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**Conflict Transformation and Asymmetric Conflicts: A Critique of the Failed Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process**

**Bahar Baser<sup>i</sup> and Alpaslan Ozerdem<sup>ii</sup>**

***Abstract***

*In this article, we examine the dynamics of the Kurdish-Turkish peace process that collapsed in the summer of 2015. The negotiations began when the conflict reached a certain level of ripeness, one that made it possible for both sides to entertain the possibility of compromise on various taboo issues. However, in the face of both domestic and international developments, the process came to an abrupt halt. This article argues that the main reason the process stalled was because it was built from the start around the idea of “resolution” rather than “transformation”, a concept better suited to responding to highly fluid asymmetric conflicts.*

Keywords: PKK, Turkey, terrorism, peace process, conflict transformation

## **Introduction**

The Turkish state has faced a number of Kurdish rebellions, but the Kurdistan Workers' Party's, namely the PKK's armed resistance has proved the most tenacious and made the greatest impact.<sup>iii</sup> Since its inception in 1984, the conflict has become of the world's most enduring civil wars, albeit with intermittent PKK ceasefires.<sup>iv</sup> To date, the conflict has cost some 40,000 lives and has displaced a million people or more; a 2013 Turkish government report found that from 1984 to 2013, 5,557 civilians had been killed in the course of the conflict, along with 2,872 extra-judicial killings and a further 1,945 victims of unknown assailants.<sup>v</sup> Thousands of Kurdish people have also been internally displaced by forced deportations from some 3,000 villages.<sup>vi</sup> The conflict has also done significant damage to the environment, agriculture and heritage of the region where the fighting took place.<sup>vii</sup>

Just after the turn of the century, there seemed to be a window of opportunity. Starting in 2006,<sup>viii</sup> the two sides began "secret negotiations", mainly via backchannel communications in Oslo, and after various domestic democratization packages, Turkey finally entered what was described at the time as the "Resolution Process". The pre-talks as well as other developments throughout the process indicated that the Turkish-Kurdish peace process would not lead to a substantial settlement agreement between the two parties as we know it, but rather will focus on a top-down democratization process in Turkey which would eventually pave the way for the accommodation of all minority groups in Turkey, including the Kurds.<sup>ix</sup> As a result of these assumptions, the pre-talks and negotiations usually revolved around the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and paid less attention to societal transformation or reduction of prejudices between two groups. The peace initiative ultimately proved too vulnerable to regional affairs and day-to-day domestic politics.<sup>x</sup> In the summer of 2015, the

process collapsed and armed clashes soon resumed. As the conflict continues, it destabilises Turkey and it not only affects the national and international politics of the country, but also has a major impact on many neighbouring countries with Kurdish populations such as Iran, Iraq and Syria. From Sur to Afrin, Turkey's Kurdish politics have gained a transnational nature while the spill-over of the Syrian civil war is deeply felt within Turkish borders. The consequences of unsolved conflicts as well as the new conflicts in-the-making pose a serious threat to human security not only in Turkey but also in the wider Middle East.

If we are to draw lessons for future attempts to secure peace in Turkey, it is vital that we understand why this particular peace process failed. Zartman suggests that “parties resolve their conflict only when they are ready to do so”, and that “at that ripe moment, they grab onto proposals that usually have been in the air for a long time and that only now appear attractive.”<sup>xi</sup> A “ripe moment” specifically means a point where both parties simultaneously find their situations too uncomfortable and costly to endure – what Zartman also calls a “mutually hurting stalemate”. This is arguably precisely the situation in which the resolution process started at the end of the 2000s, and yet the “ripeness” of that moment did not yield a successful peace process. In this article, we underline that while the pre-talks and negotiations phase demonstrated that the moment was indeed ripe, ripeness is not stable; even when both sides enter negotiations with both caution and determination, domestic and external factors can derail peace processes quite easily. We also show that the process was hampered by two other problems: the asymmetric power relations between the negotiating parties, and the two parties’ underdeveloped understanding of what long-term peacebuilding involves. The main argument of this article is that one of the main reasons why the Turkish-Kurdish peace process came to an abrupt end was that it was based on the concept of

“resolution”, where a better paradigm would have been “transformation” – an idea much better suited to highly fluid asymmetric conflicts.

Many scholars agree that for any peace process to be successful, it must address the underlying causes of the conflict in question. These causes may include power imbalances, group-level inequalities or clashes between identities, whether ethnic, religious and/or cultural.<sup>xii</sup> These are the things the conflict transformation approach tackles; as John Paul Lederach puts it, transformation “emphasizes peace as embedded in justice, the building of right relationships and social structures through a radical respect for human rights and nonviolence as way of life.”<sup>xiii</sup> Instead of this, the peace process that was implemented in Turkey between 2006 and 2015 was primarily an elite-driven political settlement exercise that did not challenge structural inequalities.

The reasons behind the failure of the peace process have been studied before by Turkey-originated and foreign academics by using a variety of theories that had to do with conflict resolution and mediation. These include Fearon’s<sup>xiv</sup> bargaining model, commitment problems as well as the arguments on the duration of civil wars, Fearon and Laitin’s<sup>xv</sup> important work on identity and conflict, Sambanis’ work on ethnic conflicts and partition<sup>xvi</sup>, Kalyvas’<sup>xvii</sup> theoretical discussion on the paradox of terrorism in civil wars and Walter’s<sup>xviii</sup> theory on civil war settlements including her emphasis on commitment problems, recurrence of civil wars and terms of negotiation.<sup>xix</sup> Although the existing empirical literature on the failed peace process offers valuable insights into the dynamics of the negotiation process, most attempts to understand why it failed still examine it through a resolution perspective.<sup>xx</sup> The emphasis is mostly on familiar themes: the “negotiating with terrorists” approach, ripeness for intervention, commitment problems and political fluidity. The resulting analyses are therefore generally confined to the short-term, and do little to establish what sort of long-term peace

infrastructures Turkey will need to achieve a sustainable solution. What the current literature offers are important findings, but they would fall short in developing alternative perspectives that could strengthen and sustain peace if a similar process would start again in the future. In this paper, we apply a different framework, going beyond the conflict resolution perspective in favor of the conflict transformation approach. We argue that this perspective makes a better device for understanding the nature of the Kurdish armed conflict in Turkey and why attempts to end it have failed. As we explain, some of the reasons for those failures stem from the very approach adopted to “solve” the problem.

