Turkey's Kurdish Conflict: Pathways to Progress

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, within the context of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. What progress has been made since the election of the ruling AK Party and the creation of a Democratic Opening in Turkey? What remains to be done for a long-lasting solution to the conflict to occur? In examining the various factors at play in the conflict, the reasons for the failure to achieve a long-term solution, despite opportunities presenting themselves, are considered. It is argued that the "classic approach" to the conflict that has been consistently applied by successive Turkish administrations has not been successful, and alternative approaches are suggested. While a number of obstacles stand in the way of progress, it is possible to overcome these, if a political solution is applied to this political problem. Addressing the conflict by military means will not lead to a sustainable resolution and non-violent, democratic means of resolution must therefore be found in order to pave the way for long-lasting peace in Turkey.

The Kurdish conflict in Turkey, what has become known as the "Kurdish Question", has deep historical and cultural roots which can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire and its demise. Efforts by the Kurds in the broader region, which encompasses the Kurdish populations in Syria, Iran and Iraq, to move towards self-determination, political representation, freedom from discrimination, and recognition of their identity as an ethnic group, have continuously been marred by oppression and violence.[1] Undoubtedly, the complex and divergent attitudes towards the Kurds, their demands and their situation have all delayed progress and impeded the achievement of a satisfactory solution. Attempts to meet calls for Kurdish autonomy and self-determination within existing states and political structures have differed and

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changed over time, further hindering the possibility for any real and sustained positive outcomes.[2]

This paper will examine the various factors at play in the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, and will consider the reasons for the failure to achieve a long-term solution, despite major opportunities presenting themselves in recent years in the form of elections, leaked records of secret talks between the state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the beginnings of a new, widely supported, initiative for change. Part one provides an overview of what can be termed the "classic approach" to the conflict by successive Turkish ad-ministrations, part two considers the initiative currently underway as well as the remaining obstacles, and part three presents some options that should be explored if the resolution of the increasingly violent Kurdish conflict in Turkey is to be a real and feasible possibility. The paper proposes that addressing the conflict by military means will not lead to a sustainable resolution and advocates that a po-litical solution to this complex and political problem must therefore be found in order to lay the foundation for long-lasting peace and democracy in Turkey.

> Since the 1920s, the political and social attitudes of Turkey's successive governments towards Kurdish demands and interests have been marked by denial, intolerance and marginalization

The "Classic Approach" to the Kurdish Question: Old Limitations and New Signs of Change

The Turkish state's "classic approach" to the Kurdish Question has historically been one of military intervention, resulting in serious human rights abuses, vio-lent conduct and killings, and leading to an ongoing conflict between the state and the PKK.[3] Since the 1920s, the political and social attitudes of Turkey's suc-cessive governments towards Kurdish demands and interests have been marked by denial, intolerance and marginalization. The Kurds, as Turkey's largest mi-nority group,[4] have presented what is perceived as the greatest threat to the creation of a homogenous Turkish nation-state. The successive strategies and approaches of the state, although in variance with international law on the issue,[5] have thus denied the existence of the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group within the country's diverse population, and the pursuit of an official policy of "Turkifica-tion" and assimilation[6] has resulted in a protracted armed conflict.

Policies pursued since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, which draw on the Kemalist ideology in their attempts to build a national Turkish identity and society, have clearly failed in resolving the Kurdish Question. Calls

for an acknowledgement of Kurdish human rights, and in particular civil and political interests, have been dismissed and attempts to ethnically, culturally and linguistically unify all groups within Turkey have continued while the denial of basic human rights to the Kurds has exacerbated the conflict. Over recent decades Turkey's approach, in the repression, violence and human rights violations experienced, has been mirrored in other Kurdish-inhabited regions, including Syria, Iran and Iraq (under Saddam Hussein).[7] In Turkey, the suppression of revolts, forcible displacement, the criminalization of language and culture, and the arbitrary imprisonment of Kurds have amounted to a blanket denial of the Kurdish Question, and have furthermore established a distinct taboo around the Kurdish minority in both Turkish politics and within society as a whole.[8]

The approach of successive Turkish administrations to the Kurdish issue has resulted in Turkey's Kurds becoming increasingly alienated and disenfranchised. Protracted tensions and increased fighting in Kurdish regions have become synonymous with the Kurdish Question and point to an underlying chasm in Turkish society. The question of whether and how the conflict in Turkey can be resolved thus continues to be of paramount importance.

Despite the ongoing violence in Turkey, claims of progress and of moves towards peace building and democratic advancement have been made by the current ruling party since its election in 2002. The AK Party government has in many ways been more pro-active than any previous government, not least by acknowledging that there are issues to be addressed. However, the relentless nature of the conflict and the hardening of public positions on both sides demonstrates the grave failures of these changes in policy and highlights a pressing need for greater action and a renewal of the commitment expressed in 2005 to resolve the Kurdish problem through democracy.[9] Despite what can be described as a change of approach, with some clear progress being advanced by the government, as discussed below, the mass arrests of politicians, academics, journalists and civil society leaders as part of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) and similar operations, demonstrate, perhaps most pertinently of all, that some key challenges to the progress of any initiative for change still remain within Turkey, and point to inconsistency in the government's commitment to Kurdish rights. That said, significant efforts have been made, the most important of which are highlighted in the following section.

