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Year 2015: the moment of truth for the "*Resolution Process*" of the Kurdish issue in Turkey

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SINCE ITS FOUNDATION, on 26 November 1978, in the remote village of Fis in Turkey's Lice province, the ethnic-secessionist PKK, also known as Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan), a terrorist organization, had its tidal phases throughout three decades and managed to transform itself in line with the conjuncture.

It has first sought to fight for Kurdish people's cultural and social rights and freedoms, then to set up an autonomous Kurdish administration within Turkey, brought together under the framework of "democratic confederalism". In the Middle East, where nation states can no longer sustain, the only convenient solution would be a pyramid-based organization of democratic confederalism (Öcalan, 2004:28). PKK's ultimate goal is to free and unite the Kurdish people living separately in the four parts (Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran) of Greater Kurdistan and find itself a passage to Mediterranean Sea.

PKK and the AKP

The PKK adapted its strategies by then and after the substantial military success of Turkish Armed Forces in the last years of 1990s and the beginning of 2000s, and the US-Israel assisted capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, it tended to pursue a more political strategy synchronized with its reduction of troops in Turkey and the gradual tactical retreat to Qandil Mountain in Northern Iraq. This choice intersected with the new approach against Kurdish uprising movement of the elected government of Justice and Development Party, also known as AKP. The AKP left the traditional securitized approach against the PKK and embarked on a quest to negotiate with the organization in return for non-confrontation and disarmament and demobilization.

The charismatic leader of AKP and currently Turkish President R. Tayyip Erdoğan successfully endorsed and executed this policy of negotiation during his rule for fourteen years and had the majority of Turkish people adapted to it with his carefully selected rhetoric of "*Let no mothers cry*". The AKP government first issued new bills in order to succeed in this so-called "*Resolution Process*" including broadcasting in Kurdish in state-owned television channels, appointing Kurdish translators to courts, renaming Kurdish towns with their ancient Kurdish names, among others, in order to carry out the democratization of Kurdish question while showing their determination. Erdoğan's another bold move was to entitle the Turkish Intelligence Service to negotiate terms with the leaders of PKK in secret meetings under facilitation of a third party, apparently an European country. The minutes and voice recordings of some of these meetings have been revealed later in Turkish media denominating these secret talks as "Oslo Meetings"; however this did not hinder the call of Öcalan to the PKK and Kurds for preparation towards peace during his regular sessions with his lawyers and Kurdish MPs, that took place in the small island of Ğmralı where Öcalan serves his sentence for life. Erdoğan named the process as "*National Unification and Brotherhood Project*" in 2009 and empowered his advisor, Yalçın Akdoğan, and the Minister of State, Beğir Atalay, within a special task force which will officially lay down the foundations to an agreement. However the government was forced to step back on domestic political grounds after PKK's first organized and agreed surrender incident named after the border gate they entered Turkey, Habur, which turned out to be a political festival in Kurdish populated regions. This created a massive nationalistic reaction in both modernist and conservative constituents in other parts of Turkey. Both sides carried the will to proceed with the Resolution Process while having their own agendas and political goals behind the apparent discourse.

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The process went on unnoticed until 21 March 2013, when Öcalan's letter (Akğm) to PKK in order to end the armed dispute and empty their military posts in Turkey and withdraw to Qandil was read out loud by a Kurdish MP and member of negotiation delegation during the celebrations of Newroz, which received positive response from both the Kurdish people and the government. The withdrawal process began immediately by the last period of 2013; however, no credible reports were able to be compiled if it was a partial one or not.

