Turkey, Syria and Saving the PKK Peace Process

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The northward advance of Syria's civil war poses multiple dangers to Turkey's ongoing peace process with the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The two sides are still in a position to end the conflict in Turkey, which has killed 30,000 people in three decades. But they will have to show a new level of urgency and political courage to ensure that the country avoids further damage, or even being engulfed by the catastrophe unfolding south of its Middle Eastern borders.

The Syria war has changed many regional balances and calculations, and the peace process is no exception. The PKK has shown an unprecedented ability to operate regionally in Syria and Iraq; its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has succeeded in forging a previously unimaginable relationship with the US; and the Syrian Kurds' conflict with Islamic State jihadis has triggered unrest in Turkish Kurdish communities in Turkey and Europe. At the same time, the now evident dangers of Syrian spillover have underlined how many shared interests Turkey, the PKK and Turkey's Kurds have in overcoming inertia in the talks, declaring some mutually agreed end-goals and making the most of the progress achieved over the past nine years.

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The Turkey-PKK peace process itself is still a rare spot of hope in the Middle East, even if it has not been much structured or pre-planned. It started with a "Democratic Opening" in 2005-2009; proceeded in 2009-2011 to secret talks known as the "Oslo Process" between representatives of the diaspora, the PKK and Turkish officials; and in mid-2011 collapsed into a new round of fighting that lasted until March 2013. In late 2012, the beginning of the most recent phase, the government reached out to the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and started what is now usually known in Turkey as the "Solution Process".

Nine years of the peace process, despite grave occasional setbacks, have achieved a surprising degree of change in this country of 77 million people, of whom about 15 percent self-identify as Kurds. But if the two sides are to reach the next level, they should start by taking more care in clearly defining the three main tracks of the process and approaching them separately.

The first track consists of the contacts between the government and the PKK. A March 2013 unilateral PKK ceasefire – the ninth of the insurgency, by the PKK's count – has survived numerous incidents. This has been largely thanks to interventions in favour of the process by the leaders of the two sides. The presence of two strong charismatic men, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan and PKK leader Öcalan, means that both sides have someone who can negotiate, agree and implement a deal if they want to. There have been many visits to Öcalan by Erdoğan's representatives and by legal pro-PKK Kurdish parliamentarians, the latter of whom shuttle between Öcalan, the diaspora and the PKK. In mid-2014, the government legalized the process and set up a ministerial board to oversee it, including 11 commissions that will deal with core matters like transitional justice and disarmament. Both sides, in private, say that they cannot

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beat the other militarily, and do not want to go back to armed conflict.

On the second of the three tracks, the efforts are to remove the roots of the conflict. Turkey is already a better place than it was in the dark years of the 1990s. Five main goals have emerged: full mother-language education; decentralization that can work throughout Turkey; full access to parliamentary politics for significant smaller parties like the Kurdish national movement; a rewording of discriminatory articles in the constitution; and a fairer counter-terrorism law. A state-run Kurdish-language TV has been broadcasting since 2009. Education in Kurdish and other languages spoken in Turkey is now offered as an option in schools, even if there is systemic resistance to its implementation on both sides. An incomplete first step towards better local government was taken in March 2014, with a quarter of Turkey's 81 provinces being assigned new powers for their elected mayors.

On the third of the three tracks, the general context and process, the atmosphere is much improved. Partly thanks to Erdoğan's embrace of ethnic differences, Kurdishness is more widely respected. At times when there is no deadly violence in the southeast and leaders use more statesmanlike rhetoric, mainstream Turkish public opinion shows support for the effort. In Kurdish-majority towns, a decade of economic progress, road-building and relative stability has encouraged the emergence of a middle class that has a big stake in peace. Although the Turkish government has continued to use arrests as a counterproductive instrument to harass the pro-PKK Kurdish nationalist movement, the torture, the forcing of Kurds out of villages and the extra-judicial executions common in the 1990s are now rare. The PKK itself has changed, seeming to be less dogmatic than in its Marxist-Stalinist past, and apparently seeking legitimacy and ways to remove its designation as an international terrorist organisation and the US naming of several of its leaders as "kingpins" in international drug-smuggling networks (a charge the PKK denies).

