

## Report

# The Kurdish Peace Process: From Dialogue to Negotiation?

*Galip Dalay\**

22 April 2015





Ocalan has called for significant moves towards a peaceful solution to the longstanding conflict  
[Associated Press]

## Abstract

The pace and nature of developments in Turkey's Kurdish peace process continues to attract the interest of the informed observers as well as general public. Despite President Erdoğan's criticism, the announcement of Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan's ten point letter in the presence of government and state officials on 28 February 2015 was an important moment in the process. Beside the content of the letter, this public meeting between pro-Kurdish political figures and government/state officials has become a topic of heated discussion in Turkey. This paper intends to analyze the significance of the letter, of the choice of date, and of the identities of the actors involved in the meeting. All these aspects carry powerful meanings. Nevertheless, after a thorough examination, this paper argues that despite all the hype, the content of the letter is too fuzzy, generic, and ambitious to form the basis of the much-awaited negotiations in the process. Its symbolism far surpasses its practicality and applicability. It breaks a psychological taboo. However, it remains short of providing a guideline or parameters on how the negotiations should take place.

## Introduction

February 28 has a special meaning in Turkey's public discourse. Until recently, this date represented one of the darkest pages in Turkey's political history. On this date, 1997, Turkey's military-dominated system forced the democratically elected pro-Islamic Welfare Party (WP) led coalition government to resign. This process culminated in the closure of the WP(1), and the banning of its chief figures from holding any public or political posts for 5 years. Moreover, the process resulted in the stifling of political liberties and democracy, and further 'securitization'(2) of all manifestation of symbols of

Islamic identity, both in its social and its political form. The developments connoted by this date also became known as 'the post-modern coup'. This was due to the unique nature of this coup, in which the military played second fiddle to civilian actors.

Fast-forward to February 28, 2015: Turkey's deputy prime minister, accompanied by other government/state officials, sat alongside pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) deputies. It was a historic moment during which Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan's letter, urged the PKK to convene an extraordinary congress to lay down arms.(3) The request was repeated when his letter was read out to a crowd of over one million people gathered in Diyarbakir to celebrate Newroz.(4), a Mesopotamian festival that welcomes the beginning of spring, on 21 March.

No doubt this meeting alone is of historic significance. Among other things, this meeting and the announcement of Ocalan's letter illustrated the extent to which the Kurdish issue - and even Ocalan's image - had become de-securitized.(5) Moreover, this declaration also showed that the government has finally conceded to Ocalan's much-awaited demand of launching formal negotiations between the parties instead of advancing the process through informal dialogue held mainly between Ocalan and state officials in secrecy.

## Significance

What is the significance of this historic moment? The fact that this meeting took place between the political representatives of pro-Kurdish and pro-Islamic politicians on February 28 further underscores the symbolism of the moment. The choice of date, of the identities of actors involved all carry powerful meanings. Nevertheless, despite all the hype, the content of the announcement is too fuzzy, generic, and ambitious to form the basis of the much-awaited negotiations. Its symbolism far surpasses its practicality and applicability. It breaks a psychological taboo. However, it remains short of providing a guideline or parameters on how the negotiations should take place. It is still early days to expect a peace road-map so soon; nonetheless, the absence of a road-map should not dampen the significance of this historic moment.

In addition, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly criticized the meeting between pro-Kurdish MPs and government officials and expressed his displeasure regarding the content of Ocalan's letter. The extent to which Erdoğan's criticism is likely to impact the pace of developments in the peace process cannot be assessed with precision; yet it is unlikely to derail it.(6) Such declarations are not aimed solely at the peace process. Instead, it is quite possible that the process has been set in motion as a smokescreen in this debate. This seeming divergence between government and president on the means, methods and sequence of the process serves as a useful tool

to: first, show the public who the ultimate decision maker on Turkey's major issues is; and second, to display a kind of democratic tension in Turkey's current political system. The evolving system is structurally fraught, following the introduction of the elected presidency, adding tensions with the elected government/parliament into the system. President Erdoğan regards this bickering between the government and his presidential office as clearly proving the need for a change of the political system in Turkey. All in all, debate over Turkey's political system is set to slow down the process and delay the taking of necessary steps towards peace. Yet, this seems to be of secondary importance when set against the general direction of the process, which seems to be destined to end with the peaceful political settlement of the Kurdish issue.