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A Break with the Past?

Since its election in 2002, the AK Party government has expressed what it claims to be a genuine commitment to solving the Kurdish Question. Historically, Turkey has faced a number of difficulties with regard to old state structures that have posed serious threats to progress. The military has played a large role in Turkish politics, for example by sometimes hampering democratic advancement considerably. Today, the government claims to be in control of all state institutions, including the army, and it is hoped that progress with regards to the Kurdish conflict can be accelerated and the polarization within the country reduced as a result of this, making way for further change.[10] Without the difficulties of the past constraining the government, opportunities for change and progress are readily available, and as such, must be embraced. The current government has seemed willing to reassess previous approaches and attempt a level of inclusion and integration of the Kurds into the political, economic and social structure and system in Turkey.[11] The allowing of broadcasting in the Kurdish language in the national media, for example, can be said to constitute a real and substantive step that has been taken by the state, and signifies a marked change in policy. This break with the old, and the outcomes it has produced thus far, has met with mixed response. While the recognition of the Kurdish Question represents an important stride in the right direction, the actual implementation and realization of substantive change has remained fragmented, with the conflict showing no signs of subsiding. Yet a change in outlook by the current government is, however small, undeniable and should be seen as a first step towards a possible solution.

One of the main steps taken by the government, which hints at a relinquishment of past attitudes and a move towards a change in stance, is its 2009 proposal of a much publicized initiative towards a solution of the Kurdish Question, initially named the "National Unity and Brotherhood Project" and now widely referred to as the "Democratic Opening" or the "Kurdish Opening". This initiative centers on a discussion of a new, more democratic constitution in Turkey, which would incorporate the protection of minorities and the promotion of civil liberties.[12] This proposal by the government illustrates a significant rethinking

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and, to a large extent, a break with the previous classical approach towards the Kurdish Question in Turkey, mainly through its full and official recognition. The acknowledgement of the Kurdish Question, by way of this initiative, may be seen as the most progressive outcome of any change in approach in state policy so far, and it should be emphasized that this has the potential to not only benefit Kurds but Turkish society as a whole.

Yet despite initial optimism that the Democratic Opening might allow the Kurds to gradually begin to extend their basic rights and eventually reach a certain degree of freedom of cultural and political expression within the boundaries of the existing political structures in Turkey, the progress made thus far has been limited. The initial momentum behind the Democratic Opening appears to have waned since 2009 and a reformed constitution, although under discussion, has yet to be drafted. During its creation, the Democratic Opening created a new sense of hope in the public in Turkey. It was widely perceived that the move represented a step towards dialogue, and that it would include all sides as well as the public. The government received overwhelming support across the political spectrum and throughout civil society for this initiative. In addition, in the September 12, 2010 referendum, 58 percent of voters in Turkey voted in favor of the proposed constitutional changes, the majority of which involved taking democratic steps.[13]

In addition to any positive steps initiated by the government, some important changes have occurred more generally within the political landscape. Most notably these include the representation of Kurdish issues and interests in Turkey's political system and electoral process through the BDP (the Peace and Democracy Party). This recent representation of Kurds in Turkey's political system can be said to be more *in spite of* than *as a result of* the state's stance, and is in fact as a result of independent members of the parliament receiving BDP backing rather than of any direct action by the government. Nonetheless, significant barriers to conflict resolution remain.

Reform and a re-evaluation of the Kurdish Question may have begun, but thus far it has certainly been fragmented and slow.[14] While a new space for change has emerged since the election of the AK Party government, parties have not used this space to its full potential. As a result, violent clashes between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces continue. Mistrust and a lack of real cooperation between the Kurdish groups and the Turkish state persists, the imprisonment of Kurdish leaders, politicians and others continues, and basic human rights such as freedom of expression are not being fully respected. Additionally, despite the hope engendered by its talk of change, and the initial momentum of the Democratic Opening, the government has struggled to secure political support and real partners for its policies.[15] Backing from other national parties has

previously been lacking on attempts at reform, with elements within the main opposition party, the CHP (the Republican People's Party), seeing the proposals as too radical and as an attack on the indivisibility of the state and undermining moves towards progress in this area. At the same time, the CHP has been more active in acknowledging the Kurdish Question than before, suggesting the establishment of an all-party parliamentary committee to discuss the issue, for example. Such inconsistencies illustrate the lack of any clear policy by the CHP. Turkey's nationalist party, the MHP (the Nationalist Movement Party), continues to interpret the government's position as a threat to its nationalist stance, refusing to engage in the Kurdish Question in any way, and continuing military-based rhetoric. While violence will always remain preferable to some, there is a real opportunity for the government to work together with the main opposition parties in Turkey, including both the CHP and the BDP, and to combine policies and find common ground for a shared solution.

