

THE KURDISH ISSUE IN TURKEY: BACK TO SQUARE ONE?

The collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process and renewed fighting has not pushed the situation back to square one because the Kurdish issue has been institutionalized within Turkish domestic politics as well as regionalized and internationalized by the earlier official governmental talks with Öcalan, other PKK members, and the HDP. Factors that influence the possibility of renewing the peace process include the Syrian civil war, ISIL, Rojava, the United States, Syrian refugees, and the current violence within Turkey. In this article, the author reviews the experiences and lessons learned to date, which will serve as important background for the renewal of the peace process.

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The collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in July 2015 and renewed fighting has seemingly pushed the situation back to square one. What led to this failure?¹ Despite incredible progress toward a resolution, the two sides proved unable to bridge the enormous gap between them. On the one hand, the government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) was unwilling to actually negotiate with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Instead the government believed it could simply list the conditions for peace and have them accepted with minimal concessions. The old Kemalist penchant for maintaining a unitary ethnic Turkish state remained. Tellingly, for example, the government rejected a neutral third-party observer or facilitator who might have encouraged and recorded the talks while even making suggestions when the process reached impasses. The failure of the minimal Dolmabahçe consensus – an attempt in February 2015 to establish a monitoring committee to oversee the failing peace process – and simmering Kurdish anger over the Turkish government's failure to support the Syrian Kurdish struggle in Kobani that raged from September 2014 until January 2015 proved to be two of the final blows to the peace process.

On the other hand, the PKK's attempts to institute democratic autonomy or grassroots, local governing structures of decentralization throughout much of southeastern Anatolia seemed to the government Kurdish independence disguised. Indeed, a month before the peace process even formally began in March 2013, the PKK formed the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H). This new organization grew quickly into an armed, urban youth militia that drew government security forces into street battles in numerous southeastern cities. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) concluded: "Divergent understandings and irreconcilable expectations coupled with the lack of a concrete roadmap made the [peace] process fragile."² Thus, a genuine resolution of the Kurdish issue proved beyond reach despite the veneer of a peace process.

Reasons for Peace Process Renewal

While the resumption of clashes between Ankara and the PKK is reminiscent of the violence of the 1990s, the Turkish-Kurdish peace process has not returned to square one for a number of reasons. Compared to the days when the very word "Kurd" constituted a four-letter word in the Kemalist lexicon and denial of a Kurdish ethnic problem prevailed, the Kurdish issue now has been institutionalized within

¹ For background, see: Michael M. Gunter, "Reopening Turkey's Closed Kurdish Opening," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20 (Summer 2013), pp. 88-98; Michael M. Gunter, "The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process Stalled in Neutral," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 16 (Winter 2014), pp. 19-26.

² "A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks" *International Crisis Group*, Crisis Group Europe Briefing No. 77 (Istanbul/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 17 December 2015), p. 7.

Turkish domestic politics and furthermore regionalized, indeed internationalized. Despite the current impasse, official Turkish talks with Öcalan, the PKK, and the legal pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have given the Kurdish issue in general and the PKK specifically a permanent legitimacy that would have been inconceivable even a decade ago. In spite of the current fighting, the Turkish-Kurdish relationship has moved far beyond square one.

Moreover, regionally and internationally the Kurdish issue in Turkey – as well as in Iraq and now of course Syria (but not Iran) – has achieved a major new permanency that also would have been unfathomable a mere decade ago. Thus, Turkey – its political and economic future still bright in the long-run despite short-term domestic and regional instability – must continue to recognize and contend with the expanding Kurdish

issue. Domestically, this has led to a situation where even such esteemed Turkish scholars as M. Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan have recently suggested that Kurdish autonomy can be considered as a solution: “for the first time, some Turks are thinking about separating from the Kurdish minority,”³ and that even “a Kurdish state seems to be inevitable, given the current political fragmentation throughout the Middle East.”⁴

How Kurdish autonomy might be implemented in Turkey, when the majority of ethnic Kurds no longer live in their historical southeastern homeland or probably do not even want autonomy as distinguished from full democracy, remains uncertain. Thus, a solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey along the lines of autonomy or even independence might simply create new problems despite any genuine Turkish government goodwill in facilitating such policies!