### **The Distinctive Mechanisms of Conflict Transformation**

While conflict management and resolution approaches are different from the conflict transformation school of thought, the boundaries and differences between them are not always clear. One of the clearer differences, though, is the two ideas’ level of optimism. According to Hugh Miall, “conflict management theorists see violent conflicts as an ineradicable consequence of differences of values and interests within and between communities. The propensity to violence arises from existing institutions and historical relationships, as well as from the established distribution of power”.<sup>xxi</sup> As far as the conflict management school of thought is concerned, these conflicts are almost impossible to resolve; the hope is simply to control them as much as possible, to end violence altogether or at least make it manageable.<sup>xxii</sup> As Miall puts it, “conflict management is the art of appropriate intervention to achieve political settlements, particularly by those powerful actors having the power and resources”; he adds that “it is also the art of designing appropriate institutions to guide the inevitable conflict into appropriate channels”.<sup>xxiii</sup> Conflict resolution theories, on the other hand, “reject the power political view of conflict” and maintain that in conflicts that concern identity politics, people cannot find a middle way unless the conflicting parties are “helped to explore, analyze, question and reframe their positions and interests”.<sup>xxiv</sup> Conflict

resolution theories therefore assume that with outside help, positive-sum outcomes can be achieved. Conflict transformation theories differ from those mentioned above by its focus on transforming factors that extend well beyond the particular site of conflict – relationships, interests, discourses and so on – implying a more comprehensive and wide-ranging approach.<sup>xxv</sup> The idea is to change people's perceptions rather than to create an immediate change in the conflict situation,<sup>xxvi</sup> and the corollary assumption that peacebuilding efforts cannot be postponed to the so-called post-conflict period.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The jury is still out as to which theory works better in which conflicts, and many authors have questioned whether conflict transformation is in fact fundamentally different from conflict management or resolution.<sup>xxviii</sup> While some perceive it transformation as a final stage in peacebuilding under a much broader umbrella of resolution, others argue that transformation is a distinct phenomenon. It can be argued that where conflict management is based on a realist perspective and resolution on a liberal perspective, conflict transformation is built around a structuralist analysis of how conflicts work.<sup>xxix</sup> Secondly, conflict management takes a top-down approach, engaging governments, high-level policymakers and international organizations, along with Tier 2 actors such as civil society organizations; in conflict transformation processes, success is measured by the level of grassroots engagement in all aspects of peacebuilding.<sup>xxx</sup> Thirdly, while conflict management/resolution models choose from a long menu of possible actions – negotiations, mediation, third party intervention, high-level diplomacy, ceasefire monitoring and peacekeeping missions, and even military intervention – the conflict transformation model focuses on creating opportunities for organic dialogue within and between conflict parties, emphasizing relationships over action.<sup>xxxi</sup> Fourthly, while conflict management and resolution models aspire to achieve political settlements in the shape of accords and agreements, the conflict transformation approach envisions any peace process as a long-term project, a process of

addressing social injustices and establishing a culture of peace at all levels of society, from family to political governance.<sup>xxxii</sup> Conflict transformation accepts that any given armed conflict might be based on perfectly legitimate grievances, and that rather than simply managing or resolving it, it might be possible to use human rights and non-violence principles to first understand the root causes of the conflict and then begin to transform them in a just manner.

### ***Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory***

One of the most influential theorists of conflict transformation is John Paul Lederach. His theoretical approach has influenced a great many scholars, but more than that, it has also helped reshape the way practitioners understand peacebuilding.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Lederach sees peacebuilding as a long-term commitment with four key dimensions: personal, structural, relational and cultural.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In Lederach's theory, a solution to a protracted conflict cannot be "pursued by seeking innovative ways to disengage or minimize the conflicting groups' affiliations" since relationships are "both the basis of the conflict and of its long term solution."<sup>xxxv</sup> Both sides need to learn to see the "opponent" as more human and less "enemy"; this implies that in order to move forward, all involved need to develop a complex understanding of the conflict situation.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This concept of peacebuilding revolves around justice, societal integration and adherence to the principle of nonviolence, all of which can only be secured via structural change.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The aim is to overcome cultural and structural violence above all else.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In a nutshell, Lederach's theoretical framework focuses on eliminating the conflict while at the same time rebuilding something better, cares more about relationship than the context, and aims to create constructive change rather than a quick political settlement with the underlying conflict dynamics still present – to fix the system that caused the conflict in the first place rather than putting a bandaid on it.<sup>xxxix</sup>



Lederach's model underlines the "interdependence of multiple levels of society, from grassroots to high-level political processes".<sup>xl</sup> He categorizes peacebuilding actors into a three-level "peacebuilding pyramid": top leadership, middle level leadership, and the grassroots. The first level includes highly visible military/political/religious leaders who focus on high-level negotiations. At level two are leaders respected in a wide range of socio-economic and political sectors – ethnic/religious leaders, academics and intellectuals – as well as civil society actors who can organize problem-solving workshops, train others in conflict resolution, and form peace commissions to inform both lower and upper levels. At the bottom lie local leaders, indigenous local organizations and community developers who can work on prejudice reduction and grassroots training.<sup>xli</sup> Lederach shows us that the middle and lower level actors are as important as the ones at the top. In his model, the "opinion shapers" in the middle of the peacebuilding pyramid can be a bridge between the elites and the grassroots, bringing the upper and lower levels of the pyramid together in order to establish a sustainable peace that penetrates all levels of society. By working with the people in the middle of the pyramid, peacemakers can reach actors at all levels and accelerate the overall transformation of the conflict at hand. Key leaders of civil society organizations, academics, intellectuals, journalists or artists can then become the "strategic who" that can make peace happen.<sup>xlii</sup> Lederach refers to this as the "critical yeast" theory of peacebuilding.<sup>xliii</sup>

In conflicts that have endured for many years, and which involve both asymmetric power relations and horizontal inequalities, making people believe in potential peace settlements is particularly hard. As happened in the case of South Africa, respected people from both sides of the conflict need to come together and listen to each other in order to relax tensions and convince others in their constituency of the necessity of peace. Lederach, therefore, does not see the outsider as the "answer" and the setting and the people as the "problem"<sup>xliv</sup>; instead,

he puts reconciliation at the heart of his theory, which is concerned with developing long-term infrastructures for peace.<sup>xlv</sup> As he writes, “the vertical gap – the lack of connection between community and political processes of negotiation – was the most significant weakness in peacebuilding processes”.

Lederach’s groundbreaking doctrine can thus be summarized in three key points: a) peacebuilding must be undertaken simultaneously at numerous levels of society, b) short-term needs and long-term vision must be linked; and c) urgent issues must be addressed while broader structural change is envisioned and set in motion.<sup>xlvi</sup> The sustainability of peace is a dynamic process built on “active interdependence and interaction of leadership across the levels of the affected society”<sup>xlvii</sup>; all involved need to “shift from being crisis driven to being crisis responsive”<sup>xlviii</sup> while at the same time putting the emphasis on reconciliation.

Thania Paffenholz, however, reminds us that in almost all conflict cases, top-level actors “have had the biggest impact on peacebuilding”. Their actions can derail the process, and have the capacity to either enable or hinder the work of middle-range actors. When top-level actors end negotiations, it is likely that the second-level will lose room to maneuver; where top-level actors are eager to see a peace process succeed, second-level initiatives can blossom. As for the lower level, the evidence shows that it can exist independently from the second-level, and that grassroots actors do not necessarily need a push from the middle.<sup>xlix</sup> Moreover, critics of Lederach’s work usually find his doctrine unrealistic in conflict settings and ask how to proceed in cases where these conditions cannot be met.<sup>l</sup> Although Lederach’s approach has been considered as the main approach to peacebuilding by numerous NGOs and international organizations, scholars still point at deficiencies including the vagueness of various concepts in his theory and the lack of conflict management aspect of transformation which is still needed to sustain peace in conflict settings.<sup>li</sup> Also, there are other factors to consider, for instance, according to Paffenholz, “external actors should not only support

insiders directly, but also need to consider the wider peacebuilding arena, and might also lobby for peacebuilding vis-à-vis other actors like regional or international governments”. She also puts emphasis on the fact that Lederach’s theory lacks a power relations dimension which is critical in many conflicts.<sup>lii</sup> Various authors acknowledge the importance of these criticisms but they argue that Lederach’s model works perfectly fine for post-conflict settings where the decision-making powers are passed from top-level to middle level as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>liii</sup>