> The government's Democratic Opening initiative shows a new and clear willingness to solve the Kurdish conflict.

Deep-rooted divisions, complex relations and diverging positions on central areas of the Kurdish issue in Turkey remain. The formulation and stipulations of a new constitution, the full recognition of Kurdish culture and language, mainstream political representation, reconciliation for past atrocities and human rights abuses, and issues surrounding the governance of the Kurdish regions within Turkey are all issues which divide opinion.[16] These fundamental points remain contentious among the main political institutions in Turkey, but also between other regional players, such as Syria, Iraq and Iran, and international organizations.[17] Although international support has been present, regional dialogue has been more open and constructive than before, and the undeniably significant substantive shift away from the classical approach to the Kurdish Question in Turkey, there remain huge challenges in effecting a workable solution to the conflict. It is therefore important and timely to reconsider a plan for peace and democratic advancement, and to ensure that the beginnings of change and the approach of the Democratic Opening in Turkey are not allowed to dissipate.

A Political Solution to a Political Problem

Having acknowledged the need for a political solution in Turkey, it is now necessary to consider how this can be attempted in practice. The pertinent question concerns what needs to change in order for both sides to move beyond negative control (resulting in the blocking of progress and the souring of public opinion)

towards positive mutual engagement and the idea of creating a shared plan for peace. This section examines a number of possible steps to be taken to achieve this goal.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Leyla Zana on June 30, 2012 in Ankara to discuss the Kurdish issue.

Recognition of the Kurdish Conflict as a Means for Dialogue

It is only when formal and frank recognition of the existence and severity of the conflict is made within Turkey that the establishment of sustainable peace will be a real possibility. While the acknowledgment and classification of armed conflict is a politically charged topic, it is essential that both sides recognize the existence of the conflict in Turkey in order to lay the groundwork for peace. Recognition of the Kurdish conflict by the Turkish government, and as therefore falling under the rubric of international humanitarian law, would create a basis for engagement that may lead to peace, without giving parity to the parties' goals or tactics. The government's Democratic Opening initiative shows a new and clear willingness to solve the Kurdish conflict. While the practical impact and reach of the government's commitment so far can be viewed as limited, its breaking of national taboos and gradual moves towards compromise should by no means be undermined. By going some way in acknowledging the existence of the Kurdish Question, through this initiative the government has provided a political space for discussions on possible solutions to the conflict. This should be built on an official acknowledgment of the conflict by the government, which would aid in moving towards constructive political dialogue. In addition, more constructive language and a progressive discourse should be adopted by the government in order to prepare the public for change. The establishment of the

Democratic Opening implicitly recognizes that resolving the Kurdish issue is a fundamental part of creating a fully-fledged democracy in Turkey, and this recognition from the state is unprecedented. However, the opportunity to expand and to act on it must be seized in order for progress to be made.

The people of Turkey have endured over 25 years of conflict with thousands of lives lost and countless human rights abuses perpetrated in the form of violence, torture, the disappearance of loved ones, intimidation, and the psychological impact of living through conflict. It is therefore necessary that an open and full acknowledgment of the experiences and a public recognition by the state that the conflict has reached the level of an armed conflict under international law occur in order for a bridging of the differences between civilians and combatants to commence. A full and official recognition of the conflict would allow for the continuing opening up and legitimization of discussion on the issues in question. Deep divisions within Turkish society with regard to self-determination and governance, constitutional reform, amnesty and disarmament and other pressing issues remain. Before these divisions can be bridged, dialogue *must* occur. The Democratic Opening has already provided significant impetus to bring the Kurdish Question into the realm of mainstream politics and has generated important debate. But the space created for such debate must continue to be used and actively expanded if workable ways forward are to be reached. General political acceptance and a legitimization of all sides must first be achieved in the public and political arena, and the establishment of open, inclusive and equal platforms for resolving historically rooted issues must occur before an attempt at a coordinated approach towards accommodating a solution can be achieved in practice. In summary, a political solution is crucial to any sustainable end to the conflict, and this will by necessity involve the government talking to armed groups. Arguments for engaging with proscribed armed groups, it has been noted, "encompass both pragmatic and moral perspectives... groups with grievances and the power to continue a conflict must be part of its resolution."[18]

The Necessity of Constitutional Reform

The government has moved closer toward acknowledging the Kurdish Question by incorporating Kurdish issues into the party political system in Turkey and by proposing some progressive policies and steps towards recognizing minority rights, such as permitting nationwide broadcasting in the Kurdish language. However, the use of mother-tongue languages other than Turkish in civil and political life remains heavily restricted in the current constitution and the Political Party Law. An acceptance of the existence and importance of the Kurdish Question through formal political structures and processes would establish a new framework, ensuring stability for democratic institutions and the rule of

law in Turkey. The drafting of a more democratic and inclusive constitution, which recognizes all minorities within Turkey and which affords real political representation and equal protection of rights to all groups, will be a crucial step in resolving the conflict and advancing democracy. The reforms proposed by the government and sanctioned by the general public in 2010 referendum consist of 26 amendments relating to reforms regarding fundamental rights and freedoms (Articles 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 23) and the reorganization of the judiciary (Articles 11 and 14-22).[19] The government's proposal for a reformed, civilian-authored constitution (under the guidance of the multi-parliamentary Constitutional Reconciliation Commission, first convened in 2011) is by far the most comprehensive in modern Turkey's history, proposing for the first time to fully recognize and admit minority groups into society and politics.[20] A degree of continued bravery on the part of the government is required in this regard. As Özpek noted, "prioritizing political survival over democracy and repeating the same mistakes will turn the hope for a new and democratic constitution once again into disappointment."[21] A reformed constitution will be a crucial step in filling a vacuum that would otherwise be filled with violence.

