

# The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process Stalled in Neutral

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**ABSTRACT** *The Turkish-Kurdish peace process began in early 2013 and stalled soon after. During that period, the Kurds expected the government to release KCK activists, improve Ocalan's prison conditions, allow Kurdish-language education, and lower the 10-percent electoral threshold. In response, the government announced a reform package, which, among others, allowed education in Kurdish in private schools. The government also sought to shut down Ocalan and remove the PKK from the peace process, by reaching out to Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Regional Government. Still, there is no doubt that a strong and democratic Turkey would improve the Turkish-Kurdish relationship and benefit the lives of Kurdish citizens.*

**T**he current Turkish-Kurdish peace process that began with cautious hope early in 2013 stalled soon after it was launched.<sup>1</sup> What caused this situation and what might be done to restart the process?

Peace can be a relative concept. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is first and foremost an adept politician. Thus, his main purpose appears to maintain and even expand his electoral mandate as Turkey enters its next electoral cycle in 2014. In so doing, he has many opposing constituencies to appease and satisfy. If he goes too far in satisfying the Kurds, he will surely alienate other, maybe even more important elements of the

electorate. As a result, he seems to have treated the mere agreement to begin the peace process as the goal itself, rather than as a part of a process to address the root causes of the conflict. His so-called democratic package released on September 30, 2013 failed to implement any of the reforms the Kurds were looking for. Gone were the earlier hopes of a new, more democratic Turkish constitution. Instead, Erdoğan seemed more interested in women's headscarves

Where then do we now stand? Is the cup of peace half empty or half full? The evidence is mixed. Thus, on the positive side, while urging Erdoğan to move faster and further, the Kurds

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also should remember that he has done much more to begin trying to solve the Kurdish issue than all his predecessors combined. In addition, the Kurds should recall Erdoğan's bold declaration when the peace process began that, "if drinking poison hemlock is necessary, we can also drink it to bring peace and welfare to this country."<sup>2</sup>

However, from June 30-July 5, 2013, the Peoples Congress of Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel), a PKK affiliated body, held its 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and declared that the first stage of the peace process had been completed by the PKK withdrawals from Turkey.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it was now time for the Turkish state and government to take concrete steps and make the required legal arrangements for the second stage of the peace process by presenting a democratization package of legal reforms. Instead, the Turkish government was constructing new military posts and dams, increasing the number of village guards, and failing to ensure the connection between the PKK head Abdullah Öcalan and democratic circles. Thus, concluded the Congress, the Turkish government was raising doubts about the peace process and creating the risk of a deadlock and failure.

In line with the gender equality principle, the Kongra-Gel assembly also elected Cemil Bayik and Bese Hozat as the co-chairs of the *Koma Civaken Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union to succeed Murat Karayilan who, however, supposedly was appointed as the new leader of

the *Hezen Parastina Gel* (HPG) or Peoples Defense Forces.<sup>4</sup> At the time, there was much speculation about what these new appointments might mean for the peace process with some thinking that Bayik would be more hawkish than the supposedly more moderate Karayilan.<sup>5</sup> However, it soon became clear that the reshuffling of leaders did not represent a policy change, but merely a procedural organizational restructuring. Öcalan, for example, was reelected the *Serok* or President of the KCK/PKK, and it was inconceivable that the switch of co-chairs between Karayilan and Bayik could have occurred without his approval. Thus, the leadership change probably did not signal a repudiation of the peace process

By September 2013, however, there were more signs that "the peace process has become bogged down and neither party is prepared to risk an initiative."<sup>6</sup> Erdoğan accused the PKK of "not keeping its promises" and asserted that only 20 percent of its guerrillas in Turkey had moved back over the border, most of them simply being children, invalids, and elderly people. Although the PKK had not released any official numbers, one of their spokesmen declared that "about 500" people had reached northern Iraq since the withdrawal process had started on May 15, 2013. This figure of 500 was close to that of 20 percent cited by the prime minister. If so, this was good news for the peace process as it was not easy for the PKK to evacuate Turkey without running into a fire fight with government troops. That no such conflict had occurred

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also might be viewed as a positive sign and credit to both sides. Indeed, as of December 2013, nobody has been killed in an armed clash since March 2013.

