

Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question: A Realist Perspective

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ABSTRACT *The developments in early 2013 generated expectations that the almost three decades old armed conflict between the Turkish state and PKK would eventually come to an end. This article adopts a skeptical position and identifies two principal factors that make a peaceful settlement a distant possibility. First, the current military situation is a stalemate that is not ripe for peace. The costs of the conflict remain highly tolerable for both sides. Next, huge differences separate what the Turkish government is willing to deliver and what the Kurdish insurgency is willing to accept for disarmament. In particular, the PKK has no incentive to accept disarmament and demobilization given current geopolitical dynamics conducive to Kurdish self-rule.*

2012 has been the most violent year in the fighting between the Turkish state and Kurdish insurgency since 1999. Hence, it came as a surprise when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's announcement that his government was talking to Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdish insurgent PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), in December 2012 was followed by a visit by two parliamentarians from the Kurdish nationalist BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*) to Öcalan in early January. These developments renewed hopes for a peaceful resolution of the almost thirty years old armed conflict. In this article, I offer a critical evaluation of the prospects for resolution of Turkey's Kurdish question. Going against the conventional wisdom, I argue that neither side has strong incentives to make the necessary concessions to reach an agreement. I suggest that the current status quo characterized by low intensity violence interrupted by periods of negotiations and ceasefires is the most probable outcome in the coming years. I first offer an analytical overview of the insurgency followed by a discussion of the strategic interests of the major political actors. I conclude with skepticism regarding the achievability of peace.

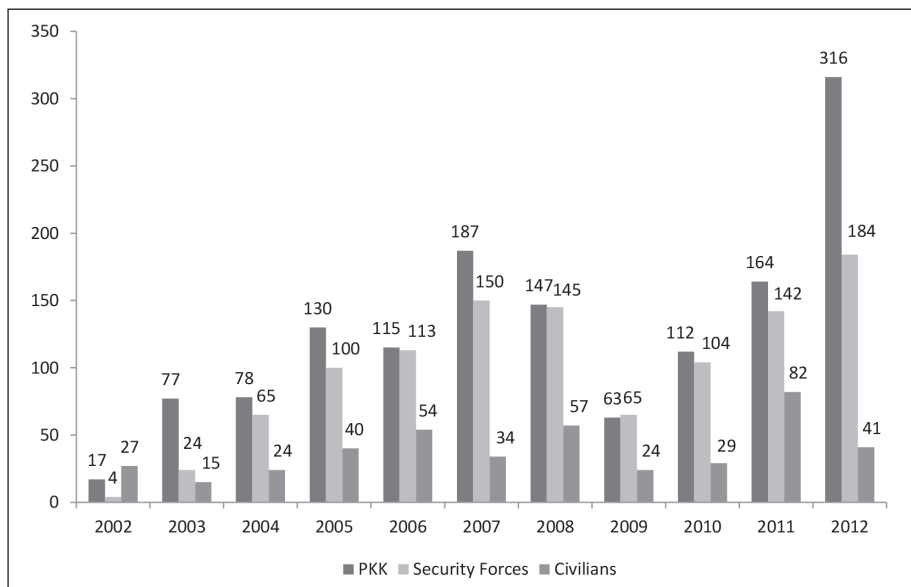
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A Mutually Bearable Stalemate

When the PKK started its guerilla warfare against the Turkish state in 1984, it was composed of several hundred poorly armed and inexperienced fighters. By the early 1990s, however, the insurgency mobilized considerable popular support and established itself as the hegemonic force in many parts of Turkey’s Kurdish areas. It presented a viable serious military challenge to the state.¹ The 1990s witnessed a vicious fight as the state opted for a variety of harsh means to curtail the growth of the PKK including forced evacuation of thousands of villages, systematic torture, and extrajudicial execution of civilians suspected to be PKK supporters. The PKK also targeted civilians who were perceived to be collaborators or resisted the demands of the insurgency. The state capitalized on its manpower and technological superiority to deny PKK militants safe areas in the countryside and the PKK’s fighting capacity was severely limited by the late 1990s. With the capture of Öcalan in 1999, a period of relative calm emerged until 2004. This first phase of the armed conflict that lasted between 1984 and 1999 was characterized by a high level of civilian victims.²

Figure 1. Fatalities by Type and Year, 2002-2012.



Note: Security force fatalities combine soldier, police, and village guard deaths. This figure documents self-reported casualties. In many cases, both sides claim that the other side suffers heavier casualties than they acknowledge.

Several observations on the armed conflict that was reignited since 2004 can be made on the basis of an original dataset, the Kurdish Insurgency Violent Events (KIVE).³ First, as shown in Figure 1, the total fatalities in a single year including civilians, security forces, and militants, did not exceed 400 until 2012 when at least 541 people lost their lives. There was a significant decline

in the deadliness of the conflict compared to the 1990s when thousands fatalities took place every year. Similarly, large scale and successful PKK attacks targeting security forces were rare. As shown in Table 1, only six such attacks killed more than 10 security forces in a single instance since 1999. Second, political developments strongly affected the temporal pattern of the fighting. 2009 experienced the lowest number of casualties since 2004. It was the same year when the AK Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) announced its “Kurdish initiative” and the PKK responded with a ceasefire. The failure of the political process contributed to violence that reached its peak in 2012 with an increase in the frequency of clashes. A PKK emboldened by the gains of the Kurds in Syria also increased its attacks in the same year.

