

Report

Is Turkey's Kurdish peace process on the brink?

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PKK does not have a clear idea of what it will become once the armed struggle phase of the Kurdish conflict is over [Reuters]

Abstract

More than two and half years ago, the peace process reached by the Turks and the Kurds seemed to usher in a new era of confidence building. That historical political breakthrough is giving way to renewed hostilities. The article seeks to answer a number of questions in the context of the recent violation of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) truce. Specifically, to what extent has the breach of the truce doomed the Turkey -PKK Peace Process? Which factors have led to, first, an impasse and, then, a regression in the peace process? Finally, henceforth the probability of reviving the broken peace process is likely to evolve from here onwards, and merits a well-thought out answer as well. This report attempts to answer these questions. As a result of the deadlock, Turkey and the PKK are once again engaged in a bloody fight, which has culminated in rising death tolls on both sides as well as mutual mistrust.

Introduction

With the recent fighting between Turkey and the PKK, the two and half year long ceasefire has come to a screeching halt. The bloody face of the conflict has once again become all too visible, with hostilities recommencing. Both sides are taking actions that are resulting in escalation of violence and loss of life. Official accounts put the number of military casualties around 60 as of 27 August. There is no reliable data on how many PKK members have been killed so far. Nevertheless, it seems that the PKK has incurred a significant number of deaths as well. The discrepancy between the Turkish

government's data and the PKK's own figure of its casualties is too wide to merit consideration. While officials put this number in the hundreds (1), the PKK continues to suggest that the figure for its killed fighters is much lower. (2) It seems plausible to contend that the PKK has incurred heavy losses since the recent resumption of fighting. Pictures reminiscent of Turkey's bloody 1990s - the heyday of fights between the state and the PKK - are dominating news bulletins and social media posts.

The PKK seems to be less hesitant to reengage in a fight with Turkey. How can this be explained? The PKK may be partly emboldened by its territorial gains - made through its sister organisation, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in the fledgling Syrian Kurdish enclave in the country's north. Similarly, its bold actions may reflect concerns over the recent deal between Turkey and the United States.(3) The PKK is understood to believe that the Turkish-US deal might prove inimical to these territorial gains as Turkey appears to aim to weaken the Kurds' position in the north of Syria. In particular, PKK strategists fear that the deal is a device for Turkey to forestall attempts by the Kurds to create territorial contiguity within the areas that they control(4) In this fight, is the PKK combining guerrilla style hit-and-run tactics with the conventional warfare strategies to wrest the control of strategically or symbolically important towns from the state. Although it has proven unable to hold onto them, the PKK, nevertheless, has attempted to incorporate these new battle plans representative of more conventional warfare into its new fight.

Temporary deadlock or dead peace?

At this stage, the question that is on everyone's mind is whether these developments spell the death of the peace process altogether. Is the termination of the ceasefire akin to the termination of the peace process? What factors have played a role in the decision by the two actors to reinitiate the fight? In particular, what was the PKK's motivation in waging this new war against Turkey? After all, the PKK is the party that broke the ceasefire first through the execution of two police officers on 22 July 2015.(5) The killing is purported to be an act of revenge for the bomb explosion that killed 32 and wounded hundreds of people in the south eastern province of Suruc on 20 July 2015. Although the Islamic State (IS) is yet officially to claim the bombing, it is widely believed that it was behind it.

Ceasefire: A component of the peace process

The literature on peace and conflict studies draws a clear distinction between the non-existence of armed conflict and the attainment of peace. In this respect, one of the pioneers of peace studies, Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, conceptualises this

distinction as positive and negative peace.(6) Whereas negative peace requires only the cessation of armed conflict or violence as sufficient criteria for peace, positive peace carries a deeper meaning. Thus, it treats peace as a more complicated, sophisticated, and multi-faceted phenomenon.(7) A positive peace requires political, sociological, structural, ideological, legal and economic conflict resolution.(8) Moreover, it requires the structural integration and creation of shared bonds and feelings amongst the previously conflicting groups.(9) In this respect, the truce, though crucial, is only one chapter of a more comprehensive process. Just as its attainment does not mean the conclusion of the peace process or the settlement of the issue at hand,(10) its derailment, likewise, does not spell the death of the process in its entirety. Hence, the ceasefire is not equal to the peace process. The latter includes the former, but goes beyond it. Therefore, the outbreak of violence, though it throws Turkey's Kurdish peace process into uncharted waters, does not yet signify the termination of the process altogether. Nevertheless, it is important to diagnose the factors that have facilitated the grounds for the reignition of hostilities that are endangering the peace process.

