GREEN LEFT

Is there a Kurdish-Turkish peace process?

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made it clear that he doesn’t want the "peace process" to be considered as a negotiation. Foreground image: Wikimedia. Background image: ANF English

It is more than 10 months since imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan's total isolation was eased with a visit from his nephew, and six months since Öcalan released a statement calling for the disarmament and dissolution of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), giving rise to hopes of a new "peace process".

A lot has happened since, but it is still not clear if we are any closer to seeing a peaceful future for the Kurds in Turkey and beyond.

What makes a peace settlement?

What could a successful peace settlement look like?

It is a question that brings to mind the 1970 interview with Ghassan Khalafani, writer and leading figure in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, made two years before he was assassinated by Mossad. In response to the interviewer's insistence on peace talks, Khalafani reminded him, "People usually fight for something, and they stop fighting for something."

When it was first founded, the PKK fought for Kurdish independence, but two decades have passed since they shifted to a position that rejected the framework of nation states completely. In practice this meant struggling to maximise local autonomy and grassroots democracy within existing state borders, with the aim of eroding centralised control.

Attempts to do this in Turkey were brutally crushed, but the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) is putting many of Öcalan's ideas into practice there.

Öcalan's February statement did not make detailed demands; however, it linked peace to democracy. It was not an unrealisable insistence on achieving all that they were fighting for, but a call for conditions where they could campaign for change through democratic means.

A peace settlement generates many practical demands and questions. When would political prisoners be released and political exiles be able to return? How would the

current fighters disarm and integrate into peaceful society? What sort of truth and reconciliation process would bring together a long-divided population?

Importantly, how would the gross injustices that brought people to take up arms in the first place be addressed?

In each of these areas, it is hard, so far, to find much ground for optimism.

What is, or isn't, happening?

The Turkish state continues to move away from democracy. Before, they arrested elected mayors from the pro-Kurdish Peoples Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party. Now they are arresting mayors from the mainstream Republican People's Party (CHP), in an attempt to weaken it and drive a wedge between it and the DEM Party.

This fundamental obstruction to the peace process was emphasised in an August 24 speech by the DEM Party co-chair, Tülay Hatimoğulları, who stated: "Without democratisation in Turkey, there can be no lasting peace — not for Kurds, not for other minorities, and not for the working population."

Addressing the arrests she was clear that, "Operations against elected representatives — whether in Kurdish cities or, as is currently the case, in CHP-run municipalities — sabotage the peace process."

When the current peace process began, there was much speculation that Kurdish political prisoners might be let out to resume their lives. It was hoped that the Turkish authorities would finally abide by the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and release People's Democratic Party (HDP) co-chairs Selahatin Dermitaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. (The HDP was the predecessor of the DEM Party.)

A genuine peace process would require Öcalan be given the freedom to meet and talk freely with leading Kurdish figures.

So far, Kurdish political prisoners remain firmly behind bars, and the changes that have been made to Öcalan's situation might be regarded as the bare minimum needed to prevent the current process — whatever that is — from stalling completely. Three further prisoners have been brought to the prison to work with him, and there have been a series of highly controlled visits from a delegation of DEM Party members.

Devlet Bahçeli, President Erdoğan's far-right ally who became the surprising leader of the current process, raised the image last October of Öcalan being granted his "Right to Hope" — and even being invited to speak in the Turkish parliament — in exchange for dissolving the PKK. Of course, a universal human right such as the Right to Hope — that is, a life prisoner's right to retain the possibility of parole — can never be conditional and bargainable, but even this conditional "right" has not been allowed by the Turkish government. They have made it clear to the Council of Europe that they have no intention of respecting the ECHRs decision on this right, too.

The progress of any behind the scenes negotiations over disarmament can only be guessed at. The downing of weapons is the government's central demand, but this cannot happen — beyond the symbolic act of destruction we saw on July 11 — without guarantees of a safe future for former fighters.

After the PKK announced a ceasefire in March, Turkey actually increased their attacks on guerrilla areas, though there could be no justification for this. From a peak in June, Turkish attacks have now reduced dramatically, but there is no guarantee that this situation will continue.

A century of oppression and four decades of armed resistance have left festering wounds in Turkey's social fabric that will need a genuine process of truth and reconciliation in order to heal. But we have seen little evidence that the Turkish state would be willing to consider such a process.

The government has set up a cross-party commission, as demanded by the DEM Party and other opposition parties, and this has taken evidence from a wide range of people, including families who have suffered at the hands of the state. However,

when the peace mothers, who have lost children in the conflict, addressed the commission, they were prevented from giving evidence in their native Kurdish. As the mother who was silenced explained afterwards, “If my identity and language are not recognised, then my existence is still not acknowledged.”

This telling incident strikes at the heart of the problem. Kurds have been systematically discriminated against all through the history of the Turkish Republic. Their forced assimilation is written into the constitution, which stipulates that the country is an indivisible Turkish nation whose language is Turkish.

This is enshrined in the first four articles of the constitution, which Turkey’s rulers have always treated as sacrosanct. The language of instruction in schools is Turkish; and if a word of Kurdish is spoken in parliament, the speaker’s microphone is turned off and the official record reads “unknown language”.

Rules have been even stricter in the past, but the suppression of Kurdish culture continues.There is no evidence that this situation will change. It is this ethnic oppression, coupled with the persistent crushing of democratic opposition, that forced the PKK to take up arms four decades ago.

Where does Erdoğan stand?

President Erdoğan has made it clear that he doesn’t want the ongoing process to be considered as a negotiation. He wants the fighting to stop without being seen as making any concessions in exchange, and has persisted in portraying the aim — in line with his previous rhetoric — as “a terror-free Turkey”.

Despite all the ongoing problems outlined above, in a speech on August 25, Erdoğan described the process as “in the final stretch”. As is clear in this speech, his vision for Turkey is the kind of Turkish-Kurdish unity that existed in the joint fight for Turkish independence a century ago: a unity that the Kurds mistook for a genuine brotherhood until the time when the Kurds had served their purpose and the Turks asserted their ethnic nationalist dominance. Notably, Erdoğan does not talk of peace, but of a “powerful Turkey” that “disturbs” its “enemies”.

What about Syria?

What happens in the “peace process” is intimately connected to events in Syria: indeed, many believe that it was the changing balance of forces in Syria, and Turkey’s wish to counter growing Israeli control in the region, that prompted the process in the first place — alongside Erdoğan’s desire for Kurdish support.

Among the most significant achievements of the Kurdish freedom movement led by Öcalan are the resurrection of Kurdish pride in their culture and heritage, and the creation of the DAANES, which attempts to enact Öcalan’s vision of a radical feminist multicultural democracy.

Turkey regards this as unacceptable and is attempting to ensure that Syria’s new president — in whose rise Turkey played a leading role — insists on centralised control and the complete dissolution of all that the DAANES has constructed — both their political and administrative structures and their defence force.

Turkish-backed militias stopped attacking the DAANES in response to the “peace process”, but recently there have been increasing skirmishes and provocations, and repeated threats of more serious Turkish-backed military action.If these were to be realised, the “peace process” in Turkey would be dead in the water, and Erdoğan’s “Terror-free Turkey” would die with it.

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