The Resolution Process

The year 2014 was the turning point of the Resolution Process in which took place the most important developments in Turkish political history as regards the Kurdish issue and in the region surrounding Turkey portraying a regional disorder. First and foremost, the Kurdish side, i. e. the legal political extension of PKK, Democratic Peoples' Party, also known as HDP, which is regularly represented within the Turkish parliament by thirty/forty MPs, had made it clear enough that they would not be part of further stall maneuvers by the government due to the noticeably disaccord with the armed faction of the PKK claiming that HDP took a passive stance in the negotiations and the constant pressure stemming from its constituents. The problem with the mentioned situation is the inevitable outcome that all negotiations must come to an end, either in success or failure, and the parties cannot bear the burden forever. The negotiations created a positive atmosphere on one hand, but raised questions by the time on the possible outcomes or whether there will be an outcome or the other. Both parties created serious expectations among their supporters; however, it became too hard to manage these expectations by 2014. Clearly, the Resolution Process had reached its limit of patience, especially from the Kurdish side, which seemed to have taken concrete steps.

As the other party to the negotiations, the AKP had something more important in its plate for the year of 2014, which was the presidential elections in which its leader Erdoğan would run for office. With the constitutional amendments of 2007, Turkey changed its political system from parliamentary to semi-presidential system by abrogating the power of the parliament to elect the president and empowering constituents to elect the president. Since to be the first president elected by popular vote was one of Erdoğan's major aspirations, the government had to be more careful while responding to the dynamics of the Resolution Process in order to not lose votes from conservative and nationalist supporters. However Erdoğan did not have the luxury of a failure in Resolution Process as well, which could end up in losing his constant support of every two out of three Kurds in Southeastern parts of Turkey. As a show of government's determination in the process and as the result of the year's long negotiations, the AKP government enacted "*The Law on Termination of Terror and Strengthening of Social Integration*" on 15 July 2014 (Resmi Gazete). The law stipulated the legal conditions of six main pillars that were laid down in its second Article. After such a strong legislation in return for the Kurdish side's steps so far, the 2014 Presidential Elections in Turkey posed a risk to be a serious indicator to end and withdraw from the negotiations if Erdoğan wouldn't have won. Beside the fact that Erdoğan's charismatic leadership cannot

yet be challenged, by the help of the lack of strong opposition in Turkey, Erdoğan won in the first leg by 52%. This majoritarian indicator was regarded by Erdoğan and AKP as popular approval of the majority not only to his presidency but also to the Resolution Process.

Another turning point in 2014 as regards the Kurdish issue in Turkey occurred not within, but alongside Turkey. In late September of 2014, the Islamic State (IS) attacked and besieged the Kurdish controlled province of Ayn al-Arab adjacent to Turkish border of Syria, as a result of its military advance against the Kurdish PYD/PKK forces in other parts of Northern Syria, also known as Rojava. With the help of its experienced troops that recently withdrew from Turkey, the PKK tried to counter the IS's offensive but it lacked the military knowledge and capability to stop the most effective and complex fighting phenomenon that recently emerged. The siege turned out to create a nation-building historical event and iconized Ayn al-Arab with its newly denominated Kurdish name, Kobane.

During the clashes, the PKK made its most intelligent move when they counter-attacked IS in Sincar Mountains in order to hinder the fall of Yazidi villages nearby, that are populated by the only Christian minority in Northern Iraq. When IS attacked their lands, there was no room for doubt that this offensive would end up with a massive slaughter of Yazidis. As the Northern Iraqi Pashmerga forces failed to protect the Yazidis and vacated Sincar province after they heard IS began its advance, PKK took over and fortificated the chokepoint into Yazidi villages and fought against IS until IS's elements withdrew. The saving of Christian Yazidis turned PKK into the "Oscar Schindler of Middle East" and gave the organization the utmost legitimacy among Western democracies which the PKK has been desperately lacking of and seeking for decades.

After the successful rescue of the Yazidis, the US administration made up its mind and conducted more than 600 surgical air strikes which were coordinated by target designation of US SOCOM Operators on the ground working together with PKK/PYD in Kobane, which resulted in a clear defeat and withdrawal of IS. This military achievement built great self-confidence in PKK and constituted a founding story that will be passed over to new generations as an icon of nation-building.