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The Importance of Working in Partnership

One of the main challenges in achieving conflict resolution in Turkey has been the constant disruption to progress and opposition to change by some groups. In order to accomplish the government's aims with regards to Kurdish issues, it is vital to maintain a focus on progressive policies and reforms, and also to reconsider positions towards the PKK, making space for the possibility of opening dialogue. Furthermore, relations between the CHP, BDP, MHP and the AK Party government must improve in order for the government to push ahead with its reforms and plans for a solution to the Kurdish Question in partnership with opposition parties. This must happen by appealing to the benefits of a *shared* solution to the conflict and by clearly addressing concerns and objections by the nationalist MHP. A long-term solution will only be successful with support from all political parties and civil society groups in Turkey. In order for this to occur, the government cannot continue to work for a solution alone; it must involve other key stakeholders in its search for a solution to the conflict.

There are of course a number of obstacles that must be overcome before the conflict can be resolved, including an official recognition of the existence of the conflict and a removal of the restrictions placed on the expression of all voices within Turkish society. Reaching a satisfactory solution in Turkey will inevitably involve the central issue of identity and will be dependent on the capacity of all

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parties to empathize and identify with one another. Identities inform political and social life and it is important that they are respected, acknowledged and expressed. Thus, the government must shift towards a position wherein Kurdish identities are acknowledged

and respected within national frameworks. It is important for other parties to be able to relate to and empathize with the position and thinking of the Kurds in Turkey in order to understand that the opposition must be treated with respect and as citizens, not as subjects. It is the responsibility of the state to provide society with the means of accepting the different identities that co-exist throughout Turkey, in order to ease the situation and to prepare the public for positive change.

Self-determination: Models for a Solution

Beyond the aspects of a new constitution, reconciliation, and new platforms for dialogue, the introduction of an approach whereby elements of decentralization are incorporated into Turkey's constitution has the potential to be a hugely positive and effective strategy of dealing with the Kurdish Question. Objections to such suggestions have been made by Turkey's main political parties, including the ruling AK Party, but finding a solution through adopting a new approach to governance could create a flexible, adaptable and Turkey-specific solution accepted by all stakeholders involved.

By learning from international experiences, a careful consideration of different governance models may bring potentially positive outcomes in Turkey with regards to the Kurdish Question. The first model of self-determination is that of secession, which can be defined as the "withdrawal from a state or society through the constitution of a new sovereign and independent state".[22] There are two legal and political models of secession, a consensual model, and a non-consensual model based on armed conflict (with the secessionist movement winning a fight for separation, and a peace agreement setting the terms of a new political arrangement). While secession is a possibility in some contexts, it would likely be an option fraught with difficulties in the context of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, given the fact that there is so much opposition for such an arrangement both within Turkey itself and externally. In addition, there exist a number of

international law difficulties in assigning assets, debts and international treaties between Turkey and any new Kurdish state. Furthermore, the Kurds are spread over numerous countries, and a settlement in Turkey would not resolve the wider claim for self-determination in the region. Secession should therefore be seen as inapplicable in this context.

A model more likely to provide a long-lasting solution in Turkey is that of devolution/decentralization. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the power of the devolved governments has been increased in some specific areas such as tax spending and through the election of regional political representatives. Furthermore, the recognition of Welsh as a mother-tongue language and the availability of Welsh-medium education have given the people of Wales increased autonomy not only politically, but also culturally and symbolically. This example, as well as other examples of multilingualism in education and public life, should be drawn on as sources of inspiration with regard to these issues in Turkey. At the same time, a compromise has to be reached on all sides, because, under a process of devolution, the central government remains the source of final and ultimate authority and power.

Federalism has also proved to be a successful political solution where large minority groups exist, for example in Quebec. Federalism can be described as encompassing diversity through unity, and, as with the devolution model, it offers a compromise between the national and regional, autonomy and sovereignty.[23] Another benefit of the federalism model is that it is flexible in character. Numerous "versions" of federalism exist, each of which can be adapted to what is needed. The various models of federalism include decentralized union, federation, confederation, federacy, associated statehood, condominium and league.[24] There is no one model of federalism that is applicable universally; it can be adapted according to what is appropriate in different contexts. Whatever version is adopted, the federal model generally allows for a large amount of flexibility in terms of reaching any kind of democratic and post-conflict arrangement in that it guarantees the protection of minority rights and acknowledges the diversity that exists within a state, something that is key if trust is to be built among all sides to a conflict.