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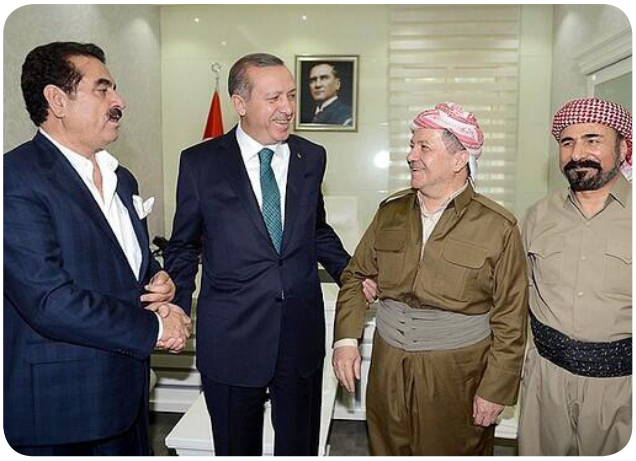
The Syrian conflict has however emerged as a grave threat to the peace process. Symbolically, Syria's Kurds have staked out ambitious goals of self-rule in northern Syria that Turkey's Kurds see as a model. Practically, too, the war has a now proven capacity to jump over the border into Turkey. Despite its many clear strengths as a state, the country remains vulnerable to regional ferment because its society shares many of the ethnic, sectarian and political divisions of Syria and Iraq.

Complicating both these issues is the challenge of Ankara's conflicted approach to the jihadis of Islamic State. Turkish officials say they have no long-term business



Diyarbakır, November 2013: (from left to right) İbrahim Tatlıses, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Masoud Barzani, Şivan Perwer.

with this dangerous group, and indeed wish to destroy it. But in the short term, AKP is worried about keeping in harmony with its core conservative constituency, from which hundreds of Turkish youths have left to join IS; some officials see IS attacks on self-declared Syrian Kurdish autonomous cantons as a useful tool to teach the PKK a lesson about trying to go it alone; others feel that IS has hijacked an Arab constituency with which AKP has strong Sunni Muslim bonds, and even that mostly Sunni Turkey is not really an IS target; still more are convinced that some leverage over radical armed rebels in Syria – which Turkey has allowed to be funded and supplied over its territory – are still a useful part of a strategy to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; and finally, Turkey is not unreasonably worried that Western attempts to push it to the forefront of a rushed, ill-thought-out campaign against IS are an artificial substitute for a policy that might actually work, and that joining such a half-hearted effort is just too dangerous for a regional country like Turkey.

At the same time, President Erdoğan, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Turkish state are appalled by IS methods and seek its elimination from the regional equation; IS has after all made clear that it views Erdoğan and Turkey's regime as infidel phenomena that are on their hit list, eventually. Separately, the PKK is locked in armed conflict with IS in Syria and in sometimes deadly political competition with IS supporters in Kurdish-speaking areas of Turkey. Despite the mutual antagonisms of the PKK and AKP, senior personalities on both sides privately tell the author of this article that they prefer each other to the IS. Indeed, AKP is potentially interested in a political alliance with the legal political party of the pro-PKK Kurdish national movement in Turkey, which may be vital in order to make constitutional changes that both sides want.

Then there is the drama of Kobani, the north Syrian Kurdish town on the Turkish border that has become an epic symbol during its struggle with IS, partly because everyone could follow the fight over Kobani live on TV and social media. For the PKK, whose sister party PYD had unilaterally declared that Kobani was a self-ruling canton, the PYD's success was a model at last for its vague doctrine of "democratic autonomy". When it turned out that the PYD could not defend this democratically autonomous canton against IS, the PKK – and therefore opinion among Turkey's Kurds – blamed Turkey for the fact that nearly 200,000 Syrian Kurds lost their homes and Kobani itself came under devastating siege. This accusation was cynical, since Turkey could hardly be expected to either invade Syria to save Kobani, or to supply the heavy weaponry needed to equip a group against whom it is still effectively at war. Nevertheless, the AKP government completely misread Kurdish opinion, which took its anti-PKK rhetoric, coldness to the fate the PYD in Kobani and track record of tacit supplies to the Syrian radical opposition as outright support for IS.

The result was an extraordinary outburst of violence in several Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey on October 6-8. Nearly 40 people were killed in lynchings and shootings. Disturbingly, these protests did not so much pit Turkish Kurd national movement activists against the security forces, but against pro-IS Turkish Kurds. Somehow the two sides' leaderships regained control. It may not be so easy next time: Kurdish public opinion has become highly volatile, and PKK leader Öcalan will not be able to use his political capital indefinitely absent real progress in the talks. While the last period of clashes in 2011-2013 was largely between uniformed combatants in the mountains, pro-PKK activists threaten that the next round of violence will include an uprising in urban areas. Indeed, ugly violations of the PKK's unilateral ceasefire in October included cold-blooded murders of off-duty officers in southeastern cities.

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In short, there is an overwhelming case for Turkey and the PKK to move determinedly forward now with the peace process. The war in Syria is likely to continue for years; outside powers, including Turkey and the PKK/PYD, have little leverage over what happens there; and ultimately both Turkey and the PKK have a common enemy in the IS jihadis. The two sides should stop playing for time, and get beyond a status quo in which Turkey mostly seeks to ensure that soldiers' coffins are not part of next year's elections, and the under-resourced PKK tries to build up a unilateral, Kobani-style parallel state-like structures inside Turkey. The peace process is unsustainable as an end in itself.

