accompanied these nationalist policies. In this context, the government shut down numerous Kurdish *madrasas* and religious orders (*tarikats*) to eradicate knowledge and tradition dating back several centuries.

Early on, Turkey’s Kurdish population reacted to these policies of denial and assimilation and rebelled against the Republic. In response to these rebellions, the state adopted

the most severe military measures and eventually exiled the Kurds to various parts of the country through forced migration and relocation. The securitization approach and its many manifestations continued over many years as the relationship between the Kurds and the state continuously deteriorated. According to the Kurds, the state became an oppressive institution –even an enemy– that denied their identity and deemed it appropriate to subject them to all kinds of atrocities. In turn, the Republican elite perceived the Kurds as either a group of rebels and bandits or a wild “kind” that needed to be disciplined and modernized.

### The Costs of the Kurdish Question

The Kurdish question entailed major costs not only to the Kurds but the entire society and country over the years. Without a doubt, the Kurds had to bear the worst circumstances as they were denied and ignored while their language was outlawed and their names had to be changed. The state-imposed forced migration led Kurds to be forcibly removed from their homelands and to live among an unfamiliar people whose language they did not speak. Furthermore, exile inevitably doomed them to unemployment and poverty. All these policies devastated the Kurds in social, economic, cultural, and psychological ways. The trauma became even deeper as violence and oppression grew and the rising number of dead, injured, and arrested Kurds accompanied the increasing population

of Kurdish fighters. Particularly the younger generations who believed that they had lost everything experienced the greatest trauma of all.

One of the leading factors contributing to this great trauma among the Kurds is the body count associated with the Kurdish question. While the exact number of dead remains unknown, the discrepancy between the accounts of Kurdish historians and the official numbers is noteworthy. Nonetheless, even the most optimistic estimates indicate that over 45,000 people perished during 21 rebellions over the first 14 years that followed the Republic's establishment. Similarly, over 45,000 people are believed to have died in the context of Turkey's anti-PKK campaign.

In turn, the state allegedly spent an estimated 150 to 400 billion US dollars on counter-terror measures. The most common estimate puts this number at around 300 billion US dollars. In other words, Turkey set aside an annual 15 billion US dollars over the past twenty years in its efforts to fight the PKK. The financial burden of the counter-terror campaign unmistakably did significant damage to the regional and national economy.

The Kurdish question did not only create social and economic problems but also jeopardized the country's political and judicial systems. The issue engendered two distinct legal and political systems, which coexisted in the same country. Following the introduction of military rule (*örfi idare*) in 1925, a state of emergency (*sıkı yöne-*

*tim*) remained in place between 1978 and 1987 and continued as emergency rule (*olağanüstü hâl*) from 1987 to 2002. Simply put, the Kurds endured various forms of extraordinary administrative measures for decades in addition to a quarter century of uninterrupted military rule. Similarly, the introduction of the Anti-Terror Law and various amendments to criminal law, an alternative legal order was established for this region. Moreover, failure to resolve the Kurdish ques-

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tion perpetuated military tutelage over Turkey's democracy and made it impossible for democratization attempts and reform initiatives to become fully operational.

A long list of factors including but not limited to aforementioned historic developments transformed the Kurdish question into a complex problem with social, political, economic, cultural, psychological, and security implications. As such, it would be impossible to generate a lasting solution or resolution initiative without a holistic approach that addresses all aforementioned dimensions.

## Resolution Attempts

The history of government policies that created the Kurdish question and resolution attempts to address the issue date back to the initial years of the Republic and the single-party period. However, successive governments during this period focused their efforts on reporting the events. A significant portion of the body of reports considered the Kurdish question as a matter of security and order, and recommended that the Kurds be disciplined through military measures and assimilated through denial, relocation, and forced migration policies. The official reports largely informed government practices during the single-party period. Although Turkey's transition into a multi-party democracy and the Democratic Party's rise to power led to a certain degree of moderation, the government failed to develop an in-depth approach toward the Kurdish question. Instead, the government sought to develop relations with the Kurds by incorporating local notables, such as the leaders of Kurdish families and religious orders, into their parliamentary group.