On the other hand the new KCK co-chair Bayik had already announced that “if the government fails to take action by Sept. 1 [2013], the cease-fire between Turkey and the PKK will be broken.”<sup>7</sup> The PKK claimed that it was living up to its part of the peace process by evacuating its militants from Turkey, but that the government was failing to reciprocate by presenting its promised democratization package of legal reforms. According to *Today’s Zaman* the PKK did not want to be viewed as breaking off the peace process, so was planning to use street protests against the government’s inactions as a method of getting things moving by bringing the issue to the attention of Western countries and blaming the stalemate on Ankara. The international attention focused on the Occupy Gezi movement in June 2013 probably influenced the KCK/PKK strategy to employ street protests.

Bayik elaborated by declaring that “mistrust between the Kurds and the government has grown deeper in the recent weeks.”<sup>8</sup> He warned that the PKK would make new decisions if Ankara did not “change the political and democratic atmosphere” of the country. “We are not mulling armed fight yet, but have other alternatives, including stopping [the] withdrawal process, suspending [the] ceasefire agreement and bringing all Turkey [’s] Kurds into the streets.”

Shortly afterwards, Bayik again charged that the Turkish government had failed to live up to its part of the peace process and ominously declared: “We will defend ourselves against this... If we see that they are doing a military operation, we will defend ourselves” and added that “if they want to increase the tensions in the war, we will send our withdrawn forces back.”<sup>9</sup> A few days later, the KCK Executive Council Presidency announced that the PKK had halted its withdrawal from Turkey, and accused Ankara of not living up to the agreement to implement democracy and a solution to the Kurdish problem: “The suspension of the withdrawal is aimed at pushing the government to take the project seriously and to do what is needed.”<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, Bayik added that “we are continuing the cease-fire, but if the government insists on its current policies then we will revise our stand.”<sup>11</sup>

When the peace process began, the Kurds expected the government to take the following steps to facilitate matters. 1) Release from prison the

approximately 5,000 KCK non-violent activists being held on terrorism charges. 2) Improve Öcalan's prison conditions to facilitate his ability to pursue peace. 3) Introduce mother-tongue education for the Kurds. 4) Reduce the 10 per cent electoral threshold for parliament. 5) Expand the boundaries for civil liber-

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ties regarding organizing, assembly, and speech. 6) Delist the PKK from the terrorism list since the government was now engaging it in a peace process.

However, the government has not taken any of these steps. Instead Erdoğan's democratization package announced on September 30, 2013 merely granted the following rights. 1) Established private schools for Kurdish-language education. 2) Restored the Kurdish village names that had been changed into Turkish. 3) Permitted the use of the letters X, Q, and W of the Kurdish alphabet on signposts and identification cards. 4) Granted freedom for political campaigning in Kurdish. 5) Abolished the student's daily vow of allegiance that began, "I am a Turk."

The Kurds were not satisfied with these provisions and also objected to

their unilateral formulation, which negated their desire to commence equal negotiations with the government. The PKK wants the government's mere dialogue with Öcalan to segue into real, in-depth negotiations in which specific proposals for a solution of the Kurdish problem are discussed. As Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of the pro-Kurdish BDP explained: "If you prepare the package without consulting us, we will not link it to the [peace] process. If we hear about this package for the first time from the mouth of the prime minister, then it will remain as your package."<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the PKK wants Öcalan's prison conditions to be improved so that some of the BDP parliamentarians who wish to meet with him will not be arbitrarily vetoed by the government. The BDP, for example, states that the government has prevented the delivery of letters from the PKK fighters in Kandil to Öcalan. Indeed, the recent death of Nelson Mandela reminds how the South African peace process was forwarded successfully by the government releasing Mandela from prison where he had been held on terrorism charges for some 27 years.

