

THE KURDISH PEACE PROCESS: OCT. 6-8 EVENTS AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) besieged the Syria's northern Kurdish city Kobani. The attack of the ISIS that carried no moral or the legal principles and performed the massacre of civilians massacres in previous seized areas to Kobani lifted up all the Kurdish public opinion. The Kurds in Turkey have reacted to both ISIS and AKP government which they do not believe helps the Kurds in Syria. Selahattin Demirtaş who is the co-chairman of HDP made a call to the nation and demanded to go into the streets.

After that Turkey suffered a very painful events in this protest of Kobani on October 6-8, 2014. More than 50 people lost their lives. Especially in the cities of Southeastern Anatolia was returned into the battlefield. Different social groups came up against. These events led to significant results in Turkish politics: the solution-process entered into a crisis. The mistrust between the parties which had existed since the beginning increased. The fault-line between the PKK and Hezbollah was triggered. The social peace and stability in both the west and east of Turkey were faced with a great danger.

Keywords: Peace process, Kurdish question, Kobani, AKP, HDP, HÜDA-PAR, ISIS, conflict resolution.

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ÇÖZÜM SÜRECİ: 6-8 EKİM OLAYLARI VE SONRASI

ÖZET

IŞİD, Suriye'nin Kuzeyindeki Kürt kenti Kobani'yi kuşattı. Daha önce ele geçirdiği yerde hiçbir ahlaki ve hukuki ilke tanımayan ve sivil katliamlar gerçekleştiren IŞİD'in Kobani'ye saldırması, bütün Kürt kamuoyunu ayağa kaldırdı. Türkiye'de de Kürtler, hem IŞİD'e, hem de Suriye'deki Kürtlere yardım etmediğini düşündüğü AKP hükümetine tepki gösterdi. HDP Eşgenel Başkanı Selahattin Demirtaş da, halka bir çağrı yaptı ve sokağa çıkmalarını talep etti.

Bunun üzerine başlayan Kobani protestolarında Türkiye, 6-8 Ekim 2014 tarihleri arasında çok acı olaylar yaşadı. 50'den fazla insan hayatını kaybetti. Özellikle Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde kentler savaş yerine döndü. Farklı toplumsal kesimler karşı karşıya geldi. Bu olaylar Türkiye siyasetinde önemli sonuçlara yol açtı: Çözüm süreci bir krize girdi. Sürecin tarafları arasında baştan beri var olan güvensizlik büyüdü. PKK ile Hizbullah arasındaki fay hattı tetiklendi. Türkiye'nin hem Batısında, hem de Doğusunda toplumsal barış ve istikrar büyük bir tehlike ile karşı karşıya geldi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Barış süreci, Kürt meselesi, Kobani, AKP, HDP, PKK, HÜDA-PAR, IŞİD, çatışma çözümü.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Justice and Development Party government in Turkey has maintained contact with the PKK leadership since 2005 in order to resolve the country's long-standing Kurdish question through democratic channels. By 2006, the talks had evolved into an ongoing dialogue. Two years later, delegations from both parties started meeting in Oslo, Norway. Although the public initially had no knowledge of this effort for several years, the peace process became public when an anonymous source leaked sound recordings of a conversation between Turkish intelligence officers and PKK representatives in an attempt to weaken the government ahead of the 2011 parliamentary election.

The leak, however, did not fulfill its intended purpose. The people not only refrained from a negative response but rallied behind the Justice and Development Party, which received 50 percent of the vote in June 2011 to make history. Meanwhile, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) proved quite successful as 36 independent candidates, whom the party had endorsed, won local races for Parliament. Although the strong performance of the two parties raised the nation's hope for a political solution to the Kurdish

question, the negotiations came to an abrupt end just a month later, in July 2011, and violence continued.

During this period, the PKK implemented a strategy called the *Democratic People's War* (tr. Demokratik halk savaşı) and aimed to stir an uprising among the people against the Turkish state. Meanwhile, the authorities launched major operations against PKK operatives in urban centers and the mountains alike in an attempt to disempower and marginalize the organization. As such, developments between July 2011 and December 2012 represented an all-out war between the two sides as the country witnessed severe bloodshed. Over 14 months, more than 700 people lost their lives – the highest number of casualties since the 1999 capture of the PKK's founding leader Abdullah Öcalan.¹ While violence and death added to tensions across the country, competing nationalist movements thrived.