In recent years, President Turgut Özal's 1991 pledge to resolve the Kurdish question marked the first effort to address the issue. While Özal continued his efforts, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel and Deputy Prime Minister Erdal İnönü declared that they "recognized the Kurdish reality" (sic.) during a visit to Diyarbakır in 1993. In response to efforts and initiatives for a peaceful resolution from



Sirri Sureyya Onder (L) and Pelvin Buldan (R) read Abdullah Öcalan's message on March 21, 2013, in the southern Turkish city of Diyarbakir. STR / AFP

Özal and others, the PKK declared its first-ever unilateral ceasefire on March 20th, 1993. A two-month extension followed after one month. Two days after the PKK's renewal of its ceasefire, President Özal passed away amidst popular claims that he was assassinated in order to prevent him from resolving the Kurdish question. 40 days after Özal's death, a PKK death squad killed 33 soldiers in Bingöl. This brought the first period of ceasefire to end.

In 1996 and 1997, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan voiced his intention to resolve the issue while Mesut Yılmaz pointed out that the government was compelled to address the Kurdish question as part of its EU membership bid by stating that "the road to the EU goes through Diyar-

bakır." However, a series of attacks and political maneuvers rendered these initiatives ineffective. The experiences of peace advocates, including politicians, bureaucrats and even military personnel, discouraged and derailed all resolution attempts.

Finally, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured and transferred to Turkey in 1999. Although the PKK declared unilateral ceasefires on several occasions and even resolved to withdraw from Turkey, successive governments failed to seize these opportunities and even misused them for short-term benefits. For instance, a 1999 military operation targeted PKK militants who followed Abdullah Öcalan's orders to withdraw from Turkey and claimed 500 lives. There is no question that this event contin-

ues to motivate the PKK's current efforts to secure legal reassurance.

## The 2000s: The AK Party and the Kurdish Question

Following the AK Party's rise to power in 2002, initiating negotiations for EU membership represented a priority item on its political agenda through the initial years. In this context, the government enacted a series of reforms intended to meet the Copenhagen Criteria. The great majority of reforms (i.e. abolishing the state of emergency, decreased detention periods pending trial, abolishing the State Security Courts, eliminating legal restrictions on the Kurdish language, lifting the ban on Kurdish-language publications, etc.) was directly or indirectly relevant to the Kurdish question. These reforms, coupled with the credentials and background of many AK Party politicians, created hope among Turkey's Kurds and resulted in widespread support for the party in Kurdish-dominated areas.

Prime Minister Erdoğan's 2005 meetings with intellectuals in Ankara and his subsequent statements during a visit to Diyarbakır received serious attention not only from the Kurds but also from national and international audiences. This marked the first instance that a Prime Minister of Turkey explicitly referred to "the Kurdish question" and announced that this was also his problem. More significantly, Erdoğan initiated talk of reconciliation by stating that "ignoring past mistakes is not suitable

behavior for great states" and thereby emphasized that they intended to resolve the issue with more democracy, equal citizenship, and greater welfare.

Erdoğan's address represented the state's official recognition of the Kurdish question. However, the Prime Minister's statements led to diverse reactions: Positive feedback from Kurds and pro-peace groups was met with harsh criticism from nationalist/Kemalist circles. Therefore, the government failed to take steps to complement Erdoğan's Diyarbakır address immediately. Moreover, various new restrictions on rights and liberties, including government-endorsed amendments to the Anti-Terror Law and the Law on the Duties and Powers of the Police, were enacted over the next years while the reform agenda practically came to a standstill.

## The Kurdish Opening

In 2009, the AK Party government sparked public debate on a "Kurdish opening." This initiative ensured an in-depth discussion of the Kurdish question and carried the issue to the mainstream. Against the background of lively public debate, the AK Party encouraged all social groups to voice their opinions and offered to work together toward a peaceful resolution instead of making a concrete proposal. However, popular reactions against the initiative led the AK Party to revise the program's name several times. The government adopted the term "Democratic Opening" to replace the original title, which was

followed by “the National Unity and Fraternity Project.” Although the reform process led by Minister of the Interior Beşir Atalay failed to engage and incorporate political parties, it made it possible for the government to engage in lengthy deliberations with professional associations, NGOs, universities, the media, and public intellectuals. As such, the government strived to receive comments from all parties willing to contribute to the process. During this period, the National Assembly held its first-ever session on the Kurdish question and its resolution while the government worked to arrange for a group of PKK militants stationed at Camp Mahmour in Iraqi Kurdistan to enter the country. The arrival of a total of 34 militants (eight from Mount Qandil and 26 from Camp Mahmour) led to celebrations at Habur (Ibrahim Khalil) border crossing while protests took place across the country.

