

Center for American Progress



The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict

By Max Hoffman August 2019

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Introduction and summary

The past five years have seen dramatic shifts in U.S. and Turkish policy toward Kurdish political and military actors, both within Turkey and in neighboring Syria and Iraq. These shifts were driven by a complex convergence of domestic Turkish political trends and a rapidly shifting regional picture. During this period, Turkish policy has oscillated from engagement with Kurdish players in pursuit of peaceful rapprochement to hard-edged repression at home and military intervention abroad. Meanwhile, the United States has slowly abandoned its previous hands-off policy toward Kurdish nonstate actors to adopt a halting, ad hoc policy of engagement with leftist Kurdish elements in Syria, driven primarily by the tactical military requirements of a laser-focused campaign to eradicate the Islamic State (IS). This report traces the policy shifts that have taken place since the Center for American Progress last studied the issue in depth in July 2014.¹

From 2013 to 2015, the Turkish government intensified its efforts to resolve its long-running conflict with the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). During those years, Turkey and the PKK maintained a ceasefire while negotiating to secure the PKK's military demobilization and the normalization of Kurdish politics within Turkey. While the Turkish state had intermittently negotiated in secret with the PKK since 2006, the new effort was more public and concerted than anything that had come before. The efforts to secure a modus vivendi with Kurdish actors held great promise, with the potential for important political, strategic, and economic benefits if a lasting peace could be achieved. But the talks were unfolding alongside regional upheaval, with Syria gripped by war and Iraq thrown back into chaos by the rise of IS. Amid this tumult, the Syrian regime had withdrawn from three majority-Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria, leaving the areas to Kurdish militias, which soon found themselves fighting for survival against an ascendant IS.

The Kurdish enclaves in Syria were dominated by the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Ankara viewed with mistrust. Despite the PYD's ties to the PKK, in the context of the peace negotiations, Turkey hosted PYD leaders in Ankara on several occasions for discussions to resolve border issues

and, some hoped, to bring the Kurdish forces into the overall effort to overthrow Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. But Turkey came to view the PYD as a threat as it won more influence and, eventually, U.S. military support in its fight against IS. The PYD's militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), would quickly become the most effective ground force fighting IS and the centerpiece of the U.S.-led counter-IS campaign. Meanwhile, Turkey's domestic Kurdish political party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP), overcame continued political repression to mobilize Kurds and liberals behind a charismatic young leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, whose rise came to threaten Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political ambitions. Eventually, the Turkish-PKK peace talks stalled in the face of these regional dynamics and Turkey's domestic political pressures, and Ankara dropped its engagement in favor of a hardline policy of opposition to Kurdish political and military gains in both Turkey and Syria.

In July of 2015, the ceasefire fell apart and the PKK conflict resumed. The reasons for the resumption of hostilities are discussed in depth below, but Erdoğan's domestic political imperatives, the Turkish state's fear of Syrian Kurdish autonomy, and local dynamics in southeastern Turkey combined to undermine the peace process. The fighting since 2015 has taken a tremendous toll, killing at least 4,397 people,² leveling large parts of majority-Kurdish cities, and displacing some 350,000 civilians.³ The political ramifications have been equally dire, contributing to deep polarization, political repression, and human rights abuses. Tens of thousands of Turkish citizens—many of them Kurds—have been jailed on often dubious terrorism charges, including Demirtaş and many other duly elected Kurdish political leaders. The draconian state response has left little room for Kurdish political expression.

Given the violence since July 2015, it might seem like a strange time to revisit the prospects for a peace process. Attitudes have hardened on both sides, narrowing the space for compromise, and many potential peacemakers are in prison. But because the cost of the conflict is so high, the incentives should be strong to de-escalate, and the concessions that could markedly improve the atmosphere are easy to identify. While a resolution of the conflict is as distant as ever, an easing of tensions and, potentially, a ceasefire could be achievable. The PKK has seen its military capability degraded, and insurgent attacks have decreased in frequency and intensity. President Erdoğan can effectively rule by decree and must find new supporters to secure reelection in 2023; the nationalist pivot he undertook after June 2015 has largely run its course. With the current economic crisis, the Syrian refugee issue, and his own harsh rhetoric eroding his popularity, President Erdoğan has the motive and means to attempt a bold about-face to try to create new political space. Finally, Turkey is

increasingly isolated internationally, embroiled in disputes with most of its neighbors and its traditional security partners. An easing on the Kurdish front would help to relieve pressure on an overstretched military, intelligence, and diplomatic corps.