Table 1. Events with More than 10 Fatalities.

Location	Type	Month & Year	Fatalities		
			Security forces	PKK	Civilians
Çukurca	PKK attack/TSK operation	October-11	25	43	
Uludere-Ortasu	TSK operation	December-11			34
Şemdinli-Aktütün	PKK attack	October-08	17	8	
Şırnak-Besta	TSK operation	April-05	4	14	
İstanbul-Güngören	Unclaimed-PKK suspected	July-07			18
Şırnak-Besta	TSK operation	February-12	2	16	
Bitlis-Çeltikli	TSK operation	March-12	1	15	
Şemdinli-Gediktepe	PKK attack	June-10	11	4	
Karlıova	TSK operation	November-03	15		
Pervari-Doğan	PKK attack	June-10	5	10	
Şemdinli-Beyyurdu	PKK attack	July-10	12	3	
Silvan-Dolapdere	PKK attack	July-11	2	13	
Muş-Şenyayla	TSK operation	March-06		14	
Uludere-Uzungeçit	TSK-PKK encounter	August-07	2	12	
Şırnak-Gabar	TSK-PKK encounter	October-07	13	1	
Yüksekova-Dağlıca	PKK attack	October-07	12	2	
Şırnak-Cudi	TSK operation	December-11	14		
Lice-Tapantepe	PKK attack	January-03	1	12	
Mutki-İkizler	PKK attack	August-08	5	8	
Beytüşşebap-Beşağaç	Unclaimed-PKK suspected	September-07	7		5
Bingöl-Dallitepe	TSK operation	February-08		12	
Güroymak-Kolbaşı	PKK attack	October-11	6		6
Şırnak-Cudi	TSK operation	March-11	6	5	
Şırnak-Bestler Derele	TSK-PKK encounter	April-06	2	9	
Ovacık-Kutu Deresi	TSK operation	April-07	1	10	
Nazimiye-Dokuzkaya	TSK operation	April-08		11	

Note: Security force fatalities combine soldier, police, and village guard deaths. TSK operations occasionally involve large presence of police and guard forces. In many cases, both sides claim that the other side suffered heavier casualties than they acknowledge. This table documents self-reported casualties.



Picture shows that PKK jog with their rifle during a training session early in the morning.

AFP / Mustafa Özer

Third, the fighting was professionalized as both sides had central commands and typically avoided attacks that may harm civilians. KIVE does not indicate any patterns of categorical terrorism that involve indiscriminate killing of civilians.⁴ As Table 1 shows, most deadly attacks typically do not target civilians.⁵ Additionally, there is no evidence of spoilers or fragmentation that complicates the dynamics of the conflict despite widespread suspicions about shadowy groups acting autonomously.⁶ Furthermore, the violence did not have a strong ethnic or sectarian dimension that beset communal relations in neighboring countries such as Iraq and Syria. Despite occasional flares-up, violence did not spread out among different ethnic groups living together.⁷ No year saw more than 100 citizens killed as a result of the armed conflict. The fatalities on both the Turkish state and the insurgency side were comparable. With the exception of 2012 when more than 300 PKK militants lost their lives, neither side had more than 200 fatalities in a year. Power asymmetries did not directly translate into significant differences in fatality rates.

Finally, the conflict had a strong temporal and geographical pattern typical to guerilla warfare. Most fighting took place in inaccessible border zones far from major population centers in warmer months. It is mostly concentrated in the mountainous zone north of the border with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This zone, which is also called Botan, is primarily composed of the provinces of Hakkari and Şırnak, just across the permanent PKK camps in Behdinan, across the border. Around 42 percent of all fatalities, as well as 35 percent of all events with fatalities between 2002 and 2012 took place in these provinces.⁸ Around of 74 percent of all fatalities occurred in six provinc-

es: Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Siirt, Şırnak, and Tunceli. The violence slowly decreased from early December to late March, and reached its peak from July to October. In fact, October is the deadliest month overall as PKK militants engaged in large scale attacks before they retreat to their winter sanctuaries.

These patterns suggest that there is a stalemate. While the militants are in no position to dislodge the Turkish state from the territory they contest with the exception of some mountainous border zones, the Turkish state also seems incapable of defeating the insurgency. However, this is not necessarily a “mutually hurting stalemate” that is “ripe for peace.”⁹ The characteristics of the conflict (limited civilian and security force casualties, geographically contained, seasonably constrained) suggest that it has limited costs for the both sides. The current military situation does not necessarily lead to optimism regarding the eventual dismantling of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey.

As Figure 1 shows, the security forces’ fatalities modestly increased in 2012 over past years, but there is no indication that the AK Party’s peace initiative in early 2013 was due to military losses. There were no large street demonstrations critical of the

government’s inability to contain political violence. In fact, the military operations in 2012 killed significantly more PKK militants than past years. While the PKK suffered heavier casualties than the previous years, it also engaged in ambitious operations challenging the state’s control in rugged border zones such as Şemdinli with some success. There is no indication that the PKK lost its resoluteness to fight and experience problems in recruiting new fighters and motivating its existing cadres. Both sides are very much capable and willing to fight. Consequently, neither side has strong incentives to reach a settlement or significantly escalate the fighting on the basis of purely strategic concerns. One should seek for alternative dynamics other than the ones in the battlefield to understand the timing of the government’s 2013 initiative.

