

Interrogating the “Peace Process” – last week in Kurdish News

Hope has always been an essential part of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, but when it comes to the prospects of what is hopefully called the “Peace Process”, there are many grounds for concern. This week’s article looks at analysis from outwit and within the movement, and the need for progressive forces to come together in the struggle for democracy.



“The balances and the political system of the 21st century are being re-established. And this new design of the region is based on Israel’s security and interests. Israel is gradually becoming the main hegemonic power in the region... This is happening with the support of the US, Britain, and the West in general.” These words were written by Besê Hozat, co-chair of the Executive Council of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), in an [interview](#) published on 27 May. Today, after Israel’s attack on Iran, they are even more relevant. Besides generating immediate fears of major escalation, this attack is another blow to international law, and a further regression towards acceptance that might makes right.

But I’m not going to try and discuss what might happen next, or in what way this might impact the different parts of Kurdistan. At this stage, that would be mere speculation. Instead, I want to look at what has – or hasn’t – happened with what has been hopefully called the “Peace Process” between the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish state, and possibilities for resolving the Kurdish Question: the Middle Eastern problem that receives relatively little attention.

“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”

Hope has always been an essential part of the Kurdish Freedom Struggle: hope against the odds. Every setback is met by the injunction to struggle harder, and hope – even irrational hope – is a central part of that struggle. It is this “optimism of the will” that has supported the movement through the decades and carried it through to its current strength; but when it comes to the prospects of what is hopefully called the “Peace Process”, “pessimism of the intellect” increasingly creeps into the conversation.

Despite all the meetings, and the historic decision by the PKK to dissolve and to put down their weapons, there has been little movement from the government side – little indication of a desire for “peace”, and little that can be described as “process”.

Faik Bulut, writing in Independent Turkish, has made a [critical analysis](#) of the views of Turkey’s Intelligence chief, İbrahim Kalın, as these were outlined in an earlier article on the same platform. He comments that these give the impression that “the state is prone to tight control, excessive intervention, and even intimidation and imposition.” And he describes the aim to make Turkey “the patron of the Kurds of Iraq and Syria” as neo-Ottomanism. When it comes to process, he observes that “Because the Erdoğan government is trying to drive a wedge between the [Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the DEM Party]; it is not yet fully embracing the process and is not taking any concrete steps to facilitate a solution.”

“Judicial reform”

This lack of concrete steps was driven home by the recent law on “judicial reform”. As a first step towards peace, many had anticipated a release of political prisoners. Instead, the new law allows for early release of common criminals to free up room in Turkey’s overcrowded prisons, but specifically excludes political prisoners. Lawyer Ercan Kanar [explained to Firat News Agency](#) that the new law actually makes the situation

worse. It will see many more people sent to prison for minor offences and will make it harder for ill prisoners to secure release. Kanar concludes that “the AKP [the ruling party] is not aiming to establish peace. Its goal is to sustain its rule by continuing classic policies of repression.”

Eren Keskin, co-chair of the Turkish Human Rights Association, [observes](#), “I cannot remember a time when freedom of expression and organisation was under greater pressure, or when arrest decisions were made so recklessly.” She concludes that the state needs to act for people to believe in the peace process.

In Syria

I won’t say that nothing has changed, because in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the PKK decision probably facilitated the ceasefire by Turkey and Turkey’s mercenary militias, who had been attacking the Tishreen Dam and threatening Kobanê; and that ceasefire is vital for the future of Syria. But, here too, despite the ceasefire, Turkey has shown no softening in their opposition to any sort of autonomy for North and East Syria. They have publicly stated that they expect the Autonomous Administration’s Syrian Democratic Forces to disband along with the PKK, and that they have [no immediate plans to withdraw](#) their Turkish forces from the lands they have occupied; and Turkey is the main stumbling block in the negotiations between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Government.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Despite the PKKs decision to lay down arms, Turkey has not stopped attacking their bases in the mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A [statement from the PKK’s armed forces](#), issued on Thursday, reports that Turkey has taken advantage of their ceasefire to attack their tunnels with high-powered explosives, chemical gas, explosive-laden drones, drills and excavators, and heavy weapons. They claim that Turkey is trying to annihilate their guerrillas and sabotage the peace process.

A comparison with Sri Lanka

This week, Gönül Tol, published a [pessimistic analysis](#) in Foreign Policy. The article, entitled “Don’t Trust Erdogan’s ‘Peace Process’ With the Kurds”, argued that “We know from case after case that autocrats—whether they are actual dictators or strongmen at the head of flawed democracies—rarely resolve ethnic conflicts. They often freeze or suppress them, sidestep root causes, and instrumentalize the unresolved conflict as an excuse to tighten their grip on power. The result is rarely peace—just postponed instability.” And she compares the situation of the Kurds with the disastrous fate of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

Tol writes that “For years, Erdogan has exploited the Kurdish issue as a political tool—sometimes dangling the promise of peace, at other times waging war. Resolving the conflict was never the goal; consolidating power was. The core of the Kurdish question—Turkey’s democratic deficit—has been consistently ignored.”

This is a situation with which the Kurds are acutely aware. They, more than anyone, understand how Erdoğan exploits every situation to build his own power, and how he will readily go back on his word or make an about turn if that favours his own agenda. Erdoğan's various initiatives succeeded in winning some Kurdish votes – which is unsurprising when the main opposition CHP was associated with anti-Kurdish Turkish nationalism – but he didn't succeed in winning support for his autocratic ambitions. The Kurds know what they are dealing with, and yet they can't afford to ignore the possibility that this time Erdoğan might consider it in his interests to make peace a reality.