Along these lines, Öcalan has three requests: 1) The right to have external contacts in addition to his meetings with the BDP and the government. 2) Some sort of a neutral third-party observer or facilitator to monitor the negotiations as occurred in the earlier (2009-2011), but secret Oslo talks between the government and PKK. Given the longstanding struggle and



Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan meets with KRG President Massoud Barzani and Kurdish singers Shiwan Perwer and İbrahim Tatlıses in Diyarbakır last November.

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resulting level of mistrust between the two sides, the peace process inevitably will continue to founder without some neutral facilitator to bring them together and transparently serve as a witness and encourager. 3) The government should offer serious proposals and solutions. As Öcalan cautiously concluded: "While I maintain my belief in the [peace] process I expect the government to take a more positive initiative on negotiations."<sup>13</sup>

Instead, the government seems to be flirting with the idea of shutting Öcalan and the PKK out of the peace process and instead somehow negotiating with Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, who has become Turkey's de facto Kurdish ally in recent years. Indeed on November 16-17, 2013 Erdoğan and Barzani met in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Here, Erdoğan seemingly sought to leverage his energy and other economic and political dealings with Barzani to seek the Kurdish vote in

the up-coming cycle of Turkish elections that begin in 2014. The Turkish prime minister went so far as to encourage Barzani to establish a new, more moderate Kurdish party in Turkey with more Islamic characteristics than the secular and nationalist PKK.<sup>14</sup> By using the ancient technique of divide and rule, Erdoğan appears to be seeking to split and weaken the Kurdish movement and make it more applicable to his wishes not only in regards to the current peace process but also in the many other avenues of Middle Eastern politics dealing with energy resources and the continuing civil war in Syria.

Barzani's KDP/KRG and Öcalan's PKK have become the two great rivals in the struggle for leadership of the pan-Kurdish movement, a contest also reflected in the Syrian civil war and the failure in 2013 on three separate occasions to convene a pan-Kurdish conference in Irbil. To the extent that Erdoğan is trying to use Barzani to marginalize the PKK,

the Turkish-Kurdish peace process will fail because the PKK is the main Kurdish party in Turkey, not Barzani's Iraqi KDP.

## Other Factors

The continuing civil war in Syria interjected a further factor into the problems of the peace process. De facto Kurdish autonomy just across the Turkish border in Hasaka (Jazira) province played havoc with Turkey's fears regarding what it perceived as the PKK threat. The problem was even greater because the leading Kurdish party in Syria was the Democrat Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of the PKK. In effect, this meant that even though the PKK was supposed to be withdrawing across the border into Iraq's Kandil Mountains, it now had extended its cross-border presence next to Turkey by several hundred miles in Syria. In addition, this new Syrian position granted the PKK a type of strategic depth that added to its influence.

At first, Turkey reacted to this situation by bitterly opposing the PYD politically and diplomatically and then even by supporting armed Jihadist/Salafist groups such as Jablat al-Nusra, which was affiliated with al-Qaeda. These Salafists looked upon both the Assad regime and the secular Kurds as *Takfiri* or apostates. Bitter fighting broke out between them and the Syrian Kurds largely led by the PKK-affiliated PYD. Soon Turkey found itself in the unenviable position of seemingly siding with al-Qaeda affiliated

Salafist fanatics against secular, even pro-Western Syrian Kurds.

Thus, on July 25, 2013, amid reports that the PYD was about to declare Kurdish autonomy in Syria, Turkey publicly invited Salih Muslim, the chair of the PYD, to Istanbul for talks. Indeed one report claimed that the PYD already had produced a constitution for the Syrian Kurdish regions.<sup>15</sup> Under its provisions, Syria would become a democratic parliamentary federal system; Western (Syrian) Kurdistan—aka Rojava or the direction from where the sun sets—with Qamishli as its capital, would be one of the federal or autonomous self-ruling regions making its own internal decisions. Kurdish and Arabic would be its official languages and self-ruling units would protect the Syrian borders from foreign intervention