The Kurdish problem undermines Turkey’s economic growth, democratic achievements, and regional aspirations. Yet, it is not that clear if Turkey’s Kurdish problem actually overwhelms the Turkish government

The AK Party: Electoral Calculations & Geopolitical Concerns

It’s a widespread argument that the Kurdish problem undermines Turkey’s economic growth, democratic achievements, and regional aspirations.¹⁰ The ongoing insurgency contributes to regional inequalities, worsen Turkey’s human rights records, and limit its foreign policy initiatives. Yet, it is not that clear if Turkey’s Kurdish problem actually overwhelms the Turkish govern-

ment. The AK Party came to power in 2002 when the Kurdish insurgency was mostly dormant. In the following years, the renewal of violence did little to prevent the party from consolidating its power and achieving sustainable rates of economic growth. The party managed to significantly diminish the political autonomy of the military despite the ongoing fight. Overall, the human, military, foreign and economic costs of the fighting have not affected the party's ability to stay in power for more than a decade, which is unprecedented in Turkish politics since the 1950s. In fact, the AK Party has managed to flourish in parallel with the Kurdish insurgency.

If so, then how can we make sense of the AK Party's most recent attempt to resolve the conflict? First, electoral and political considerations are central to the party's decision making. The party won three consecutive parliamentary and two consecutive local elections, and two referenda on constitutional amendments with wide margins since 2002. These electoral victories ensured the party's survival and enabled it to dismantle military and judicial autonomous forces that periodically intervened in politics. The party also gained widespread support from the Kurdish citizens in the 2004 and 2007 elections. However, it saw significant declines in its electoral fortunes in the Kurdish areas in the 2009 local and 2011 parliamentary elections.¹¹ The AK Party's increasing flirtation with Turkish nationalism, pursuit of aggressive law-and-order tactics to contain Kurdish nationalists, and impunity associated with the *Uludere* bombing¹² have accelerated this downward trend. The party's increasing religious discourse that emphasizes common Muslim identity shared by most ethnic Turks and Kurds and distribution of economic benefits are insufficient to contain the increasing appeal of Kurdish nationalism. Moreover, the emergence of a new Kurdish Islamist party by the remnants of the Kurdish Hezbollah in fall 2012 (*Hür Dava Partisi*) further complicates the electoral calculations of the AK Party leadership.¹³ Hence, the AK Party's latest attempt at resolution can be interpreted primarily as an attempt to reverse this downward trend in the wake of the 2014 local and presidential elections. At minimum, the AK Party would want to reconstitute its image of as a "party of peace and reconciliation" in the eyes of the Kurdish citizens. Furthermore, a deal with the Kurdish movement would enable the AK Party to push for a referendum on a draft of the new constitution that would significantly increase the powers of the presidency consistent with the ambitions of Prime Minister Erdoğan.¹⁴

Geopolitical developments that contribute to the rise of the Kurdish nationalist actors complicate the AK Party's foreign policy initiatives and its perception of Turkey's security

Next, geopolitical developments that contribute to the rise of the Kurdish nationalist actors complicate the AK Party's foreign policy initiatives and its per-

ception of Turkey's security. Turkey now enjoys warm relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Northern Iraq, after years of mutual suspicion. There are three dimensions to the Turkey-KRG cooperation. First, it involves expanding mutually beneficial economic relations. The KRG trade is central to the Turkish government attempts to revitalize economic life in its Kurdish regions. Second, the KRG and Turkey are planning to construct a new pipeline that would export Kurdish oil and natural gas independent. Such a development would ensure the economic independence of the KRG from Iraq and satisfy the fast growing energy needs of Turkey.¹⁵ By increasing KRG's dependency on Turkey, the AK Party hopes to fundamentally change the incentive structure of the Kurdish leadership in Iraq and weaken their commitment to the Kurdish nationalist cause in Turkey. Finally, the government expects that its warm relations with Masoud Barzani would limit the appeal of militant Kurdish nationalism in both Turkey and Syria.

In Syria, the AK Party has hostile relations with the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) that has emerged as the most robust and powerful organization among the Syrian Kurds with the civil war. Militant groups supported by Turkey have engaged in combat with the PYD militia in the town of Sêrekaniyê, just south of the Turkish province of Urfa in November 2012.¹⁶ While the Syrian Kurds do not control rich natural resources, are demographically dispersed, and lack mountains and powerful backers, their mobilization has triggered pan-Kurdish sentiments and strong demonstration effects among the Kurds in Turkey. In the long run, it is unreasonable to expect that the Kurds in Turkey would be satisfied with the status quo while their ethnic kin in Iraq and Syria enjoy political and cultural autonomy.¹⁷ In this regard, cooperation with Barzani offers a way for the Turkish government to compete against the PKK for the hearts and minds of the Kurds.

Öcalan: Crucial to Peace?

These electoral, political, and geopolitical factors are critical for making sense of the timing of the Turkish government's decision to seek a resolution to the Kurdish question. But, how can we make sense of the AK Party's decision to work with Öcalan in the last months of 2012? After all, the government's relations with Öcalan have reached a nadir since the intensification of the armed clashes in summer 2011. He has been kept incommunicado for most of the time since July 2011. Prime Minister Erdoğan repeatedly emphasized that he will not be released to house arrest.¹⁸ Several developments in fall 2012 contributed to a rapprochement between the imprisoned Kurdish leader and the Turkish government. First, hunger strikes that were initiated by a group of Kurdish prisoners on September 12, 2012 have brought back Öcalan to the forefront of political debates. While hundreds of prisoners and Kurdish activ-

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ists and politicians joined the strikes over time, they all heeded Öcalan call to end the strikes in late November. This act has reconsolidated the perception that the Kurdish nationalist movement will follow his authority.