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's once touted policies of “zero problems with neighbors” and strategic depth have instead metastasized into ones of huge problems with neighbors and strategic quagmire. The US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 is one major background reason for this dilemma. Without the late dictator's strong hand, Iraq has been shattered into its sectarian and ethnic parts and has come to exist only in the minds of the United

“The Kurdish issue in Turkey (...) has achieved a major new permanency that would have been unfathomable a mere decade ago.”

³ M. Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan, “Turkish Democracy and the Kurdish Question,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter 2015), p. 76.

⁴ Yavuz and Özcan (2015), p. 78.

“In a well-documented, misguided attempt to facilitate the overthrow of Assad and restore stability to its southern Syrian neighbor, Turkey allowed jihadists from all over the world to transit its territory and cross into Syria.”

southern borders, ISIL and Rojava, two dynamic non-state actors, have created a dilemma of new realities that cannot be ignored or imagined away. Moreover, on all of these new problems, including its early call for the demise of Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime, Turkey has arguably come down on what seems the wrong or at least losing side.

In a well-documented, misguided attempt to facilitate the overthrow of Assad and restore stability to its southern Syrian neighbor, Turkey allowed jihadists from all over the world to transit its territory and cross into Syria.⁹ Turkey also hoped to reduce or even eliminate the threat it perceived in the rise of Rojava, which Turkey saw as a proto-PKK state that would transform its success against ISIL into a contiguous Kurdish-dominated territory along its southern border. Thus, Turkey also sat

States.⁵ The resulting instability has led to countless problems for Turkey such as opportunity spaces for the rise of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq⁶ and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).⁷ More recently, the Syrian civil war has also helped give rise to ISIL as well as the institutionalization of Rojava (Western or Syrian Kurdistan) as a second de facto autonomous Kurdish state (and in this second case, one closely linked to the PKK).⁸ Within the context of the horrific Syrian civil war raging just below Turkey’s

⁵ For background, see: Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); and US vice president Joseph Biden’s still very relevant three-state solution in: Joseph R. Biden and Leslie H. Gelb, “Unity through Autonomy in Iraq,” *New York Times*, 1 May 2006.

⁶ Among many other excellent studies on the KRG, see the relevant sections of: David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

⁷ Among many other recent studies of ISIL, see: Till F. Paasche and Michael M. Gunter, “Revisiting Western Strategies against ISIL,” *Middle East Journal*, 70 (Winter 2016); and Michael M. Gunter, “Iraq, Syria, ISIL and the Kurds: Geo-strategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey,” *Middle East Policy* 22 (Spring 2015), pp. 102-111.

⁸ On the Syrian Kurds, see: Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014); and the essay review on this book by Jonathan Steele, “The Syrian Kurds are Winning!” *New York Review of Books*, 3 December 2015, pp. 24-27.

⁹ See, for example: David L. Phillips, “Research Paper: ISIL-Turkey List,” *Huffington Post*, 9 November 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research--a-er-ISIL-turke_b_6128950.html, which cites numerous sources. In addition, see: Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurdish Leader: Ankara Supporting Jihadists,” *Al-Monitor*, 23 September 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/09/pyd-leader-salih-muslim-turkey-support-jihadists-syria.html#>; and also “Syrian Kurds Continue to Blame Turkey for Backing ISIL Militants,” *Al-Monitor*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/zaman-syria-kurds-rojava-ypg-muslim-pyd-turey-ISIL.html#>

by passively watching ISIL try to destroy the Syrian Kurds holed up just across the Turkish border in Kobani during the vicious fighting for that city from September 2014 to January 2015. For Turkey, support for the Syrian Kurds in Kobani would be tantamount to aiding the PKK, a terrorist enemy that had been trying to dismember Turkey for more than 30 years. As Erdoğan explained: “For us [the] PKK is what ISIL is.”¹⁰ In addition, why should Turkey get involved when the US, its superpower NATO ally, would not do more? It suited Turkey that ISIL and the Syrian Kurds were weakening each other by slugging it out while Turkey sat idle.

