

# NEW TURKEY-PKK PEACE TALKS: AN INEVITABILITY POSTPONED

*Since the breakdown of the reconciliation process between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the summer of 2015, the resumption of violence in the southeast has escalated to an alarming degree, threatening to exacerbate both regional instability as well as political polarization within Turkey. Currently, the PKK feels emboldened by its affiliate PYD's perceived strategic importance to the US owing in large part to its role in the fight against ISIL in Syria. This dynamic has negative spillover effects on the prospects for talks between the PKK and the Turkish state. In this article, the authors underline the need for a ceasefire, resumption of peace talks, and on a separate track, for the longstanding rights-related demands of Turkey's Kurdish-speaking communities to be addressed.*

Nigar Göksel & Berkay Mandıracı\*



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\* Nigar Göksel and Berkay Mandıracı are respectively Senior Turkey Analyst and Turkey Researcher with the International Crisis Group, an independent conflict prevention organization. This article is an abbreviated and updated version of Crisis Group Europe Briefing No. 77, "A Sisyphian Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks," 17 December 2015. For the original, visit: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/b077-a-sisyphian-task-resuming-turkey-pkk-peace-talks.aspx>

**W**hen a two-and-a-half year ceasefire collapsed in July 2015, the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – listed internationally as a terrorist organization – entered into a dark, dangerous tunnel from which it will take a great effort for both sides to find a peaceful exit.

The problem is not just that the fighting – the worst since the grim 1990s – had within six months killed around 700 people, including at least 220 civilians, according to the open-source tally of the International Crisis Group (ICG). It is that the achievements of a decade of peace efforts have been lost, causing massive new polarization within Turkey that will be harder than ever to repair.

Already, a number of districts in Turkey's majority Kurdish-speaking southeast are looking more and more like a war zone. Armed young militants are manning sand-bagged roadblocks and trenches in urban centers, entering into bloody pitched battles with Turkish security forces. The urban conflict affects the lives of civilians, more than 100,000 of whom ended up having to leave their homes because of the disruption caused by fighting and weeks-long curfews which the security forces say are meant to "cleanse" the region of PKK militants and restore public order. The state, municipalities, and some non-state groups provide financial and humanitarian assistance to the displaced. Reflecting the fallout between the ruling AKP and pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the latter which runs a majority of the municipalities in the region, coordination between these actors is virtually non-existent, rendering the assistance disjointed and unsystematic.

The tragic paradox is that the previous peace efforts were born of a realization by the leaderships of both sides that there can be no winner from military confrontation. Turkey and the PKK should urgently build their way back to peace talks.

With expectations that violence will worsen in spring when militants can again move through mountain passes, now is the time to reverse the spiral of mistrust between Ankara and the Kurdish movement, including the legal HDP, which is represented in the Parliament, and the outlawed PKK and its jailed leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

The biggest beneficiary of the resumption of violence between Turkey and the PKK is the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Ankara certainly worries that the PKK's offshoot in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), will transform its gains against ISIL into a land corridor along Turkey's southern border. This dynamic has pit the ruling party and Kurdish movement against each other. Since May 2015, four apparent ISIL attacks targeting pro-Kurdish activists in Turkey strengthened the perception among Kurds that the state is not protecting them. Recently,

after an ISIL-linked suicide bombing in Istanbul's historical center Sultanahmet on 12 January 2016 killed 13 foreigners, 11 of which were German tourists, the shared interest in confronting ISIL has become more apparent

Turkey's allies in the West, who remain primarily focused on the Syrian crisis and its regional security and refugee crisis consequences, should not dismiss the risks posed by a swiftly deteriorating conflict in Turkey. In their own interests they should encourage Ankara to focus on achieving a long-term solution to the Kurdish issue.

### *What the Peace Process Should Look Like*

The peace process should have two tracks. On one hand, talks with the PKK should resume with the goal of obtaining the withdrawal of its fighters from Turkey and agreement on mechanisms for amnesty and reintegration in Turkey of those who are ready to disarm. Öcalan has underlined the need for a broader and more structured format for the peace talks that would also bring in other PKK figures and the HDP, as well as a monitoring mechanism. To achieve a mutually agreed roadmap and timeline, the government needs to clarify its position on institutionalizing the process so that the cyclical effort to resolve the conflict does not parallel the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was condemned to an endless struggle of rolling a boulder uphill only to have it roll back down again.

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The PKK and Turkish state must pursue a reinforced ceasefire, with well-defined parameters that can be monitored. While the state needs to ensure that politically motivated arrests end, and that past and present rights abuses are investigated, the PKK must put an end to autonomy declarations that undermine the state and so-called defense of territory using young armed militants behind trenches and barricades in urban centers.

On a separate track, the government and all legal parties in Ankara should gather together, preferably involving Parliament, to address longstanding demands of Turkey's Kurdish-speaking communities, which accounts for roughly 15 percent of the population. Such an effort would need to include mother-tongue education

rights, decentralization for the whole of Turkey, a new constitution that removes even the appearance of discrimination, fairer anti-terrorism laws, and the lowering of the 10 percent national vote threshold for a party to enter Parliament.

### *Talking Peace, Preparing to Fight*

During the 30-month ceasefire, while peace talks were ongoing, both sides were simultaneously preparing for renewed fighting in case negotiations failed. This set the stage for the resumption of violence in July 2015.

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of the ceasefire to block its supply routes.