Second, the AK Party has realized that Öcalan's interests are not necessarily compatible with that of the Kurdish nationalist movement. While Öcalan, who now spent fourteen years in prison, is naturally concerned about his own well-being, the Kurdish nationalist leaders are primarily interested with the well-being of their own organization.¹⁹ The way in which the hunger strikes ended crystallized this divergence of interests. While Öcalan's ability to end the strikes before any deaths occurred has contributed to his image as a peace-maker, and restored his credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of the government, this outcome has not necessarily been in the strategic interests of the insurgency. Öcalan actually helped the AK Party out of a "warden's dilemma"²⁰ by ordering an end to the acts of political sacrifice before the loss of life. Self-destructive but non-violent nature of strikes aimed to condemn the government in Kurdish public opinion similar to the Kurdish movement's framing of the Uludere bombing as a deliberate act on the part of the government.²¹ Hunger strikes deaths would strongly contribute to Kurdish nationalist mobilization and further delegitimize the government as an immoral entity who has complete disregard for Kurdish life.

Finally, the Turkish government perceives Öcalan being less demanding than the Kurdish movement's pursuit of power-sharing in the form of some sort of autonomy.²² For years, the Kurdish nationalists have cultivated a personality cult around Öcalan and argued that he represents their movement. Now the government is actually directly talking to Öcalan who may or may not consider the interests of the movement he founded. The government hopes that the Kurdish nationalists would be prisoners of their own discourse and symbols.

In this regard, an important source of uncertainty concerns the relationship between Öcalan and the Kurdish nationalist movement. How much actual control does he still enjoy over the behavior of the Kurdish insurgency?²³ While he remains the unquestioned leader of the whole Kurdish movement, Öcalan lacks control over the dynamics of violence. The insurgency can again act in ways that would demonstrate that his leadership is more symbolic than actual. In fact, a series of PKK attacks culminating in an ambush that killed 13 soldiers in July 2011 took place despite conciliatory messages delivered by

A Turkish Kurd woman is seen during the celebrations of the Kurdish new year festival Newroz in Istanbul.

AFP / Mustafa Özer



Öcalan. Moreover, the PKK leadership claims that it always maintains its right to retaliate against state attacks.²⁴ Obviously, what is portrayed as a retaliation by the PKK is perceived an act of aggression by the Turkish state. In any case, the government has not much to lose from negotiating with Öcalan. If the plan fails and violence continues despite Öcalan's public call for an end to insurgent attacks, the AK Party would squarely blame the PKK for being a warmonger. If the insurgency in fact follows Öcalan's

call, the AK Party would ensure that violence remains at low levels in the wake of the 2014 local and presidential elections.

The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Disarmament beyond the Horizon

The leadership of the Kurdish insurgency does not appear to have strong incentives to make significant compromises under the current conditions. There are no tangible benefits for the PKK leadership to consent to a deal unless they would be able to transform their military power into institutional power (e.g., running and winning office). It would be naïve to expect that they would be willing to be sidelined and sent to exile after leading an armed struggle for years.²⁵ The PKK leadership is primarily composed of middle-aged men, but there is no indication that they are ready to give-up the power they have enjoyed for decades. It is also unrealistic to expect that the insurgency will disarm and demobilize its forces in exchange for increased legality for the Kurdish language and a general amnesty. The PKK has its own organizational interests that would not be served by political reforms alone. The insurgency is incapable of any significant military gains vis-à-vis the Turkish state, but is sustainable for the foreseeable future. And that is what matters more. As long the insurgency remains feasible, meaning that it maintains its recruitment capacity, safe havens, financial resources and a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurds, there are no good reasons for the insurgent leaders to say farewell to arms.²⁶ There is a significant gap between the insurgency's capabilities and its ideological goals, but many Kurdish nationalists now believe that the historical tide is on their side.²⁷ They perceive that after the gains of both the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds in the last decade, it is now their turn to achieve self-governance. They may simply prefer to preserve their positions and hope that geopolitical and electoral developments would strengthen their bargaining position in 2014.²⁸

Furthermore, there is a widespread perception among the activists and sympathizers of the Kurdish nationalist movement that the armed struggle is not only legitimate but also effective. In the eyes of many Kurdish activists, the BDP and other legal organizations owe their existence to the legacy of the armed struggle. They believe that violence has had a transformative effect in regenerating the Kurdish nation. In fact, the government's willingness to negotiate a settlement with the insurgency reinforces the belief that the armed struggle has actually worked. Meanwhile, the rise of the PYD among the Kurds of Syria contributes to the geopolitical reach of the PKK and significantly expands its support base. In the eyes of Kurdish nationalists, the Kurds in Syria have achieved de-facto autonomy thanks to their self-defense units. According to them, a military force is essential to restoring the sovereignty of Kurds as a nation in the face of existential threats.²⁹

It can be argued that ongoing violence has huge costs for the Kurdish people. It is true that most supporters of the Kurdish nationalist movement outspokenly express their demand for peace. The conflict has huge human costs in terms of deaths, disabilities, poverty, mass arrests, and disruption of everyday activities especially for families living in conflict zones. However, there are two factors that also reduce the effectiveness of Kurdish public opinion in constraining PKK violence. Primarily, many Kurds perceive that PKK violence is a legitimate response to the existential threat posed by the Turkish state to the Kurdish people. Funerals and memorial services for killed PKK militants reinforce and collectivize this perception. As the government arrests thousands of activists, it inadvertently strengthens the identification between the Kurds and the Kurdish nationalist movement. Anger and feelings of injustice are overwhelmingly stronger than fear, which in turn lead to greater support to the Kurdish nationalist movement. Hence, it is very unrealistic to expect that the government could marginalize the Kurdish nationalist movement among the Kurds by primarily making it more costly to support the movement.