### **Islamists and the Kurds: The Making of a "New Turkey"?**

First, the symbolism of the choice of date for the joint declaration was deliberate. The joint declaration was made on the 18th anniversary of Turkey's post-modern coup which toppled the pro-Islamic WP led coalition government in 1997. This coup was the clearest demonstration of the crisis of the Kemalist Project, which was unable to accommodate identities that did not fit into its narrowly defined and non-democratically enforced ideology. This coup was essentially committed not just against a government but rather against an identity: the Islamic identity, through attacks on its public manifestations, and the Islamic social constituency. Militant Kemalism in the 1990s, rather than recognizing the failure of its project, going through a process of renewal and responding to identity groups' demands for more democratization and political liberalization, decided instead to repress them further. This approach further drove a wedge between the society at large and the Kemalist elite and sowed the seeds of its demise.

To contextualize this verdict, the 1990s witnessed the political rise of two sections of society, Islamist and Kurdish. Their identities had been securitized and their political manifestations penalized by the Jacobin Kemalist republican project. Yet a bird's eye view of Turkey's political history will reveal how much the country's political contours have changed since this last coup took place in 1997. The Islamists and Kurds have been shaping and are destined to further shape the contemporary politics of Turkey. Of the two marginalized groups, Islamists have been in Turkey's driving seat uninterrupted since 2002. The Kurds, on the other hand, have increasingly come to represent Turkey's real and formidable opposition. The level of political influence they are exerting on the course of Turkey's politics is higher than their numerical representation in parliament would suggest. Thus, their joint declaration on February 28, 2015 did not only illustrate how far Turkey has travelled to settle its Kurdish issue politically, but also how much the country, the political center, and Turkish citizens' understanding of their identities have changed since 1997.

## **Developing a common vision of conflict resolution**

Second, the joint declaration is also symbolically important for the peace process itself. This importance stems from the fact that such joint declarations, coupled with the transparency that it implies in negotiations, will push the sides closer to each other in their understanding of the process and the resolution of the Kurdish issue. One of the criticisms rightly levelled at the process relates to the fact that the Kurdish side and the state have different understandings of the process and of the solution. As a corollary to this, they have different expectations from the process. Since they have disparate expectations from the process, they socialize their constituencies in different and increasingly divergent views of the solution of the Kurdish issue. Whereas, political status, constitutional recognition of Kurds and Kurdish rights, decentralization, the status of Ocalan and of the PKK, the use of Kurdish language in all level of public life and in all levels and types of educational institutions forms the content of the Kurdish view of a political solution; the disarmament of the PKK, the termination of the insurgency, and the recognition of individual level rights constitute the basic understanding of an average constituent of the governing AK Party vis a vis the political settlement of the Kurdish issue.<sup>(7)</sup> Normally, such divergent views of a settlement between negotiating parties is natural. Yet the fact that the gap between sides has widened since the commencement of the settlement process in the closing days of 2012 is troubling.

The fight between the Kurds and ISIS and Turkey's stance on the ISIS' siege of Kobane have particularly proved poisonous for the process. This episode has particularly led to the widening of the gap between the Kurdish and Turkish sides. One of the main causes of this picture stems from the fact that the whole dialogue surrounding negotiations is being conducted in complete secrecy. Putting aside the recent one, no common declaration has been offered by the sides to the public. This allowed the two sides to be able to offer their own account of the issues/dialogue to the public, which paved the ground for different sections of society to develop different views of possible settlements. With joint declarations, the parties will have to bridge the gap in their understanding of settlement terms. Once that has been achieved at an elite level, this will allow sides to socialize their constituency towards a shared view of a single settlement. If achieved, this will earn the process (and its content) a social base whose conceptualization of the solution will be increasingly convergent, and which in return will put the process on a solid ground.

## **Political implications of the joint declaration**

Third, besides its symbolic importance, this announcement is likely to yield political dividends for the parties in the upcoming June 7 elections and their more general political calculations. Entering the elections without the shadow of arms will benefit both the governing AK Party and the Kurdish Political Movement. Since the initiation of the

peace process, public support for the process has progressively increased. At the outset, only 40-45 per cent of Turkey's general public supported the process, but the level of support among the Kurds stood at around 70-75 percent. Following two years of the process, these levels of support have reached around 60 and 80-85 percent respectively.<sup>(8)</sup> This reveals that policies aiming to settle Turkey's century-old Kurdish question receive increasing levels of consent from the public. Thus, Kurdish peace is not only a cost-bearing endeavor; it is also rewarding for the parties engaged in it. In this respect, the perception that yet another critical milestone has been reached will play into the hands of the main protagonists: namely, the AK Party and pro-Kurdish HDP.