### **The Resolution Process in Turkey**

According to Mehmet Gürses, what lies at the heart of the conflict is the suppression of the Kurdish identity and culture and the denial of the fact that Kurds were a separate nationality.<sup>liv</sup> Starting in 1923, the Turkish state’s engagement with the Kurdish question stood on three pillars: assimilation, repression and containment. But come the 1990s, this strategy started to fail. Kurdish resistance was reaching uncontrollable proportions, and the PKK had turned into a full-fledged insurgent group with the capacity to fight a low-level war without recruitment problems.<sup>lv</sup> This could explain why the Turkish state then opted for a harsher security policy across the region.<sup>lvi</sup> This does not mean, however, that the Turkish state had never tried to negotiate with the PKK before. On the contrary, previous attempts were made during the tenure of President Turgut Özal, with negotiations starting after the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1993. The ceasefire could have been a great chance for both sides to end the war, but the opportunity was ultimately wasted,<sup>lvii</sup> while Özal was an open-minded leader by his predecessors’ standards, he died shortly after talks began and the violence immediately returned.<sup>lviii</sup>

The 1990s also hold a particularly significant place in Kurdish memory, as it was in those years that the Kurdish armed movement began to turn into a social movement among the

Kurdish population at large. The state responded to the ensuing uprisings by repeatedly declaring states of emergency in the region, while forcibly displacing many Kurds from their villages after accusing them of recruiting for and otherwise helping the PKK. There were also many disappearances, kidnappings, extra-judicial killings and incidents of torture, which Ensaroğlu calls “terror from above” by the state as a response to “terror from below” from the PKK.<sup>lix</sup>

Up until the 2000s, Kurds struggled to open a political space for representation in Turkish politics, but their attempts were pushed back by the state. Just as the conflict reached its peak at the end of the 1990s, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya. After he was imprisoned, the Kurdish movement rapidly transformed itself into a political power in Turkey’s Kurdish-dominated regions. The movement dropped the idea of a separate Kurdish state and instead began calling for a semi-federal solution, demanding the decentralization of the Turkish state.

In 2002, The AKP (Justice and Development Party), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to power. Once elected, the AKP set about implementing a conservative agenda, and at the same time, “taboo” topics such as the Kurdish identity and peace negotiations were suddenly open to discussion. This tactic attracted Kurdish votes that had previously gone to other parties, and it helped the AKP secure victory in the 2007 elections. This in turn enabled the party to further consolidate its power, but at the same time gave its leaders enough confidence to proceed with a reform process. This proved critical in cultivating the sense of “ripeness” needed to initiate a “resolution process”. One of the main reasons why we consider this specific period ripe for peace negotiations is that, although the AKP had been ascending as a political power in the Turkish context, it still needed legitimation in the eyes of the European leaders while it still pursued the aim of accession to the European Union. Moreover, in 2007, peaceful mass rallies started taking place in Turkey just before the presidential elections

(Republic Meetings). These were reactions to the AKP which was considered as a party posing a threat against the secular identity of the Turkish nation. At that time the serving President, Ahmet Necdet Sezer commented on AKP's non-secular acts (head-scarf issue among other things) and declared that the Islamic fundamentalist threat against the Turkish Republic was closer than ever.<sup>lx</sup> AKP put forward Abdullah Gül as the candidate for presidency and this also created an uproar among the military, political circles and the society. Gül's wife has been wearing a headscarf and for secularists, this was unacceptable. The Turkish Army even published a declaration from their website (referred to as e-memorandum/ e-muhtıra) stating that they would protect the secular nature of the country. As Turkey's political history has been full of military coups, AKP's position was threatened despite the fact that it was successful in the elections. The AKP needed Western support to hold on to power and in order to do that it had to follow a reformist agenda which was supposed to demonstrate to the outside world that they are in favor of democracy and there is no Islamic fundamentalist threat in Turkey. The Kurds were the perfect allies in a political environment where the Kemalists and the nationalists were trying to curb their political power.<sup>lxi</sup>

Various external dynamics encouraged the government to pursue some sort of resolution. Firstly, it was clear that the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq was there to stay; its leaders were willing to collaborate with the Turkish government, which began to imagine that their own country's Kurdish region could become an ally rather than a perpetual security threat. At the same time, Turkey was cultivating its status as a "rising power" in the Middle East with a view to securing a bigger role in the future politics of the region. This aspiration made solving domestic security problems a major priority. Moreover, despite the outrage of opposition parties such as the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Republican Peoples' Party (CHP), public opinion had turned in favor of peace. The conflict had been going on for

nearly two decades; it had become obvious that Turkey could not win the war by conventional military methods, since the PKK had no problems of recruitment or arms supply and was steadily attracting more and more popular support. Considering the conflict had taken a huge human toll and the Turkish state had set aside an annual \$15 billion over the past 20 years to tackle it, negotiations were obviously considered as a rational thing to do.<sup>lxii</sup> With all these circumstances finally aligned, the mid-2000s seemed like a ripe moment to establish covert or secret communication channels between the two warring sides.

Starting with the 2007 elections, the AKP began to take advantage of the ripeness of the overall political environment. By trying to change the discourse on the Kurdish question, the AKP managed to keep increasing its popularity among religious Kurds and enhancing its voter base while at the same time retaining the approval of the international community, legitimizing itself as a force for peace. The PKK also instrumentalized the peace process in order to gain international legitimacy. The PKK has long been listed as a terrorist organization by the USA and the European Union, heavily curtailing its political options abroad. By willingly entering into negotiations with Turkey, the movement would appear more docile and less warlike, hopefully paving the way for the removal of the “terrorist” label. The prospect of peace negotiations was thus too attractive for either side to pass up; the moment was ripe.

### ***Initial negotiations and the “Kurdish Opening”***

Secret talks are almost a must in any contemporary peace process. Both sides have an interest in keeping their early dealings under the radar, thanks to “both the desire not to accord legitimacy to the other side and the fear of the reaction of supporters”. These early talks are usually “exploratory in nature” and not binding.<sup>lxiii</sup> Initial talks are often secret because they

are deniable any time by any party; as they are exploratory and indirect “feelers”, they can help establish the terms that will be discussed in the future.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Sure enough, when the AKP decided to implement a new policy of negotiation with the PKK, the resolution process also started with secret talks, completely away from the public eye. It is clear that the initial talks were conducted with extreme caution, and there is no credible source that gives the exact start date of the secret negotiations.<sup>lxv</sup> It is said that several meetings occurred in Europe, but these talks are usually referred to as the “Oslo Talks”. The exact number of people involved, their statuses and roles were not shared with the public.

Just as opaque is what these talks were even intended to achieve. According to Amed Dicle, what we do know about the talks clearly indicates that the Turkish state never showed any genuine commitment to the process;<sup>lxvi</sup> Kadioğlu instead, claims that “the secret negotiations clearly indicate that the Turkish government genuinely sought a political resolution”.<sup>lxvii</sup> Although it is hard to draw a definitive conclusion about both sides’ intentions, it is fair to say that they both took a risk simply by agreeing to backchannel communications in the first place. In a highly securitized environment where the PKK had been framed as a terrorist group for many years, the government was essentially putting its political survival on the line; for its part, the PKK risked losing the goodwill of supporters who might have rejected anything that looked like a compromise with the Turkish state. Still, the secrecy of the talks at least provided them with “plausible deniability” for a short period of time.<sup>lxviii</sup> In almost any peace process that begins with backchannel discussions, the general public will become aware of the secret talks sooner or later; sure enough, the transcriptions of Oslo meetings were later leaked to the public in 2011, making it clear that the Turkish state was now treating the PKK as the Kurdish movement’s lead actor.