This report assesses the reasons for the collapse of the last Turkish-Kurdish ceasefire, the current impasse and prospects for moderation, the regional factors at play, and what must be considered for a potential new peace process to take shape.

The breakdown of the peace process

The peace process fell apart in July 2015. The reasons for the resumption of hostilities are complicated and highly contested, but a combination of Erdoğan's domestic political imperatives, the Turkish state's fear of growing Syrian Kurdish autonomy, PKK opportunism or hubris, chaos sowed by IS, and local dynamics in southeastern Turkey undermined both the negotiations and the ceasefire. Domestically, the June 2015 elections saw the HDP win 80 seats in Parliament, playing a crucial role in denying Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) an absolute majority in Parliament for the first time. Demirtaş and the HDP campaigned explicitly against Erdoğan's rule, specifically his desire to move the country to a strong presidential system in which he would control all executive branch institutions and have sweeping power over the judiciary.⁴ Erdoğan saw his political ambitions at risk and began to court the anti-Kurdish nationalist right.

Meanwhile, in Syria, the YPG had gained the edge against IS with the support of the United States, taking the strategic town of Tal Abyad on June 15, 2015, thereby linking two of three Kurdish cantons in northern Syria.⁵ The capture of Tal Abyad was a serious blow to IS, but Turkish officials reacted with alarm, fearing the creation of a permanent, autonomous Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. Turkish leaders believed such a development could foment separatism within Turkey and offer strategic depth to the PKK.⁶ Many Kurds in southeastern Turkey were deeply invested in the fate of the Syrian Kurdish cantons, a political and emotional commitment that was visible in urban graffiti, public protests, and through the dozens of funerals held for Turkish Kurds killed fighting to defend the Syrian Kurdish enclaves from IS.⁷ Turkey's refusal to aid the Syrian Kurds—and Ankara's apparent sympathy for some jihadist Syrian rebels at odds with the YPG—was a consistent point of tension, sparking violent protests from Kurds in Turkey.⁸

Tensions increased during a tense Turkish electoral campaign in spring 2015, one punctuated by repeated attacks on HDP party offices and the bombing of an election-eve rally in Diyarbakir that left four dead and more than 400 injured.⁹ Across the majority-Kurdish areas of southeastern Turkey, young Kurds—emboldened by the gains in Syria,

furious with Ankara's refusal to help the Syrian Kurds against IS, and likely encouraged by the PKK—erected barricades in urban centers and clashed with security forces.¹⁰ Gönül Tol, founding director of the Middle East Institute's Center for Turkish Studies, summed up the situation in May 2015 as these events gathered steam:

[The] relative democratization and the partial withdrawal of the Turkish security forces have opened up a democratic space for the PKK in the country's southeast. Quasi-state structures with legal and fiscal trappings such as courts and tax collection centers have emerged. The PKK has also stepped up recruitment of militants and has enlarged its insurgency capacity in cities via its Patriotic Revolutionist Youth Movement (YDGH).¹¹

CAP researchers saw firsthand the absence of state security forces from some southeastern urban centers as the central government allowed the restive municipalities to police their own communities; this unstated policy of noninterference might be unremarkable in many federal states, but it was astonishing in the Turkish context. Eventually, angered by the government's harsh turn following the June elections, Kurdish leaders in these areas would declare autonomy from the Turkish state.

The declaration of autonomy, likely combined with the HDP's threat to Erdoğan's political dominance, ended the security forces' hands-off policy for urban areas in the Southeast. When the security forces returned to the cities, they came with heavy weapons. Much ambiguity remains about the spark that reignited the war—the murder of two Turkish policemen in Ceylanpınar on July 22, 2015, which the PKK initially claimed but subsequently disavowed. The men accused of the crime were eventually acquitted due to a lack of evidence.¹² Speculation about possible conspiracies behind the incident will undoubtedly linger, but the response from both the Turkish state and the PKK illustrates that, by that point, key decision-makers on both sides had lost the political will to maintain the delicate peace process.