Despite bold statements and high aims, both sides eventually failed to live up to their expectations. After 14 months, the PKK could not persuade the people to go to war with the state. Meanwhile, the authorities, which primarily relied on legal and military operations, fell short of forcing the organization into submission. It was during this period that the nation discovered the impossibility of a peaceful resolution through violence and securitization. It was in light of this development that dialogue resumed in January 2013.

The main difference between this series of talks and their predecessors has been the element of, at least partial, transparency. In this sense, the government publicly acknowledged that its representatives had started talking to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and reiterated their commitment to addressing the problem through by any means necessary. Around the same time, a delegation of BDP parliamentarians started to pay regular visits to Öcalan on the prison island of İmralı and, sharing the PKK leader's ideas with the organization's operational wing on Mt. Qandil and operatives inside Europe, brokered a ceasefire.² Subsequently, a government-sponsored Wise Men Commission went on tour to engage the question of peace with local communities across the nation – which, in turn, mobilized support behind the initiative.

¹ International Crisis Group (ICG), Turkey: The PKK and Kurdish Settlement, September 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/219-turkey-the-pkk-and-a-kurdish-settlement.aspx>

² Following the Peace and Democracy Party's closure, the delegation was comprised of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) parliamentarians.

The peace process, of course, had no lack of challenges. Just days after the official announcement, in January 2013, three female PKK operatives were assassinated in Paris, France. Over the next months, government plans to build new high-security police stations and hydroelectric dams in predominantly Kurdish areas as well as the PKK's resumption of illegal activities such as imposing roadblocks and kidnappings caused controversy. Despite such negative developments, both parties remained committed to dialogue and joined forces to overcome challenges.

II. THE UPSIDE OF THE PEACE PROCESS

Turkey's society has shown great interest in the Kurdish peace process, as the Justice and Development Party and the Peoples' Democratic Party, which sponsored the initiative, claimed major victories in the March 2014 local elections and the August 2014 presidential race. What united pro-dialogue camps across the country has been their shared weariness of violence and bloodshed. As such, it was the shared yearning for an end to widespread suffering that helped the peace process attain greater legitimacy. Furthermore, the peace process had a positive influence on Eastern and Southeastern provinces in at least four areas:

- a. The end of the PKK's violent campaign, which had terrorized the nation almost continuously since 1984, led to psychological relief among the population. Having worried about themselves and their loved ones for years and attended funerals after funerals, locals found an opportunity to relax after the ceasefire. In certain parts of the country, a normal life became possible again for ordinary citizens.
- b. Social life thrived during the ceasefire, as local communities gained access to a greater number of diverse socialization areas. Previously prohibited areas, among other things, became accessible to ordinary citizens. Curfews ended and a renewed sense of safety made it possible for locals to spend time in public areas until later hours.
- c. The peace process spurred economic growth, particularly in the tourism industry. The number of Turkish and international tourists visibly grew in places like Diyarbakır, Mardin, Şanlıurfa and Tunceli. Investors started to show greater interest in local communities, making citizens more hopeful about the future.
- d. The political arena became more pluralistic. At present, the predominantly Kurdish areas remain split between the Justice and

Development Party and the Peoples' Democratic Party. New players including the Azadi Initiative, the Just Cause Party (Hüda-Par), the Kurdistan Freedom Party and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey have, however, emerged over the past months. Similarly, the influence of non-governmental organizations has increased and activists have stepped in either to eliminate PKK-imposed roadblocks or to broker peace between competing groups. In this sense, the number of actors with influence over the political landscape has been soaring.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OCT. 6-8 CLASHES

The above-mentioned developments, which exert direct influence over everyday lives of ordinary citizens, built up hopes and expectations. On October 6-8, however, a series of violent clashes created a serious rupture in the reconciliation process. Thus far, the popular support behind the dialogue initiative rested on the premise that conflict and bloodshed would end to facilitate the normalization of everyday life. Since January 2013, the people had witnessed a lasting ceasefire between the parties and, convinced that peace had been restored, threw their weight behind pro-dialogue actors. Although both the government and the Kurdish political movement became the target of fierce criticism, the people's support allowed them to overcome these challenges.

