

# New Peace Talks in Turkey: Opportunities and Challenges in Conflict Resolution

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**ABSTRACT** *The restart of peace talks between the Government and the PKK has brought renewed optimism about the possibility to settle a nearly three-decade conflict, one of the oldest ongoing armed conflicts in the world and one with a major impact on neighbouring countries. These new efforts can be understood as part of the rapprochement process started in the mid 2000s. While it comes after a tremendous peak in violence, there seem to be very positive signs of the seriousness of this new stage. However, there are also doubts on its strength, structure, and direction.*

In December 2012, the same month that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly announced talks with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, peace processes were also moving forward in the Philippines, Colombia and Myanmar, to name just some of the ongoing peace negotiations worldwide. 2012 left us with encouraging news of opportunities for peace in conflicts between Governments and historic insurgencies in different corners of the world.<sup>1</sup> There are prospects of more positive steps in 2013 in these and other conflicts that have been preceded by decades of deaths, forced displacement, sexual violence, extrajudicial executions, and other consequences. Peace

negotiations are usually understood as pragmatic, tough and far from disinterested ways to put an end to violence and help address the underlying root causes, grievances, demands, and wrongdoings. It is not by chance that the potential benefits of risky negotiations are accepted at times when historic guerrilla movements face new contexts, questions, limitations, and strategic opportunities and when governments of different political persuasions and armed groups prove that they are incapable of imposing their military victory.

It is precisely at times like these that Turkey too is engaging in a new initiative to deal with its unsolved PKK/

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Kurdish question. There is nothing exceptional in giving it another try, following the significant difficulties encountered during the Democratic Initiative and Oslo talks, but it will be extraordinarily good news if this new process succeeds.

Things are moving fast in Turkey and any interim assessment can become outdated overnight. Still, there is room to analyse general elements of this new historic peace opportunity. This new effort, which many call the 'Imrali Process,' can be understood as part of the rapprochement process started around 2005. It comes after a tremendous peak in violence from mid-2011-2012, when the Oslo talks came to a dead end. Despite the short time that has elapsed since then, there seem to be very positive signs of the seriousness of this new process, which increases its chances for success. Indicators from the direct talks appear to be constructive in terms of preliminary political will, discourses, attitudes, and trust-building measures among other elements. Öcalan's call for the silence of arms and withdrawal of guerrilla forces outside the borders of Turkey gives evidence

of the window of opportunity. The pressing regional and local context somehow also urges determination in making the process move forward. However, while some elements of the process already indicate that positive lessons were learned from past failed attempts, there are also doubts on the strength, structure, and direction of the process. This would imply that some of the challenges include the need to further reinforce, structure, and protect the process itself, to build broad agreements at the political and social level on basic agenda issues, including guarantees for political participation, and to discuss, prepare and anticipate solid solutions for current and future phases of this process. If the strong political will shown so far is real, as it seems, the conflicting sides will need to make an enormous effort to consolidate the process, including through concrete measures.

This short, non-exhaustive review will try to point to the positive aspects, risks and challenges faced by the new peace talks in Turkey by focusing mostly on elements of the process itself. It will do so while recognizing the inherent limitations of external observation and drawing on the experience of years of external monitoring of this and other armed conflicts and peace negotiations worldwide.

### With Whom and How to Make Peace? Critical Decisions at Critical Times

Some key Turkish commentators, such as Hasan Cemal, have adopted

the healthy habit of reminding the public and the parties to the conflict that it is easier to make war than peace, which means that enormous efforts are needed to secure peace attempts. A critical part of this relates to processes themselves, to how negotiation processes are conducted, including the political will behind them and their structure and methodology (clear objectives, flexibility, procedural agreements, guarantees, timing and calendars, among other elements). The stronger the process the less chances disagreements, provocations, and efforts by spoilers will have to derail it. Worldwide monitoring of peace processes shows that frequent and recurrent sources of crises in negotiations can be found in procedural and methodological problems, as well as in mistrust between the parties, disagreement over substantive agenda issues, open military clashes or ceasefire violations, and political crises. These are all relevant in the case of Turkey.

As mentioned above, there are very positive indicators in Turkey that point to the seriousness of this process. The public stances taken by the different sides indicate a firm commitment –at least apparently– to the peace talks. The attitude has been mainly constructive and the parties have expressed their determination and political will to push the process forward and overcome obstacles. Even if it is too early to determine the real extent of this commitment, the approach of “speaking less and doing more” appears to be a sign of the willingness to avoid the rhetorical provo-

cations and ambiguity that hindered previous peace initiatives and that created so much distrust.

Among its already positive indicators, one can highlight the fact that for the first time the Turkish Government has publicly recognised Abdullah Öcalan as its interlocutor in peace talks and as a central figure for millions of Kurds in Turkey. In such an identity-related conflict as the Kurdish one, public acknowledgement and recognition plays a significant role. For many Kurds, regardless of whether or not they accept armed struggle, Öcalan symbolizes Kurdish identity and resistance. In addition to that symbolic importance, any realistic approach to the dynamics of power and conflict had at some point to include dealing with Öcalan (and the KCK/PKK) in the search for an end to violence. The Turkish government is now in a position where it can publicly accept this. Thus, public recognition by the AKP Government that Öcalan is a valid interlocutor and that it accepts direct talks as the way to settle the conflict makes an important difference compared to the ambiguity and secretiveness of past attempts. This could partially reduce accumulated Kurdish fears, deep distrust, and scepticism.

