

TURKEY'S KURDISH PEACE PROCESS AND THE THIRD EYE

Turkey's Kurdish question has witnessed novel developments since the commencement of meetings between government officials and the PKK in late 2012 designed to settle the long-running conflict. Rapidly changing regional patterns of alliances, as well as domestic constraints, have led to a gradual internationalization of the process. Although the Turkish government firmly rejects the idea of introducing a "third eye" to the process, the widening gap between Turkey and its Western allies and PKK's increasingly positive publicity and rising reputation as a result of its campaign against ISIL challenges the Turkish position on this issue.

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fter almost 30 years of armed struggle, costing tens of thousands of lives, Turkey's Kurdish problem recently witnessed serious efforts to settle the conflict through an AKP government initiative declared in July 2009. By November 2014, the process had reached a point where both the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which led the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey, began to signal an approaching date for the disarmament of the insurgent group. But in these last phases of the process, which were aimed at a mutually agreed-upon road map for settling the conflict, a new challenge has emerged involving the question of whether to introduce a "third eye," that is, a neutral player to monitor the disarmament process. The idea of a third eye has been frequently demanded by the Kurdish side. The Kurdish representatives to the process demanded that a third eye, as a neutral country to the conflict, monitor the process and keep the record of steps taken in accordance with the defined road-map as well as to mediate between both parties if a conflict occurs regarding the road-map.

While the Turkish government firmly rejects the idea of a third eye, this problem has steadily risen to become the major challenge for the Kurdish peace process. Moreover, recent developments in the region, namely the rise of the belligerent jihadist group the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), as well as ongoing violent turmoil in Syria and Iraq, have put Turkey and its main Western allies, the United States and the United Kingdom, in differing positions regarding the Kurdish problem.

Past Failures and the Process

The AKP government's endeavors to reach a settlement to Turkey's Kurdish problem began in 2005 with a peace process led by Emre Taner, former head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MİT). The initial aim of the process was to reach an agreement on the disarmament of the PKK by engaging with PKK cadres based in Europe, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and even the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The initial process was conducted with utmost discretion by all parties. After preliminary, indirect communications among Turkish officials and PKK cadres, direct meetings were held in various European cities. However, the recordings of these meetings – later referred to as the Oslo Meetings, since this city was one of the main locations where they were held – were leaked to the public through a PKK-affiliated news agency on 13 September 2011. Between 2005 and 2011, third parties were also heavily involved in the process. Western representatives, including British intelligence officers, were present in the meetings as a third eye, with the consent of the Turkish government. However, both Turkish and Kurdish representatives withdrew in 2011 when the meetings failed to make progress and armed clashes erupted again.

From the perspective of Turkish decision-makers, especially for then Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, one of the main reasons behind the failure was the involvement of third parties, mainly Western but also the KRG representatives in some cases as well, in the meetings. Rather than helping, Turkish decision-makers believed that the involvement of the third eye in the process created obstacles for Ankara by unnecessarily delaying the process. Erdoğan revealed Turkey's position on British involvement by stating that “[Britain] was also performing as a ‘third party.’ This was not able to accomplish anything; on the contrary, it further complicated this process. The same actors played a role in Oslo too. Nothing positive emerged from there either.”¹

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After the collapse of the meetings, violence resurged in Turkey from both sides. In December 2011, Turkish fighter jets mistakenly bombed a group of Kurdish smugglers, causing 35 deaths. In turn, the PKK intensified its attacks on government institutions such as military barracks in Kurdish-populated areas, causing dozens of casualties. In a striking development in domestic politics, the Istanbul-based Special Attorney-General called in the head and deputy head of MİT for an interrogation in February 2012. The main content of the investigation was the leaked recordings of the meeting they held with PKK cadres, which revealed the nature of the negotiations and possible concessions on the Kurdish political and civil rights in exchange of disarming the PKK.