The Oct. 6-8 clashes, which followed a call for action from the Peoples' Democratic Party, turned the situation upside down. It all started with an emergency meeting of the party's executive committees over the siege of Kobani and ISIS advances toward the town center. Holding a press conference afterward, HDP leaders explained that the situation in Kobani had reached a critical stage and called on their supporters to take to the streets and occupy public areas. In the wake of this announcement, protests took place in predominantly Kurdish provinces among others to express solidarity with the people of Kobani. The initially peaceful demonstrations, however, soon took a violent turn and resulted in the death of 50 people.³ Across the country, competing groups, blinded by hate, targeted each other and brought back memories that the nation had worked hard to forget.

³ Ali Dağlar, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/27525777.asp>

It was in this sense that the Oct. 6-8 clashes, in the words of Etyen Mahçupyan, damaged the essence of the peace process. The damage was twofold: First and foremost, the primary selling point for the talks had been the lack of violent conflict and bloodshed. The casualties and a wave of clashes that wreaked havoc in major urban centers effectively stripped the peace process of its main source of legitimacy. Meanwhile, the violent protests jeopardized the common ground between various groups of different ideological backgrounds that, over the course of the talks, had helped keep efforts to derail the process under control. It was this particular damage inflicted by the clashes that represented the greatest threat to dialogue and caused widespread concern over the future of the peace process.

IV. COMPETING VIEWS ON THE OCT. 6-8 CLASHES

The Justice and Development Party government and mainstream media outlets held HDP chairman Selahattin Demirtaş, who called on the people to participate in the demonstrations, responsible for the developments. He, in turn, held a press conference after the situation was back under control and, claiming that he merely called for democratic protests, denied his party's responsibility for violent deeds. According to Demirtaş, the clashes represented a popular response to the following: The government's reluctance to take necessary steps within the framework of the peace process, Turkey's misguided Syria policy, Ankara's unwillingness to assist the Kurdish fighters in Kobani and take a firm stance against ISIS terrorism, police brutality and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political style. Reaction had been building up among the people, the HDP leader suggested. And the explosion would have happened even if his party had not called for protests.⁴

The Justice and Development Party government, however, analyzed the Oct. 6-8 clashes in different light. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, for instance, drew three main conclusions from the developments:

1. According to the Prime Minister, the government had produced a roadmap with several stages and shared the blueprint with Abdullah Öcalan as well as PKK commanders on Mt. Qandil – to which

⁴ <http://gundem.bugun.com.tr/ocalanla-mesajlastik-haberi/1291516>. For
Demirtaş's press conference record go to:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNUhVEZUNpE>

neither party objected. In response to the government's request for an end to all illegal activities by October 15, 2014 as a requisite for the implementation of the plan, the organization's leadership reportedly made necessary pledges. The protests, interestingly enough, took place despite this preliminary agreement.

The authorities have no doubt that the PKK was behind the violent attacks. According to Davutoğlu, the organization may have been distracted by foreign stakeholders in the region. Similarly, the operational wing on Mt. Qandil may have had doubts about the government's future in the wake of the worsening situation in Kobani. Regardless, however, the Oct. 6-8 clashes discouraged the pro-dialogue camp and postponed the final stage of the peace process.

2. Government officials, furthermore, do not believe that the clashes stemmed from the build-up of negative sentiments among the people or represented a social explosion pioneered by young people. After careful sociological and political assessments, they concluded that the events were part of a rational plan with specific goals. The protestors, for instance, picked certain targets to convey their messages:
 - a. Attacks against official buildings indicated that the participants did not recognize government authority and sought to exercise political power themselves.
 - b. By burning down stores whose owners did not support the HDP, they implied that there was no room for diversity.
 - c. Finally, the targeting of Justice and Development Party and Just Cause Party (Hüda-Par) offices, they denied the right to engage in political activities.
3. In the wake of the developments, the Prime Minister met with Justice and Development Party parliamentarians from predominantly Kurdish provinces as well as elected local officials and non-governmental organizations – all of whom complained that the PKK had accumulated more influence over the region and warned that Kurdish citizens who did not support the organization found themselves increasingly vulnerable. In light of these meetings, the government reiterated its commitment to preserving public order in order to facilitate the resumption of the Kurdish peace process.

Davutoğlu repeatedly stated that the concerns of ordinary citizens over the future course of disarmament talks could not be ignored. If the

people associated dialogue with fear and concerns, the authorities reasoned, confidence would soar among Turkey's Kurds and trigger more questions. In order to neutralize this threat, the officials believed they had to prevent any developments that could potentially aggravate popular concerns. The future of the talks would, then, depend on public order: Only when the authorities could completely restore public order could the negotiations continue.