The factors endangering the peace process

There are both short-term and long-term factors that complicate Turkey's Kurdish peace process. The conjectural factors can be dealt with through less energy and effort. By contrast, the structural ones necessitate new thinking, more compromise and time.

First, a strong and functioning government is essential for the smooth evolution of the peace process. However, Turkey had a provisional government from the 7 June 2015 general elections which produced a hung parliament up until August 28. This government was then replaced by a caretaker government with the inclusion of ministers from either an independent background or parties other than the governing Justice and Development Party (AK) Party as Turkey opts for early elections planned to take place on the 1st of November. Neither a provisional government nor a caretaker government is able to meet the Kurds' demands. Hence the peace process was effectively on hold even before violence broke out between the Turks and the Kurds. Until and unless Turkey has a definitive government, there is little chance for the peace process to advance in any meaningful way. Although violence has slowed down and complicated the process, it is a conjectural factor. It can easily be overcome once Turkey has finished with repeat elections and has formed a democratic government mandated to decide on big issues, including the fate of the peace process begun cautiously in 2013.

Second, since the commencement of the Arab Spring, the PKK has heavily invested political capital in the Kurdish part of Syria, more popularly known by its Kurdish name,

Rojava. The PKK does not regard Rojava as a separate case. Rather, it views the area as intrinsic to its regional strategy, including its political calculations vis-à-vis the peace process. Hence, developments in Syria function as a make or break point for Turkey's Kurdish peace process.(11) This point was conspicuously confirmed when the Kurdish Movement initiated waves of protests on 6-8 October 2014, which resulted in the deaths of more than 50 people and brought the whole peace process to the verge of collapse.(12) Likewise, the latest developments in the Kurdish part of Syria, , particularly the fight between the PKK and ISIS, which has spilled over into Turkey with deadly consequences, have gravely endangered the process. A case in point is the recent Suruc suicide bombing, widely believed to have been orchestrated by ISIS, which claimed the lives of over 32 people and wounded hundreds of Turkish citizens, mostly of Kurdish origin.

In recent years, a common Kurdish 'public sphere' has increasingly come into being as a result of the Kurdish fight against ISIS.(13) But Turkey's foreign policy seems to be ill-equipped to face this new trend. Instead of crafting a foreign policy that can address this new reality, Turkey has stuck to its fragmented Kurdish policy, which means it has separate policies for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), PKK, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), but not a regional Kurdish policy. This approach is set to face many challenges. The emergence of a Kurdish public sphere means that developments in one part of Kurdistan will have serious ramifications for the others. In this regard, unless Turkey adopts a clear regional Kurdish policy, especially one towards the Syrian Kurds, the peace process is unlikely to advance in any significant way.

The Turkey-US Deal & the Peace Process

The PKK's reaction to the deal signed between Turkey and the United States on the complicated Syrian situation once again confirms this point. The exact and complete content of the deal is yet to be revealed. Nevertheless, the official discourse(14) of both countries suggests that the two sides do not see eye to eye on all matters concerning the crisis in Syria, particularly the nature of the measures that need to be undertaken and the groups to be targeted in an Islamic State-free zone in Syria along the Turkish border. Such a step is expected to weaken the capacity of ISIS to pose a threat to Turkey and Syrian insurgents. The U.S. has repeatedly emphasized that this deal solely aims at the curtailment of IS' activities,(15) whereas Turkey suggests that the deal includes additional provisions to limit the Kurdish PYD's activities, especially the westward territorial expansion towards the west side of the Euphrates river.(16) Perceiving a grave danger to its territorial gains in Syria achieved through the armed

activities of the PKK's sister organization, the PYD, the PKK regarded this as a move against it and its gains, and hence a breach of the peace process. In fact, PKK leadership has cited this deal as another factor in terminating the ceasefire. As stated above, the PKK's approach towards Syrian Kurdistan represents one of the primary determinants that will affect its stance on the peace process.