In parallel with the Oslo Talks, in 2009, the AKP government declared the beginning of a process of reforms with the potential to help resolve the conflict. Officially named the “Democratic Opening: National Unity and Fraternity” in January 2010, this programme is now known as the “Kurdish Opening”.<sup>lxxix</sup> A state TV channel (TRT 6) broadcasting in Kurdish was opened, several departments at universities started teaching in Kurdish, and the existence of a Kurdish Question was openly acknowledged by politicians, including then-Prime Minister Erdoğan himself. The AKP also ended the state of emergency as “a gesture of goodwill” and prepared an amnesty law for PKK fighters.

The government was clearly signaling that it treated these reforms as public diplomacy,<sup>lxxx</sup> but these initiatives were exclusively elite-driven and top-down, and the public remained skeptical about the whole process.<sup>lxxxi</sup> Meanwhile, despite these “gestures”, the PKK and Kurdish activists more generally were still questioning the government’s sincerity. During the rapprochement period, Kurdish identity and freedom of speech were still visibly curbed; Kurdish politicians and journalists were arrested, pro-Kurdish parties were outlawed or criminalized, Turkish opposition politicians constantly referred to the Kurdish movement as “terrorists”, and ceasefires were violated (albeit on a fairly small scale). Yet at the same time, the “peace project” still seemed to be viable. With the outraged mainstream opposition too weak to derail the process, the AKP and PKK proved determined to continue with public gestures of peacemaking. One such move was the return to Turkey of 34 PKK fighters in October 2009, from both the PKK’s base in the Qandil Mountains and the Maxmur refugee camp, both of which are in neighboring Iraq. This unusual scene was shown on every TV station; intended as a spectacle of peacemaking, it backfired, rekindling Turkish nationalist “sensitivities” and compelling the government to take a step back from the process. Shortly afterwards, the process came to a deadlock, and violence resumed in southeastern Turkey.<sup>lxxxii</sup>



The elite-driven process had ultimately proven vulnerable to everyday politics, and to the events that had continued even as the talks proceeded: the banning of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP); the Roboski incident of 2011; the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) trials; and the assassination of three Kurdish activist women in Paris in 2013. The Gezi protests in 2013 also outraged the government, which then started implementing ever more authoritarian policies to curb the opposition. As Turkey was becoming less and less democratic under the elected AKP government, the space in which civil society could openly support the peace process also began to disappear.<sup>lxxiii</sup> These and other events conspired to widen the gap between the two sides. Particularly divisive were the hunger strikes initiated by Kurdish political inmates in Turkish prisons in 2012. The striking prisoners demanded that Abdullah Öcalan be allowed to see his lawyers and convey messages to the PKK. It is said that the then Minister of Justice, Sadullah Ergin, held individual meetings with prisoners to end the strike, something not shared with the public at the time.<sup>lxxiv</sup> As a result of the hunger strikes, among other developments, the communication channels with Öcalan were opened again to rejuvenate the process.

### ***Öcalan's Road Map and the İmralı Meetings***

While Öcalan had prepared a road map for the resolution process well before it hit its stride, that plan was not made public until early 2011.<sup>lxxv</sup> He even met the Chief of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, Hakan Fidan, in December 2012, a meeting that was confirmed by Erdoğan himself.<sup>lxxvi</sup> But Öcalan really came to the fore when he began receiving regular visitors to his prison cell. A committee established by the deputies of the pro-Kurdish Party, BDP (later to become HDP), visited Öcalan at the İmralı Island prison in the Marmara Sea on a number of occasions and mediated between the different segments of

the Kurdish resistance movement. As Yeğen explains, “the state and Öcalan would keep talking, Öcalan would inform the PKK headquarters in Kandil and be informed by them through the BDP deputies visiting İmralı”.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

On January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013, two Kurdish MPs went to İmralı Island to visit Öcalan, which officially started the peace talks, namely the *İmralı Meetings*. Other Kurdish MPs visited throughout February and April. After those meetings, BDP officials then visited the leadership of the PKK and KCK. That same year, the Turkish state officially admitted that negotiations were underway. Another major taboo was broken when the government let Kurdish MPs convey Öcalan’s messages to the symbolically important Newroz celebrations in the city of Diyarbakır that March. In his letter, read out loud in public, Öcalan declared that armed struggle should be a thing of the past and called on the Kurdish movement to opt for a democratic struggle instead. He suggested that PKK fighters retreat from Turkey, that the government make democratic reforms, and that the PKK be integrated into civic and political circles in Turkey. The PKK duly declared a ceasefire on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March.

- Figure 1 Here -

Three stages of the road map<sup>lxxviii</sup>

Peace processes only flourish after ceasefires, and when both actors put confidence-building measures in place.<sup>lxxix</sup> Öcalan’s Newroz call did a lot to soothe the tensions between the Turkish military and the PKK. As Özkahraman argues, “the Turkish government and many of the Turkish and Kurdish public saw Öcalan’s announcement on Newroz and the withdrawal of the PKK as a welcome move.”<sup>lxxx</sup> “For the first time in its history, Turkey was serious and

confident regarding making peace with its Kurds.<sup>lxxxix</sup> This incident was so radical and unprecedented that many treated it as a critical juncture in Turkey's political history.

In late 2013, the PKK stated that they had done their share by withdrawing from Turkey, and that it was time for the Turkish state to make good on its promises;<sup>lxxxii</sup> by that it meant legal reforms to guarantee Kurdish rights under the constitution and make them irrevocable, rather than mere democratization rhetoric unsupported by laws or regulations. There was obviously still deep mutual distrust between the two parties, which the Newroz declaration could not erase. During the peace process, the Turkish state continued building military posts in southeastern Turkey and increasing the number of village guards, indicating that the state was actually considering going back to fighting and increasing its security presence just in case.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

After two years of dialogue process following Öcalan's Newroz declaration, a pivotal encounter took place on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2015. Known as the Dolmabahçe Meeting, this was the first time that representatives from both attended a press conference on the peace process. HDP MP Sırrı Süreyya Önder read from the report of the İmralı Committee and relayed a message from Öcalan to the PKK, calling on the party to hold an extraordinary meeting in Spring 2015 and end the armed struggle in order to arrive at a democratic solution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. AKP Representatives also made declarations underlining that resolution was in sight.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> However, less than a month after the Dolmabahçe Meeting, Öcalan's annual Newroz declaration introduced a precondition for the gathering of the extraordinary PKK Congress: the convening of a truth and reconciliation commission, its members to be selected from among the members of parliament and the monitoring commission. To complicate matters further, Erdoğan declared that he did not agree with the declaration, and he strongly opposed the formation of any sort of monitoring commission for the negotiations.

Elections in 2015 and HDP's rise as a competitor to the AKP completely changed the political atmosphere. It was revealed that the peace process was increasing the popularity of the HDP while at the same time decreasing AKP's nationalist voter base. As the AKP needed parliamentary majority for its agenda to change the parliamentary system to a presidential one, it started prioritizing its election success over peace. Moreover, several bomb attacks on Kurdish activists escalated the tensions between two sides. The PKK killed two policemen on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July in 2015 and the Turkish military started bombing PKK camps in Northern Iraq. This incident is now accepted as the official moment the peace process fell apart. It completely derailed the process and brought back violence that has been more intense than before; in our opinion, it goes well beyond any sort of "stop-start"<sup>lxxxv</sup> dynamic and instead represents full collapse.

