Back to Square One?
The Collapse of the Peace Process with the Kurds in Turkey

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The Kurdish question is one of the fundamental problems, if not the most important, facing the Turkish republic. Since the 1980s, some 40,000 people have been killed in the violent struggle between Turkey's central government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK. Serious efforts were made to promote solutions during the tenure of President Turgut Ozal in the early 1990s, but since its rise to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party has made the most progress on the issue compared to previous governments. Since 2008, and in greater intensity since the end of 2012, Turkey promoted a peace process between the government and the Kurdish minority. However, in July 2015, the process collapsed, leading to renewed violence between the sides, especially in the southeast of the country. Compared to the past, the PKK is putting more emphasis on urban warfare. Consequently, one of the Turkish army's reactions to the renewed hostilities has been to impose an extended curfew on several neighborhoods and towns with a Kurdish majority, which severely disrupts the population's routine of life.

While past talks between the government and the Kurdish minority have also ended without a resolution and have seen the resumption of fighting, it seems that this time the escalation is more acute. Statements such as that made by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that Turkey's objective is "to annihilate" the armed Kurds[1] raise concern that it will be extremely difficult to revive the peace process anytime soon.

This article analyzes the factors that led to the collapse of the peace process, focusing on four main issues: the political considerations of

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Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party; divisions within the Kurdish minority in Turkey; regional developments; and the missteps taken during the peace process. The conclusion discusses the regional strategic implications of the collapse, focusing on Turkish suspicions about the Kurds gaining strength in Syria and Western support for the Kurds in the context of the struggle by the international coalition against the Islamic State.

Background

In May 2009, then-President Abdullah Gul declared that "good things are going to happen"[2] in reference to the Kurds. A process that was dubbed "the democratic initiative" was launched that entailed several reforms and general relief for the Kurdish minority, including a television channel that broadcasts continuously in Kurdish and permission to open Kurdish language and culture courses at the universities.[3] In September 2011, recordings were leaked of secret conversations that began in 2008 between the heads of the Turkish intelligence community and highly placed PKK personnel in what became known as "the Oslo process," as it was facilitated by Norway, as well as the United Kingdom. Erdogan accused the PKK of leaking the tapes,[4] but thanks to the disclosure, the secret talks became an open peace process called the "Imrali process," named for the island where PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan is jailed.

The Imrali process achieved results. In March 2013, the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire, and some two months later the organization started withdrawing its troops from Turkey into northern Iraq. Given what was seen as the government's lack of sufficient progress with the requisite reforms, the PKK stopped the withdrawal of its troops in September 2013.[5] In July 2015, after the Islamic State attacked an aid delegation that assembled in the Turkish border town of Suruc to help the Kurds in Syria, the ceasefire collapsed, as the Kurds felt that government elements were cooperating with the Islamic State against them.

Political Considerations of Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party

There has been an increase in the nationalistic rhetoric of Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party, especially ahead of election rounds, in order to draw voters away from the Nationalist Movement Party, the MHP. Beyond the desire to win election rounds, Erdogan's drive to change the

Turkish regime from a parliamentary to a presidential regime requires a clear parliamentary majority to pass the necessary changes to the Turkish constitution (for the parliament to change the constitution directly, a two thirds majority – 367 of 550 – is needed; to pass the required section via a referendum, three-fifths of the votes – 330 of 550 – are needed). Given that the Kurds also want extensive changes to the current constitution, which was composed following the 1980 military coup, Erdogan thought it would be possible to enlist them in order to pass the changes that he too seeks. Erdogan's efforts to draw the pious Kurds to vote for his Justice and Development Party on the one hand, and the nationalist voters on the other, were evident before the parliamentary elections in 2011 and 2015 as well as the presidential election in 2014. These electoral considerations and the attempt to draw voters with contradictory agendas generated inconsistency in the policy on the Kurds, and caused regressions in the talks after progress had already been made.

In March 2015, after Selahattin Demirtas, the co-leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, the HDP, declared that "we will not make you [Erdogan] the [omnipotent] president," there was a sharp turn in Erdogan's position on the peace process.[6] That month, Erdogan said that Turkey has no "Kurdish problem," in stark contrast to his August 2005 speech in Diyarbakır, the capital of the province by the same name and a Kurdish stronghold, when he said, "The Kurdish problem is my problem…We will solve all problems through democracy."[7]

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Divisions within the Kurdish Minority in Turkey

As part of the Imrali process, the Turkish government held direct talks with PKK leader Ocalan. While Ocalan's standing is still strong and many claim that most Kurds will support any decision he makes, his long incarceration (since 1999, and he has spent much of his time in solitary confinement, totally isolated from the world outside) has undoubtedly damaged his political abilities. To try to preserve his standing, become popular with the supporters of the hawkish factions of the PKK, and contend with the high ranking members of the organization who have taken shelter in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, Ocalan from time to time makes non-compromising or equivocal statements.[8] The different power centers

within the PKK also cause the Turkish side to wonder whether talks with Ocalan will, in fact, lead to all of the organization's armed forces leaving Turkish soil.