In establishing a federation, the constitutional process is of particular importance as it must establish a particular form of political institutionalization, which

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reflects diversity and which distributes power between central or federal legislatures on the one hand, and state or provincial authorities on the other,[25] with neither being allowed to "trespass" into the legislative or executive competence of the other.[26] The federalism model therefore allows for the construction of more democratic and less nation-state bound communities.[27] The federal model allows for some important powers such as defense and foreign affairs to be reserved for the federal authority, while social affairs such as education and social welfare, among others, are often assigned to the regional governments. This may be considered as being particularly relevant to Turkey, as it would allow for the securing of cultural, religious and ethnic identities of different minority groups living in distinct regions, such as the Kurds.

A gradual move towards devolving certain powers to the regions of Turkey, through particular reforms anchored in a new constitution, would open up the possibility of progress towards a solution to the conflict on the ground to the benefit of all people in Turkey. A gradual roll out of direct measures and policies with a careful consideration of contexts and all partners involved would avoid valuable time and resources being squandered on various debates surrounding autonomy. Setting an example through actual reforms and "learning by doing" could lead to more effective and successful outcomes, as opposed to fragmented debates and ideological arguments about nationalism and independence. The first step towards such an approach would also be to incorporate the possibility for change on this level into reforms in the Democratic Opening initiative. The Turkish government needs to be prepared to offer minority rights protection and constitutional guarantees of diversity if a solution to the conflict is to be reached and support for armed conflict lessened. Decentralization offers a feasible and political means by which this can be achieved.

Transitional Justice: Moving Forward

It will be difficult for both sides of the Kurdish conflict to overcome historical experiences and wrongs, but by appealing for a long-term democratic solution with positive outcomes for all, more fruitful discussions might emerge. Examining international experiences of conflict resolution, as well as models of reconciliation and transitional justice, amnesty and reparation will help overcome barriers and divisions between the Kurds, the state, the main political parties and civil society. For example, the outcomes and the impact of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the transition to a democratic state in South Africa and in the establishment of a reconciliatory approach in dealing with human rights abuses and violent conduct provides a number of valuable lessons. South Africa's Promotion of Unity and Reconciliation Act (1995) still provides the "most sophisticated mandate for any truth commission to date",

with precisely balanced powers and far-reaching investigative capacity.[28] Other important examples of truth commissions that have been particularly successful in confronting issues of justice and accountability across a range of political frameworks include those established in Guatemala, Peru, Timor-Leste and Morocco.[29] Looking at lessons learned both in terms of what has worked and what has not worked in other cases would prove extremely beneficial in this context. Regardless of whether the Kurdish conflict is addressed by transitional justice methods, it is im-

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portant that the conflict is officially acknowledged. Even in cases where truth commissions are deemed unsuitable, having any form of official documentation which recognizes the reality of a conflict situation, including crimes perpetrated and harms suffered, is important in "clarifying historical truths" and paying respect to "previously unrecognised victims or their descendants",[30] and is necessary in order to move forward.

Negotiating a Peace Agreement

In addition to public dialogue and overt moves towards a solution to the Kurdish conflict, it is likely that negotiations will also need to occur in private, away from the scrutiny of the media, between the state and the PKK if contentious issues are to be solved and the foundations for any kind of peace agreement are to be laid. In the case of the Northern Ireland peace process, for example, individuals acting on behalf of the parties involved had numerous confidential negotiations to allow for each side to gain an understanding of the rationale, capacity and objectives of the other. While these negotiations took place in private, public expressions of good will were made to strengthen the process. And while publically deniable, these meetings allowed parties to gain an appreciation of the motives of the other. These backchannels provided a space in which contentious issues could be discreetly negotiated. Moving on from that phase, the Irish Republic Army (IRA) and the British government pursued both direct contact, largely facilitated by Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) officers, and unofficial, indirect links, that were maintained by unconnected individuals who relayed messages between the two sides.[31] The backchannel facilitated the building of confidence and laid the foundations for open talks between both sides. While a number of belligerent rejections to the negotiations in Northern Ireland were made by various figures and groups, by the 1990s it had become clear to all parties that resolving the conflict by military means was not a possibility, and that any attempts to do so would result in continued stalemate.

With a secure parliamentary majority it is arguably the optimum time for the government to take the first steps towards negotiation.[32] It has even been suggested that a nascent process of private dialogue is already taking place in Turkey, with leaked tapes and records suggesting that the state has met with the PKK. Since the leaking of this information, however, discussions seem to have been brought to a standstill. Some have blamed the PKK attacks, which started one month after the elections, for this deadlock.[33] The leaked discussions suggest that the government made a number of promises to the PKK with regard to concessions for the Kurds; however, following the elections such alleged promises cannot be said to have materialized, something which is also likely to have brought any possible process to a halt. In addition, promises offered by the government can be said to be overly vague in nature; for engagement to occur, the concessions that will be granted in the case that talks occur and arms are laid down need to be as precise and as specific as possible. One thing that has been made clear as a result of the leak is that the public is broadly comfortable and even supportive of talks taking place between the state and the PKK.