Next, the insurgency strategically chooses not to escalate its attacks and keep its demands from its constituency at modest levels. Many Kurdish cities have seen increasing levels of prosperity in the last decade as a result of sustainable growth rates achieved under the current government. Growing trade linkages with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), especially since 2007, have improved economic well-being in the Kurdish areas of Turkey. The leading Kurdish cities such as Diyarbakır and Batman are experiencing a huge real estate boom. The PKK seems to be content to receive a share from the growing economic pie rather than disrupting these activities.³⁰ The insurgency typically avoids staging attacks in the cities that would jeopardize the life of civilians and contribute to an atmosphere of insecurity.³¹ To put it bluntly, the PKK so far has not attempted to pursue a "fireball strategy" involving indiscriminate and suicide attacks against both security and civilian targets in the cities. Such a

strategy would entail huge costs, and uncertain political benefits, and likely to generate significant resentment among its constituency. At the moment, many middle class Kurds who vote for the BDP and generally support the Kurdish nationalist movement are not required to make huge sacrifices.³² Furthermore, the PKK needs only around several hundred new recruits every year to be sustainable given the current levels of warfare.³³ An increase in the attacks would mean greater sacrifices from its constituency. Consequently, it is not necessarily in the best interests of the PKK to unilaterally escalate the conflict and test the limits of the support of its constituency.

The Status Quo as an Equilibrium

It can be argued that political, electoral, and geopolitical factors discussed earlier give strong incentives to the Turkish government to a secure deal independent from the military situation. If the government does not act now, Kurdish nationalism would become less containable. The government seems to believe that it is better to negotiate from a position of strength before domestic and geopolitical developments may erode its power. This line of thinking is not compelling for two reasons. First, the AK Party's willingness to negotiate with the Kurdish nationalists does not indicate that the government is also willing to grant the core of their demands, some sort of political autonomy and liberation of Öcalan from his island prison.³⁴ Huge differences separate what the Turkish government is willing to deliver and what the Kurdish insurgency is willing to accept for disarmament. There is no sign that the government, which has been increasingly consolidating its rule, is ready to share political power with the Kurdish nationalists even at local level. In a sense, the government seeks a cheap solution to the Kurdish question not involving painful compromises such as transfer of power to Kurdish nationalists. Even a new constitution expanding political liberties and paving the way for Kurdish language education is unlikely to satisfy the Kurdish nationalist movement that primarily seeks self-governance.³⁵ Besides, Öcalan remains a highly polarizing figure despite his huge popularity among the Kurdish people. Despite his regeneration as a "messenger of peace," large sections of Turkish society oppose negotiations with Öcalan.³⁶ His transfer from İmralı to another place would inflame Turkish nationalist sentiments. Hence, the oft-repeated claim that



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he is indispensable to peace is dubious. He may be more a liability for the government in the long run, even if he appears to be an asset in the short run. And the PKK will have a strong justification to maintain its armed forces as long as he remains in captivity.

Next, the Kurdish nationalist movement has every incentive to sustain their armed forces until the moment in time when they can also negotiate from a position of strength. Right now, they are too weak to wrestle significant concessions from the Turkish government, but, as discussed above, geopolitical developments seem to be conducive to Kurdish nationalism. For the first time in history, the Kurds now have their own armed forces in all four parts of historical Kurdistan. The PKK affiliated PYD has already formed its armed forces in Syria, and PKK affiliated PJAK is gradually expanding its influence over the Kurds in Iran. It is rather delusional to expect the PKK to accept a

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disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) plan under these historical conditions. It may temporarily halt its operations but it will aim to build-up its fighting capacity in the meantime.³⁷

It should be also noted that the process may collapse even if the sides are willing to make compromises. As it is observed in many other con-

flicts, the sides may be unable to reach peace due to commitment problems caused by lack of mutual trust.³⁸ A central reason for the collapse of an earlier process was the huge differences between perceptions. While the government ensured the safety of the PKK returnees, it simply did not anticipate that they would be welcomed as war heroes by large and cheering crowds at the Habur crossing in October 2009.³⁹ The scenes of returnees in militant uniforms posing for victory provoked the Turkish nationalist public opinion and greatly undermined the government resolve to continue the process.⁴⁰ A similar issue of mistrust stalled the process in January 2013 after the murder of three Kurdish women activists in Paris. The government allowed for mass funerals in Turkey as a gesture of good will. However, the speeches delivered by the leading figures of the BDP, such as Ahmet Türk, accusing the Prime Minister for "killing Kurds" angered Erdoğan and delayed the visit of another BDP delegation to Öcalan.⁴¹ These problems will become more acute when both sides are expected to take costly and irreversible actions such as the withdrawal of PKK militants from Turkey to their bases in the KRG.⁴²