### **A Critique of the Resolution Process from a Conflict Transformation Perspective**

The conflict resolution perspective can only do so much to explain why Turkey's resolution process failed; such an analysis would focus on the conditions that fostered a sense of ripeness for negotiations, but it would overlook that these events took place in the context of an asymmetric conflict. Such a critique would shed little light on the relevance of Turkey's geopolitics in the midst of the Syrian conflict and war with ISIS in Iraq, the shifting priorities of both sides throughout the negotiations, and Turkey's own transformation towards a more authoritarian state. Moreover, a resolution analysis cannot assess the importance of various other failures, among them the lack of third party intervention or monitoring, the parties' failure to agree a clear road map, and the absence of any bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding throughout the process. To assess these crucial factors, this section critiques

Turkey's resolution process from a conflict transformation perspective using Lederach's three criteria for a comprehensive peacebuilding framework.

***Peacebuilding must be undertaken simultaneously at numerous levels of society***

From a conflict transformation perspective, it is clear that the main actors in the peace process were then-Prime Minister and now-President Erdoğan, PKK leader Öcalan, the Intelligence Service of Turkey, and the PKK cadre. While pro-Kurdish party representatives and AKP MPs got involved in the process, the evidence shows that they did not participate independently from the decision makers at the very top. For instance, HDP MPs could only meet Öcalan when they were allowed to by the government, while AKP MPs who showed enthusiasm for the peace process were then excluded from the cabinet. Remembering Lederach's pyramid, the top level was extremely powerful and that the interdependence between the top and middle levels ran only in one direction. This was an avoidable mistake but at the same time in Turkish politics, this was very predictable.

In April 2013, Erdoğan appointed 63 people as "wise people" in order to formulate a fact-finding commission that would be responsible for the seven different regions of Turkey. Dispatched to make observations on trips to various locations, they were expected to report back to Erdoğan about their findings after two months. This exercise could be described as "testing the waters", but it was tailored for testing Turkish sensitivities towards the process rather than Kurdish ones. The wise people committee included journalists, authors, actors, academics and public intellectuals who were thought to have the capacity to understand the people's expectations of the peace process. Each commission wrote a report on the public's expectations, but such a strategy could not do much apart from emphasizing how confused people were by the process.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> These reports still have not been shared with the public, and

there is significant doubt about their impact. Nevertheless, it was quite a revolutionary attempt by the Turkish state to engage the general public on an issue which would traditionally remain in the domain of top-down policy making. It was never clear whether the government was genuinely interested in making the peace process participatory by incorporating the public's views on peacebuilding, but the mere fact that such commissions were formed indicated that the state was able to think outside its usual mindset of security and counterterrorism.

The Turkish Parliament also founded a "Resolution Commission" that included ten MPs from the ruling AKP and one member from the pro-Kurdish party (at the time known as the BDP).<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Again, a variety of civil society organisations, political parties, academics and intellectuals were invited to share their thoughts on the resolution process.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> At the end of the Commission meetings, the AKP and the BDP<sup>lxxxix</sup> published their own interpretations of the process, along with a joint report.<sup>xc</sup> The other opposition parties, such as the CHP and MHP, refused to nominate members to this Commission. One of the authors of this paper was invited to provide evidence and comment on peace processes from across the world and answer questions from the Commission's members; the meeting was rather tense, and frequently interrupted by verbal sniping between AKP and BDP members. From beginning to end, whether they were discussing lessons learned from South Africa, Northern Ireland or Colombia, Commission members from the two parties were given to interpreting each and every recommendation from their own political party perspective, acknowledging only those views and lessons that would support their own political stance.

On the other hand, at the middle level, a great many initiatives popped up in all areas of society, with Turkish and Kurdish civil society actors alike entering the political arena to support the peace process. For instance, Women Freedom Assembly was founded in 2015 at Öcalan's request to give women more active roles in peacebuilding, while the Turkey Peace

Assembly was founded by people from all walks of life after a call from the “Turkey is Looking for Its Peace” Conference in 2007. The assembly brought together people determined to break down mutual prejudices between Turkish and Kurdish people, who have been buffeted by war rhetoric for the last 30 years.<sup>xci</sup> Another women’s movement, the Women for Peace Initiative, was founded in 2009 by Turkish and Kurdish feminists who wanted a say in the process. They even organized “peace watches” to monitor the process on the ground in several cities.<sup>xcii</sup> And in 2015, various trade unions, political parties, leftist platforms and organizations also formed the Peace Bloc.<sup>xciii</sup> However, because the actual work of the process was operated from the top down these and other initiatives’ involvement in the actual resolution process was in the end very limited. Although they have organized numerous activities and remain committed to the ideal of peace, they were allowed little leverage, with their reports not taken into account by the process’s core decision-makers.<sup>xciv</sup>

Civil society still did its best to move the needle. Numerous fact-finding missions were mounted by NGOs, dozens of peace process reports were written, conferences and seminars were organized within and outside Turkey. According to the prominent journalist Cengiz Çandar, who took active part in the efforts of resolution of this conflict for many decades, the activities that were happening in the middle level fell into deaf ears.<sup>xcv</sup> If we look at organizations such as the Women for Peace Initiative or the Turkey Peace Assembly, we see activists of all stripes – academics, journalists, artists and other public intellectuals – who wanted to have a say in the process.<sup>xcvi</sup> Most of these civil initiatives took a lessons-learned approach, looking at other successful and unsuccessful peacebuilding projects from all around the world and putting significant time and effort into understand what mechanisms bring sustainable peace. For instance, some diaspora associations organized a number of visits to countries such as South Africa, Colombia and Northern Ireland, bringing activists together to discuss the potential of the peace process in Turkey. The Northern Ireland and

South African cases were constantly discussed on Turkish TV and in newspapers as well as at conferences and workshops, and many reports issued to make policy recommendations to the government. But while these initiatives organized many activities in line with Lederach's framework, such as prejudice reduction workshops, peace and human rights training seminars among others, they ultimately ended up preaching to the choir. They brought together people who already cared about sustainable peace and conflict transformation in Turkey, but they never became the "strategic who" outlined in Lederach's theory. The vertical gap, which Lederach defines as the most common factor in failed peace processes, was there from the beginning – and as the government continued to edge towards authoritarianism, especially after 2013, that gap only widened.

At the grassroots level, meanwhile, plenty of local initiatives sprung up, usually in Diyarbakır and other metropolises where many Kurds have settled after forced or voluntary migration. Usually supported by middle-level civil society organizations or by the pro-Kurdish political party, these organizations made almost no impact on the critical decision-making happening at the top. They were also overwhelmingly Kurdish-led; it is almost impossible to find a local Turkish initiative that was formed specifically to support the peace process. This fact not only underlines the asymmetric nature of the conflict, but also shows which segments of the society wanted or needed "peace" more than others.

Looking at this reality through Lederach's five principles for achieving sustainable peace, it is clear that Turkey's resolution process fell short on many fronts. The process was not comprehensive enough, and the pressure to move it forward was exerted from the top rather than the middle. While the government created a façade of civil initiatives, chiefly the Wise People Commission, their reports were never shared with the public; rather than genuine local engagement committees, they were PR tools. The process also did little, if anything, to foster and strengthen interdependent relationships. On the contrary, its middle and lower



levels were dependent on the top; while actors lower down the pyramid organized numerous activities in parallel with Lederach's doctrine, their influence was minimal to the point of irrelevance. This brings us to Thania Paffenholz's criticism of Lederach's theory. As she confirms, in most peace processes, when the top level offers incentives, the middle-level flourishes; but when top-level actors end negotiations, those at the middle level cannot sustain their efforts. The same held true in the Turkish-Kurdish process. Middle-level initiatives stalled after the process collapsed – and as discussed below, the government even criminalized their activities after the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. The vertical gap, ultimately, could never be closed.