Moreover, with this announcement, each party has acquired a vantage point on which to capitalize in their dealings with the public. The governing party can claim victory for convincing the Kurdish Movement to publicly commit themselves to the goal of disarmament and demobilization within Turkey. The Kurdish Movement can also claim victory by arguing that it has convinced, if not forced, the government to give its consent to its proposed solution framework as formulated in Ocalan's ten point letter, and that it has also persuaded the government to commit itself publicly to the Kurdish Movement's long-standing demand of starting a process of negotiations with Ocalan. In other words, each has gained talking points that will go down well with their respective constituencies. Erdogan's recent announcement of his disapproval with the meeting held between government officials and pro-Kurdish politicians and with Ocalan's ten-point letter reduces the discursive value of these points. Yet it does not completely obliterate it.

To be more precise, for the government, it will also provide more discursive power to claim that it is a reformist actor willing to and capable of settling Turkey's century-old ills. As evidenced by the immediate positive reactions from the European Union, such progress in the peace process will partially alleviate Turkey's recently deteriorating international standing. Given that no other single issue has dominated the Turkey –EU relations agenda as much as the Kurdish issue has, it is unimaginable that further progress on the peace process track will go unnoticed among the EU circles.

Likewise, the Kurdish Movement will also gain considerably from the advancement in the negotiations. The pro-Kurdish party already garners the votes of all pro-PKK and pro-armed resistance partisans. There is no more need for the party to manoeuvre on this account. Secondly, its prime goal of overcoming the ten percent election threshold to enter the parliament as a party instead of as independent candidates obliges it to appeal to non-Kurdish voters, especially those from Turkey's left and liberal circles residing in the major metropolitan cities. The pro-Kurdish party's prospects for receiving these votes will be dimmed in the case of the continuing shadow of armed conflict over the Kurdish movement. In other words, as the party strives to transform itself from being

solely a Kurdish party into being a Turkey-wide party (the terminology they employ is *Turkiyelilik* meaning being “of Turkey”), it has to adopt a new language, agenda, and political style. Such a transformation in the party’s *modus vivendi* will be unlikely to be realized if the PKK does not terminate its armed struggle in Turkey.(9)

In addition, the laying down of arms in Turkey for the Kurdish Movement is not tactical but strategic. And it does not only reflect Kurdish Movement’s internal political aspirations in Turkey but also its international strategic vision. Boosted by the increased legitimacy that it has received internationally as a result of its fight against ISIS, the Kurdish Movement wants to seize and capitalize on this moment by getting itself taken off on the terrorist list of the US, EU and individual European countries. This goal will remain unfulfilled if the PKK remain engaged in armed struggle against NATO member and EU membership applicant Turkey. In this regard, PKK seeks a political settlement in Turkey in order to be regarded as a legitimate actor in regional politics by international powers. This is especially important for the PKK given the recent gains that it has made in Syria by carving out a Kurdish enclave consisting of three PYD-administered cantons in the country’s North. In a sense, it aims to repeat the experience and trajectory of Iraqi Kurds, transforming itself from being a revisionist, anti-systemic force to a capable governing power in Kurdish parts of Syria and Turkey in different ways. These all require that the PKK terminates its armed activities within Turkey.

### **Is radical democracy a prerequisite for the settlement of the Kurdish issue?**

Despite these positive sides of the announcement, the content of the 10 point letter is too vague, too generic, and too ambitious to provide a blueprint or a foundation for the negotiations. It covers a broad spectrum of topics, not all of them directly related to the settlement of the Kurdish issue. Vagueness on these points renders it difficult to define benchmarks to assess whether or not these demands have been met. To be clearer, Ocalan’s letter includes the following points: (10)

- The definition and content of democratic politics must be debated;
- What needs to be done for the national and local dimensions of democratic settlement;
- The legal and democratic assurances of free citizenship;
- The relationship between democratic politics and the state and society and its institutionalization;

- The socioeconomic dimensions of the settlement process;
- The new security structure that the settlement process will lead to;
- The solving of problems and the legal assurances pertaining to women's [rights], culture and ecology;
- The concept, definition and development of pluralist, democratic and equal mechanisms to acknowledge identity;
- The definition of concepts of the democratic state, common land and the nation by democratic means, their legal and constitutional rights enshrined in the pluralist democratic system; and
- A new constitution aiming to internalize all of the above democratic moves and transformations.

These articles sound more like a radical left wing party's manifesto than a national movement's demands. It advances more a general contour for a new vision of citizen-society-state-environment relations rather than addressing the genuine grievances and concrete demands of the Kurds. The omission of the words Kurd, Kurdish issue, and Kurdistan is not a mistake, but a choice. It fits seamlessly into the Kurdish National Movement's declared goal of filling the vacuum on the left-side of the political spectrum. As a disciple of political theorists/sociologists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's conceptualization of "Radical Democracy", the Kurdish Movement believes the adoption of such a recognizably left-wing agenda and parlance will serve as a social/political marker to set itself apart from Turkey's self-purported social democratic party, namely the Republican People's Party (CHP).