A liberal perspective may counter that strong public demand for peace would overwhelm political differences and commitment problems. In fact, an increas-

ing number of public voices transcend ethnic and political divisions and ask for reconciliation. No side wants to be seen as responsible for the coffins carrying the dead bodies of young soldiers and militants. Nonetheless, this growing peace discourse does not alter the predominant perceptions on both sides. For the Turkish government, the PKK represents a terrorist threat that endangers the security of citizens and integrity of the country. PKK violence is an aberration that disrupts the normal order of life.⁴³ For the Kurdish nationalists, the Turkish state represents an occupying power that illegitimately deprives the Kurdish nation's right to self-determination. PKK violence is a result of deep historical and political inequalities and injustices. Consequently, no Turkish politician has a hard time justifying killing PKK militants to Turkish society, and no insurgent leader has a hard time justifying killing Turkish security forces to its constituency. Furthermore, civil society in Turkey as an autonomous and mediating force remains embryonic and currently lacks the capacity and means to midwife a reconciliation process. The Kurdish question attracts increasing international interest, but no outside power has the power to impose a settlement.

This realist reading of the latest Kurdish initiative does not imply that political violence in Turkey is likely to get much worse. Despite almost three decades of the insurgency, ethnic tensions and strife at the communal level remain manageable. The Kurds continue to perceive the Turkish state as the primary source of their problems but also the locus of the solution. Voices that racialize the Kurdish identity and associate with negative traits are still not part of the Turkish mainstream. It is most likely that this pattern of limited violence with strong seasonal and geographical trends and with low civilian casualties that has characterized the Kurdish question during the AK Party years will continue. Negotiations decrease the intensity of the violence but not necessarily bring an end to it. It is very likely that the PKK would announce a temporary ceasefire, and withdraw some of its forces from Turkey until the next election period.⁴⁴ For the government, a decrease in violence will contribute to its campaigning for both the local and presidential elections of 2014 and perhaps pave the way for a new constitution it seeks. For the Kurdish movement, the government's negotiations with Öcalan will elevate the statute of the Kurdish nationalist movement and sanctify it with some degree of legitimacy it desperately seeks. ■

Endnotes

1. For analyses of the military situation in the 1990s from the opposing sides, see Ümit Özdağ, *Türk Ordusu'nun PKK Operasyonları: 1984-2007* (Istanbul: Pegasus Yayınları), pp. 102-9; Murat Karayılan, *Bir Savaşın Anatomisi: Kürdistan'da Askeri Çizgi* (Weşanen Serxwebun, 2011), sections V and VI.

2. There is no authoritative and comprehensive study of the casualties of the insurgency during the 1990s. However, reports by human rights organizations demonstrate that civilian casualties were particularly high in the early 1990s. In addition to state violence, the PKK pursued a strategy of "intimidation" with the aim of forcefully compelling the civilian population to accept its authority. For a summary of statistics from various agencies, see TBMM İnsan Haklarını İnceleme, Terör ve Şiddet Olayları Kapsamında Yaşam Hakkı İhlallerinin İncelenmesine Yönelik Kurulan Alt Komisyon Raporu (Taslak) (Ankara: 2013),

pp. 55-78. This report gives the total number of fatalities as 35, 576. For five different types of violent strategies targeted against civilians, see Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31 (Summer 2006): 49–80.

3. KIVE v.1 includes all insurgency related events with fatalities that took place in Turkey between 2000 and 2012. It does not include fatalities as a result of cross-border operations and security forces killed in accidents. It includes civilian deaths as a result of accidental mine explosions. Open sources such as major Turkish newspapers (e.g., *Hürriyet* and *Zaman*) and Kurdish nationalist media (e.g., Ajansa Nûçeyan a Firatê) are used to generate the dataset. As a rule of thumb, official Turkish sources are used to calculate security forces casualties, and insurgency sources to calculate insurgent casualties. Both sides tend to exaggerate the casualties of the other side. Compared to the 1990s, it is now more feasible to keep statistics of fatalities, as funerals are also reported by a variety of media sources. Still, KIVE v.1 may slightly underestimate the actual number of casualties given self-underreporting. For more information about KIVE v.1, contact the author.

4. Especially in 2011 and 2012, the PKK engaged in acts of kidnapping that can be classified as "selective terrorism" targeting civilians (e.g., AK Party members, teachers) working for the state. There is a little evidence that it also engages in categorical terrorism involving indiscriminate targeting of civilians. For a discussion of different forms of violence by revolutionary movements, see Jeff Goodwin, "A Theory of Categorical Terrorism," *Social Forces* 84 (June 2006): 2027-46. Like many other armed organizations, the Kurdish nationalist movement pursues a multiplicity of strategies to pursue its goals. Charles Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," *Sociological Theory* 22 (March 2004): 5-12.

5. The government claimed that the air bombing of villagers in December 2011 was an accident. The PKK did not own up the Istanbul bombing that killed 18 civilians in July 2007. The Beştaş massacre when gunmen killed 7 guards and 5 civilians in a minibus in September 2007 remains murky. The only other attack that resulted in civilian fatalities in Table 1 took place when a PKK bomb targeted a police vehicle in Güroymak in October 2011.

6. For a general treatment of the problem of spoilers in conflict resolution, see Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22 (Autumn 1997): 5-53.