Furthermore, many Turks felt betrayed that by giving the Syrian Kurds air support against ISIL, the US was strengthening Syrian Kurdish attempts to gain autonomy that could encourage separatism among Kurds in Turkey as well as to seize Arab lands near the Turkish border.¹¹ Amnesty International (AI) published a report confirming that Kurdish militias forcibly displaced thousands of non-Kurds civilians.¹² On 15 June 2015, for example, Syrian Kurdish forces – led by the PKK’s closely associated Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and women’s branch Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) – took control of the Syrian border town of Tal Abyad and supposedly forced its non-Kurdish population to flee to Turkey where a burgeoning refugee population was destabilizing Turkey and now exceeded two million.

However, the Syrian Kurds strongly objected to such reports as being inaccurate and unjust.¹³ In general, of course, AI is an NGO that plays a very important role in protecting the rights of the individual against government suppression. But the AI report released on supposed Syrian Kurdish abuse alleges forced Syrian Kurdish displacement and home demolitions, which are very partial and distorted. It does not do justice to the PYD’s efforts to protect not only Kurds but also Arabs against the depredations of ISIL. Of course, if you are fighting against ISIL there is going to be some collateral damage, but the PYD and its YPG/YPJ fighting units have gone out of their way not to kill or displace the population.

In some cases, of course, the Arab population has been asked to leave during the fighting. But as soon as the fighting is over the PYD invites the Arab population to return, and it has returned. Indeed, that is what the democratic autonomy the Syrian

¹⁰ “ISID ne ise PKK da odor” [PKK is what ISIL is], *Al Jazeera Turk*, 4 October 2014, as cited in International Crisis Group (2015), p. 4n10.

¹¹ Alexander Sehmer, “Thousands of Arabs Flee from Kurdish Fighters in Syria’s North,” *Independent*, 1 June 2015.

¹² “Syria: ‘We had nowhere to go’ – Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria,” *Amnesty International*, 12 October 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/>

¹³ Amberin Zaman, “Amnesty International accuses Kurdish YPG of War Crimes,” *Al-Monitor*, 13 October 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/syria-turkey-right-groups-accused-kurds-rojava-of-war-crimes.html#ixzz3v3WpsVTZ>

Kurds are implementing is all about: giving everybody the right, not just the Kurds, to administer themselves. On the other hand, we all know that ISIL even brags about how much it destroys cities and murders people it disagrees with. Therefore, the Syrian Kurds argue it is ISIL, not them, that is causing most of the damage and killing. In a misguided attempt to be politically correct, AI is faulting the little nuances of the Kurds, while implicitly ignoring the horrendous ones of ISIL.

Moreover, illustrating the law of unintended consequences, ISIL blowback had already led to the capture of 49 Turks when it overran Mosul in June 2014. They were only released after who knows what Turkey had to offer or threaten. Subsequently, Turkey came to blame ISIL for deadly attacks that mostly killed only ethnic Kurdish citizens in such Turkish cities as Suruç (Kobani's twin Turkish city) and Ankara in July and October 2015. These twin attacks furthered the Kurdish belief that the Turkish government could not or even did not want to protect them. Some actually claimed that Erdoğan had turned a blind eye to such attacks in order to further the perception of Turkey under siege and thus increase his fortunes in the elections held on 1 November 2015. Such perceptions might have helped Erdoğan regain power in the short-run, but would certainly hinder his chances to restart the peace process in the long-run.

In the summer of 2015, Turkey finally claimed to have entered the struggle against ISIL by allowing the US to use the Turkish Incirlik airbase to carry out bombing raids against ISIL.¹⁴ However, instead of Turkey striking ISIL, most of the Turkish air attacks hit the PKK bases in the Kandil Mountains along the border of the KRG and Iran and even on occasion Syrian Kurdish YPG forces in Rojava, leading some to conclude Turkey was simply using ISIL as a foil to really go after both the PKK and PYD.¹⁵ The situation grew even more complicated in September 2015 when Russia began air strikes against Syrian rebels, only to have a Turkish missile destroy one of its bomber jets in November 2015. Cemil Bayık, the co-head of the PKK's umbrella Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), claimed that Turkey was really supporting ISIL and that Russia might begin directly supporting YPG/YPJ forces in Syria.¹⁶ The Turkish action against Russia also had the potential to draw the US into a confrontation with Russia, which potentially would soon be supporting the US bombing campaign against ISIL in the Syrian civil war that was close to becoming a struggle of all against all. For its part as 2015 came to a close Turkey did begin to ramp up a domestic crackdown against ISIL by arresting several hundred suspects.