Salih Muslim quickly pulled back from this constitutional proclamation, claiming that it was premature and that other viewpoints still had to be consulted. The PYD leader hastened to assure Turkey that his party's call for a local administration for Syria's Kurdish regions did not mean that it was seeking independence that would threaten Turkey: "Our thought is to establish a provisional council of 40 to 50—maybe a hundred people." He added that "this council will comprise Kurds, Syriacs, Arabs and Turks," and was simply a necessary ad hoc device to help alleviate the war-torn situation until the end of the civil war would allow more permanent arrangements. "Kurds will need to have a status in the new order in

Syria. But what's in question now is a provisional arrangement... It's not about making a constitution."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, on November 12, 2013, the PYD moved yet another step toward some type of autonomy by declaring provisional self-rule in areas under its control and announced that it had formed a constituent assembly with the view toward creating a transitional government. Elections would be held within three months. Both Turkey and the KRG responded negatively, however. Barzani declared that "this is clearly an unilateral... act which disregards the other Kurdish parties."<sup>17</sup> Thus, it remained to be seen what the future held for Kurdish autonomy within what seemed to be the crumbling remains of the now failing Syrian state.

However, if the stalled Turkish-Kurdish peace process could be revived and brought to a successful conclusion, the Syrian Kurds might seek to become associated in some manner with Turkey. After all the PYD of Salih Muslim is closely associated with the PKK and is by far the strongest Syrian Kurdish party. If its elder brother the PKK and elder statesman Abdullah Öcalan accept Turkey, the PYD and Salih Muslim might see fit to follow in their footsteps instead of risking life in a broken Syria. Turkey would not only continue to become more democratic and thus acceptable to Kurdish nationalists, but also offer the Kurds in Syria the 16<sup>th</sup> largest state economy in the world. After all no matter what they do, the landlocked Kurds in Syria would obviously require good rela-

tions with Turkey to enjoy any chance for economic success.

Further, if Turkey joined the European Union (EU), as it has been formally seeking to do so since 2005, the Syrian Kurds would suddenly become part of this most advanced economic bloc that also offers considerable political protection to its members. The PKK model, instead of Barzani's KDP/KRG, would have led ironically to a successful moderate

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future. Moreover, Turkish EU membership would also offer Barzani's KRG close ties with the EU given the de facto alliance between Turkey and the KRG. Even more, of course, the Kurds in Turkey would also enter the EU by definition.

A strong and democratic Turkey might offer the vast majority of the Kurds in the world an incredibly bright future. For their part, the Kurds ironically would offer Turkey the Kemalist security it has always sought to the detriment of the Kurds, but now with the support and cooperation of the Kurds because it would now be to the benefit of the Kurds! What just a decade ago might have seemed counterfactual, would have become reality. ■

## Endnotes

1. For background, see my earlier analyses in "Reopening Turkey's Closed Kurdish Opening?" *Middle East Policy*, 20:2 (Summer 2013), pp. 88-98; "The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 14:1 (Winter/Spring 2013), pp. 101-111; and "The Closing of Turkey's Kurdish Opening," *Journal of International Affairs* (Columbia University/School of International and Public Affairs) 9/20/2012 (online edition). <http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/closing-turkey%E2%80%99s-kurdish-opening>. In addition, the 10th International EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC) Conference, entitled "Turkey, the Kurds and the Imrali Process: An Historic Opportunity," took place on December 4-5, 2013 at the EU parliament in Brussels and should be consulted for some of the latest information on the stalled peace process. All the published texts and speeches, including the final resolution, are available at this link. <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/category/10th-eutcc-conference>.
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4. In reality, Karayilan had long held this position. The KCK is an umbrella organization that supposedly includes the PKK. In practice, however, the two are the same.
5. Amberin Zaman, "Kurdish Rebel Group in Turkey Re-Focuses on Syria," *Al-Monitor*, July 17, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/pkk-leadership-change...>, accessed July 19, 2013.
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11. Cited in Chase Winter, "Turkey's Strained Kurdish Peace Process," *Foreignpolicy.com*, December 11, 2013. <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/12/11...>, accessed December 13, 2013.
12. Cited in Kadri Gursel, "Time Running Out for Turkey-PKK Peace Process," *Al-Monitor*, November 4, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/akp-stall-kurd-peace-process.html>, accessed November 11, 2013.
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