V. THE OUTCOME OF THE OCT. 6-8 CLASHES

The Oct. 6-8 rupture simultaneously demonstrated that the peace process was under constant threat of derailment and reminded both parties of its limits. The developments, furthermore, established beyond all doubt what the failure of dialogue could entail. In light of the present situation, the following assessments can be made regarding the PKK leadership and the Justice and Development Party government:

The PKK remains an organization which resorts to violent means in order to reach its goals. According to the organization's founding philosophy, both the state and the masses, on whose behalf it acts, can be pushed in certain directions and kept in line through the use of violence. Over the course of its campaign, the organization may have shown some level of flexibility with regard to the above-mentioned principle, but a group of hardliners inside the PKK continue to believe that violence remains the sole means to progress. The Oct. 6-8 clashes, however, have shown that resorting to violent activities could harm the organization itself. In this sense, we can identify at least three ways in which the demonstrations hurt the PKK:

1. A return to arms could possibly lead to a reversal of the Kurdish community's democratic gains in Turkey and led to greater military presence in the region. Furthermore, competing terrorist organizations such as the Turkish Hezbollah, ISIS and Al Qaeda could turn against the PKK if the organization re-initiates its violent campaign. In other words, the PKK might find itself fighting not only the Turkish authorities but also other illegal organizations. Similarly, with major conflicts underway in Syria and Iraq, opening a new front inside Turkey would not serve the organization's interests. Even though PKK leaders like to claim that they are perfectly capable of fighting on multiple fronts at the same time, these statements do not necessarily reflect the situation on the ground. The re-initiation of violence, then, would hinder the PKK's efforts to gain greater political influence.

2. The involvement of PKK fighters in the anti-ISIS struggle received positive feedback from Western audiences and has encouraged the organization's efforts to be removed from the list of terrorist organizations in various countries. As such, the PKK currently has a genuine opportunity to become a legitimate political actor – which, provided that the militants embrace violent means again, would be lost.
3. At this point, violence puts major strains on the PKK's relations with certain elements within Turkey's Kurdish community. With violent tendencies on the rise, the number of people suspecting the organization's motives has been climbing. Kurdish voters supporting the Justice and Development Party as well as other conservatives had long had doubts about the organization. The most recent clashes have both aggravated existing concerns and rendered them appealing to a larger audience. Today, the middle, upper-middle and upper classes of Kurdish society remain more disgruntled about the PKK's activities than ever before. And the overwhelming concern among these groups relates to the organization's perceived unwillingness to tolerate competing movements.

A number of PKK activities such as the imposition of roadblocks, arson and declarations of autonomy since the Oct. 6-8 clashes have further alienated certain segments of Kurdish society. After all, such deeds both disrupt everyday life for ordinary citizens and deprive them of certain public services. Inevitably, the PKK and the Peoples' Democratic Party will have to bear the political costs of such actions. One thing is clear: If the Turkish government had stuck to the methodology of the 1990s and sought to address the problem exclusively through security measures, violence could have served the PKK's interests. The situation, however, has changed drastically. At this point, each manifestation of the government's commitment to resolving the Kurdish question through political channels adds to the cost of violence for the organization and makes it increasingly difficult for violent-prone actors to build bridges with the majority of Turkey's Kurdish community.

From the Justice and Development Party government's standpoint, there are at least two key conclusions to be drawn from the most recent wave of violent clashes: First and foremost, the PKK has established beyond all doubt that it remains perfectly capable of mobilizing its urban-based forces within a short period of time. These operatives, in turn, proved able to spread violence through the streets and trigger widespread clashes – which, surely enough, are no longer confined to government officials and PKK operatives

on the ground but affect other political movements as well as civilians. Such developments, furthermore, have a natural tendency to get out of control and shake the population's confidence in political stability. In this sense, street violence effectively serves to weaken the government's standing.

