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**Research Report**

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## Erdoğan and Öcalan Begin Talks

A Paradigm Shift in Turkey's Kurdish Policy and a New Strategy of the PKK

*Kevin Matthees and Günter Seufert*

The ceasefire between the Turkish government and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is more than just a new attempt by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's administration to bring an end to the asymmetric war that has been waged for nearly 30 years in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish south-east. For the first time, the Turkish government has demonstrated its willingness to recognise PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned since 1999, as the chief negotiator for the Kurdish side. Although the negotiations are being held as unofficial talks under the aegis of the Turkish intelligence services (MIT), the prime minister himself and members of his cabinet have directly commented on their progress. Of no less significance are the changes on the part of the Kurdish movement. Under Öcalan's influence, representatives of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) have backed away from seeking to establish a Kurdish national state. Öcalan himself has even been voicing doubts about the whole idea of the nation state as such. Thus, the outlines of a new vision for Turkey and for the country's future role in the Middle East, shared by the Turkish government and the militant Kurdish opposition, are beginning to emerge.

After month-long negotiations with the Turkish intelligence services, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, marked the start of the Kurdish New Year on 21 March 2013 with a call for an end to the armed insurrection. On the very same day, Murat Karayılan, commander of the armed wing of the party, ordered an indefinite ceasefire. In exchange, the Turkish air force has since suspended its strikes on PKK positions in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had stated several times that the Turkish military

would not take advantage of a truce to carry out attacks against PKK fighters withdrawing from Turkish territory to northern Iraq and Syria. This practically amounts to an acceptance of the PKK's long-standing demand for a mutual ceasefire.

A series of confidence-building measures had preceded this change in policy. On 13 March 2013, armed PKK militants in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq near the Turkish border had released eight Turkish civil servants, some of whom had been held captive for more than one and a half years. It seems that the Turkish intelligence ser-

vice had been engaged in secret talks with Öcalan on behalf of the government since as early as November 2012. With Ankara's blessing, two parliament members from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) had visited Öcalan in early January 2013 at the high-security prison on the island of İmralı, where he is being held. A second BDP delegation that had met with Öcalan on 23 February delivered letters from him to top officials of the BDP, to the current PKK military leadership in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq, as well as to the PKK's inner circle of leaders in Europe. In these dispatches, Öcalan explained his decision to halt the armed campaign, specified the reforms he expected from the Turkish state and outlined the steps to be taken in the withdrawal of PKK militants from Turkey. After receiving responses from the BDP as well as from PKK leaders in northern Iraq and Europe, on 21 March Öcalan called for an end to the fighting.

The peace process did suffer a setback, however, in early April. Erdoğan pressed for the PKK fighters to lay down their weapons and leave Turkey whilst at the same time refusing to seek parliamentary approval for his policy, as demanded by the Kurdish side. The government wants to prevent the PKK from gaining legitimacy as a result of the negotiations. Yet it will not be possible to keep this from happening. In an effort to build public support for the initiative, the government has established a "council of the wise" consisting of 63 prominent public figures, which is set to begin its work in the coming days.

The peace plan proposed by Öcalan requires armed militants to withdraw from Turkey to bases in northern Iraq and Syria. The pull-back is to be overseen by parliament and monitored by civil society organisations. At the same time, Turkey is supposed to initiate confidence-building measures like setting up a truth-finding commission to address past human rights violations and political murders in the Kurdish region. Once PKK militants have

completed their withdrawal by early November, Turkey is supposed to change laws that exclude Kurds from politics and criminalise Kurdish political positions. This should include, for instance, lowering the 10-percent threshold for parliamentary representation to a level that is more in line with the standard European practice, formulating a clearer – and more restricted – definition of terrorism in both the counter-terrorism law and the penal code, as well as releasing political prisoners. Local authorities should receive more powers and in regions with significant Kurdish populations, native language instruction should be provided and Kurdish declared the second official language. These reforms should find their symbolic expression in the removal of references to "Turkishness" and thus ethnic criteria from the Constitution's definition of citizenship. Once the unchecked pursuit of Kurdish political interests, including those of former PKK members, is possible within the civil-political process, the PKK will, according to Öcalan's roadmap, lay down its arms for good.

One of the government's first reactions to the plan was to admonish the PKK militants to complete their withdrawal by late June or, at the very latest, early November when budget deliberations begin.