From the perspective of the authorities and that of much of the Turkish public, the ties between the PKK and HDP are strong, so much so that many view the HDP as the political wing of the organization (as was the perception about all previous Kurdish parties disbanded by the Turkish constitutional court).[9] In truth, however, there are tensions between the PKK and the party. The increased strength of the HDP caused concern within the PKK that the organization was weakened,[10] especially given the unprecedented success of the HDP in passing the electoral threshold in the June 2015 election, even without reforms in Turkey's high election threshold,[11] and given the increased popularity of Demirtas himself, which worried the organization.[12] That rise in power was also seen as a threat to the chances of senior PKK personnel finding refuge in the Qandil Mountains of ever being able to translate their long struggle into political positions within Turkey. For that reason, the leadership in the Qandil Mountains decided to renew hostilities as a way of announcing who was still the source of power and authority for the Kurds in Turkey.

From time to time, the Turkish government has also played with the idea of translating the good relations that have developed with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and its dependence on Turkey for exporting energy into strengthening elements opposed to the PKK within Turkey. There were even hopes that the President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani, would succeed in establishing a new Kurdish party in Turkey with a moderate, pious identity, unlike the PKK's secular, nationalistic nature. The Turkish government was thus trying to use the rivalry between the PKK and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) led by Barzani over who was the leading figure in the pan-Kurdish world.[13]

Regional Developments

The growing strength of the Kurds on the regional level and the empowerment of the Kurds in Syria were seen as a threat to the Turkish policy of progress in the negotiations with the Kurds in Turkey. Turkey is worried about unification between the Kurdish cantons in northern Syria and the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, and in turn, about the tailwind such a development could provide to Turkish Kurds' separatist intentions. The West's support for the Kurds in Syria is also perceived in the context of the old imperialist

intentions of Western powers to weaken Turkey and break off chunks of its territory. A pro-government commentary stated that the West's objective is to seize control of Syria's oil fields and, by means of geographical contiguity among northern Syria's Kurdish cantons, provide them with an outlet to the Mediterranean.[14] Moreover, the Kurdish successes in the battles in Kobani and Tell Abyad – particularly with the battle over Kobani seen as s a type of Kurdish Stalingrad[15] – contributed to a greater sense of unity among the Kurds scattered in different countries, and in particular identification between the Kurds in Turkey and the Kurds in Syria. Furthermore, the strong, dominant Kurdish force in Syria proved to be the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an extension of the PKK. Turkey's initial thought that it could enlist Barzani and the KRG to reduce the PKK's influence on the Kurds in Syria proved incorrect, which in turn gave even more impetus to the Turks to hunker down in their opposition to the autonomous status of the Kurds in Syria.

Turkey's initial unwillingness to help the Syrian Kurds in the battle over Kobani was read by the Kurds in Turkey as an expression of the government's insincerity in the peace talks. They went so far as to threaten that were Kobani to fall it would spell the end of the negotiations.[16] On the other hand, when Turkey allowed the transport of aid (including human assistance) from northern Iraq to pass through Turkish territory on its way to the Syrian Kurds, masses cheered the forces,[17] raising Turkey's suspicions about the Kurds' ultimate goal – if it wasn't separation from Turkey and unification with all other Kurdish parts after all. The fact that hundreds of thousands of the huge waves of refugees coming to Turkey from Syria are of Kurdish descent further complicated the Kurdish problem in Turkey. The weakening of Syria and Iraq, and the growing possibility that these nations will stop existing in their familiar format, make the Turkish demand that armed PKK personnel leave its territory problematic, because there are fewer forces to restrain them in neighboring countries.

Missteps during the Negotiations
The government chose to conduct the talks without either a roadmap or a clear timetable. The process was fluid, and the emphasis was more on the very fact of the negotiations in order to prevent a renewed outbreak of violence than on attaining an agreement and a long term resolution of the conflict.[18] For their part, the Kurds also failed to present a well-defined vision with regard to their demands, although it is clear they retreated from

demanding independence and are interested in some sort of federative arrangement. In particular, some of the vague concepts the Kurds presented, such as "a democratic autonomy," raised questions. The government's unwillingness to discuss federative solutions seriously also stems from Turkey's centralized form of government and the difficulty in changing this political culture.[19] The government was not even willing to acquiesce to the Kurdish demand of having a significant third side present or of documenting the talks, which to the Kurds signaled a lack of seriousness about the process.

Despite the progress in the talks, the Turkish perception that the PKK could not change its spots and the Kurdish perception that the Turks do not actually accept them as a minority remain rooted. So, for example, the incident in October 2009, in which the return of unarmed PKK activists from Iraq – the first such return as a result of an agreement with the Turkish government – became, from the government's perspective, a show of victory of the PKK, was among the key factors that led to the end of the "democratic initiative." The government, however, was perceived as insincere in its intentions when it continued with arrests of Kurdish members of parliament. Moreover, violent events provoked by the PKK were seen as an escalation intended to break up the process, although it is possible they were only a means of applying pressure to the government to move the talks along.[20]

While in recent years there have been hundreds of people killed every year in the conflict, the level of violence has been significantly reduced compared to the 1990s, and both sides have been careful not to end up in a mutually painful stalemate.[21] While the PKK is not strong enough to cause significant damage to the Turkish army, it is still strong enough to have continued the struggle for more than three decades. It seems that for the sake of the peace process, the Turkish government significantly reduced enforcement in the country's southeast, thereby helping to strengthen the PKK in these regions,[22] a factor that may have contributed to the organization's self-confidence.