The urban guerilla war that ensued brought what had previously been a largely rural insurgency war to the cities with startling brutality.¹³ It quickly became clear that some elements on both sides had used the peace to prepare for war, with the security forces continuing to build outposts and roads to improve their position while the PKK stashed arms and supplies. According to the International Crisis Group's conservative tally, at least 4,397 people have been killed in fighting or terror attacks since July 2015, including 464 civilians, 1,166 Turkish security personnel, 2,544 PKK militants, and 223 unidentified casualties.¹⁴ Large sections of Kurdish cities and towns in Diyarbakır,

Silopi, Cizre, Mardin, Şırnak, and Hakkari were destroyed as Turkish security forces used tanks, airstrikes, and artillery to defeat the insurgents, displacing some 350,000 civilians in the process.¹⁵ In the face of this draconian response, the European Union (EU) and the United States issued only pro forma condemnations of the violence, unwilling to endanger tense discussions with the Turkish government over the Syrian war and associated migration crisis.

Alongside the human costs of the fighting, the political ramifications have been disastrous for Turkey. Tens of thousands of citizens, journalists, academics, political activists, and elected officials have been jailed on often dubious terrorism charges.¹⁶ Hundreds of Kurdish news and media outlets have been shut down. As of 2019, 10 HDP parliamentarians—including Selahattin Demirtaş—and 46 co-mayors remained in prison, as well as thousands of party activists, while the Turkish government has removed elected mayors and installed government-appointed trustees in all but four of 102 HDP-controlled municipalities.¹⁷ Collectively, the Turkish state response has dramatically reduced the peaceful paths for Kurdish political expression and largely criminalized Kurdish journalism and dissent.

Why the peace process failed

When revisiting the breakdown of this process, a few points emerge. First, Erdoğan did go further than any previous Turkish leader in his attempts to reach a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question. He oversaw improved atmospherics, rhetoric, and economic conditions in the Southeast, particularly by helping open up trade with northern Iraq. He allowed the expansion of Kurdish language rights and, for a time, permitted Kurdish-run municipalities to run their affairs with minimal central government interference—though some would note that these should be basic legal rights for all citizens of Turkey. To preserve the fragile ceasefire, Erdoğan consistently rejected the Turkish military's repeated requests to conduct anti-PKK military operations.¹⁸ But the lack of trust between the parties meant that the most crucial step for peace—the withdrawal and/or disarmament of PKK fighters—was never taken.¹⁹

This impasse is tied to a second key point: the secrecy and centralized handling of the peace process by the government. The PKK wanted legal assurances from Parliament regarding its safety during a withdrawal, but the AKP had negotiated outside the auspices of Parliament and never institutionalized the process.²⁰ Through the peace process, government and intelligence officials would meet with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in his prison, with HDP leaders acting as mediators and go-betweens, conveying messages to the PKK's military leadership in Kandil.²¹ The government wanted it both ways, seeking

to ease tensions and earn Kurdish support without risking the nationalist backlash that had undermined earlier attempts at peace. The 2013–2015 process included more work to persuade the public than a prior attempt from 2009 to 2011, but it was still a closely guarded process on uncertain legal footing. Indeed, rivals within Turkey’s judiciary tried to arrest Hakan Fidan, Turkey’s intelligence chief, in 2012 for his role in earlier secret negotiations with the PKK.²² The move against Fidan—as well as leaked recordings of secret negotiations in Oslo between Turkish intelligence and the PKK—is believed to have been orchestrated by Gülenist security officials opposed to peace talks with the PKK, reflecting the divisions within the Turkish state and the governing conservative political alliance when it comes to the Kurdish question.²³