7. Petty disputes escalated into communal clashes in İnegöl, a district of Bursa on July 26, 2010. A day later, PKK killed 4 police officers in Dörtöy, a district of Hatay. A group then attacked business owned by ethnic Kurds.

8. Hence, political violence in Turkey is characterized by low levels of transmissibility but also low levels of recovery. For a conceptualization of these two patterns, see Monica Duff Toft and Yuri M Zhukov, "Denial and Punishment in the North Caucasus: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Coercive Counter-Insurgency," *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (November 2012): 785-800.

9. William I. Zartman, "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in P. C. Stern and D. Druckman (eds.), *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press), pp. 226-52.

10. For instance, see Emre Peker and Yeliz Candemir, "Turkey Cabinet Shuffle Supports Kurdish Peace Talks," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2013. For an overview of human, economic and political costs of the insurgency, see Hüseyin Yayman, *Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu* Hafızası (Ankara: SETA Yayınları, 2011), p. 21.

11. The AK Party's reforms expanding the public usage of Kurdish after the 2009 elections can be also understood as responses to the Kurdish nationalists' success in the March 2009 local elections. Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden, and Nic Walker, "Fruitless Attempts? The Kurdish Initiative and Containment of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 44 (Fall 2011), pp. 103-28.

12. On December 28, 2011, Turkish jets bombed a group of smugglers from border villages mistaken them for PKK militants crossing the border near Roboski/Ortasu village of the Uludere district of Şırnak. 34 people belonging to the group were killed. Judicial investigations into the killings did not result in an indictment by the time of writing (March 2013).

13. Mehmet Laçın, "Beklenen Parti: Hür Dava Partisi," *Doğru Haber* (November 30, 2012), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://www.dogruhaber.com.tr/Haber/Beklenen-Parti-HUR-DAVA-PARTISI-59914.html>.

14. Together, the AK Party and BDP have less than 367 parliamentary seats, necessary to amend the constitution without a referendum, but more than 330 seats, necessary to call for a constitutional referendum.

15. For a comprehensive analysis of energy politics involving Iraq and the KRG, see International Crisis Group, "Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit," Middle East Report N° 120, April 19, 2012.
16. For a comprehensive study of the Syrian Kurds, see International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within Struggle," Middle East Report N° 136, January 22, 2013.
17. For an example on the effects of the gains of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria on the expectations of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, see Veysi Sarısozen, "Kürtlülüğü İnkâr için Türklülüğü İnkâr Edenler," *Özgür Gündem*, February 17, 2013.
18. In a report published just after the 2011 elections, veteran journalist Cengiz Çandar suggested that Öcalan's release to house arrest or significant improvements in his detention conditions is central to the success of the resolution of the conflict. *Dağdan İnış-PKK Nasıl Silah Bırakır?* (İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, 2011), pp. 88-9. Yet Erdoğan unequivocally declared that there will be no house arrest for Öcalan during the AK Party rule. "Öcalan'a Ev Hapsi İddiasına Yanıt," *Hürriyet*, January 6, 2013.
19. Apparently, Öcalan, who was born in 1948, expressed his concerns with old-age and death to three BDP parliamentarians who visited him on February 23, 2013. Reported by *Sabah*, February 25, 2013. Like many other armed organizations, the PKK is primarily interested in ensuring its self-survival. Güneş Murat Tezcür, "When Democratization Radicalizes? The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey," *Journal of Peace Research* 47 (November 2010): 775-89.
20. According to K. M. Fierke, the warden's dilemma entails a relationship between a norm setting entity and a weaker opposition. Given the power asymmetry, the opposition can challenge the authority of the ruling entity by engaging in non-violent acts of political sacrifice, such as hunger strikes. The ruling entity either concedes or risks appearing immoral and its legitimacy being undermined in the general public opinion. See her *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
21. For instance, see Erdal Er, "Roboski'yi Sahipsiz Bırakmayın," *Özgür Gündem*, December 20, 2012. .
22. According to leaked transcripts of his meeting with three BDP parliamentarians on February 23, 2013, Öcalan actually seems content with the government's promise of a new constitution. His self-delusions and conspiracy mind-set aside, he appears to work with the government to halt violence. Namık Durukan, "İmralı Zabıtları," *Milliyet*, February 28, 2013.
23. In a series of interviews, a range of PKK commanders all expressed their loyalty to Öcalan's leadership. Yet, they also claimed that the AK Party government is not pursuing an agreeable solution and emphatically stated that they are ready to continue fighting in 2013. For example, see the interview with Nüredin Sofi, the commander of *Hêzên Parastina Gel* (HPG), the armed forces of the PKK, "Sofi: Em di Fermana Rêber Apo de Ne," ANF, (February 21, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://ku.firatnews.com/news/cihan/sofi-em-di-fermana-reber-apo-de-ne.htm>. He argues that the Turkish state continues its attacks and 2013 will be a difficult year.
24. "Karayılan: İşgal Kuvvetisiniz, Burası Bizim Ülkemiz," ANF, (January 23, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://www.firatnews.com/news/guncel/karayilan-ısgal-kuvvetisiniz-burasi-bizim-ulkemiz.htm>. Obviously, what is portrayed as a retaliation by the PKK is perceived an act of aggression by the Turkish state.
25. Karayılan repeatedly states that they will never consent to exile. "Karayılan'dan Erdoğan'a: Asıl Siz Çekin Gidin Ülkemizden," ANF, (January 1, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://www.firatnews.com/news/guncel/karayilandan-erdodana-asyl-siz-cekın-gıdın-ulkemizden.htm>.
26. For a discussion of the factors conducive to civil wars and conflict resolution, see Thomas Ohlson, "Understanding Causes of War and Peace," *European Journal of International Relations* 14 (March 2008): 133-60.
27. An article by one of the former leaders of KAWA, a pre-1980 Kurdish nationalist organization, suggests that the Turkish government seeks to resolve the Kurdish question with minimum concessions as it realizes that the Kurdish nationalism is being a transformative force in the Middle Eastern politics. Cemil Gündoğan, "Devlet Neden Öcalan'la Neden Oturdu?" *Gelawej* (March 2, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://gelawej.net/index.php/cemil-gundogan/8961-2013-03-02-19-59-32.html>.
28. In fact, this is what Karayılan implied after meeting with the BDP delegation who visited Öcalan on February 23. See "Karayılan: Karar Almamız Kolay Değil," ANF, (March 6, 2013), retrieved March 9, 2013, from <http://firatnews.com/news/kurdistan/karayilan-karar-almamız-kolay-değil.htm>.