Third, as a corollary, the discrepancy in the parties' understanding of the content of a prospective resolution has become all too apparent, despite previously being glossed over. At this juncture, the PKK no longer sees the Kurdish issue as solely an outcome of Turkey's democratic deficit and hence curable through further democratization.⁽¹⁷⁾ Certainly, some aspects of the Kurdish issue have resulted from Turkey's dismal track record in the realm of democratisation. Nonetheless, as an ethno-national issue, the PKK believes that it is more than that. For the PKK, the crux of any settlement should include a framework in which Kurds and Turks share sovereignty. The government, in contrast, strives to frame the issue as resulting from Turkey's semi-authoritarianism in which the military previously had primacy over civilian governments when it came to deciding on major domestic and foreign policy issues such as the Kurdish issue. Moreover, it wants to treat the issue largely at an individual rather than group level. In other words, Turkey wants to settle the question of Kurdish citizens while the Kurds are keen on framing the issue as one concerning the Kurdish people – that is, a collective cause that emanates from being a distinct people and nation with collective rights, privileges and liberties. Despite falling short of secession, the PKK-led Kurdish side demands a significant level of power devolution and rearrangement of public administration to reflect a new and multicultural reading of Turkey's political identity.

Hence, the gap between the two sides' understandings of the issue and formulas for its settlement, unfortunately, has not decreased. Instead, it has widened since the commencement of the peace process in 2013. The Kurds' gain in Syria in the form of the de-facto establishment of Rojava has only emboldened them and made them less compromising on their demands vis-à-vis Turkey. Thus, further democratisation of Turkey seems unfit for the settlement of the Kurdish issue due to the PKK's political status-focused demands and aspirations. Now, the question is how to move forward with the process.

The need for a new peace roadmap

Firstly, decision-makers and the public should recognise that, though crucial, the cessation of armed hostilities is only one aspect of the Kurdish peace process. The peace

process and ceasefire is not the same thing. As stated above, however, the former includes the latter as one of its essential ingredients.

The process builds on its previous experience and failures. The evolution of Turkey's search for a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue under the AK Party government since 2002 is a testament to the assertion that a fine line needs to be drawn in differentiating between the failures of the process and its conclusive termination.(18) The first serious attempt to settle the Kurdish issue occurred in 2005 when then-Prime Minister Erdogan publicly accepted the existence of a Kurdish issue and pledged to tackle it in all its aspects in earnest in a speech delivered in front of a crowd in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish-majority city in Turkey. However, this opening soon runs aground. In this attempt, Turkey did not engage any Kurdish partner for the settlement of the issue. Learning from this failure, Turkey embarked on a second trial through secret talks between government officials and PKK representatives in Oslo in 2009. This too came to a halt with the outbreak of violence in 2011. In the trial, the process did not start as a political project with the full backing and participation of the main political actors on the Turkish and Kurdish political scene, namely then prime minister and now president Erdogan and PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. It also took place without public knowledge; hence the process would have faced a major crisis if the talks were disclosed. Drawing lessons from this attempt and failure, Turkey's most audacious attempt to date was announced by Erdogan on the closing days of 2012(19) when he said that the state was talking with Ocalan, the most important Kurdish political figure in Turkey, in aims of a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue. Erdogan and his party threw their full weight behind the process. This last attempt, which had the full support of the primary decision-makers in Turkish and Kurdish politics, is unrivalled in the history of Turkey's search for a settlement in the Kurdish issue. Nevertheless, a regional upheaval, particularly the Syrian imbroglio and its Kurdish dimension, has upset this last trial. Turkey should learn a new lesson too: to incorporate the regional (Kurdish) dimension into the process and enhance the political space for Ocalan in order to stave off the emergence of a significant anti-peace process figure on the Kurdish side. To reciprocate and facilitate this, the PKK should completely silence arms against Turkey without excuses or reservations, a demand that has also been made by the political wing of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey.(20)

Therefore, since the start of the search for a resolution of the issue in 2005, the process has failed three times. Each restart has built upon the experience gained and the lessons learned from the previous process. The lessons learned from the failure of the 2005 opening set the stage for the opening of 2009. Likewise, the lessons drawn from the

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failure of 2009 paved the way for the 2013 opening. In the meantime, society has been socialised more into the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue, which in return has freed politicians' hands in being more forthcoming on the settlement. Politicians should not be afraid of making readjustments in the architecture of the process and then go forward with it.

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