The AKP’s desire to maintain its appeal with both Kurds and Turkish nationalists illustrates a third point: the failure to differentiate between terrorism and legitimate Kurdish political expression, as well as the associated failure to build a viable negotiating partner. The government wanted to win Kurdish votes but feared being seen as soft on the PKK, so it did not want to strengthen civilian Kurdish interlocutors, such as the HDP, who might appeal to both PKK sympathizers and those critical of the group’s violent tactics, thereby siphoning Kurdish votes away from the AKP. The government therefore elevated Öcalan, despite the fact that the HDP was the only legal representative for the Kurds. The actual PKK military cadres, as well as the YDGH, were controlled by a separate decision-making structure in Kandil—one long isolated from Öcalan, if deferential to him. Politically, the AKP did not want to negotiate directly with groups it labeled as terrorists in Kandil, but it also did not care to build up the HDP as a legitimate partner in the public eye, given the fact that the HDP was a political rival for Kurdish votes as well as a party to the negotiations. This political reality led the government to negotiate primarily with Öcalan, who the state could control but who lacked operational command of the PKK military cadres. Meanwhile, the government sought to weaken the HDP by positioning the party as merely an intermediary to the PKK leadership in Kandil, ignoring the HDP’s potential to serve as a conduit to Kurdish society at large and a legal, peaceful outlet for Kurdish political activity. To be fair to the Turkish government, the relationships between these various entities is murky. The PKK helped set up, train, and arm the YDGH.²⁴ But the story is different with the HDP; while the groups share many goals and rhetoric, the HDP consistently emphasized peace and sought to reduce tensions, for example, playing peacemaker with the YDGH during protests in 2014 and 2015.²⁵ In the end, the YDGH ignored HDP leaders, hinting at a distance between the groups. For its part, the PKK likely grew concerned about Demirtaş’ popularity after June 2015, perhaps fearing that further peaceful political success would undermine

the guerillas' influence. Absent definitive proof, the political evidence suggests that HDP is not fully subservient to the PKK, even if they share overlapping goals and constituencies as well as some organizational links.²⁶ But their shared base of support means that the HDP cannot easily condemn the PKK in absolute terms and that the HDP was punished by voters in the November 2015 rerun elections for the PKK's culpability in the resumption of the conflict.

Fourth, had the Turkish government been able to pursue peace absent other political considerations, it might have sought to build peaceful alternatives like the HDP by accentuating the ideological and tactical differences between the various Kurdish groups. But the peace process became a threat to Erdoğan's personal ambitions, and he eventually sought to lump the HDP and PKK together in pursuit of electoral advantage. Erdoğan's rhetoric on the peace process shifted in parallel to the rise of the HDP and Demirtaş in the polls as well as their opposition to the proposed presidential system—specifically, a March 2015 speech in which Demirtaş vowed that the HDP would not make Erdoğan president.²⁷ This visibly enraged Erdoğan, who turned on the HDP-AKP peace talks—by then housed at Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul—as they neared a conclusion.²⁸ Erdoğan seemed to take the HDP's opposition as a personal affront, apparently believing that he had given the Kurds more than any previous Turkish leader and therefore deserved unquestioning support. Shortly thereafter, the HDP's success in the June 2015 elections confirmed his fears, and Erdoğan saw his political dream to build himself a strong presidential system placed at risk.

Fifth, the Syrian Civil War presented a crucial outside stressor on an already delicate process. As noted above, Kurdish gains in Syria increased the Turkish government's fear of permanent Kurdish autonomy, undermining Ankara's commitment to the ceasefire. Those same Kurdish gains also caused some Kurds to adopt maximalist demands or unrealistic expectations about their influence, losing sight of the fragility of the peace process and the asymmetry of power with the Turkish state. But what is often forgotten is the role of IS in deliberately sabotaging the peace. In the early years of the Syrian war, Erdoğan and then-Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, both for humanitarian reasons and to support the rebellion against Assad, had adopted a hands-off border security policy, allowing people and goods to move freely. IS exploited this vulnerability, and by 2015, the group had thoroughly infiltrated Turkey, establishing networks of supply and support. This allowed the jihadist group to repeatedly stoke the fires of Turkish-Kurdish conflict with terror attacks at crucial junctures, playing on the cleavages in Turkish society as they had previously exploited sectarian fault lines in Syria and Iraq. The IS bombing of a Kurdish peace rally in the Turkish border town of Suruç on July 20, 2015,

was instrumental in reigniting the conflict, with the PKK claiming that the Ceylanpınar murders were a retaliation for this tragedy.²⁹ A subsequent October 2015 bombing of another Kurdish peace rally in Ankara came just as the peace movement seemed to be gathering strength, leading to more violence and recriminations.³⁰

Finally, the government's security response in late 2015 was draconian and misguided. The Turkish government can legitimately argue that it had to reassert its authority over the areas that had unilaterally declared autonomy absent any democratic process. But there was no justification for the way in which it was done: with the use of heavy weaponry. The Turkish state responded with disproportionate force in southeastern Kurdish cities, prompting further violence and crippling the prospects of a political resolution. It is possible that this was not entirely a top-down decision taken by Erdoğan himself; there are indeed factions within the state security apparatus, and many soldiers and gendarmes displayed ultranationalist symbols and slogans in the campaign in the Southeast. In addition, as mentioned, Gülenist officials had at several points sought to sabotage the peace process.³¹ But ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the security forces must rest with the government, and Erdoğan himself—through his rhetoric and his decisions—sought to instrumentalize the conflict for personal political gain. Instead of trying to promote peaceful, alternative pathways for Kurdish political expression, his government suppressed it, polarizing the country and making his equation of the HDP with the PKK a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The current impasse and prospects for moderation