This peace plan of the PKK leader basically represents a slightly watered-down version of the measures that he already proposed in 2009. So why is the Turkish government now embracing a course of action that it rejected in the past?

### **Domestic policy: an about-face on central convictions and positions**

Many observers have answered this question by saying that Prime Minister Erdoğan seeks to move Turkey to a presidential system of government and is therefore altering the constitution for just this purpose, with the ultimate aim of becoming the country's first president with expanded powers in August 2014. They have pointed out that as his party lacks the qualified

majority needed to make changes to the charter on its own, Erdoğan needs the support of the pro-Kurdish BDP and is promising to give the Kurds greater local autonomy in return.

Yet as accurate as this description of Erdoğan's personal motivations may be, it alone cannot explain the current strategic shift. Too great is the risk that Erdoğan runs if his initiative fails; too deeply ingrained are the taboos that this new policy challenges.

Through the present negotiations with the PKK, the government has implicitly turned against its previously held notion that a 30-year armed guerilla movement could be permanently defeated and the Kurdish problem solved by military means alone. The PKK consisted of only around 150 recruits when it began to mount attacks in 1984. It is assumed that 1,500 to 2,000 militants are active in Turkey today. Öcalan also claims that the PKK has 10,000 militants in northern Iraq, 40,000 in Iran and another 50,000 in Syria. After three decades of hostilities and some 40,000 lost lives, Ankara has come to the conclusion that the PKK would still be a force to be reckoned with even if it succeeded in reducing the movement to its original size.

The resumption of negotiations also testifies to the dwindling confidence of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in its ability to maintain strong support from broad segments of the Kurdish electorate. Erdoğan's AKP may have garnered roughly half of all votes cast throughout the predominantly Kurdish populated regions in the last two parliamentary elections, but support within its base there has experienced a sharp collapse in the past few years. For the first time, explicitly Kurdish-Islamic parties have been formed, which from now on will compete with the AKP for the votes of pious Kurds. On top of that, the secular ideology of Kurdish nationalism is spreading among the religious-leaning Kurdish population that has normally voted for the AKP. Ankara's negotiations with the PKK are a clear sign that the gov-

ernment is aware of the limited reach of its former military and political strategy of marginalising the PKK. The present decision to change course can only be understood against this backdrop, which compels Turkey to fundamentally revise its previous positions on the Kurdish conflict as well as its very conception of itself.

This explains why Ankara is allowing the legal pro-Kurdish BDP to take part in the current talks the government is conducting with Öcalan and the PKK, thus recognising the BDP as the official political arm of the PKK. It was precisely the refusal to make this concession that led to eight pro-Kurdish parties being either outlawed or forced to dissolve over the last 21 years.

The second taboo that has been broken concerns Öcalan himself. In the past 30 years he was cast as the arch enemy of the Turkish people and nation. To negotiate with him means crossing a psychological barrier – probably the most emphatically drawn red line of the former Kurdish policy. Yet today the government is committed to having Öcalan, previously vilified as the head terrorist, serve as the main link between the BDP and PKK, thus recognising him as representative of the Kurdish national movement. What is more, by entering into negotiations with Öcalan and the PKK, the government implicitly accepts the idea that the sovereign state of Turkey is made up of two peoples – the Turks and the Kurds.

As all of this represents a radical departure from earlier views, it has produced a strong reaction among nationalist opposition parties in Parliament. The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has been organising demonstrations in the western part of the country commemorating the founding of the Republic of Turkey as a state of the Turks and branding the peace negotiations as a step toward the dissolution of this same state. The MHP has accused Erdoğan of treason and threatened to bring him to trial before the supreme criminal tribunal.

The secularist Republican People's Party (CHP), which leads the opposition, is also

not in favour of involving Öcalan in the negotiations. In the parliamentary commission that has been drafting a new constitution since May 2012, both parties have been putting up stiff resistance to any revisions that would alter the ethnically defined concept of citizenship and to the use of Kurdish as a language of instruction in schools, thereby underscoring their rejection of the entire peace plan.

The government's decision to work with the PKK is also highly controversial among the population. A survey in Istanbul – which provides a good picture of Turkey as a whole because its residents come from all parts of Anatolia and represent different social segments – showed that a majority of respondents were opposed to negotiations with Öcalan; only a fourth welcomed the talks. This policy even fails to find support among the majority of AKP voters.