¹⁴ Liz Sly and Karen De Young, "Turkey Agrees to Allow U.S. Military to Use Its Base to Attack Islamic State," *Washington Post*, 23 July 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-agrees-to-allow-us-military-to-use-its-base-to-attack-islamic-state/2015/07/23/317f23aa-3164-11e5-a879-213078d03dd3_story.html

¹⁵ Tim Arango, "Turkey Confirms Strikes against Kurdish Militias in Syria," *New York Times*, 27 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/28/world/europe/turkey-syria-kurdish-militias.html>

¹⁶ "KCK's Bayık: Turkey Downed the Russian Plane to Protect IS," *Kurdish Info (Firat News Agency)*, 26 November 2015, www.kurdishinfo.com/kcks-bayik-turkey-downed-the-russian-plane-to-protect-isil/

In the autumn of 2015, the Syrian crisis exploded with yet another destabilizing dimension when more than a million Syrian refugees began entering Europe from Turkey. This massive influx threatened the stability of the European Union (EU) and soon led the EU to offer Turkey 3.2 billion dollars, progress toward visa liberalization, and a revitalization of Turkey's moribund EU accession process in return for Turkish help in stemming the refugee flood.¹⁷

In Turkey, violence against the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) had already begun in the lead up to the June 7 parliamentary elections and grew exponentially in the days heading toward the subsequent one on 1 November 2015. Indeed, HDP leaders attributed their losses in the second election to the violent atmosphere that prevented mass rallies as well as their party representatives from appearing in the mainstream mass media particularly following the deadly bombing of the HDP rally in Ankara on 10 October 2015. The ICG concluded that:

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Following the ceasefire's collapse [in July 2015], most fighting has been concentrated in southeastern urban centers, where security forces have declared over 62 urban curfews, ranging in duration from several hours to two weeks. Between July and 15 December, violence claimed the lives of 194 security officials, at least 221 PKK insurgents and as many as 151 civilians. (...) Thousands of residents across the region have been displaced.¹⁸

By the end of 2015, the PKK-affiliated Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) summed up the situation by declaring:

In short, everyone who is opposing the war is either being killed, imprisoned or forced to flee. Since August [2015] 300,000 Kurds have been forced to flee from their homes. The Turkish state is resuming its age-old policy of killing Kurds and emptying Kurdistan of its population while labeling those who resist this policy as terrorists or traitors.¹⁹

¹⁷ “EU Reaches \$3bn Deal with Turkey to Curb Refugee CrISISIL,” *Al Jazeera*, 30 November 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/eu-seeks-deal-turkey-curb-refugee-crISISIL-151129152134803.html>

¹⁸ International Crisis Group (2015), p. 8.

¹⁹ Kurdistan National Congress, “The Turkish State Continues its Attacks in Kurdistan,” 30 December, 2015.

However, others argued that “by not distancing itself from the PKK and not criticizing its terrorist tactics, the HDP has delegitimized itself.”²⁰ Specifically, “the Kurdish voters were disappointed by the actions of the HDP municipalities, such as declaring self-government and not recognizing the legitimacy of Ankara, not paying taxes or public utility bills, and digging ditches around government buildings and along major roads against the police force.”²¹

The Future

So what are the future prospects for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process? Given the situation outlined above, the breakdown of the process in July 2015 is probably just one more tortured step toward an eventual solution of the Kurdish problem rather than a return to square one. Even as they now fight and blame each other for the situation, the two sides are maneuvering toward new positions within a continuing process. After his near-crippling defeat in the election of 7 June 2015 and three other elections in just the past two years, a possibly somewhat chastened, but now renewed Erdoğan will have no more distracting elections for the next four years. He can devote his full attention to solving real problems, rather than devising mere tactics for the next election. In addition, despite its losses in the November 1 elections, the pro-Kurdish HDP still maintains a guaranteed position in the Turkish Parliament. Hopefully their experiences and lessons learned to date will serve as a most important background for the renewal of the peace process. However, President Erdoğan’s attempt to criminalize the 1,128 Turkish and Kurdish academics who signed a petition to the Turkish government asking that it end its violence in the southeast and his refusal to meet with HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş, are discouraging for the chances of the peace process being resumed in the near future.²²