## The Oslo Process

What really facilitated the Kurdish opening, however, were talks that the National Intelligence Agency held with Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK—which later came to be known as the Oslo Process. The Oslo Process marked the first instance that Turkey engaged in direct talks with the PKK and Öcalan. Furthermore, there was no outrage when the minutes were leaked through a news agency in Turkey. However, a group of disgruntled members of the police and judiciary attempted to detain Hakan Fidan, head of the National Intelligence

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Agency, and former directors of the organization on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

An important contribution of the Oslo Process was that it eradicated the perception that direct talks between the state and the PKK were an extraordinary affair and provided an opportunity for both parties to get to know each other and their exact demands. Truly, the current peace/resolution process in Turkey represents an effort that builds upon the experience and the know-how of the Oslo Process as opposed to a new beginning. In other words, the contribution of the Oslo Process must receive due credit for the ongoing success of the peace process.

Unfortunately, the PKK attack on Silvan, Diyarbakır and the subsequent recurrence of violence interrupted the Oslo Process as sound recordings from one of the meetings was leaked to ferment distrust and doubt. In the meanwhile, the PKK's increased activity was met with more military operations from the state. Still, by the end of 2012, the PKK had failed to initiate its “People's Revolutionary War” while the state proved unable



A Kurdish man waves a BDP (Peace and democracy party) flag during celebrations for Nowruz, on March 17, 2013. AFP / Gürcan Öztürk

to eliminate the organization. Precisely during this period, hundreds of inmates –convicted PKK members and defendants at ongoing KCK trials- located in various correction facilities engaged in hunger strikes and even ‘death fast’ to call upon the government to end Abdullah Öcalan’s isolation on the island of İmralı. Following a lengthy interruption, the PKK were able to make contact with their imprisoned leader and the hunger strikes ended following Öcalan’s press release. This was followed by Prime Minister Erdoğan’s statement a few month later that “the state would re-initiate talks with Öcalan if necessary.” This was an indication that renewed contact facilitated discussions not only on the hunger strikes but also about the development of a lasting solution to the Kurdish question. Once talks between the Nation-

al Intelligence Agency and Öcalan reached a certain level, two deputies serving in the current Parliament, Ahmet Türk and Ayla Akat, met with Öcalan on January 3rd, 2013.

## The Current Peace Process

The İmralı meeting between Abdullah Öcalan and the two deputies officially initiated the current peace process. On February 23rd, 2013, a second group of deputies that included Pervin Buldan, Altan Tan, and Sırrı Süreyya Önder visited Öcalan in prison. Following the meeting, BDP officials travelled to Iraq and Europe to meet with PKK and KCK leaders. Öcalan authored three letters to the PKK base on Mount Qandil, the organization’s European wing and the government in Ankara following the



preliminary meetings and had these delivered through official channels. After lengthy deliberations among the Kurds, Öcalan made a historic

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announcement during Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır: "We have now reached a point where guns must go silent and ideas and politics must speak. We will unite in the face of those who try to split us. From now on, a new period begins when politics, not guns, will come to the fore. It is now time for armed elements to withdraw outside the country." The PKK leadership on Mount Qandil responded positively to Öcalan's message and declared ceasefire only days after their announcement of loyalty.

### **The Peace Process and Perception Management**

Currently, only a handful of people are in charge of the peace process and have detailed information about the negotiations. However, the media serves as a channel for actors close to

either negotiating party to send messages to one another and the broader public. In other words, a parallel negotiation is being held through various media outlets, which not only increases expectations but also creates a considerable amount of disinformation. However, the multitude of commentators during such processes seems to cause misunderstandings and thereby create additional challenges to the peace process. Similarly, it is necessary for observers to watch their tone and avoid using a language that humiliates and/or ignores the opposite party.