In order for any process of dialogue to succeed in Turkey, the underlying issues must be fully understood and certain questions must be answered. If a blueprint for a solution to the conflict is to be created, a number of issues must be addressed including, but not limited to, the following: the ways and means through which a successful solution can be reached; the nature of the negotiations; the extent to which third parties can assist in this process; and the conditions, if any, that should be in place before a process towards peace can begin. Such questions are central to any kind of establishment of a peaceful, sustainable and successful solution.

While entering into discussions with opposing groups is rarely straightforward, a number of points can be adduced in considering how to move closer towards a political settlement of the conflict. The first point to note in considering the factors necessary for potential negotiations to begin in Turkey centers on the importance of the current political context in which the conflict, and its possible resolution, are situated. The forthcoming elections in Turkey could be viewed as an obstacle to progress and to the commencement of dialogue among parties, due to the desire of the ruling party to maintain its majority and its nationalist support. However, rather than seeing the election as a challenge to progress, it should be viewed as a further opportunity to bring political momentum to a solution. Referring once again to the Northern Ireland peace process, Blair's[34] 1997 election victory clearly brought new impetus and political momentum for a resolution of the conflict, which had previously been unthinkable during almost two decades of Conservative government. Erdoğan's last term as Prime Minister provides the platform from which to seize the opportunity to solve the Kurdish Question.

Leadership is a very important factor in the successful resolution of conflict, and in the case of Northern Ireland, Adams,[35] McGuiness[36] and Blair were all political leaders of strong calibre, with an absolute belief in a solution.[37]

A second important point in assessing the likelihood of peace talks becoming a possibility concerns conditionality. Conditions and pre-conditions can be addressed in many different ways. There is no clear "right way" with regards to this subject; however, there are some key points to bear in mind when considering this issue. While permanently halting violence is urgent, this cannot be a condition upon which negotiations and dialogue among parties rests. Conditions are most commonly discussed during what is termed "pre-negotiations" before any conditions are set. This is the stage in which parties agree on the agenda, procedures and pre-conditions to any negotiations.[38] While this phase may be a "rolling process" that spreads into the actual negotiation stage, it is distinct, and should be viewed as separate, and the pre-conditions should not be seen as a *reason* for discussions to take place or not. The danger of pre-conditions to peace talks is clearly illustrated by the example of former British Prime Minister John Major[39] setting pre-conditions to talks with the IRA in 1994. Major insisted on the IRA committing to a permanent ceasefire prior to talks, which the IRA did not agree to. Additionally, all British governments, until that of Blair, insisted on a certain amount of decommissioning[40] before entering into official dialogue, which also IRA did not agree with. As a consequence, all previous attempts failed, and it took years and a change of government before talks resumed. Most significantly, the British government's insistence on decommissioning during the discussions in 1975 led to the breaking down of the longest ceasefire to have existed prior to that of 1994. At the time, Merlyn Rees, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, continually insisted that the ceasefire was not "genuine or sincere" because of the weapons that were being held.[41] Placing such demands and conditions on the opposing party before entering into dialogue can cause irreparable harm to any process as it requires one of the sides to surrender.[42] This links with the subjective views of each party on what is deemed to be a "complete" ceasefire. Blair and his government understood that a ceasefire for the IRA was about "restraint" and that decommissioning was not possible because it would mean "surrender". This in turn would provoke the hardliners in the IRA, causing them to break

> Surrender is an anathema in negotiations. In order for any conflict to be resolved, both parties must feel like they are winners; that is to say, if one party feels they have "lost" the solution will not be a sustainable one and negotiations will be reopened

away. The British government, by engaging under the Mitchell Principles[43] on decommissioning, met the Republicans in the middle by receiving their assurance but not demanding it as a pre-condition.

Surrender is an anathema in negotiations. In order for any conflict to be resolved, both parties must feel like they are winners; that is to say, if one party feels they have "lost" the solution will not be a sustainable one and negotiations will be reopened. In the same vein, mutual trust of both parties is not necessary for a successful process of dialogue to occur. The important thing is for the *process* to be trusted, not the people or parties involved in it. Waiting until the other party is deemed to be "trustworthy" could potentially mean discussions never

> In the case that any process towards peace does take place in Turkey, third-party assistance should be carefully considered as an important tool for progress

begin, and, in the case of Turkey, greater trust must be placed in the *process* of achieving a solution, as opposed to looking at the parties for reassurance or the meeting of conditions.

The third point to bear in mind when considering the factors of any successful peace process is the issue of "spoilers". It is a fact that not all sides to a conflict come to the negotiating table in good faith. Some feel they would be damaged by a solution, and therefore aim to reduce the chances of resolution. While the government has expressed its willingness to resolve the Kurdish conflict through democratic means, it must be said that there are still some elements of the Turkish state that are in favor of using a military approach. While most parties in Turkey today have policies with regards to the Kurdish Question, the MHP, for example, has no policy on this issue and are continuing their use of military-based rhetoric. Those seeking to derail the process should never be given a veto over dialogue.

