

## Seeking new solution paths for the Kurdish issue

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Since the establishment of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in the early 1970s, Turkey's 'Kurdish Issue' is inextricably intertwined with the terrorist activities that have plagued Turkey for over three decades. The conflict has been extremely expensive as well: the government estimates that the public money allocated to counter-terrorism during this period amounts to between \$300 and \$500 billion. The PKK has pursued one goal: to create a confederated Kurdish state carved out of Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian territory, where Kurds have lived for centuries. Today the PKK still has some 5,000-7,000 armed guerrillas operating both inside and outside Turkey, and particularly in the Kandil mountains of Northern Iraq – despite the imprisonment of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan since 1999.

A key element of the PKK's long-term survival has been its ability to use the 'Kurdish question' as a tool for seeking community support and legitimacy by accentuating the fact that Kurds are unable to enjoy their political rights. The PKK has waged a bloody campaign for self-rule in predominantly Kurdish Southeast Anatolia since 1984. More than 40,000 people, including civilians and security forces have been killed in clashes with the PKK.

The policies of consecutive Turkish governments, particularly during the early decades of the Republic, led to segments of the country's Kurdish population – particularly in the South-East – supporting the PKK. Turkey made several major mistakes, including coercion and denial of the Kurdish identity. Former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit frequently labeled the Kurds as "mountain Turks". Moreover, the ill-formulated security policies of the 1990s provided popular arguments for the PKK propaganda machine.

### **A slow thaw – The Imrali process**

Over the last decade, efforts to improve the rights and freedoms of the Kurds have slowly progressed – not least as a consequence of Turkey's EU accession process, which necessitates key reforms in this area. But progress has been patchy and has proven insufficient to fully win over the Kurds, eliminate PKK support and reach a comprehensive settlement acceptable to all parties, in order to bring about a permanent ceasefire. Earlier this year a new initiative was launched. This followed a period of increased hostilities in Turkey, exacerbated by the situation over the border in Syria, where the PKK's 'partner' has become a powerful actor in areas populated by Kurds, further complicating matters and increasing regional tensions.

The meetings between National Intelligence Agency Under-Secretary Hakan Fidan and Abdullah Öcalan in December 2012 kick-started the so-called 'Imrali process' (named after the island where Öcalan is imprisoned), which is in essence a dialogue between all stakeholders – something unthinkable only a short time ago. Since last summer, Ankara had taken a number of important steps to prepare the ground, including the approval of the municipality law; the adoption of the third judicial reform package; the approval of a law to allow legal defence in the Kurdish mother tongue in court; new regulations for conjugal visits – including for Öcalan; preparations for a fourth judiciary reform package; and meetings of government officials and members of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) with Öcalan.

While the process has broad political support from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, there is also significant opposition from elements of the CHP as well as the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The process thus remains fragile and could potentially be derailed, with the killing of three PKK members in Paris in January highlighting the dangers. A successful outcome is thus far from guaranteed. But, not surprisingly, fed up with decades of terrorism, public support for the process has been high – reaching 70 percent in mid-February.

### **Constraints of the process**

While the Turkish public has initially been supportive, managing public perceptions of the process will be challenging nevertheless. Turks remain sceptical with regard to Öcalan's participation, which, if not handled correctly, may increase nationalist sentiment. With elections slated for 2014 (regional and presidential) and 2015 (parliamentary), Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan needs to tread carefully in order not to agitate voters and lose support from considerable portions of society.

Öcalan, and the PKK more broadly, also face several constraints, driven by the different substructures within the organisation. The PKK is not simply a one-man-show. There are many unknowns and it is unclear which element of the PKK is the right counterparty for talks.

Broadly speaking, the PKK can be understood to have three key elements. The 'ideological' PKK is the largest and most important of the three groups, as it forms the organisation's backbone and attracts the most sympathisers. Öcalan enjoys close to absolute influence over this group, as was in evidence during the recent mass hunger strikes of several hundred people: the moment Öcalan ordered them to stop, he was immediately obeyed.

The PKK has also fostered relationships, based on mutual interests, with countries including Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria and some European countries too. The PKK has improved relations with the intelligence services of these countries over the years. The group that fosters and sustains these relationships is known as the 'sub-contractor'. It is unclear what this group's agenda is within the PKK and whether it can make its own decisions and move independently from the influence of these countries. As these countries continue to have disputes with Turkey and they would not want to see the PKK out of the picture, because the organisation serves their interests.

There is also an arm of the PKK which is involved in financing the organisation, including by allegedly carrying out numerous smuggling (drugs and human) activities. The process of rapprochement could threaten these criminal interests.

### **Can the peace be won?**

What the PKK will gain in exchange for laying down arms and retreating from Turkey's borders is a key question. One possibility could be 'house arrest' for Öcalan once armed terror has been eliminated. However, at the core of the Kurdish issue lie fundamental rights and freedoms. The Imrali process will not deliver a sustainable solution unless it is supported by tangible improvements in fundamental rights and freedoms embedded in the new constitution – which is currently being drafted – offering full equality and rights to Turkey's Kurds. Only in this way can Kurdish hearts and minds be won.

It is also important to provide an alternative to the PKK and its approach. Pro-Kurdish political parties, particularly the BDP, should fully distance themselves from the PKK and stand up for the rights of the Kurdish community in order to secure sustainable peace and harmony within Turkey.

Although the process had a shaky start, there is cautious optimism. While Öcalan has yet to call for a ceasefire, following his recent meeting with three BDP representatives he signalled that Turkish prisoners abducted by the PKK may be released in the near future.

Turkey's leadership and the main opposition need to remain unified, demonstrating courage and vision, because a resolution of the Kurdish issue will be a win-win for all sides. Decades of terror would finally come to an end, bringing increased security and prosperity, and the Kurds would finally have their rightful place in society. Turkey could become a conflict resolution model and a positive example for the region.

### **A role for the EU?**

The European Union can play an important role in supporting this process. The EU has external leverage, giving it a crucial place in the puzzle. The EU accession perspective has, particularly during the first term of the Erdoğan government, provided considerable leverage for Turkey's democratisation. Consecutive reform packages not only brought Turkey closer to the EU but also increased democracy and fundamental freedoms, explaining why the Kurds rank among the strongest supporters of Turkish EU membership. The closing down of political parties, for example, has become more difficult, thereby paving the way for more active Kurdish politics, with less risk of an anti-democratic push-back.

Democratisation, fundamental rights and freedoms, and the new constitution – currently being penned – will be most effective if they are shaped within the EU framework. But, given the precarious state of Turkey's membership talks, the democratisation process in the country could also be under threat. Turkey's EU membership process must be injected with new dynamism, for the sake of continuing progress in the Turkish democratisation process, including by achieving a consensual and lasting solution to the Kurdish issue.

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