### ***Short-term needs versus long-term vision***

The process proved very fragile in the face of day-to-day politics and international developments. Turkey held a number of elections during the peace process, all of which pushed both sides to put their electoral performance first rather than surrendering some popularity to help reach an agreement. The AKP charted its policy course not according to the need for peace, but in relation to its successes and failures at the ballot box. While a few confidence-building measures were established throughout the process, the mistrust between both sides was never fully dissipated. With regards to strategic focus, the process's elite participants were fundamentally concerned with security rather than conflict transformation; the stress was on the disarmament of a "terrorist organization" and going back to "normal" by ending violence. Structural violence, deep-rooted identity-related problems, human rights violations and truth-seeking efforts were constantly swept under the carpet by Turkish authorities, even as they were frequently brought up by middle-level actors, and Kurdish actors at all levels. The result was a failure to construct "peace infrastructures" that would

make the process less vulnerable to the changing political interests of top-level actors as well as day-to-day developments outside Turkey.

Meanwhile, from on early in the process, the situation of the Kurds in Syria and Iraq shaped both sides' vision of the resolution and a potential settlement. The Kurdish side naturally followed with great interest the rising international interest in the Kurdish-ISIS conflict, which increased the popularity of Kurdish fighters around the world and improved the image of the Kurdish movement overall. Meanwhile, the Turkish side's perception of the Kurds did not change. It has stepped out of the security perspective on a number of occasions, but all in all it stayed loyal to the official policy that has been going on for the last 40 years. The Kurdish side, on the other hand, was skeptical of every Turkish step toward a resolution, and always made a show of its caution for fear of appearing weak. Each and every concession from both sides, then, was shaped by short-term needs and interests rather than a long-term strategy to transform the conflict's fundamental dynamics at all social levels.

From the beginning, the PKK's demands were clear: release political prisoners, improve Öcalan's prison conditions, eliminate the 10% threshold for parliamentary elections (which would enable the movement to secure political representation), introduce mother-tongue education in Kurdish-populated areas, and legalize the PKK while acknowledging its role in the peace process. But the reform package the government eventually offered hardly met these conditions, merely offering a few token changes on cultural and linguistic issues.<sup>xcvii</sup>

The Kurdish side consistently demanded that a third party be involved in the peace negotiations; given the stark asymmetries between the two sides, the rationale went, a neutral outsider could have helped level the playing field in the formal talks and negotiations. But the government rejected the idea until the Dolmabahçe Accord of 2015, which suggested an independent monitoring commission. For the rest of the process, the government remained

intransigent and controlling. In 2014, the AKP formulated two legal frameworks that could constitute the basis of a legal settlement to the conflict. The first gave the National Intelligence Service (NIS) the authority to “negotiate with the terrorists”; next, a law entitled as “Law to End Terror and Strengthen Social Integration” was prepared.<sup>xcviii</sup> Even the names of these laws indicated that the state had no intention of abandoning its security-centric views, and the legal stigmatization of the PKK continued.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish movement in Syria – which is very sympathetic to the PKK – began fighting ISIS in Northern Syria, including on the Turkish border. The Turkish state never wanted to acknowledge that the Kurdish PYD and its armed wing, The People’s Protection Units (YPG) which were discrete movements; instead, they were consistently referred to as wings of the PKK. Their successes against ISIS were viewed as a possible threat to Turkish territorial integrity, as the hypothetical creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria could herald the establishment of a similar region in Turkey. More specifically, the Turkish state did not want to see a PKK-friendly structure just next to the border. Therefore, when ISIS laid siege to the Syrian border town of Kobane in September 2014, the Turkish attitude towards the town’s Kurds became a crucial determinant of the peace process’s future.

Some Kurds were convinced that Turkey had been supporting ISIS and other violent Islamist movements in Syria in hopes of preventing the formulation of an autonomous Kurdish region, and that siege was therefore cause for hope rather than dismay in Turkish nationalist political circles, including the government.<sup>xcix</sup> In October 2014, Kurds all around Turkey participated mass protests against the situation, venting their anger against both ISIS and Turkey. The situation turned violent; dozens of civilians lost their lives, as did some Turkish military personnel. These events made it clear that the government had gradually withdrawn its strategy of “winning hearts and minds of the Kurdish population”, and that the PKK could

not opt for disarmament while their sister organisation was waging a fight of survival against ISIS.

As both sides tried to strengthen their asymmetrical power base throughout the resolution process, the trust between them duly broke down. Factors outside Turkey clearly did not help, but both sides tried to exploit the civil war in Syria for their own ends. The PKK took the view that as the PYD earned goodwill from the US and European Union by fighting against ISIS, its own negotiating position would only be strengthened – that instead of settling for a deal dictated by the Turkish state, it was increasingly in a position to demand more or even revert to its original secessionist agenda. On the other side, the Turkish state saw an opportunity to crush its insurgent enemy via its collaboration with Russia and Iran in the Syrian civil war, which was changing regional dynamics significantly in its favor. In other words, events in Syria gave both sides good reasons to shuffle the cards.

***While broader structural change is envisioned and set in motion, critical issues must be solved***

It can be argued that in the Turkish-Kurdish resolution case, traditional peace negotiations simply never took place. Meetings between various actors from both camps could only be qualified as the precursors to actual peace negotiations, or in peace studies terminology, “negotiations about negotiations”. The conflict’s asymmetrical nature informed every step; the Turkish state never accepted the PKK as an equal partner at the negotiation table, and the “terrorist” epithet it had long attached to the PKK was at no point put aside. Unlike in other cases such as Colombia or Northern Ireland, the government never engaged in open negotiations with the PKK, instead deploying the Turkish Intelligence Service to conduct meetings on its behalf. This meant the correspondence between the two parties was never

conducted within a legal framework that would be binding for eventual full-on negotiations. While the HDP became a participant, the AKP kept its distance, giving itself all the room it needed to step away from the peace process whenever it deemed it necessary. In their discussion of why the process failed, Rumelili and Çelik argue that one of its key shortcomings was “its inattentiveness to the concerns of ontological security and its failure to facilitate opportunities for an agonistic peace”.<sup>c</sup> As they suggest, the talks were confined to closed-door meetings between the PKK and the state, leaving little space for the promotion of alternative routes and narratives that could eliminate ontological insecurities. The conflict was “managed” when it worked for the both sides, but the notion of sustained peace and the transformation of structural inequalities were simply not on the government’s agenda, at least not in the short-term.

What lies at the heart of Lederach’s conflict transformation theory is the transformation of relationships. In protracted conflicts whose opposed parties are highly polarized, issues such as justice and societal integration and reconciliation are all the more important for peace to be established. The idea is not just to eliminate the conflict, but to construct something better in the process. The top-level actors in the Turkish-Kurdish process did not see this as a priority. Although mainstream media was utilized to create a positive atmosphere, deeply embedded structural inequalities went unaddressed, meaning it was only a matter of time before a more polarized atmosphere returned. For instance, starting with the elections of June 2015, Turkish nationalist groups have mounted dozens of attacks against Kurdish individuals, HDP party buildings and property.<sup>ci</sup> As for transforming relationships, it should also be underlined that this whole process was conducted by AKP and the PKK at the top level via proxy negotiators. With major political parties such as the CHP and MHP refusing to take part, to nominated members to investigatory parliamentary commissions or to engage with middle or local-level actors who wanted to make their voice heard to the top-levels, around 30-40% of

the society were denied political representation in the whole process. This meant that horizontal gaps contributed to the process's failure just as much as vertical ones.