While post-Oslo meetings between government representatives and PKK cadres (now mainly via its imprisoned leader Öcalan) were publicly declared by Erdoğan in December 2012, the actual content of the talks has been kept hidden from the public. In further development, the Turkish Parliament passed a law empowering intelligence agencies by increasing their role in the Kurdish peace process, and protecting their officers from future legal risks of communicating with a designated terrorist group according to Turkish law.² A committee derived from the legal Kurdish political party (Peoples' Democratic Party – HDP) also engaged in these

¹ “President cites Oslo talks to justify exclusion of third-party from Kurdish peace process,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 November 2014.

² For a survey of the reform in the Turkish intelligence community, see: Egemen Bezci, “Reform and Threat Perception in the Turkish Intelligence Community,” *Journal of Mediterranean and Balkan Intelligence*, Vol.3, No.1 (June 2014), pp. 25-42.

talks, effectively acting as a mediator between Öcalan and the PKK cadres based in Iraqi Kurdistan and Europe.

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The post-Oslo meetings have yielded three distinct outcomes thus far. First, the level of armed violence between Turkish armed forces and PKK insurgents dramatically declined thanks to Öcalan’s call, during the Newroz celebrations of 21 March 2013, for the PKK to cease its armed activities in Turkey. Thus, the Turkish government could hold meetings without fear of strong public criticism that could otherwise have erupted as a result of a resurgence of violence. Second, Öcalan demonstrated that he is the only figure within the PKK legitimately able to call for a cessation of violence. Indeed, Öcalan proved that he is almost an omnipotent figure, solely capable of impacting and shaping the PKK’s actions and agenda. Third, due to the cessation of armed clashes, the PKK could shift the focus of its armed struggle from Turkish territory towards northeastern Syria. Indeed, the PKK successfully carved out areas of territorial control in that region, exploiting the lack of the state authority due to the Syrian civil war. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu recently defined the major characteristics of the post-Oslo meetings as “national, local, and authentic,” but there is a rising call from the PKK for internationalizing them.³

The post-Oslo meetings have not been a smooth process. At different points, various actors involved – the PKK cadres, HDP deputies, and the Turkish government – have explicitly voiced their discontent regarding how other actors have behaved during the process.⁴ For instance, Öcalan often publicly expressed his impatience over the government’s hesitancy to take further steps. Also, the government warned that the peace process could not be achieved should the PKK continue its threatening and aggressive rhetoric. Such statements have signaled mistrust for the process. Partly because of this, in October 2013, the PKK’s Cemil Bayık called for a third eye to be reintroduced into the process. In December, Öcalan echoed this call and frequently reiterated it in 2014. The clearest statement, however, recently came from Bayık in November 2014 when he asserted that the PKK wanted the US to become the third eye in the process.⁵ While this proposal was immediately rejected by the

³ “Turkish PM says Kobane offers two paths: Peace or pain,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19 October 2014.

⁴ The most alarming development to destabilize the process was the Kobane Protests in 6-7 October 2014 that caused the 26 lives, see: “Battle for Kobani between Isis and Syrian Kurds sparks unrest in Turkey,” *Guardian*, 8 October 2014.

⁵ “Senior PKK leader says US could mediate in Turkey talks,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 3 November 2014.

government, the PKK is only likely to increase its demand for a third eye, namely the US or the UK.⁶ The PKK's call will likely be bolder because its cadres would like to exploit the widening gap – caused by their differing approach to the Syrian civil war – between Turkey on the one side, and the US and the UK on the other, to maximize their gains from the process.

Risks Ahead

During the course of the post-Oslo meetings, the demand for incorporating a third eye came from the PKK when mistrust peaked between parties. It is apparent from press briefings of the parties involved that the current agenda revolves around devising a road map for a lasting settlement.⁷ However, since mistrust between the government and the PKK is so high, agreeing on a road map and its implementation is bound to be difficult. The PKK is also likely to increase its call for a third eye so as to ensure that the government does not shift its position based on outcomes of the forthcoming parliamentary elections (due in the summer of 2015). For its part, the Turkish government, while fiercely rejecting a third eye, may prefer to create a largely symbolic monitoring body – possibly one set up from among the Wise Men Commission. Established in 2013, the Commission consists of 63 individuals including members of the business community, academicians, journalists, authors, and other prominent figures, and is intended to inform the public about the Kurdish peace process. However, while the government endeavors to limit the process to one held solely between itself and the PKK, the potential third eye actors, namely the US and the UK, are hesitant about the whole process.