However, having an interlocutor such as Öcalan, in prison since 1999 and with restricted access to the Kurdish movement, poses dilemmas with regard to the sustainability of the talks. Severe restrictions in communications hinder the fluidity and guarantees that are needed in any peace



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) and the Democracy and Peace Party leaders Gulten Kisanak (L) and Selahattin Demirtas attend a meeting in Ankara.

AFP / Kayhan Özer

negotiation process. Therefore, strategies to avoid the possible negative impact of these restrictions could be crucial, including by creating the conditions for more direct communication between Öcalan and the KCK during the process. In addition, an adequate response to this could in turn contribute to a more stable process, a greater sharing of responsibilities, and a reduction in the risks of unpredictability that could result from giving too much weight to the individual figure of Öcalan. This goes hand in hand with the need to somehow clarify the role that Öcalan, the KCK, and the BDP will each play in this new process, as some analyses highlight. A possible necessary ques-

tion is how to find a balance between inclusive and participatory negotiation mechanisms, approaches to negotiation schemes that reduce the risk of misunderstandings or confusing roles, and realistic assumptions with regard to intra-power and decision-making dynamics.

In any case, the AKP Government's approach to interlocutors reflects the Government acceptance of Öcalan and the Kurdish movement –including the KCK and the BDP– as a main actor in Kurdish dynamics and in turn in Turkey. And this is a very positive sign of the willingness to deal with the question in realistic terms. So far, the authorization of visits by

BDP delegations to Imrali and of the circulation of Öcalan's draft proposals (letters to KCK, Europe, and BDP) are positive signs, in contrast for example to the retention of his roadmap in 2009 and the recent policy of keeping him in total isolation in prison.

The willingness shown so far by the parties to embark on trust-building measures and to avoid provocations to facilitate steps towards those aims is significant. These have included, among others, the Government's acceptance of BDP visits to Öcalan as part of the negotiation process; the toning down of Government rhetoric on Öcalan; the unconditional release of prisoners by the PKK in March as a result of an appeal from Öcalan and the Government's public acknowledgment of this measure; and Öcalan's historic call for the silence of arms and for PKK withdrawal outside Turkey, made during Newroz celebrations.

All in all, it seems that a preliminary understanding has been reached by the State and Öcalan/KCK with regards general objectives such as an end to violence, withdrawal, and some need for reforms. As the process advances it is overcoming difficult tests –such as the shocking and appalling Paris assassinations–, and it is becoming an asset that promotes a climate of conflict transformation in the country. However, apparently the ongoing process is being conducted without a clear structure, horizon, mechanisms and guarantees, as different analyses highlight. This is partially understandable taking

into account the deep level of accumulated distrust and the need to see measures in place before discussing another step. However, precisely due to the past failures there seems to be the need to structure and clarify the process, anticipate and prepare future phases in order to avoid deadlocks, indecision on how to proceed, lack of guarantees or ambiguity later on in the process, including for example stages related to eventual withdraw-

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al and future reintegration. Preparation and protection of the process as it moves forward could prove crucial for its sustainability.

At this point it is still uncertain how steps towards an end to violence and eventual withdrawal interrelate with needed steps in the political arena, whether this will meet Kurdish expectations regarding basic demands, what Kurdish demands exactly consist of now (content, degree of flexibility, timing, guarantees), what the role of Parliament will be, and how this will affect the expected new Constitution, among other questions. It can be foreseen that basic reforms

will need to include or focus on freedom for thousands of Kurdish political and social cadres who were detained in anti-KCK operations and who are clearly not part of the PKK, guarantees for political participation,

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decentralisation, and education in their mother tongue, among others, even if with different timings and processes.

Any peace negotiation involves some kind of deal where everyone is supposed to gain in some way. It would thus be naïve to expect withdrawal and eventual disarmament without security guarantees or progress with regard to Kurdish demands. And it would be constructive for the Government to accept an eventual armed withdrawal and work towards guaranteeing an agreed disarmament at a later stage if this scenario prevails –considering past negative experiences the PKK has had during withdrawal and the fact that many insurgencies worldwide keep their arms until processes are more advanced

and clear guarantees are provided. Even if the pace for political reforms is slow, a comprehensive approach to the Kurdish question implies that there will need to be advances in solving pending basic issues in order to sustain an end to violence. This may prove not to be so difficult if some of the measures, including judicial reforms, benefit broad sectors of society and if the process is consolidated. Some of the reforms could be agreed and implemented more immediately than others and some analyses point to an emphasis on legal reforms and liberation of Kurdish political and social cadres –especially in view of 2014 local elections– and to a new Constitution, preferably in the absence of violence. However, these issues will be plagued with problems, tensions and uncertainties.