Many of the factors that crippled the last peace process remain today. There is the lack of reliable, acceptable interlocutors with whom the Turkish state could negotiate. The state crackdown—and the pro-government media’s vilification of Kurdish politicians—has marginalized the leaders and institutions that might be capable of delivering a political settlement.³² There is also the issue of overcentralization of decision-making. The advent of an all-powerful presidency complicates efforts to build a broad, inclusive peace process, though this concentration of power also means that President Erdoğan can deliver sweeping changes to government policy with the snap of his fingers. And there is the political problem of Erdoğan’s reliance on Turkish nationalist support, which comes in several forms. Formally, the AKP must maintain its alliance with the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to hold a parliamentary majority. Informally, President Erdoğan likely feels pressure to present public policies that appeal to nationalist voters, as he hopes to hold together the right-wing constituency that won him the presidency. And less visibly, Erdoğan may need to manage factions within the state security apparatus that favor a hardline response to the Kurdish question.

None of these factors seem to signal a softening on the Kurdish front. At one level, then, the prospects for peace have rarely seemed more remote. The bloodshed and urban destruction, as well as the pro-government press’ ubiquitous vilification of the HDP as terrorist-sympathizers, have stoked nationalist fervor and fury on both sides, dramatically shrinking the political space among both constituencies for any compromise or easing of tensions. Meanwhile, the jailing of Kurdish leaders and activists has undermined many of the very political interlocutors with whom the state would need to negotiate to achieve a settlement. These detentions have continued apace, with dozens of HDP members and local activists arrested in July 2019.³³

However, because the costs of continued conflict are so high, holding back economic growth and shattering tens of thousands of lives, the incentives to de-escalate are strong. Moreover, because the situation is so dire and the political repression is so severe, the concessions that could markedly improve the atmosphere are easily identifiable. Most Turkish citizens—particularly Kurds in the Southeast—are tired of the fighting

and draconian security measures. Regionally, IS has lost much of previous its ability to launch attacks and play spoiler within Turkey, while the Syrian war has entered an uneasy stasis. While the bloodshed, regional upheaval, and transformation of Turkey's domestic political structures in the past five years have made a resolution of the conflict far more difficult, they may have also lowered the bar for a general easing of tensions and, potentially, a ceasefire.

Opportunities for a softening of tensions

On the military front, the PKK has been dealt severe setbacks, and both insurgent attacks and casualties were down dramatically in 2018 and, thus far, in 2019.³⁴ Turkey's adoption of armed drones has shifted the tide further against the group, broadening the scope of surveillance and allowing for increasing numbers of government air-strikes.³⁵ But a final military resolution is unlikely, given the sympathy for the insurgency among a Kurdish population exposed to generations of Turkish state repression, the mountainous terrain, and the strategic depth offered to the insurgency by strongholds in neighboring Iraq.

Politically, several factors could augur an easing of tensions. Under Turkey's new presidential system, President Erdoğan can effectively rule by decree, with a constitutionally weakened and politically pliant Parliament as well as a cowed judiciary. In order to win reelection—the next vote is scheduled for 2023, though the president can call early elections—Erdoğan must secure support of 50 percent plus one vote.³⁶ At this point, the nationalist pivot he undertook after June 2015 may have largely run its course. There are few additional votes to be won, and if anything, President Erdoğan may now view the MHP as a greater potential political threat than ally. It is hard to imagine what further hawkish, anti-Kurdish steps Erdoğan could take without completely destroying the country's social fabric and economic prospects. With the economic crisis and the Syrian refugee issue eroding his popularity, President Erdoğan now faces a situation where continued stagnation may only bring the slow erosion of his personal authority, political brand, and party support. In the past, he has consistently chosen the path he thought would best advance his personal political ambitions; therefore, he may opt for a bold about-face to try to create new political space. If Erdoğan believes that he can win over significant numbers of Kurdish voters—or comes to view his nationalist allies as too unreliable—he may pivot back to the Kurds to try to win reelection, a strategy that would necessarily require a new effort at peace.