Now that both sides have accepted that neither can win their maximum demands, one of the first things they need to do is at least outline and jointly declare some shared, compromise goals. Amazingly, the two sides do not even articulate clearly such minimum possible targets as a Turkey at peace, where citizens' and communities' universal rights are equally respected, and where the Kurdish national movement has full and fair access to the legal political system. The two sides also need to keep clear in their minds that there are three separate tracks to a settlement, which influence each other but should be kept well apart.

The first track is the actual negotiations with the PKK. This has the various ingredients of demobilisation, transitional justice, and rehabilitation of an armed group. It should include PKK disarmament, which for now can only be inside Turkey; conditions for an amnesty that is palatable for public opinion and legally unchallenged internationally; the make-up and parameters of an independent truth commission reporting to parliament; a transitional justice mechanism to deal with past abuses by both sides; and an agreed security system for the southeast, possibly including a vetted, retrained volunteer force drawn from disbanded pro-government and PKK units. The two sides will also need to agree watertight monitoring and verification, the absence of which has damaged the process in the past.

International actors have in the past played positive roles in helping with mediation. The "Oslo Process" period showed how such help and advice could guide Turkey and the PKK toward finding common ground. Similarly, excellent Swiss support to Turkey and Armenia in 2009 was essential to framing a set of protocols that could still one day normalise ties between these two countries. Looking forward, Turks and Kurds have shown that it has the maturity to do much of the talks on their own, and in 2013 "Wise Persons" committees of leading Turkish and Kurdish personalities were to defuse many prejudices about the peace process as they travelled to hold town hall meetings throughout Anatolia. Nevertheless, the breakdown of the process due to local over-enthusiasm when a group of PKK fighters returned to Turkey through the Habur border gate in 2009 shows how essential it will be to have prepositioned and effective remedies, and the government should certainly not rule out a role for the right third party states or personalities. Separately, European partners could do much already to enlighten Turkish officials and opinion leaders about options for decentralisation and rehabilitation of combatants. There are also critical lessons to learn about ways to deal with the new international legal limits on transitional justice from the peace talks for Colombia.

The second track should consist of the long-discussed reforms to give equal rights to all citizens and remove the root causes of the Kurdish problem. This process should certainly be in Ankara, centered on parliament and open to all parts of Turkish society. The five main issues are

clear: education in mother languages, decentralization, an election law that brings down to five percent (from ten percent) the threshold of the national vote needed for a political party to enter parliament, a constitution without perceived ethnic discrimination, and a counter-terror law that cannot be abused by putting non-violent activists in jail.

Progress in this second track of reform will be vital to building up trust in the first track of Turkey-PKK talks. But the two sides should stop mixing the two tracks up. There is a PKK problem in Turkey, and a Kurdish problem. They overlap but are not the same. The legal Kurdish national movement party wins less than half of the vote of all Kurds, half of whom live in the west of the country. The PKK should have clear proposals for the second track of reform, but it cannot negotiate alone with the government on, say, decentralization or constitutional reform for the whole of Turkey. And the government must not try to take short cuts on Kurdish reforms as part of a quick, too easy deal with the PKK.

The third track is the overall context and process. This would be helped by less unilateralism, more joint actions, a better-structured process and greater transparency. The mudslinging rhetoric should end too: the PKK is not the same as IS, which in turn is not the same as AKP. Terrorism is a polarizing phrase and should not be abused – especially as, according to an open-source International Crisis Group tally, 90 percent of the 920 people killed in 2011-2013 were uniformed combatants, and 34 of the civilians killed died in an unexplained Turkish government air strike.

As part of the current relaunch of the process, the two sides should find an eye-catching way to show commitment. On the first track of negotiations, one way would be for the government to accept a consolidated negotiating team. It is not unimaginable that a PKK guerrilla leader or delegation can be given safe passage to Imrali or elsewhere in Turkey to join with diaspora representatives and Öcalan. On the second track of reform, the Kurdish national movement needs to build trust with the government and Turkish opinion by clarifying exactly what it means by its goal of "democratic autonomy" – for instance, if this goal is really not an independent or federal state, as the movement usually says, then much would be gained by clearly stating this.

Finally, the deteriorating security in Syria, and its spillover into Turkey, show how important it is for Turkey to fortify without delay its south-eastern flank where Kurds live and the PKK is strong. Peace will release a longstanding brake on its economy as well as on its democratisation efforts. The government should recognise that the end goal is not just disarmament in Turkey, but to get to a point where Turkey's Kurds no longer feel any need for the PKK. Otherwise, there is little anyone can do to stop the movement from arming again the next day after a deal. Perhaps more essentially, mainstream public opinion needs to guided towards visualising and embracing a possible scenario that this process may well lead to if it succeeds: Turkish and Kurdish leaders standing together on an international podium, accepting accolades for having made hard choices and taken the risky road to peace.