Tol, who writes from a CHP perspective, reduces the Kurdish position to a Faustian pact to keep Erdoğan in power, claiming that the pro-Kurdish DEM Party is playing into Erdoğan's hands rather than supporting the CHP in the fight against democracy. Her arguments encourage the very divisions that Erdoğan is aiming for and that she criticises, but they do not reflect the actual position of the Kurdish movement. The Kurdish position has been made clear in many speeches and articles, and was laid out at length by the KCK's Besê Hozat in the [interview](#) from the 27 May that I quoted at the start. The KCK is the umbrella body that includes the PKK.

The view of the Kurdish Freedom Movement

Hozat makes clear that the Kurdish Freedom Movement is very aware of the problems with the path that the government appears to be following – both the government's actions and their lack of actions. She writes, “Without recognising the right to democratic politics, without legal and constitutional reforms, and without creating the conditions for Kurdish people's leader Abdullah Öcalan to work and live freely, without him being able to lead and direct this process, it is not possible for the decision to dissolve the PKK and to put an end to the armed struggle to be implemented.”

And she explains that the PKK's purpose is to replace armed struggle with democratic politics and to enable the former fighters to work towards a “democratic society”. “Surely,” she points out, “these people will not come and put themselves up for extermination like sacrificial lambs. They will not be stuffed into the prisons. The approach of the government to this issue is extremely unserious.” And she protests the government's “poisonous rhetoric”, which “fuels nationalism and racism” and “provokes war”.

She underlines the importance of the call for peace coming from the ultra-nationalist Devlet Bahçeli, who represents the state ideology that was responsible for a century of Kurdish oppression. But she also observes that “there are many individuals and circles who feed off this war, and this process is extremely disturbing for them.”

Hozat is very clear that what the Kurdish Movement is looking for is the transformation and democratisation of Turkey as a whole, and while acknowledging the positive statements of the CHP and their fight for democracy, and totally dismissing claims of a deal between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Kurds (which she describes as really irrational) she calls on the CHP to be much more radical.

Specifically, she calls on them to take practical steps for organising a peace commission in parliament, which has wide political support, and to accept Öcalan's status as an interlocutor, and work for him to be free to play his full part in the peace process.

The position put forward by Hozat was [reinforced by Helin Ümit](#), a member of the PKK's central committee, when she was interviewed by Medya Haber on Tuesday.

The Republican People's Party

It is clear that all who genuinely seek democracy need to work together, but on the ground, that is not as easy as it sounds. The CHP is the party of Atatürk and the original anti-Kurdish Turkish nationalism. Their opposition to Kurdish oppression is a relatively new development that is not easily accepted by many members and supporters, or by some leading figures. Even sympathetic leaders are wary of alienating their base. At the same time, Kurds will tend to keep away from rallies dominated by Turkish flags and images of Atatürk.

Doğan Özgüden, a veteran Turkish journalist who has had to work from exile in Europe since the 1970s, [argues](#) that what is needed is a united front of progressive organisations that extends beyond political parties. He criticises the CHP for only focussing on the government crackdown against their party and against their Istanbul mayor, and calls for similar actions to be taken in support of persecuted Kurds and Leftists.

Veysi Sarısözen, [writing in Yeni Özgür Politika](#), argues that the CHP grass roots are pushing to take the resistance against government oppression further, but that without the experience and support of the Kurds this resistance will be crushed. He notes that the fears of some Kurds that active support for the CHP could jeopardise peace negotiations ignore the reality that without the CHP it would be impossible to form the cross-party parliamentary commission that is seen as a basic requirement for reaching a settlement.

Quite how detached CHP politics still is, can be illustrated by the [speech](#) of their chair, Özgür Özel, at the closing of the Council Meeting of the Socialist International, which was held in Istanbul from 23 to 25 May. He talked about the oppression of CHP mayors, but made no mention of DEM Party mayors; of stopping bloodshed in Ukraine, but not of peace in Turkey; of international solidarity, but not of solidarity with the Kurds at home. It is not that he hasn't addressed these things on other occasions, but they are not given the priority that a serious resistance to autocracy demands.

The DEM Party

In what can seem like a parallel world, and despite vital concerns over Erdoğan's game plan, the Kurdish Movement continues its rounds of meetings and discussions aimed at propelling the "Peace Process" forward. These are led by the DEM Party, and were well

summed up in the party's [press conference](#) on Wednesday, which discussed the meeting of their General Executive Council.

Party spokesperson, Ayşegül Doğan, explained that the first item on the agenda was the establishment of the much-discussed parliamentary commission, and that they have called on the Speaker of the Parliament to take action before everything shuts down for the summer recess. She also talked about meetings with opposition parties, which all want active participation in the process, and noted that “It is not only a DEM Party issue”. In discussing the government’s operations against the CHP, she stressed that the DEM Party fights against all such attacks, with which they are themselves very familiar.

Doğan talked about communication with İmralı Prison, where Abdullah Öcalan now has six comrades with whom he can work, since three more prisoners were transferred there two months ago. The DEM Party plans to make another visit to İmralı soon, and it is “highly probable” that Öcalan will meet with representatives of other parties in the coming days. He has also asked to meet with other Kurdish leaders – Masoud and Nechirvan Barzani, Bafel and Qubad Talabani, and SDF Commander, Mazloun Abdi.

There are ongoing discussions about Öcalan’s [perspectives text](#), which continues the ideas of his Manifesto for a Democratic Civilisation and was published in the final edition of Serxwebûn, the PKK journal. And the DEM Party is planning two thousand meetings of different kinds and scales across Turkey, to “understand, explain, and organise”.

There will be a lot more organisation and cooperation needed from all progressive forces if Turkey is to find real hope of confounding Gönül Tol’s prognosis and turning away from the autocratic abyss.

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