Still, such a move faces large obstacles and is far from certain. First and foremost, President Erdoğan has so thoroughly alienated Kurds over the past five years that Kurdish voters and political leaders may ignore such a blatantly instrumental political maneuver. A nationwide Center for American Progress poll conducted by Metropoll in May and June 2018 showed that just 33 percent of self-identified Kurds approve of Erdoğan, while 56 percent disapprove; among self-identified Kurdish nationalists, just 2 percent approve, while 90 percent disapprove.³⁷ Furthermore, a June 2019 poll showed that just 24 percent of Kurds said they would support the AKP in a snap election.³⁸ During Istanbul's mayoral election rerun in June 2019, the AKP's last-minute play to peel away Kurdish voters by releasing a letter purported to be from jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan calling on Kurds to "remain neutral" had little effect, with Kurdish voters breaking heavily for the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu.³⁹ While the AKP's last-minute appeal was seen as insincere and instrumental by Kurdish voters in Istanbul, a more credible effort might succeed in winning some conservative Kurds back to the AKP fold. At the same time, however, nationalist, anti-Kurdish voters—mainly represented by the MHP—who have sided with Erdoğan against CHP opposition candidates in the past might break against the AKP leader if he appears as soft on Kurds. President Erdoğan will undoubtedly size up these uncertain political calculations; if he sees no electoral benefit in a Kurdish pivot, he is unlikely to make the effort and therefore risk losing the support of some on the anti-Kurdish nationalist right. In many ways, this calculation is the key factor determining the prospects for peace.

The HDP's durable success in the face of profound Turkish state repression is therefore another factor militating against an Erdoğan moderation. The HDP's initial success in the June 2015 elections was probably the result of the easing of restrictions on its grassroots organization in the Southeast, the personal charisma of Demirtaş, tactical voting by liberal Turks, and widespread Kurdish anger at the Turkish government's refusal to come to the aid of Syrian Kurds fighting IS in the northern Syrian city of Kobani.⁴⁰ In that way, the peace process helped make the HDP by allowing it to organize more freely and by softening its image among liberal Turks. Paradoxically, the HDP's continued success in clearing the electoral threshold in November 2015 and in subsequent elections—even after the resumption of the PKK conflict and intensified state repression—could be attributed in part to the government crackdown. The violence, curfews, and arrests elevated ethno-political identification and eroded AKP support among conservative Kurds. In 2011, the arrest of thousands of people accused of being part of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) network—an umbrella group advocating for the PKK's agenda—may have also inadvertently helped the HDP to build its own, more independent organizational capacity.⁴¹ The KCK had apparently competed with the HDP at the local level despite their shared pro-Kurdish sentiments,

as the HDP did not fall under the KCK structure.⁴² Beyond that, the KCK arrests may have also opened up space for the HDP to advance a more moderate pro-Kurdish line, one that appealed to more than just avowed Kurdish nationalists and that won over increasing numbers of Turkish liberals.⁴³ The HDP's survival means that the vehicle within which to negotiate and elevate peaceful political action already exists but must be freed to advance that goal. Opening up space for the HDP does carry potential political costs for President Erdoğan and the AKP, unless they can convince a sufficient number of Kurdish voters of their credibility in pursuing peace to counterbalance the likely loss of right-wing Turkish nationalist support.

Forecasting this complex political environment is nearly impossible, but President Erdoğan has the means—and some motive—to quickly reorient his political axis. The economic crisis is a real threat to his electability, and the Kurdish conflict carries a hefty direct price tag as well as opportunity costs, precluding development in the Southeast and imposing a massive political risk premium on the overall economy. The security situation in southeastern Turkey has improved but is far from quiet.⁴⁴ An easing of tensions could have important benefits for all citizens of Turkey, many of whom delivered a message in the nationwide local elections that they are tired of the government's divisive, draconian approach to alleged terrorism and political dissent. Finally, a moderate turn could serve Erdoğan's personal political interests, but it also carries huge risks for him. An easing of tension might lessen the ethnic divergence visible in Turkish voting patterns, potentially allowing President Erdoğan, over time, to win back conservative Kurdish votes on the margins. However, it might also lose him conservative Turkish nationalist votes. On balance, such a pivot remains unlikely but, perhaps, no longer impossible.