Fourthly, sufficient time must be given to any potential dialogue process if conflict resolution is to be prioritized and achieved. The process of constructive dialogue and discussion cannot be rushed, and patience and persistence are crucial if any steps toward progress is to be made. While timetables may be established, and can play an important role in reaching a resolution, it is important that all parties concerned feel ownership of any deadlines discussed, and that adequate time is given to the process. An example of externally imposed deadlines proving disastrous to peace negotiations can be found in the case of the failed negotiations for the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) between the rebel groups and the government. Numerous members of the international community were involved in the DPA negotiations, and there was a clear sense of urgency

around ensuring that all parties signed the agreement. Parties were given very limited time frames within which to consider the drafting of the DPA, and were pressured into accepting terms, which, as a result, were not unanimously accepted by the parties, and as a result the peace process disintegrated. If more time had been allowed for reflection and discussion, mediators and international actors would have been likely to have arrived at a more favorable solution which would have suited all the actors within the process.[44]

In addition to the above, the role of third-party interlocutors must also be addressed in considering the vital elements of a successful peace process. The Northern Ireland peace process demonstrates the value of bringing international neutral actors to the process. The international role in this process continued throughout negotiations, and included US Senator George Mitchell and Canadian General John de Chastelain, among others. George Mitchell, sent as a special envoy by then President Bill Clinton, chaired talks in Northern Ireland, and as a neutral and independent third party and referee, his presence was acceptable to both sides. The presence of an independent impartial mediator is often reassuring to parties to a conflict during discussions, and can be instrumental in assisting parties to engage in dialogue and to agree to mutually acceptable principles. In the case of Northern Ireland, the now renowned "Mitchell Principles" were developed, and these "ground rules" proved integral to the peace process. These six principles focus on the importance of using democratic and non-violent means to reach a solution, and stress the necessity of halting all retaliatory violence and counter measures, to achieve a solution to conflict.[45] In the case that any process towards peace does take place in Turkey, third-party assistance should be carefully considered as an important tool for progress. There are many other international examples that can be drawn on for ideas on ways forward in Turkey (including such cases as South Africa and the former Yugoslavia, among others); however, it is clear that every conflict is different and that there is no "one size fits all" answer. In addition, it should be emphasized that there is no quick fix to the conflict in Turkey, and any process that may occur in future will by no means be simple or easily concluded.

Crucially, in order to open up peace negotiations of any kind, it is important to avoid the demonization of any groups in the media, and to create a wider awareness of the different perspectives and positions in existence in any conflict. It is vital that care be taken to avoid specific, hurtful or inflammatory terms and language in the media during discussions of any kind to ensure that dialogue between the different actors remains open and constructive. For example, labelling specific groups as "terrorists" or "supporters of terrorism" may not be helpful to the establishment of a holistic framework for discussion and negotiation. Softening the rhetoric and adopting the language of peace building in the media, as

opposed to the language of war, has the potential to greatly benefit the overall situation of any conflict. In addition, the importance of gestures should be taken into account. The use of public statements of good will, the softening of language, and the abstention from violence, in particularly at important times such as key anniversaries for example, could prove crucial in improving relations, something which is necessary if a negotiated settlement is to occur in Turkey.

A long-term solution to the Kurdish Question can only be reached by considering, acknowledging and mediating between all stakeholders and actors involved, as well as by accepting political realities and ongoing developments and finding appropriate responses to them. With regard to such an approach, it is important to note that it must be the Turkish government's responsibility to accept the complex challenges ahead, and it must lead by example in terms of openness, inclusion and coming to the table for discussion if the opportunity arises. In situations of unequal power relations, for example where one party is an elected government and the other is not, it is a given that it must be the responsibility of the stronger party to lead the process and show greater generosity.[46] The stronger side and the elected party must initiate progress and take the first step in helping to remove any deadlocks that present themselves in the path to progress, and must ensure that "spoilers" do not take developments off course, and that the process is continued despite any attempts to derail it. Rather than wait passively for more bloodshed to occur the state needs to take initiative.

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Steps towards peace

Having addressed some important factors that need to be in place in order for any future negotiations to occur, the sequencing of events necessary for successful conflict resolution, and the necessary content of any future peace process in Turkey, will now be looked at in more detail. First, before any process of resolution can commence, it is necessary for all sides to lay out their proposals in terms of how progress can be made. Proposals for change by parties need to be as specific as possible in nature, and put together in a codified document that can be acknowledged by all sides in good faith. It is important that any proposals presented are as concrete and as precise as possible, and that they are goal driven and performance based so that progress can be measured. This would entail providing clear phases, target dates and yardsticks for progress across all

fields. Any future plan for progress of this kind would need to be acknowledged by all sides in good faith in order for it to bear fruit. It should also be agreed by all parties concerned that the principle of non-violence should underpin such a process, and that in acknowledging such a declaration of proposals, parties are agreeing to take part in a long-term process of negotiation and political dialogue within a defined timeframe and agreed procedural framework. As mentioned, it is important that any possible future process that occurs in private between the sides works in tandem with a more open, public process that engages the wider society. Any negotiations should deal with all aspects of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, including security, politics, society and culture, economics and humanitarian concerns. They should also take place in distinct phases with achievable aims. Suggested phases in which a political process could occur in Turkey are as follows.