In fact, the British have taken a reserved position on the post-Oslo process since its commencement and these reservations have recently increased. According to the British perspective, the Turkish government took a risky and serious step in starting the process. During one of the meetings between British Foreign Office officials and Turkish representatives, the British side raised several concerns, including a main worry that Turkey's Kurdish initiative lacked a commitment to a final resolution of the Kurdish problem. Instead, the process seemed to be ambiguous and open-ended. This, the British feared, created a suitable atmosphere for obstacles designed to seriously damage the process. Another concern raised was that both sides – the Turkish government and the PKK – had only initiated the post-Oslo processes due to their respective concerns and agendas regarding the civil war in Syria. The British pointed out to their Turkish counterparts that the PKK was unlikely to completely lay down its arms while the turmoil in Syria and the threat from ISIL continued. Also relevant to this point

6 “Turkish government fiercely rules out third-party involvement in peace process,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 November 2014.

7 “AKP declares roadmap, hoping to set Kurdish peace bid on track,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16 October 2014.

was the intra-Kurdish rivalry between the PKK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the influential conservative Kurdish party that leads the government in Iraqi Kurdistan and is particularly active among Kurds based in Iraq and among the diaspora. Moreover, the British were concerned that Turkish officials conducting the process had been tentative in liaising with their British counterparts and providing information on whether progress was being made.

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In addition to specific concerns about the peace talks, Turkey’s image in the British media and among other interested parties has shifted since the commencement of the process. When the post-Oslo phase began in 2012, Britain perceived Turkey’s leadership as an honest move towards the democratic consolidation of the country. However, three developments – namely the nation-wide *Gezi* Protests in 2013,

ISIL attacks on Kurdish enclaves in Iraq and Syria, and Turkey’s hesitancy about countering ISIL (even when it has approached the Turkish border) – raised questions regarding the sincerity of the Turkish government and its aims in the region. The differences between the UK and Turkey on issues relating to the Middle East should not be exaggerated; looking at British foreign policy in general, Turkey still stands as a strategic partner and a NATO ally that should not be alienated. Since the Turkish government retains cooperative relations with the Barzani administration in Iraqi Kurdistan, Ankara is also a key factor in the security of the recently-completed Iraqi Kurdistan pipeline, stretching from the Kirkuk oilfields to the Turkish border.⁸ Therefore, although the British remain skeptical about Turkey’s Kurdish process and aims in Syria, wider foreign policy interests prevent them from taking bold steps, such as removing the PKK from London’s list of terrorist organizations, or directly engaging with the PKK’s Syrian branch (People’s Protection Units – YPG) in the campaign against ISIL. All in all, the British, in protecting their strategic and security priorities in the region, do not want to directly confront Turkey. For this reason, they will be reluctant to act as a third eye in the post-Oslo meetings.

The US shares similar concerns to the British about the post-Oslo meetings and agrees that it is unlikely that the PKK will lay down its arms in full. Washington, however, assumes a different role and takes a different path in the process due to

⁸ For a comprehensive account of Turkey’s role in the Kirkuk oil, see: Nicholas Borroz, “Turkey’s Energy Strategy: Kurdistan over Iraq,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.13, No.3 (Summer 2014), pp.103-10.

its engagement with the Democratic Union Party (PYD). It is important to note that the US views its relations with Turkey through a realist lens; Washington has never been severely critical of Turkey's democratic deficiencies at the expense of its strategic relations with Turkey, which was an important ally throughout the Cold War. Especially after the start of the "Arab Spring," Turkey once again played a crucial role in the US politico-military strategy in the region, which downgraded the priority of the Kurdish question in bilateral relations.