The regional picture

The Turkish domestic context is inextricably linked to the dynamic regional picture. President Erdoğan and his government clearly think of Kurdish leftist groups in southeastern Turkey, Syria, and Iraq as one cohesive problem set, hammering home their view that the PKK and PYD are one organization. This also partially explains Turkey's regular military interventions in northern Syria to limit Kurdish influence, which have been justified on the grounds of domestic security, even if other considerations also play a role. The repression of Kurdish political expression is interlinked with these military interventions. For example, when the Turkish military seized the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Afrin—in what was dubbed “Operation Olive Branch”—domestic critics of the operation were arrested and prosecuted. President Erdoğan continues to threaten a military invasion of the remaining Kurdish-dominated areas to eliminate the YPG/PYD presence, vowing to destroy what he calls a “terror corridor” in northern Syria.⁴⁵ A third Turkish incursion into Syria—likely aimed at Tal Abyad and meant to divide the remaining areas of YPG/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control—remains quite possible and would obviously put an end to any near-term hopes for an easing of tension.

But while Turkish security officials have settled back into anti-Kurdish dogmatism—long the normal stance for the Turkish state⁴⁶—there are persuasive foreign policy arguments in favor of a more moderate policy. Indeed, the abandonment of Turkey's moderate course toward the Syrian Kurds was a contributing factor to the resumption of hostilities, as mentioned above. More broadly, the PKK conflict has long been a vulnerability that foreign powers—primarily Syria, Iran, and Russia—have used to pressure Turkey. For example, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, allowed PKK training camps in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley and used the group to pressure Turkey in disagreements over water rights to the Euphrates River.⁴⁷ Both Iran and Russia have been credibly accused of providing assistance to the PKK as a lever against Turkey.⁴⁸ President Erdoğan aspires to make Turkey into a global power in its own right, one more independent of foreign influence.⁴⁹ A ceasefire, let alone a negotiated disarmament, is the best way to address the Turkish state's long-standing vulnerability on the Kurdish question and advance Erdoğan and the government's ambitions.⁵⁰

Despite Turkish concerns, U.S. officials say that there have not been meaningful cross-border attacks from the northeastern Syrian Kurdish cantons controlled by the SDF, of which the YPG is the largest force.⁵¹ Whether this is due to the United States' restraining influence on the SDF, which it helped to train and equip, or unilateral YPG/SDF restraint is unclear. YPG would seem to have every motive not to provoke Turkey. For its part, Turkey maintains that the YPG is no different than the PKK and that the SDF is just a ploy to cover up those connections. Turkey has repeatedly threatened invasion if the YPG is not disarmed and removed from within 30 kilometers of the border, a buffer zone that Turkey says it will secure with its own troops.⁵² For the SDF and YPG, who lost tens of thousands of fighters protecting and retaking these areas from IS, such a zone is unacceptable and would represent a complete strategic capitulation. The SDF/YPG has signaled pragmatism, saying it is prepared for any Turkish military moves but hopes for a diplomatic resolution.⁵³ Some reports indicate that the Kurdish forces continue to reject the idea of Turkish troops patrolling a buffer zone, even with U.S. accompaniment, while others suggest that they would accept a limited zone provided the Americans guarantee their security from the Turkish military and its proxies.⁵⁴ The negotiations over a buffer zone continue to this day, punctuated by periodic Turkish threats of unilateral military intervention.⁵⁵

However, a buffer zone is unlikely to improve Turkey's security, and Ankara would be better served pursuing a diplomatic détente with the YPG/SDF. Functionally, a buffer zone would simply serve to move the border to a new location lacking the border fencing, barriers, and military emplacements defending the current line. The proposed zone would encompass significant majority-Kurdish Syrian areas, including towns and cities. These areas would be difficult to secure, likely exposing Turkish forces—who would be viewed as invaders—to prolonged insurgency, roadside bombs, and hit-and-run assassinations. Turkey is already overextended militarily, with security zones to patrol in Syria from Afrin to Jarabulus, hugely exposed observation posts in Idlib province, and incursions in northern Iraq. These deployments already present serious security vulnerabilities and financial liabilities; Ankara cannot afford a new commitment amid a hostile populace.