One month before Öcalan even called for a ceasefire in March 2013, and a limited withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey actually took place, pro-PKK media had already announced the formation of the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H). It grew rapidly into an armed, urban youth militia with the capacity to draw security forces into indiscriminate street battles in many cities. During this period, Turkey’s military consolidated its position, building highly-fortified outposts and dams that the PKK considered an abuse

Turkey’s security bureaucracy remained unconvinced of the peace process spearheaded by a narrow circle of leading politicians. In 2014, military officials applied to carry out 290 operations against the PKK in the southeast, though the government, in an attempt to safeguard the process, only approved eight. “The government left the southeast to the PKK,” said a Diyarbakır human rights activist critical of the PKK.

Ankara’s delayed reaction to the siege of Kobani was a turning point for the Turkey-PKK conflict. Kurds across Turkey rushed to the aid of the Kurdish defenders of the besieged Syrian border town, but the government blocked their passage, igniting outrage among the Kurdish movement. Anti-government protests broke out in mainly Kurdish southeastern provinces on 6-8 October 2014, resulting in 50 deaths. Eventually, on 29 October, the government allowed the *peshmerga* fighters passage to Syria and on 26 January 2015 the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the PYD’s

military wing, announced it had freed Kobani. Ankara justified its delayed response by saying that both ISIL and the PKK (as well as the PYD) are terrorist groups, with no distinction between them. This strengthened the view among Kurds that Ankara was covertly supporting ISIL, and became the main pillar of the Kurdish movement's political campaign against the government.

### *The Ceasefire Collapses*

Fueled by the failure of a last-ditch effort to salvage the peace process in February 2015 (the unsuccessful “Dolmabahçe consensus”) and simmering Kurdish anger over Kobani, animosity between the AKP and HDP rose sharply in the run-up to parliamentary elections on 7 June 2015. The unexpected success of HDP's candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, in the August 2014 presidential election prompted the party to contest the parliamentary elections as a party instead of fielding independent candidates. As usual, it could capitalize on the resentments of young Kurds in the southeast. But this time, illustrating how interconnected Turks and Kurds can be in Turkey, it also attracted votes from liberal, leftist segments in the country by arguing that Erdoğan's ambition to change the government system into a presidential one with weak checks and balances could only be prevented if the HDP crossed the 10 percent threshold to enter Parliament.

Political violence surged during the campaign, but HDP won an unexpectedly high 13.1 percent of the total vote and secured 80 members in Parliament. The AKP, with 40.9 percent, was without a majority for the first time since 2002. Efforts to form a coalition government failed and Erdoğan called new elections for 1 November.

As clashes increased, making this period one of the most violent in Turkey's modern history, a pro-Kurdish peace rally on 10 October 2015 was targeted by what turned out to be the deadliest terrorist attack ever recorded on Turkish soil. Two ISIL-linked suicide bombers killed 103 people, mainly pro-Kurdish activists. The attack, and the perceived inadequacy of the response of the security forces, fueled growing anti-state sentiment among HDP supporters.

The result of the 1 November election deepened mutual suspicions. The AKP won 49.5 per cent, comfortably enough to form a single party government. The HDP lost nearly a million votes compared to June, though its 10.7 percent share of the total allowed it to narrowly pass the 10 percent threshold and enter Parliament. HDP attributed the losses to an unfair, insecure electoral environment in which they were unable to hold mass rallies and an intimidation campaign hindered party

representatives from appearing in mainstream media. Thousands of pro-Kurdish activists were also detained and hundreds arrested. An AKP parliamentarian however interpreted the results differently:

Seeing the unitary nature of the country under threat, both Turkish nationalists and Kurdish constituencies rallied behind the AKP. (...) The people in Silvan, Cizre, Nusaybin did not stand behind the democratic self-rule ideal that the PKK is propagating. If they had stood behind it, we would have seen a completely different, much more violent scenario that could even have led to a civil war.

### *False Confidence*

The outlook for peace is undermined by the fact that both Ankara and the PKK are confident that their role in relation to the Syria crisis is crucial, at the same time as domestic political polarization during the election period has burned down painstakingly-built political bridges. The PKK is trying to capitalize on the successes of its affiliated groups in Syria to bolster its position vis-à-vis Turkey. The West's growing reliance on the YPG in the struggle against ISIL has increased the legitimacy of the PYD/YPG and given momentum to their aspiration for a PYD-run project of Kurdish autonomous enclaves in Syria. The deterioration of Moscow-Ankara relations since Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet on 24 November 2015 has further elevated PKK confidence.

Ankara, meanwhile, sees its critical role for those fighting against ISIL as insurance against PKK ambitions in Syria. Washington would like Turkey to seal a crucial stretch of border across from ISIL-held Syrian territory. At the same time, the PYD, which lacks the legitimacy to occupy and govern majority-Arab cities in northern Syria, appeared in December to have reached its natural limits, though now it is also increasingly supported by Moscow. Turkey, a Turkish expert maintained, "is a strong state. Its strategic importance for the US and the West will always outweigh the PKK's or the PYD's. Europe needs Turkey for the refugee crisis, and the US needs Turkey to be able to fight ISIL more effectively."

Both the PYD/YPG and Ankara are therefore emboldened by their strategic importance for Washington. However, the flare-up in the PKK-Turkey conflict complicates the US-led coalition's fight against ISIL, especially because Turkey refuses to collaborate directly or indirectly with the YPG. Washington should use its leverage over both the PYD and Ankara to condition its military and political support in Syria to parameters that PYD and Ankara can agree on. Bringing the PKK and Ankara back to the negotiation table could potentially open the way for a more constructive PYD-Turkey relationship, which can only improve efforts to counter ISIL.