As a result of the will to die to fight against IS, PKK has successfully opened a window of opportunity probably to replace Turkey's alliance with the West in its war against IS and thus by achieving the rank of the new strategic partner of the West which will help PKK to evolve into the legitimate and capable National Armed Forces of the whole Kurdish entities in Northern Iraq and Northern Syria in the foreseeable future.

These two developments in 2014 gave the Kurdish nationalist political movement a massive boost for 2015 which resulted in the meeting of the historical "Dolmabahçe Accord" on 28 February 2014 in Istanbul's Ottoman Palace of Dolmabahçe between Yalçın Akdoğan, who is the Aide to Prime Minister, Efkan Ala, the Minister of Interior Affairs, and Muhammed Dervişoğlu, the Undersecretary of Public Order and Security and the representatives of HDP consisting of three MPs. The Accord reflected the common will to bring the long-lasted negotiations to an affirmative outcome and disarmament and demobilization of PKK in return for 10 conditions that Sırrı Süreyya Önder, interlocutor between the government and HDP as MP, declared after the meeting (Karaka):

1. The definition and content of democratic politics
2. The definition of the local and national dimensions of democratic resolution
3. The legal and democratic safeguards of free citizenship
4. The relationship of democratic politics with the state and society and headlines for institutionalization
5. The socioeconomic dimensions of the resolution process
6. The evaluation of the relationship between security and democracy in order to protect public order and freedoms
7. The legal safeguards and solutions to the women, culture and ecologic issues
8. Promotion of pluralist democratic understanding towards the concept, definition and recognition of identity
9. Definition of democratic republic, common land and people with democratic criteria, and safeguarding it legally and constitutionally within the democratic system
10. A new constitution which will internalize the abovementioned democratic transformations."

The point of no return

To conclude, although President Erdogan called out his objection to the conditions mentioned by HDP and pointed out that the Turkish side had a different text of understanding in its presence in Dolmabahçe, it is clear that the Kurdish side had already crossed the point of no return and perceive the abovementioned conditions as given in order to reach a peaceful resolution. As a result of the Dolmabahçe Accord, Abdullah Öcalan made a direct call to the PKK on 21 March 2015 in his letter which was read by Sırrı Süreyya Önder to lay down arms and call for a congress to decide on disarmament and end the dispute for the first time in PKK's history (Bugün).

The PKK currently has *de facto* authority in many Kurdish populated provinces in Southeastern Turkey. It has its own judiciary, own law enforcement, and collects tax under different forms. If the HDP would succeed to overcome the national electoral threshold of 10% in the upcoming parliamentary elections on 7 June 2015, it will gain more seats than it ever did and could become a candidate for a coalition partner if AKP fails to reach the majority to form the government alone. Current polls show HDP over 11%, which is another factor indicating the success of the Kurdish side not only in negotiations, but also in perception management. Last, but not least, for the last decade, the Kurdish identity and nationalist awareness under PKK's flagship has been internalized by the majority of the Kurdish people so much, that it would not be assertive to claim that the Kurds of Turkey had passed the point of no return towards self-rule. That is why the year 2015 would play a crucial role in defining the future of the relationship and will be the moment of truth if the conditions agreed upon would fail to be fulfilled. ■

"ARTICLE 2(1). THE GOVERNMENT SHALL CARRY OUT THE FOLLOWING DUTIES WITHIN THE SCOPE OF RESOLUTION PROCESS.

a) It shall determine the steps to be taken in order to terminate the terror and strengthen the social integration in political, legal, socioeconomic, psychological, cultural, human rights, security and disarmament fields and other matters in relation to these.
b) It shall decide to engage into contact, dialogue, to hold meetings and perform other similar duties with domestic and foreign individuals, institutions or entities and shall commission individuals, institutions or entities to carry out these duties.
c) It shall take the necessary precautions in order to provide for the return of the members of the organization who laid down arms and for their re-participation into social life and their adaptation.
d) It shall inform the public in time and correctly on the practice of the above mentioned duties and measures taken that are set forth in this law.
e) It shall observe the results of the practices and provides for the coordination between relevant institutions.
f) It shall enforce necessary legislative regulations."

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