According Lederach's model, a conflict's root causes – such as enduring insecurities and displacement – are as important as its manifestations. Addressing these fundamental issues is vital for the success of the process; structural changes should be a matter of debate in peace negotiations, and cannot simply be postponed until an accord has been reached. The Turkish-Kurdish case a perfect example of how an enduring conflict can warp the economic and socio-political fabric of a society. The conflict manifests itself in every realm of life – governance, economic inequalities, the rule of law, human rights, gender inequalities, economic divides and social problems in general. It has driven significant depopulation and deforestation in Southeastern Turkey; state policies have left the region underdeveloped, while harsh state of emergencies have kept the Kurdish population under control as intended.<sup>cii</sup> Moreover, around 4 million people have been displaced throughout the conflict.<sup>ciii</sup> As Çelik states: “The Turkish state's position on the Kurdish Question and internal displacement has always focused on maintaining its hegemony in the conflict zone, securing its territorial sovereignty and national security rather than protecting human security.”<sup>civ</sup> The conflict has also incurred numerous human rights violations over the years, and the rule of law has not been upheld in cases where the state cracked down on Kurdish activism;<sup>cv</sup> the 1990s in particular saw frequent extra-judicial killings and disappearances. These in turn led to the formation of civil society organizations such as Saturday Mothers, who to this day are pushing the state to account for the forceful disappearance of children, or the Human Rights Association, which has documented human rights violations all across Turkey since 1986.

One way for the Turkish state to address these issues would have been to commit to a transitional justice mechanism and form a Truth Commissions. The Kurdish side demanded this throughout the peace process, including it in their suggested roadmaps. Several NGOs,

such as the Memory Center (Hafıza Merkezi), published reports compiling the lessons learned from other similar processes around the world.<sup>cvii</sup> The Democratic Progress Institute in London, founded by a Kurdish diaspora member, also published a report on this issue.<sup>cviii</sup> However, the peace process collapsed before the two sides even began to discuss a viable plan. After the collapse, human security deteriorated sharply in the Kurdish-populated areas of Southeast Turkey, and thousands more people were displaced by the resurgent violence between the Turkish state and the PKK. This is all testament to a sad reality: during the peace process, the policy-makers involved failed to grasp the importance of structural and political violence, and completely ignored the impact of such traumatic events on the Kurdish people's collective memory.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis in this article clearly shows that a conflict transformation model was never adequately applied during Turkey's failed resolution process, which remained a top-down elite-driven initiative throughout. It included only token gestures democratization initiatives, and was highly vulnerable to the self-serving political interests and priorities of the main participants. The segments of society who could have played the role of "strategic who", so important in Lederach's critical yeast theory, were given no room to influence the process, instead acknowledged only in superficial references to their peace activities. The process was opaque, and because it was planned mostly in relation to short-term interests, it never benefited from a clear road map to a sustainable long-term settlement. The most critical issues were not addressed, and by the end of the process, the identity politics and structural inequalities that lie at the heart of the problem remained solid, if not even more so.

The fallout has been appalling. After clashes between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces resumed when the process collapsed, the government simultaneously began to put more pressure on opposition groups. As observers remarked that Turkey was becoming more and more authoritarian<sup>cviii</sup>, the clashes reached a peak point when the urban wing of the PKK declared self-rule in certain districts of Southeastern Turkey, digging trenches and building barricades to defend territory against the security forces. The authorities responded by imposing 24-hour curfews in many cities, measures that prevented people from leaving their homes and obtaining supplies such as food and medicine. It was reported that many civilians lost their lives during the security operations. Starting from 2017, both sides have returned to a posture of “total war”, and what traces of the peace process remained have gradually disappeared.

Other political events have only compounded matters. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016, Turkey witnessed one of the most critical political events in its history when a small segment of the Turkish army mounted a failed coup attempt against the AKP government. The Gülen Movement, a religious cult that shared a close relationship with the AKP until only a few years ago, has been accused of masterminding the putsch.<sup>cix</sup> After the events of 15th July, the government declared a three-month state of emergency, which it would extend twice; this was an opportunity to begin a massive purge of all public institutions, from the judiciary, bureaucracy, police and army to academia, purportedly in the name of eliminating Gülenist infiltrators. Since the purge began, many journalists, academics, and opposition party members have been arrested or persecuted.<sup>cx</sup> Elected politicians from the HDP, including the co-leaders of the party, have been jailed.

What happened in Turkey after the peace process failed raises the question of whether Lederach’s theory is applicable in authoritarian contexts. In line with Paffelholz’s criticism, we need to engage with peacebuilding without romanticizing middle-level actors<sup>cxii</sup>, as their



capacity and leverage is usually determined by rules set by those at the top. In the current state of affairs, Turkish civil society is almost completely dominated by Erdoğan's regime; it is now a criminal act to demand peace or call for the resumption of the peace process. Grassroots organizations have been closed down, and some of their leaders have been arrested. It seems the failure of the peace process has in fact made the political environment worse than it was before. All that said, we know that "peace processes rarely succeed quickly"<sup>cxii</sup>, and it's certainly not impossible that changing regional or national conditions might once again push both sides to reach a mutually hurting stalemate. Yet from a conflict transformation perspective, mid-range and grassroots leadership do not need to wait for that to happen; in Lederach's doctrine, peacebuilding begins well before the official peace process and is not confined to post-conflict reconstruction.

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Figure 1



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<sup>ii</sup> Professor Alpaslan Ozerdem, Dean of the School for Conflict Analysis & Resolution George Mason University.

<sup>iii</sup> Mehmet Gurses. *Anatomy of a Civil War*. (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

<sup>iv</sup> Mehmet Gurses, "Partition, democracy, and Turkey's Kurdish minority." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 16.3-4 (2010): 337-353.

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<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>xxxvii</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Conflict Transformation, Beyond Intractability* (2003). <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation> (Last Access March 2019)

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Cordula Reimann, *Assessing the state-of-the-art in conflict transformation reflections from a theoretical perspective*. Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. (Berlin, Berghof Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004), 10.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Lederach, *Conflict Transformation*.

<sup>xl</sup> Lederach, "The origins and evolution of infrastructures for peace", 9.

<sup>xli</sup> Lederach, *Building Peace*.

<sup>xlii</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>xliii</sup> Lederach, *Conflict Transformation*.

<sup>xliv</sup> Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*.

<sup>xlv</sup> Paffenholz, "International peacebuilding goes local", 15.

<sup>xlvi</sup> John Paul Lederach, "Civil society and reconciliation." *Turbulent peace: The challenges of managing international conflict* (2001): 843.

<sup>xlvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 846.

<sup>xlix</sup> Paffenholz, "International peacebuilding goes local", 22.

<sup>l</sup> We thank the anonymous reviewer for this comment.

<sup>li</sup> Paffenholz, Thania. "Understanding peacebuilding theory: Management, resolution and transformation." *New Routes* 14, no. 2 (2009): 5.

<sup>lii</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>liii</sup> Emkic, Eleonora. "Reconciliation and education in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Cham, Switzerland: Springer* (2018).