Erdoğan is taking a significant risk by letting Öcalan participate in the negotiations with the PKK. The goal of securing domestic peace does not sufficiently explain why this step was taken. In fact, foreign policy challenges and opportunities have played a crucial role in bringing about this change of course.

### **The Syria factor**

It was in Syria that the so-called new foreign policy pursued by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu hit the rocks for the first time. Syria had been the poster child for the strategy of economic penetration and its corollary of countries in the region forging strong political links with Turkey – which is seeking to establish itself as the new central actor in the Middle East. Some of the measures taken toward this goal included regular government consultations, military and cultural collaboration with Damascus as well as free trade agreements and the mutual lifting of visa requirements with Damascus, Amman and Beirut. Before civil war broke out in Syria, Ankara had believed that the upheavals in the Arab world would increase Turkey's

attractiveness in the region. Bashar al-Assad's refusal to implement reforms, however, made clear just how little influence Turkey retained over Syria. Now we may even see an erosion of the common ground that initially existed between Ankara and Washington concerning support for the Syrian opposition. Unlike the United States, Turkey has been advocating for some time the creation of no-fly zones and humanitarian corridors, in other words, for military measures to be carried out against Assad. Also in contrast to the United States, Turkey rejects negotiations with the regime on principle. Moreover, Ankara has given little consideration to the dangers associated with weapons financed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar falling into the hands of radical Islamic groups.

Turkey's cooperation with the Sunni powers Saudi Arabia and Qatar on Syria has also resulted in worsening its rift with Shiite-controlled Iraq and in increasing tensions with Shiite Iran. Both of these countries support Assad. Davutoğlu's plan for Turkey becoming the decisive power in the Middle East through closer ties with Syria has failed for the time being.

Yet the developments in Syria have not only proved to be a hurdle to Turkey's regional ambitions – they have once again made Ankara aware that the Kurdish policy it has pursued so far is unsustainable. No natural border divides Turkish and Syrian Kurds, which have close historical and family ties. The PKK has been recruiting Kurdish youth from Syria for two decades. The Syrian regime's retreat from the border region with Turkey has enabled Kurds living in northern Syria to take control of local government in large parts of their population centres. In the usual rhetoric, the Turkish government initially declared in summer 2012 that they would not tolerate any form of Kurdish self-government in Syria and threatened with military intervention. It then focused on persuading Masud Barzani, president of the federal Kurdish state in northern Iraq, to use his influence to push the Syrian Kurds in a

direction favourable to Ankara's interests. But the Kurdish National Council, a coalition of twelve smaller parties founded in 2011 under the patronage of Barzani, has not proven capable of altering the dominant role of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) among Syrian Kurds.

The PYD shares the same ideology as the PKK and regards Öcalan as its intellectual mentor. After Iraq, Syria is the second country in the region whose ongoing disintegration is turning Turkey's Kurdish problem into a regional and even international issue – one that cannot be resolved with the traditional Turkish-nationalist policy. Unlike the Kurds in northern Iraq, the Syrian Kurds lack a single strong figure and are closely aligned with the PKK leader.

### **The Iraq factor**

In the run-up to the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in Turkey both the advocates and opponents of joining the US-led "coalition of the willing" were agreed that the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq should be avoided at all costs. Today, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil is Turkey's most important ally in the region. For the (Sunni) Kurds in Iraq, close ties with Turkey are the best hope they have of maintaining their autonomy from the central government in Baghdad now the US has pulled out of the country. Erbil and Baghdad are at loggerheads over the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, the exact borders of the Kurdish settlement area, and the Kurdish regional government's trade and defence policy competences. They are also divided on the issue of Syria.

Turkey's U-turn in its policy on Erbil was initially due to US pressure and its expectations that Turkey should help secure the stability of Iraq. An additional factor was the increasing need to restrict the PKK's influence in northern Iraq. Today, economic cooperation is thriving between Ankara and Erbil. Between 2004 and 2011, the income per capita in Kurdish northern Iraq rocketed from around \$300 to around \$4,500.

This new wealth has unleashed a veritable consumer frenzy, which has been particularly profitable for Turkey. Around 80 percent of the food and clothing bought by the Kurds in northern Iraq comes from Turkey, and around 60 percent of all the foreign companies registered in the region are Turkish. In 2011 no less than 1,200 Turkish companies were active in Iraq, including 300 construction and civil engineering companies, and were developing whole new districts in the city of Erbil.