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The perception that as part of the peace process PKK fighters would remain armed and leave for northern Iraq instead of disarming and becoming part of the political scene in Turkey was apparently problematic. This notion helped preserve one of the PKK's power centers and strengthened the organization's more hawkish wings. Given the fact

that the Kurdish issue already crosses borders, it seems that the increased presence of the PKK in the Qandil Mountains worsened the problem rather than helped solve it.

While the religious view that unites the Justice and Development Party helped it to break some of the taboos around the Kurdish question, the party exaggerated its ability to harness the religious element to rebut the Kurds' nationalist demands. The party heads believed that the farther they got away from the secular Kemalist tradition, the more the Kurds, most of whom are Sunnis, would feel at home.[23] Still, although the Justice and Development Party won a not insignificant level of support from religious Kurds in the last rounds of election, the Kurdish demand for recognition as a national minority has not changed.

One of the government's mistakes was its inexperience in enlisting the opposition parties into the peace process, especially the Republican People's Party (the CHP), which in the 1990s presented ideas similar to – if not bolder than – those introduced by the Justice and Development Party in the 2000s.[24] The notion was that the opposition would fall in line in any case and support progress in the talks with the Kurds. However, in practice, the opposition's criticism pulled Erdogan in an even more nationalistic direction. Moreover, the process was identified personally with Erdogan, leaving the opponents of Turkey's leader hard pressed to support him even if, in principle, they supported some of the government's proposals. Thus, the polarization of the Turkish political system meant that in the delicate balance between those supporting a rigid line on the Kurdish issue in Turkey and those supporting a political resolution and a more liberal approach, the proponents of the more rigid stance carried the day.

Conclusion

The peace process in Turkey is an excellent illustration of some of the difficulties faced by those who want to promote negotiations over an internal state conflict that also has trans-national dimensions. Thus, strategic developments on the regional level with sometimes conflicting ramifications and the multiple voices that must be considered make it difficult to find a solution. On the other hand, while it is tempting to try to conduct negotiations with one element, not paying sufficient attention to other elements can damage the process in the long run.

There are two particularly prominent factors in the explanation for why the process collapsed. One is Erdogan's disappointment that it was

impossible to enlist the Kurds in favor of the restructure of the Turkish regime and its transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system. He was convinced that precisely because the Kurds desired changes in the Turkish constitution he would be able to enlist them in his plan for changing the political system. The other factor concerned developments in Syria that led to the Syrian Kurds gaining strength, which heightened the suspiciousness of the Turkish government toward its own Kurdish minority.

Along with the difficulties in the talks and the fact that they ended without positive results, it is important to note that many taboos were broken during the discussions. Michael Gunter claims that Erdogan accomplished more to solve the Kurdish problem than all of his predecessors combined.[25] In this sense, the disappointment with the collapse is especially great because much of the Turkish and Kurdish public believed that if anyone could promote a solution it was Erdogan. Nonetheless, the sides will hopefully be able to translate the progress that was made during the talks into a more flexible starting point in future negotiations.

The collapse of the peace process has several strategic meanings. It makes it difficult to enlist Turkey as a full partner in the efforts to fight the Islamic State, not only because the Turks are opposed to the West arming the Syrian Kurds in their fight against the Islamic State, but also because the Turks are warring on two fronts. The Turkish unwillingness to relate to the Kurds in Syria differently than to the Kurds in Turkey may also make it difficult for the PYD to formulate a more independent identity and at least a partial severing from the PKK. Furthermore, the collapse of the peace process affects Turkish policy on northern Iraq and generates actions that are controversial internationally and in the eyes of the Iraqi central government, such as bombings in northern Iraq and the deployment of Turkish ground troops on Iraqi soil. The collapse of the peace process and the renewal of hostilities with the Kurds also makes it difficult for Turkey to meet Europe's human rights standards, thus further reducing its chances of being accepted into the EU, chances that were low to begin with.

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As to the Israeli angle, in the past, Turkey made use of Israeli military technology to fight the Kurds. As part of the explanation for the softening

in the Turkish stand vis-à-vis Israel since the November 2015 election, analysts have noted Turkey's renewed interest in Israeli technologies, especially UAVs.[26] Nonetheless, given the high level of suspicion still prevailing between the two states and Turkey's cooperation with Hamas, Israel will find it tough to sell these systems to Turkey. Furthermore, the importance Turkey currently ascribes to the demand for knowledge sharing so that it can, in the future, build these systems independently rather than buy them off the shelf, will make it difficult for Turkey and Israel to sign such agreements.

Notes

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