The horrific Syrian civil war presents even more daunting obstacles for peace in Turkey. Two deadly terrorist attacks – one striking Istanbul’s Sultanahmet area on 12 January 2016 that left 13 foreign tourists dead and the other striking a Turkish military bus in Ankara on 17 February 2016 that killed 28 people and wounded more than 60 – illustrate the deteriorating situation. Turkey blamed ISIL for the Istanbul bombing and the PYD’s YPG militia for the Ankara one. Although the US-backed PYD denied any culpability, it was clear that both bombings were blowback from the violence radiating out of Syria.²³ What is more, the second Ankara bombing elicited vituperative recriminations from Erdoğan against the US for its aid to the

²⁰ Yavuz and Özcan (2015), p. 82.

²¹ Yavuz and Özcan (2015), p. 81.

²² A. Kadir Yıldırım, “Why Turkey’s Government Is Threatening Academic Freedom,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/16/why-turkeys-growing>

²³ Michael Cruickshank and Gissur Simonarson, “A Kurdish Convergence in Syria,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/opinion/a-kurdish-convergence-in-syria.html>

YPG.²⁴ For its part, the US declared that the YPG was not a terrorist organization and urged Turkey to stop shelling the YPG in northern Syria, action that had begun when the Syrian Kurds crossed west of the Euphrates River in mid-February 2016.²⁵

If Turkey continues to become more involved in Syria to counter both Rojava's expansion and Russia's support for Assad, all three of which Turkey views as current enemies, things could quickly escalate into a dangerous confrontation. This could even include an indirect clash with the US who supports the PYD/YPG as the most viable boots on the ground against ISIL. Turkey should

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remember how the US had refused to support it regarding Cyprus in 1964 if the then-Soviet Union had threatened intervention.²⁶ Similarly, NATO is not guaranteed to support Turkey in a Syrian incursion that ends up clashing with Russia, much less the US who supports the PYD/YPG. If a Turkish invasion of Syria goes badly, Turkey might even end up losing Hatay, the province Atatürk's patient and astute diplomacy added to the country in 1939, but which Syria has never recognized.

The recent Russian/Assad advance in the north has clearly put them in a much stronger position concerning who would be invited to any future peace talks and under what conditions, but this does not mean that Assad has defeated the Turkish- and Saudi-backed rebels. The Syrian civil war is likely to continue, challenging Turkish statecraft to avoid further immersion. In addition, Turkey should work closer with its US and NATO allies in the fight against ISIL instead of merely paying lip service while supporting jihadist oppositionists in Syria as a way to oust Assad.

Turkey should also get over its unreasonable fear of the Syrian Kurds and instead seek to embrace them similarly to how Turkey successfully reversed its opposition to the KRG in 2007. Once the Syrian civil war ends, Turkey will remain as the most powerful country in the region as well as the 16th largest economy in the world. Like the Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian Kurds will have no other alternative than to embrace Turkey to the mutual benefit of both. In the meantime, Turkey should avoid

²⁴ “Turkish President Accuses US of Supporting Terrorism,” *Today's Zaman*, 23 February 2016, http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_turkish-president-accuses-us-of-suspporing-terrorism_413109.html

²⁵ “US Calls on Turkey to Stop Shelling PYD, Citing Syria Cease-fire,” *Today's Zaman*, 24 February 2016, http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_us-calls-on-turkey-to-stop-shelling-pyd-citing-syria-cease-fire_413216.html

²⁶ George S. Harris, *Troubled Alliance: Turkish-American Problems in Historical Perspective, 1945-1971* (Washington D.C., American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1972), pp. 114-15.

confronting Russia (as well as the United States) in a senseless war that will bear no positive outcomes for any of the parties involved and has already hindered Russia even if Putin does not yet realize it.