Today, Iraq is Turkey's second largest export destination after Germany, with growth averaging 18 percent in the first eleven months of 2012.

Impressive as these figures are, the region's economic prospects for the future are even more significant. Northern Iraq has the energy resources that Turkey lacks. Gas imports from northern Iraq would give Ankara more leeway to negotiate with Russia, on whose supplies it is heavily dependent. Importing oil from Iraq would free Turkey from its awkward position between Iran, its main oil supplier, and the US, its strategic ally. It is not without cause that the Turkish government is talking about two "compatible economies" and pressing for economic integration between the two countries.

The Kurdish Regional Government's minister of trade and industry has already told Turkish journalists that the region's gas reserves could supply Turkey with enough gas for 300 years, based on today's consumption of 40 billion cubic metres per year.

Despite opposition from Baghdad, Erbil has signed exploration and production agreements with companies like Gazprom, Total and Exxon Mobil. The Kurdish Regional Government is also touting with the huge oil deposits in Kirkuk province (around 7% of the world's oil reserves), even though the status of the province is far from clear.

Turkey has not been standing by idly either. In a bid to better equip itself in the dash for the fossil fuel reserves in Iraqi

Kurdistan, Ankara has reorganised the division of tasks between its three major state-owned exploration, production and distribution companies, TPAO, TPİC and BOTAŞ, and has increased their capital and production capacity.

The Iraqi Kurds are thus becoming a key factor in Turkey's economic future. Even now the boom in northern Iraq is having a positive economic impact on the under-developed Kurdish provinces in south-eastern Turkey.

### **Cross-border “threat” and “potential”**

The Syrian-Kurdish “threat” and the Iraqi-Kurdish future potential are both cross-border in nature. Whereas the Syrian “threat” shows Turkey's limited options to shield itself against undesirable developments outside its territory, the Turkish-Iraqi border stands in the way of complete integration of the economies of Turkey and Iraqi-Kurdistan. Both “threat” and “potential” are closely linked with the existence of the Kurds in Turkey. From a wider perspective, the scattered Kurdish minorities in Turkey, Iraq and Syria and the cross-border integration of these nations' economies reveals the dysfunctionality of existing nation-states and their current borders.

Indeed, the real motive behind the Turkish government's decision to risk negotiating with Öcalan is to counter this dysfunctionality of the (Turkish) nation-state. It is based on a new vision of the Turkish Republic and its relationship to the Kurds of the region.

Needless to say, moves to solve the Turkish-Kurdish problem would lessen the “threat” from Syria and raise the prospects of tapping the economic potential of northern Iraq. There is also consensus that in order to solve the Turkish-Kurdish problem, the Turkish nation state must revise its ideology and reform its administration. Today Erdoğan and Öcalan share a common vision which stands out in that both subscribe to the need to actively reshape the

Turkish nation-state and wish to transform their concept into a programme aimed at establishing a new type of statehood in the Near East. In this quest they are aligned with the foreign policy programme of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

### **The end of “Sykes-Picot” and the authoritarian nation states of the Middle East**

In an interview on 5 March 2013 in pro-government newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, Davutoğlu directly linked the search for a settlement with the PKK with the approaching end of the Sykes-Picot era in the Middle East. The term refers to the agreement concluded by France and the United Kingdom in 1916 that provided the basis for defining the borders of Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and south-eastern Turkey. According to Davutoğlu, the European powers intentionally drew the borders between the region's different Muslim peoples in a way that served their own interests and made bloody conflicts between the various groups inevitable. He said that it was now time to rethink the artificial borders that have separated the peoples of one shared civilisation for so long. He went on to say that the region's history would not allow for such geographical borders and that modern Turkey would put an end to this period in which its fate and that of the Middle East's was determined by foreign powers. Davutoğlu did not neglect to add that existing borders would be accepted. However, according to opinions from his circle of political associates, it is possible that five to ten years down the line, the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria could become part of an entirely restructured federalised Turkey.

In fact, the idea of joining northern Iraq to Turkey is not new. When Saddam Hussein was driven out of Kuwait in the early 1990s, Turkish President Turgut Özal toyed with the idea of Turkey forming a federation with the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, under the proviso that the Turkish

statehood would remain unchanged. Özal was, in fact, drawing on a position that has existed in Turkey since its very foundation as a republic. After World War I when the Muslim organisations in the Anatolia region signed the “National Pact” (Misak-ı Milli) and joined together in a freedom movement to liberate themselves from their European occupiers, Mosul province was also involved and was to become part of the new state.