The Constitutional Reconciliation Commission is an example of how difficult it is to reach a consensus on substantive issues. Moreover, additional uncertainties have emerged with the proposal to move towards a presidential system, which is advocated by Prime Minister Erdogan and broad sectors within the AK Party. How this will impact reforms on other issues is still uncertain. While the BDP has expressed its willingness to discuss presidential models, changes towards a certain presidential rule or towards certain presidential systems could compound political and social polarisation and directly or indirectly have a negative influence on pending reforms that relate to the Kurdish issue. Or it could just be one more piece of the puzzle, but not one that

would affect the necessary advances for Kurdish rights. In that sense, strengthening the non-violent political struggle by Kurds in the political arena and providing guarantees for their political participation will also influence the final form those rights take.

The degree of transparency and openness is also a delicate issue in any peace process, especially when negotiations take place within a context of polarization. The degree of internal divisions in Turkey seems to require finding a complex balance between transparency and confidentiality in how peace talks are conducted. Transparency allows matching the process to public expectations of peace while confidentiality protects the dialogue space and dynamics from internal and external pressures. A balance between both avoids creating excessive expectations among the public and prepares the ground for subsequent deals or steps, which might imply a rupture with the past. While the Oslo talks were secret, the Imrali talks were officially announced and some information may need to be made public even though the individual actors exercise prudence and caution. If no general information is provided on the 'what' and the 'how' of the discussion it could be counterproductive. Consequently, the leak published in *Milliyet* could in itself be seen as relatively positive as it disseminates basic information on the process. At the same time it was a step backward in the sense that it could have been taken as a violation of correct procedures and could have led to greater distrust

between the sides and within the public. All in all, the incident pointed to the need to reinforce and protect the process and strengthen its methods.

### **Local and Regional Pressures and Opportunities**

This new peace attempt coincides with local and regional pressures, including the 2014 local and presidential elections in Turkey, and is taking place in a regional context of serious instability, especially with regard to the war in Syria and regional and international disputes for power. These circumstances add time constraints to the new process in Turkey and could act as uncertain tests for its success, but at the same time this context of local and regional pressure reinforces in pragmatic terms the opportunity presented to Turkish and Kurdish actors to settle the conflict.

The election calendar in Turkey leaves relatively little time to advance on certain issues considered relevant for resolving the conflict and that would help pass the litmus test of elections and reinforce the process. These include the liberation of Kurdish politicians and activists detained in anti-KCK operations and legal reforms that would give broader guarantees for political participation. Still, time constraints can also act to avoid impasses and can reinforce motivation and responsibility in the process.

On the other hand, according to some analyses, the regional context of pressure could be pushing Turkey

and the Kurdish movement inside Turkey towards peace talks while simultaneously adding uncertainties and complexity. On one hand, amid the challenges and difficulties of Turkish policy in Syria and given Turkey's logical concern over growing Kurdish territorial control in some areas of Syria, Turkey may now be beginning to regard the Kurdish movement as a potential partner in the region, including in Syria, or at least does not see it as the enemy it used to be. This could reinforce Turkey's position in the region at the expense of other actors. Besides, the KCK/PKK apparently benefited from the regional turmoil and from the apparent "laissez-faire" approaches adopted by Syria and Iran towards the KCK/PKK in their proxy strategies. The peak in violence in 2011 and 2012 is somehow tied to this greater access to military assets and to lesser recent international isolation. However, the KCK/PKK's main objective continues to be the negotiated settlement of the Kurdish issue in Turkey and within Turkish borders, and in the best terms as possible for its guerrillas and followers.

At the same time there are uncertainties regarding how future developments in the region, including the Kurdish situation in Syria and Iran, could affect the process in Turkey. Special note must be taken of the cross-border nature of the KCK, with affiliated groups in Syria, Iran and Iraq, common loyalties to Öcalan, the mixed origins of the armed combatants in the various Kurdish guerrilla groups in the cross-border move-

ment, and their willingness to fight across borders. There could, therefore, be some degree of uncertainty on how this cross-border dimension will be approached or the impact it will have in the short, medium or long term in Turkey and in the region.

## Conclusion

The new process may not be the last attempt to solve the Kurdish issue in Turkey, but it is a new and resolute initiative. There are many positive signs that point to eventual success, not least in terms of political will and some aspects of the process itself, while the experience of failed processes, the certain fragility of the process, and inevitable regional uncertainties recommend a cautious approach. Furthermore, beyond the objectives of bringing violence to an end and reaching agreements on political reforms, the challenge of deeper transformations in the relations between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population remains. The process is moving forward and the difficulty will be conducting it safely and pragmatically towards a horizon of common success: a horizon of positive peace and just and equitable relations. ■

## Endnote

1. For example the year 2012 saw the signing of a preliminary peace agreement between the Philippines government and the MILF armed group, which was founded in the 1970s by a MNLF splinter group; the start of dialogue between the government of Colombia and the FARC, a guerrilla movement founded in the 1960s; and ceasefire agreements between the Myanmar government and almost all rebel groups, including the KNU which was founded in 1948.