The clashes, moreover, made it clear that the authorities do not have the luxury to slow down and/or delay the Kurdish peace process. At this point, there are at least three reasons why Turkey needs to address the Kurdish question without further delay:

- a. With state border becoming obsolete, alliances falling apart and new partnerships on the rise, the Middle East finds itself at a critical junction in history. Thus far, the Turkish government has opted to describe the peace process as an original and inherently domestic affair with no room for foreign intervention. The negotiations, however, become more vulnerable to outside influences as the talks continue. New proposals, such as the inclusion of the United States in the talks as a so-called third eye, have recently been voiced – which puts additional pressure on the parties and adds to the probability of failure.
- b. New and previously unforeseen problems have surfaced with time and led to the emergence of new sources of conflict. In light of this developments, the parties find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on genuinely important issues and instead end up wasting time and resources on formalities – which slows down the talks and makes it more and more difficult to make progress.
- c. The prolonged negotiations have triggered different responses from the Turkish and Kurdish communities alike, with the former expressing a sense of weariness and the latter complaining about being stalled. It goes without saying that certain stakeholders work hard to amplify these sentiments. As such, both domestic and international circumstances compel the country to complete the peace process as soon as possible.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS

It is natural for peace processes to encounter certain problems and challenges. Surely enough, both the parties to the disarmament talks and the people expected some turbulence on the way. The problem with the Oct. 6-8 clashes, however, was that the resulting crisis was too deep and too influential. As such, the magnitude of the troubles caused certain setbacks

from the standpoint of those directly involved in the negotiations as well as ordinary citizens. As such, it was absolutely necessary to address the doubts as quickly as possible while looking for ways to get on top of the crisis. The peace process, after all, served both parties' political interests – a statement that stood the test of two elections since the talks began. In other words, derailing the negotiations would have inflicted serious damage to both sides and neither side would want to risk trading a win-win relationship to a lose-lose situation.

As a matter of fact, the parties made a clear effort to shelter the peace process from critics and resume the talks. Although representatives from both sides tended to blame the opposite camp for the road bump, they were careful not to slam the door shut – making it possible for the negotiations to continue and the leaders to reiterate their support for dialogue. As such, they turned over a new leaf and ushered in a new era in the Kurdish peace process. At this point, the authorities and the PKK leadership can take the following steps to make progress:

Primarily, both parties must pay greater attention to respecting each other's sensitivities. At present, restoring public order represents the government's top priority while the PKK operatives concentrate on further empowering their imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, at the negotiation table. In this regard, the organization has a responsibility to cease all activities in violation of public order. Here, the term *public* does not merely refer to official buildings and state officials. Similarly, obedience to public order means more than not attacking official buildings and state officials. The public domain includes all citizens and social spaces. In this sense, the organization must refrain from all activities that place the lives and property of citizens at risk in order to abide by public order. It is particularly important to point out that the people, not the government, urges PKK militants to meet this demand.

The government, in turn, has a responsibility to expedite the negotiations and take necessary steps to live up to its commitments. The first order of business should be to allow a larger delegation to visit Abdullah Öcalan for deliberations as well as to facilitate the establishment of a secretariat to assist the PKK's imprisoned leader and help launch a monitoring task force to oversee progress. Forming a delegation to monitor the negotiations, in particular, would seriously contribute to find middle ground among parties and ensure a satisfactory flow of information to the general public. Similarly, opening direct channels of communication between Öcalan and the organization's operational leadership on Mt. Qandil could help eliminate the ongoing schism at top levels of the PKK hierarchy.

Secondly, the parties must agree on a mutually agreeable end game and completely commit to achieving this goal. Similarly, representatives on both sides must carefully avoid looking unwilling to continue dialogue and ready to abandon the talks. Positive reinforcement could further consolidate supporters on both sides and help overcome challenges ahead. The parties, in this sense, should make an effort to prepare their social base and the general public for peace while constantly reminding the people that the reconciliation process will benefit all parties involved.

Finally, both parties have responsibilities toward the supporters of the opposite camp. In other words, the PKK must share the burden of persuading the Turkish community and, in particular, Turkish nationalists while government officials must win over reluctant elements within the country's Kurdish community.

Bringing an end to violent conflict and bloodshed as well as refraining from placing Turkey's territorial integrity at risk represent two key factors in order to secure additional support from Western Turkey. In this regard, the PKK bears primary responsibility: By ceasing all illegal activities, the organization could encourage the general public to embrace peace and thereby allow the authorities to take necessary measures with greater ease.

The government, in turn, must make an effort to reach out to reluctant Kurds—which requires a clear roadmap and legal arrangements to this effect. In this sense, the Turkish authorities must meet demands for the release of imprisoned PKK operatives in poor health, the lifting of official reservations regarding the European Charter on Local Self-Government and the establishment of closer ties with Syrian Kurds. The Justice and Development Party government should raise awareness about the country's democratization. Violence cannot end unless the above steps are taken.