At the same time, there is need for third parties to serve as intermediaries during the peace process. Particularly for this reason, the merits of establishing certain commissions came to the public's attention in the country. In this regard, a 63-member Wise Men Commission was established from among intellectuals, academics, artists, and NGO representatives. The Commission held its first meeting with Prime Minister Erdoğan, Cabinet members and bureaucrats in Istanbul on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013. This intermediary body is expected to serve as a messenger between various social groups and decision-makers and to help create a fertile ground for peaceful resolution. Quite significantly, Prime Minister Erdoğan emphasized that the Commission would work independently and not on behalf of the AK Party or the Turkish government. This emphasis on the body's independence heightens the public's expectations regarding its performance and functions. Furthermore, the AK Par-

ty proposed to establish a Parliamentary Commission but this initiative was met with criticism from the CHP and the MHP, which announced that they would not assign any representatives to this Commission. Nevertheless, establishing a Parliamentary Commission represents a major step to ensure the successful conclusion of the peace process.

### **Demands and Expectations**

The peace process in Turkey is at its earliest and easiest stage. Until the Kurdish opening of 2009, it was legally unlawful and politically and

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socially inappropriate to talk about the Kurdish question. Therefore, there continues to be a considerable amount of confusion among the general public, decision-makers and even negotiating parties. It remains unknown whether the parties have a concrete set of expectations (end game) for resolution or what their 'red lines' are. It is also noteworthy that individual actors who collectively constitute a given negotiating party may at times be at odds with each other and fall apart. Therefore,

there has been considerable excitement about the responses to Öcalan's message from Qandil, Europe, and the BDP. Luckily, all three groups responded positively to Öcalan's requests and strengthened the case for the peace process.

However, Öcalan's emphasis on Islam and shared historic experiences created some disillusionment among Leftist intellectuals, certain Alevi groups, and part of the PKK affiliates. It remains to be seen whether these statements represent significant changes in Öcalan's thinking or mere rhetoric intended to comfort the Turks and the state. After all, Öcalan's past statements historically tended to feature positive and negative elements together. Still, critiques of Öcalan's Newroz message have been extremely agitated and –more significantly- chose to express their disapproval through such means that might jeopardize the peace process altogether.

It continues to be unknown what has been discussed in negotiations between the state and Öcalan that paved the way for the aforementioned developments. Nonetheless, it would appear that negotiating parties agreed on a three-stage process where ceasefire represents the first stage. At this point, the PKK is expected to withdraw its armed militants from Turkey. Although there seems to be principal agreement on this step, practical uncertainties continue to surface in public discussions. For instance, while the PKK insists on some legal arrangement to facili-

tate its withdrawal, the AK Party government claims that there is no need for such legislation. However, Prime Minister Erdoğan has pledged several times that the PKK withdrawal would not be met with government actions similar to the military operation in 1999. Armed PKK fighters are expected to leave the country in line with Öcalan's orders.

It is possible to claim that the PKK's disarmament and constitutional and legal arrangements to address the Kurdish question are likely to follow the withdrawal. However, each individual step shall acquire substance over time. Moreover, there is a considerable chance that negotiating parties would actually prefer such vagueness. For warfare and peace processes, as mentioned above, tend to cause considerable transformations in the parties' demands. After all, it is possible to observe that such a transformation will actually taken place given the history of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss to what extent constitutional and legal arrangements for the official recognition of Kurdish identity, citizenship, Kurdish-language education, and the strenghtening of local governments will be able to address the Kurdish question and cross it off from Turkey's political agenda. It would appear that the transformation of Kurdish demands from official status and self-government to democratic reforms constitutes a major dynamic for the peace process. The AK Party may easily meet these demands with reference to rights and liberties. On the contrary, the peace process is

unlikely to succeed if the Kurds insist on official status instead of democratic reforms that shall safeguard Kurdish identity.

### **The Future of the Peace Process and Potential Risks**

In order for the peace process to lead the country to success and lasting peace, we must acknowledge and analyze all aspects of the Kurdish question. After all, social aspects of the problem need to be addressed alongside political and legal regulations for the peace process to succeed. It might be quite difficult to find a set of policies that will simultaneously satisfy the Kurds and prove acceptable to the concerned non-Kurdish members of Turkish society. In this sense, undoing the taboos in the hearts and minds of decision-makers may be a more important step than addressing society's concerns.

While the entire society must play its part in the peace process, the greatest role belongs to negotiating parties – that is, the state and the Kurdish political movement. Their most urgent task is to take steps to support each other in addition to engaging in competitive negotiations. Particularly, leading actors from both sides must consider the remainder of society in mind instead of themselves and their constituency. However, various non-political institutions including universities, the media and NGOs can and must do their part to encourage negotiating parties and persuade the general public. ■