In his declaration on 21 March 2013, Abdullah Öcalan explicitly referred to this “National Pact”, which was jointly concluded by the Turks and Kurds of the Ottoman Empire. Öcalan called on the “Kurds, Turkomans, Assyrians and Arabs who are separated despite the National Pact and today have been condemned to live ... in conflict with one another within the Syrian and Iraqi Arab Republic” to show solidarity with one another. Like Davutoğlu, Öcalan is not referring to ethnic or religious solidarity here, but a solidarity based on a common history and civilisation. Öcalan was also speaking in a very similar vein to Davutoğlu when he said that it was time to move beyond the authoritarian politics of the last 100 years, which negated ethnic and religious differences and assimilated people by force. He said that in the early 1920s Turks and Kurds fought side by side for the freedom of Turkey, and that today Turks and Kurds represented “the main strategic powers in the Middle East”. He called on them to play a leading role in defining the new democratic era in the region. Öcalan also holds “the imperialists” responsible for establishing authoritarian nation states in the Middle East and, like Davutoğlu, does not fail to point out the two peoples’ shared one-thousand-year history “under the banner of Islam”.

### **World view, strategy and tactics**

To make it possible to found a secular Turkish nation at all, Kemalism, the state ideology of the Republic of Turkey, spe-

cifically excluded pious Muslims and other ethnic groups, notably the Kurds, from the political process. Erdoğan’s AKP represents the integration of pious Muslims into the country’s political and economic elite. This process has been flanked by criticism of the nation state and an idealisation of the cultural diversity of the Ottoman Empire. It thus stands to reason that the settlement with the Kurds is being considered and legitimised within these same parameters, which have become firmly established in Turkey. In this respect, the Kurdish settlement complements Davutoğlu’s concept of a Turkey that is plural in ethnic terms and Muslim dominated in terms of religion, and which sees itself as the central power in the region. This concept is a regional version of global developments, which are leading to a critical re-evaluation of the nation state and its political and economic premises all over the world. It then also becomes necessary to redefine the demos in a way that is not based on ethnic distinctions. New common ground must be found, and thus the references to a shared history, civilisation and religion are not altogether surprising.

At the domestic policy level, this solution to the problem of the Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds seems to be the only realistic option at the present time. The majority of the Turkish population, with its strong sense of nationalistic pride, will only support a solution to the Kurdish problem that promises increased power and economic advantages for Turkey. For the PKK, this kind of solution allows it to do more than just save face after 30 years of fighting and gives it a chance to share power. For the Kurdish population in Turkey, it opens up the prospect of an end to the war and of economic growth. With regard to regional policy, this “alliance” of the Turkish and Iraqi Kurds with Turkey (despite all the rhetoric about Islam) provides a Sunni-secular counterweight to the Shiite arc of Iran, Syria and the Lebanese Hezbollah. A significant number of observers in Turkey also see a connection between the peace plan and Israel’s recent apology for killing



Turkish citizens during the attack on the Gaza aid flotilla in June 2010.

However, Turkish and Kurdish nationalism could still shatter this common vision of the Republic of Turkey and its previous greatest foe, the PKK. Erdoğan is therefore remaining as vague as possible about the concessions he is actually prepared to make once the PKK fighters have withdrawn. For the same reason, Öcalan, the PKK and the BDP are showing unprecedented moderation. Nonetheless, the PKK leadership in the Qandil mountains and in Europe is insisting that Öcalan's prison conditions be improved as soon as possible. They say it is necessary for the founder of the PKK to be able to contact all its branches at any time in order to convince them of his new strategy.

That is just one of the stumbling stones on the path to success. If the current process fails, we will see new and harder battles, as no alternative concepts or considerations are in sight. The skirmishes in recent months between the Arab-Sunni groups supported by Turkey and Syrian-Kurdish PYD fighters show that sooner or later this conflict will also spread to Syria and create yet another war front there. This would also endanger Turkey's good relations to northern Iraq, which would in turn open the doors to an expansion of Iran's influence in the region.

European politicians should therefore do everything in their power to support the negotiation process, even if its success would put an end to all discussions about Turkey becoming a member of the European Union.

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