<sup>liv</sup> Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*, 2.

<sup>lv</sup> Mesut Yeğen, *The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects*. IAI Working paper 11, (2015): 3.

<sup>lvi</sup> See also M. Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan. "The Kurdish question and Turkey's justice and development party." *Middle East Policy* 13.1 (2006): 102-119; M. Hakan Yavuz, "Five stages of the construction of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 7.3 (2001): 1-24.

<sup>lvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lviii</sup> Cemal Ozkahraman, "Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim of Traditional Turkish Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?." *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 4, no. 1 (2017): 56.

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<sup>lix</sup> Yilmaz Ensaroğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Question and the Peace Process”, *Insight Turkey*, 15:2 (2013): 7.

<sup>lx</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/world/europe/15turkey.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/world/europe/15turkey.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)

<sup>lxi</sup> A prominent Turkish journalist, Cengiz Çandar who worked on Kurdish politics for many years, stats that the secret negotiations have already started in 2006. 2007 is not a magical date however after the elections in 2007, the AKP understood clearly that “it has the government but not the State”. Therefore, it needed to secure its place by keeping the West as a close ally. Çandar also suggests that because the AKP did not have the “political baggage” that the Kemalists had with regards to the Kurdish Question, meaning the same ideological background, it has perceived itself as the sole power to resolve the conflict with the Kurds by using religious references to point out to commonalities rather than differences between Turks and Kurds. Çandar elaborates on these dynamics in his forthcoming book “Turkey’s Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds” (Lexington Books, Kurdish Studies Series, 2019). Interview with Cengiz Çandar 2018/2019.

<sup>lxii</sup> Ensaroğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Question”, 7.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Adrian Guelke, "Negotiations and peace processes." In *Contemporary Peacemaking*, (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008), 63-77.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Jonathan Tonge, *Comparative peace processes*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 17.

<sup>lxv</sup> Yeğen, *The Kurdish Peace Process*, 5; Ensaroğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Question”, 13.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Amed Dicle, *2005-2015 PKK-Turkiye Gorusmeleri: Cozum ile Derinlesen Cozumsuzluk*, (Germany: Mezopotamya Yayınevi, 2017). Dicle provides a pro-PKK account in this book and analyses the peace process from the PKK perspective.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Kadioğlu, "The Oslo Talks, 2.

<sup>lxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>lxix</sup> Köse, "Rise and fall of the AK party’s Kurdish peace initiatives”, 142.

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<sup>lxx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Yeğen, *The Kurdish Peace Process*, 6-7.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> For more information on Turkey's democratic decline see: Bahar Baser and Ahmet Erdi Ozturk. *Authoritarian politics in Turkey: elections, resistance and the AKP*. (London:IB Tauris, 2017).

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Ensaroğlu, "Turkey's Kurdish Question", 14.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Yeğen, *The Kurdish Peace Process*, 7.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Köse, "Rise and fall of the AK party's Kurdish peace initiatives", 143.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Yeğen, *The Kurdish Peace Process*, 8.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Köse, "Rise and fall of the AK party's Kurdish peace initiatives", 144.

<sup>lxxix</sup> Tonge, *Comparative peace processes*, 18.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Ozkahraman, "Failure of Peace Talks", 58. However, authors such as Köse argue that the withdrawal was limited to only 10-20 % of the PKK militants in Turkey. Köse, "Rise and fall of the AK party's Kurdish peace initiatives", 145.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Ozkahraman, "Failure of Peace Talks", 58.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> See Ozkahraman, 2017, 58

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "The Turkish-Kurdish peace process stalled in neutral." *Insight Turkey* 16.1 (2014): 19-27.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Cuma Cicek and Vahap Coşkun. *The Peace Process from Dolmabahçe to Present-day: Understanding Failures and Finding New Paths*. (Istanbul: Peace Foundation, 2016).

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> John Darby and Roger Mac Ginty, eds. *Contemporary peace making: Conflict, violence and peace processes*. (Springer, 2003), 1.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Baskın Oran, *Kürt barışında batı cephesi: " Ben Ege'de akılken..."*, (Istanbul:İletişim, 2014).



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<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The BDP was active on the political scene between 2008 and 2014. It is succeeded by People's Democratic Party (HDP).

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> One of the authors of this article was amongst those academics who took part in this Commission's proceedings.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> 'BDP Kürt Sorunu Komisyon Raporu' [*BDP Kurdish Question Report*], Available online [[https://serdargunes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/bdp-kurt-sorunu\\_komisyonu\\_raporu.pdf](https://serdargunes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/bdp-kurt-sorunu_komisyonu_raporu.pdf)]

<sup>xc</sup> [https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/cozum\\_sureci/docs/cozum\\_kom\\_raporu.pdf](https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/cozum_sureci/docs/cozum_kom_raporu.pdf)

<sup>xc<sup>i</sup></sup> For a detailed discussion on these civil society initiatives see: Yasin Sunca, *Infrastructures for peace in Turkey: A mapping study*, 21 (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2017).

<sup>xc<sup>ii</sup></sup> Sunca, *Infrastructures for peace*, 24.

<sup>xc<sup>iii</sup></sup> The Peace Bloc was found after the peace process was stalled. See: <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/turkey-growing-peace-bloc-resists-regimes-war-drive>

<sup>xc<sup>iv</sup></sup> Sunca, *Infrastructures for peace*.

<sup>xc<sup>v</sup></sup> Author's interview with Çandar 2018/2019.

<sup>xc<sup>vi</sup></sup> Sunca, *Infrastructures for peace*.

<sup>xc<sup>vii</sup></sup> Gunter, "The Turkish-Kurdish Peace", 22.

<sup>xc<sup>viii</sup></sup> Yeğen, *The Kurdish Peace Process*, 10.

<sup>xc<sup>ix</sup></sup> Köse, "Rise and fall of the AK party's Kurdish peace initiatives", 147.

<sup>c</sup> Bahar Rumelili, and Ayse Betül Celik. "Ontological insecurity in asymmetric conflicts: Reflections on agonistic peace in Turkey's Kurdish issue." *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 4 (2017): 280.

<sup>ci</sup> Francis O'Connor and Bahar Baser. "Communal violence and ethnic polarization before and after the 2015 elections in Turkey: attacks against the HDP and the Kurdish population." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 53-72.

<sup>cii</sup> Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War*.

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<sup>ciii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>civ</sup> Ayşe Betül Çelik, "State, Non-Governmental and International Organizations in the Possible Peace Process in Turkey's Conflict-Induced Displacement." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 26.1 (2012): 1-25.

<sup>cv</sup> See Derya. Bayir, *Minorities and nationalism in Turkish law*. (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>cvi</sup> <https://hakikatadalethafiza.org/hakikat-komisyonlari-raporu-cikti/>

<sup>cvi</sup> <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/TRC-Paper-Turkish.pdf>

<sup>cviii</sup> Ozturk, Ahmet Erdi, and İřtar Gözaydın. "Turkey's constitutional amendments: A critical perspective." *Research and Policy on Turkey* 2, no. 2 (2017): 210-224.

<sup>cix</sup> For more information see Simon Watmough and Ahmet Erdi Ozturk. "The future of the Gülen Movement in transnational political exile: introduction to the special issue." *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19.1 (2018): 1-10.

<sup>cx</sup> Baser and Ozturk, *Authoritarian Politics*.

<sup>cx</sup> Paffenholz, "International peacebuilding goes local", 25.

<sup>cxii</sup> Tonge, *Comparative peace processes*, 16.