29. These observations are based on my extensive talks with hardcore supporters of the Kurdish nationalist movement in late 2012 and early 2013.
3. The PKK occasionally targets contractors working on state projects. The widespread perception in the region is that the PKK opts for coercion only when its demands for a cut are not met by the contractors.
31. The insurgency is concerned about its image in the eyes of ordinary Kurds. It either denies its responsibility for or condemns attacks resulting in civilian casualties. A PKK mine killed four civilians including Kurdish activists on August 2, 2010. Four months later, HPG declared that two militants who set the mine were expelled from the ranks and received long prison sentences. After a bomb set by the insurgents targeting the police in Şemdinli killed two civilians in November 2012, HPG announced that it would punish the perpetrators.
32. Only in few places, such as Yüksekova and Cizre, street demonstrations and widespread boycotts are frequent occurrences that disrupt economic transactions.
33. Since the PKK has also widespread recruitment networks also in Europe, Syria and Iran, the actual number of people that need to be recruited from Turkey is lower.
34. For PKK's core demands, see "Karayılan: Ne Pêwîst e Hevdîtin bi me re Bikin," ANF, (February 12, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://ku.firatajans.com/news/rojane/karayilan-ne-pewist-e-hevditin-bi-me-re-bikin.htm>
35. The much touted fourth judicial reform package that was sent to the parliament in February is not likely to result in the release of most Kurdish political prisoners who are accused of being members of terrorist organization. Emel Gülcan, "4. Yargı Paketi Özgürlüğe Açılmıyor" *Bianet.org*, (February 26, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/144660-4-yargi-paketi-yeterli-mi>.
36. "Her İki Kişiden Biri," *Vatan*, February 25, 2013.
37. Apparently even Öcalan does not consider disarmament as an option in the near future. He talks about building up the guerilla forces after withdrawal from Turkey and the option of "50,000 strong people's war" if the government does not meet his demands. Durukan, "İmralı Zabitleri."
38. For a classical treatment of the issue, see Barbara Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51 (Summer 1997): 335-64. PKK leadership has repeatedly expressed suspicion about the intentions of the AK Party government. For instance, "Kalkan: Ateşkes Arayanlar Çözüm Projesiyle Gelsinler," ANF, (February 23, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, <http://www.firatnews.com/news/kurdistan/kalkan-ateskes-arayanlar-cozum-projesiyle-gelsin.htm>.
39. A total of 34 individuals entered Turkey through the Habur Crossing on October 19, 2009. All of them were put on trial. By June 2011, 10 of them were in prison and 24 of them already left Turkey. Çandar, *Dağdan İniş*, p. 73.
40. Support for the initiative from the AK Party's constituency was low. Murat Somer and Evangelos G. Liaras, "Turkey's New Kurdish Opening: Religious versus Secular Values," *Middle East Policy* XVII (Summer 2010): 152-65.
41. "Tarih Affetmez," *Radikal*, February 2, 2013.
42. PKK leaders claim that they suffer heavy casualties even during ceasefire periods. See Erdal Er, "Dêsim: Gerîla Paşve Naçe, dê Pêşve Biçe," ANF, (February 17, 2013), retrieved March 5, 2013, from <http://ku.firatajans.com/news/cihan/dersim-gerila-pasve-nace-de-pesve-bice.htm>. The PKK withdrawal following Öcalan's call for an end to the armed struggle was particularly costly for the insurgency. See Karayılan, *Bir Savaşın Anatomisi*, pp. 352-3. At the same time, Prime Minister Erdoğan promised that the Turkish state would not attack withdrawing militants. "PKK Çekilirken Vurmuyuz," *Hürriyet*, January 11, 2013.
43. As Turk neatly states, "terrorism...[is]... conscious efforts to manipulate perceptions to promote certain interests at the expense of others." Austin T. Turk, "Sociology of Terrorism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 271-286.
44. It is actually very difficult to determine if the PKK actually orders a complete withdrawal as some of its fighters may simply remain dormant or mix with the civilians. Furthermore, potential for clashes remain even in the wake of a PKK withdrawal given the treacherous geography of the Turkish-Iraqi border zone.