However, during the course of the Arab Spring, a gap emerged between Turkish and American strategies toward the Middle East. Differences have been evident on various issues, from Libya to the plight of refugees in Turkey, but three topics in particular have proven divisive. The first was the clear disagreement over the ousting of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, since Turkey initially did not acknowledge Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's military rule, while the US continued diplomatic channels with the military regime. The second disagreement was due to differing approaches to the Syrian civil war (and the potential use of land forces there), and the third was Turkey's relations with the KRG at the expense of the central Baghdad government.

Moreover, the rising prestige of the PYD in fighting against ISIL in Syria shifted American preferences on the Kurdish issue; the Kurds, after all, seemed like possible partners in the field, working for the American campaign against ISIL in Syria. As an indicator of this new approach, American military support and humanitarian aid dropped in October 2014 for PYD fighters in Syria.⁹ The rapidly changing patterns of alliances in the region have meant that while Turkish-American relations sour, the PYD/PKK endeavors to find a secure place in the American campaign against ISIL. Therefore, while initially the PKK/HDP representatives could not find any serious counterparts in Washington with whom to meet, now both PYD/PKK and HDP representatives have been receiving serious attention from circles there. It is still unlikely that the US will remove the PKK from its designated terrorist group list. However, US State Department spokesperson Maria Harf has stated that the US does not designate the PYD as a terrorist group, so does not see any obstacle to aiding the PYD or engaging with them.¹⁰ Therefore, even if the US refrains from involving itself in Turkey's Kurdish process as a third eye, it is developing its own multivectoral Kurdish policy to serve its politico-military interest in Syria and Iraq. It is unlikely that the US would develop its Kurdish policy completely independent from its broader set of relations with Baghdad and Ankara, but it will certainly continue to make use of the PYD in its Syria policy.

9 "Kobane aid triggers Turkey-US debate," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 23 October 2014.

10 "PYD not terrorist under US law, Turkey should provide them support: Washington," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 October 2014.

Future Directions

While the post-Oslo meetings enter into a critical phase, the Turkish government is exposed to more pressure to settle the issue. Due to the changing regional patterns of alliance and cooperation, new actors in the conflict have emerged in more influential roles. For instance, Iran's role in broader regional relations has become more visible due to Tehran's role in the anti-ISIL campaign and its apparently-improving relations with Washington. Thus, Iran finds more channels to utilize its existing relations with both the PKK and KRG in order to diminish Turkey's possibilities of settling the Kurdish issue in a direction Iran would dislike.

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As the US-led coalition against ISIL coordinates plans for taking down the jihadist group, the PKK will attempt to gain popular support to pressure the Turkish government in two manners. First, the coalition recently signalled that it will shortly agree to “train and equip” moderate rebels in Syria. Turkey will be an essential actor in this process, not only by providing a host site but also by taking a lead in training. The PKK will likely conduct more aggressive attacks on ISIL

in order to prove itself as a more efficient counterbalance to the jihadist group than moderate rebels. Second, the PKK will try to exploit its improving reputation in the West by publicly increasing its demands on the Turkish government. It will primarily criticize the Turkish government for not easing its attitude towards the PKK, which is a major fighting force fighting against the West's common enemy, ISIL.

Rapid developments in Turkey's domestic politics and approaching parliamentary elections in Summer 2015 will also create internal constraints for the government to maneuver towards a road map for settling the Kurdish issue. Therefore, it is crucial for the government at least to take initial steps towards a clear vision for the future, both to ease domestic and international pressures on the process and avoid possible setbacks.

Turkey is clearly entering into one of its most crucial times since the formation of the Republic. The PKK is likely to try to internationalize the peace process by using the reputation of its campaign against ISIL and it will continue calling for a third eye. It is important for Turkish decision-makers to realize that although the conduct of the Kurdish process remains a domestic endeavor, by fiercely opposing the

incorporation of a third eye, new patterns of regional alliances and multi-vectored foreign policy initiatives in the region could internationalize the process against Ankara's will.