In the marketplace of ideas and competition between ideologies/ political visions, this is not only legitimate, but might be a sophisticated strategy to woo the support of Turkey's left and liberals. However, the recent strategy does not seem to be well-placed for the settlement of an ethno/national question of this magnitude. Situating the Kurdish issue within the wider framework of an ideological battle will diminish the emphasis and focus placed on the settlement of the issue. In other words, such an approach will provide the government with the leeway to not to tackle the Kurdish issue head on with concrete steps commensurate with the magnitude of the issue and grievances. Therefore, the Movement needs to set well-crafted, concrete, and actionable demands while sitting with the government for these negotiations. Such a concrete agenda is also a necessity for any independent commission, a long-standing demand from the Kurdish side, to observe and measure compliance by the sides on the agreed topics during the negotiations.



All in all, the joint declaration has illustrated that Turkey is intent on bidding a genuine farewell to its recent past of securitizing Islamic and Kurdish identities. Moreover, it has also overcome a psychological barrier: the belief that the Kurdish issue is too sensitive to be dealt with in public. Overcoming this threshold has provided an amenable and permissive socio-political context for the protagonists to move forward with negotiations and a favorable context for the upcoming elections. Yet the content of the letter that is supposed to provide a basis for the much-awaited negotiations is no match for its symbolism and psychological importance.

---

Copyright © 2015 Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.

\*Galip Dalay is a Senior Associate Fellow on Turkey and Kurdish Affairs, Al Jazeera Center for Studies.

#### End Notes

1. The closure of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) was issued by Turkey's Constitutional Court which invoked in its judgment that the Welfare Party has become the center of anti-secularism activities in the country.
2. The term securitization refers to the approach of the political establishment in the country towards public and political manifestation of Islamic symbols and values. Turkey's powerful National Security Council referred to the increasing threat of 'irtica' (Islamic reactionarism). In this atmosphere, thousands of civil servants were dismissed from their jobs based on the pretext that they were either supporting or sympathising with Islamism. Headscarved female students were denied entries to public schools, including universities. Similar practices had become prevalent in the 1990s.
3. To gain a better understanding of this call, see, "Kurdish leader Ocalan seeks end to Turkey armed struggle", BBC World, 28 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31673830> (Accessed: 23 March 2015)
4. To see the content of Ocalan's Newroz message, see "Ocalan urges PKK to convene congress to lay down arms", Hurriyet Daily News, 21 March 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ocalan-urges-pkk-to-convene-congress-to-lay-down-arms.aspx?pageID=238&nID=79988&NewsCatID=338> (Accessed: 23 March 2015)
5. For over three decades, Ocalan has been portrayed as terrorist chieftain responsible for the death of over 40.000 citizens of Turkey, mostly Kurdish fighters and civilians, and Turkish soldiers. However, since the initiation of the peace process, Abdullah Ocalan has been portrayed as one of the chief architect, along Recep Tayyip Erdogan, of Turkey's grand peace plan. This has partially normalized Ocalan's image in public perception.
6. Erdogan criticized the meeting between government officials and pro-Kurdish MPs, the reading out of Ocalan's ten points letter, and the PKK's lack of clear commitment to the process. To read more about the substance of Erdogan's criticism, see, "Turkey's Erdogan at odds with gov't over stance towards Kurds", [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/22/c\\_134087641.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/22/c_134087641.htm) (Accessed: 24 March 2015)
7. Galip Dalay, "Siyasal ile toplumsal arasında çözüm süreci", Star Acik Gorus, 15 March 2015, <http://haber.star.com.tr/acikgorus/siyasal-ile-toplumsal-arasinda-cozum-sureci/haber-1009801> (Accessed: 18 March 2015)

8. See Bekir Agirdir's interview with UKAM: Çözüm Süreci Söyleşileri 3: Bekir Ağirdir, UKAM Söyleşi, 15 December 2014, [http://www.ukam.org/pdf/UKAM-soylesi3-bekir-agirdir\(1\).pdf](http://www.ukam.org/pdf/UKAM-soylesi3-bekir-agirdir(1).pdf) (Accessed: 18 March 2015)
9. Galip Dalay, "Kürt Siyasal Hareketi nasıl bir gelecek öngörüyor?", Star Acik Gorus, 14 February 2015, <http://haber.star.com.tr/acikgorus/kurt-siyasal-hareketi-nasil-bir-gelecek-ongoruyor/haber-1000438> (Accessed: 22 March 2015)
10. For the 10 points, see, "10 madde diyor ki", Hurriyet, 02 March 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/28334292.asp> (Accessed: 22 March 2015)