A first phase in any strategic plan for progress in Turkey should be a declaration by the government that it will initiate a new fully inclusive democratic settlement for Turkey. In addition to this, the government should establish a body to continue to work on a strategy for peace. This could take the form of a body charged with setting the terms of reference for any political process and also with the publication of any conclusions. The body could comprise well-respected politicians, academics and other figures from across the spectrum of Turkish society, and would be approved by parliament. It might also include provisions for transitional justice mechanisms such as a future truth commission.

A second phase would be to initiate formal dialogue on substantive issues within Turkey. This may need to begin by way of backchannel discussions, where necessary, as in the case of Northern Ireland so that, for instance, both sides can talk freely without fear of public scrutiny or sabotage. This should occur at the same time as measures to suspend any military operations and violence, under the principle of non-violence. The halting of violence can prove to be a "game-changer" and as other well-established principles of peace processes demonstrate can be the crucial element in moving things forward. In Turkey, this may mean a cessation of violence by the PKK and the abolition of certain state security structures such as village guards as well as the disengagement of forces. At the same time, the constitutional reform process underway should be accelerated.

A third phase would involve the rolling out of a cultural and language rights package across Turkey, making sure that any restrictions on the freedom of expression of the Kurdish and other minority identities and language be lifted. Implementing mother-tongue language curricula in schools, as part of a constitutional agreement, would be a huge advancement in this area. In addition, a comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) pack-

age should be considered at this stage, ensuring full reintegration of combatants. Employing a council to advise on the exact terms of the DDR package would be a possibility, and this could draw on independent expertise. The role of the council would be to ascertain the number of arms held, their approximate location and so forth, in order to begin working towards decommissioning.

Conclusion

The steps taken by the government towards integrating and recognizing Kurdish rights in Turkey, though important, are in practice relatively small, and they must be expanded if a long-term and satisfactory solution to the Kurdish Question is to be achieved. While challenges abound, a solution to any conflict, no matter how long or intractable, *is* possible if the political will is present. This should be remembered in the case of Turkey before more lives are lost due to the continuing conflict.

A number of strategies are offered in this paper as possible means of contributing to a sustainable and successful solution to the Kurdish Question. First, full recognition of human and citizen rights entrenched within a reformed constitution would give Kurds a legal and substantive place in Turkish society.

Secondly, mutual and full recognition and reconciliation of historic events, experiences and differences between the Kurdish minorities and the state must be worked on to achieve a lasting resolution and healing on both sides. Crucially, reconciliation for past violent actions, amnesty for armed groups and an acceptance of previous mistakes by all sides, including the state and the PKK, will prove the greatest challenge, as well as the most significant positive step in this context.[47] As part of this process, the issues of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration must be considered, and a peaceful agreement such as that reached in Northern Ireland must be held up as a realistic goal in any potential future discussions. Furthermore, relations between the government and the BDP must be improved and a shared vision for a Kurdish solution must be worked towards by all key actors in partnership.

Thirdly, the recognition and adoption of Kurdish civil, political, social and economic rights alongside Turkish demands is necessary to provide Kurds with

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the right to self-determination and freedom of expression. This includes language, cultural customs and norms, education and the rule of law.

Fourth, models of decentralization as a means for a political solution should also be considered in seeking a solution. This process may take various different forms including devolution, federalism, or a shared rights approach.

Fifth, the recognition and acceptance of third-party assistance to advance the process of reaching a solution to the Kurdish Question by all actors involved, where necessary and if desired, is crucial. While the momentum and commitment to finding a solution must stem from within Turkey and its Kurdish regions, regional contexts and international perspectives should also be considered in order to reach a satisfactory and long-term solution for all.

Turkey has changed considerably over the last ten years, and the government has managed to effect some positive and real changes for the Kurds. However, the sheer size and complexity of the challenges still ahead must be accepted and dealt with in order to reach long-lasting and peaceful outcomes. The state should be the main driver of change in this context, acting as a partner to Kurdish stakeholders. To facilitate any process of conflict resolution in the future, a renewed emphasis on reconciliation between different groups and the state will be central, as will a focus on third-party assistance, cooperation and partnership. The maintenance of a clear, sequenced strategy towards a solution, in partnership with all key actors, as well as offering full recognition of the conflict, and, most importantly, maintaining political will and momentum regardless of how intractable the conflict may seem, will help to reach a gradual and holistic peace process and an eventual political solution to the Kurdish conflict in Turkey.

Endnotes

* The author thanks to Eleanor Johnson for her assistance with the research of this paper.

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