In any case, the SDF-controlled area has shielded Turkey from some of the ill effects of the Syrian war. It was the YPG and, subsequently, the SDF that largely defeated IS in northeastern Syria, clearing the jihadist group from most of the Turkish border and helping protect against infiltration. It was only a few years ago that Turkey was facing regular terrorist attacks from IS suicide bombers filtering back into the country from Syrian border regions now cleared of IS. Today, despite dire humanitarian challenges, the SDF-controlled areas are host to hundreds of thousands of internally

displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing Assad and IS. The last thing Turkey—already home to nearly 4 million refugees despite what appears to be a new hardline policy of refoulement⁵⁶—needs is further displacement and more refugee influxes; a Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria might cause just such a displacement.

In addition, Turkey should not want to push the SDF into the arms of the Assad regime. A deep buffer zone such as that which Turkey is demanding would represent a total strategic capitulation from the SDF and a relinquishment of the gains it sacrificed thousands of lives to earn; the SDF could likely get better terms from the Assad regime and might seek to make a deal with Damascus rather than accept such an outcome. If Turkey acted militarily to seize these areas, the YPG would likely resist and might even request Syrian government support, as it did in Afrin when attacked by Turkish forces. So far, Damascus has rebuffed Kurdish offers to recognize the central government's authority in exchange for local autonomy, but it is not clear how the regime and its Russian backers would respond to Turkey forcing the issue.⁵⁷ Such a scenario could bring Turkey into further direct confrontation with the Syrian regime and Russia.

Looking forward, a Syrian Kurdish area dominated by the Assad regime and unrestrained by U.S. influence would present a much worse security risk to Turkey than the current SDF-controlled zone under the protection of the United States. In keeping with historical precedent, Assad might eventually seek to use Kurdish militants to exact revenge on Turkey for its support of the Syrian rebellion, and those militants would no longer be restrained by the need to maintain U.S. support, having been forced to choose Assad over the United States.⁵⁸ Finally, the continuing risk of a Turkish incursion impels the SDF to maintain forces in the North, taking pressure off the continuing IS insurgency emanating from the Middle Euphrates River Valley and, therefore, threatening to throw eastern Syria back into chaos, with the humanitarian suffering and political instability that would accompany such a result.⁵⁹

As CAP argued in 2014, a policy of engagement would better serve Turkish interests.⁶⁰ Compared with the situation five years ago, such a shift would be slower and more difficult, requiring the multistage confidence-building measures outlined in the following section; but it is still possible, and the benefits are clear. It would reduce Turkish-Kurdish polarization within Turkey, potentially feeding into a domestic peace process; improve bilateral ties with the United States; and weaken the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran's influence in an eventual post-war Syrian settlement. Moreover, it would reduce the risk of an IS resurgence and of a new Turkish-Kurdish front in the Syrian war. Some refugees could return to Syrian Kurdish areas, which would then be at less risk from the threat of military conflict and be more accessible to humanitarian aid organizations.

There are also economic and energy advantages that might accrue to Turkish businesses if trade and cross-border exchange are eventually normalized. Similar to what happened in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq following the normalization of Turkish-Kurdish ties in that area, Turkish companies would find new markets in trucking, construction, agriculture, and energy. In particular, Turkish construction companies—in desperate need of new markets as the domestic market cooled—could benefit from the sweeping reconstruction required in areas devastated by war. Eastern Syria would remain extremely complex, and the fundamental issue of the shape of a post-war settlement would remain unresolved with the Assad-alliance. The SDF, however, has shown itself to be pragmatic and likely has little desire to return to a highly centralized Syrian state. Such decentralization might prove a boon to Turkish interests following a period of cooling tensions and normalization.

The contours of a new peace process

The links between the regional picture and Turkish domestic developments raise the potential for an outside-in approach, in which a deal on the Syrian Kurdish front feeds into a wider peace process. Of course, President Erdoğan could just as easily scuttle these hopes at any point by ordering the Turkish military into northeastern Syria. Assessing the likelihood of this is difficult, and there is no way of knowing what might be happening in absolute secrecy between the Turkish government and the PKK, in semi-secret in the U.S.-Turkish talks over northeastern Syria, or intermittently at the İmralı island prison where PKK leader Öcalan is held in isolation. Recently, there have been faint signs of movement, with Öcalan's lawyers permitted to visit him for the first time in years.⁶¹ Öcalan used the opportunity of his lawyers' visit to call for the SDF to take "Turkey's sensitivities into account," a telling message of conciliation as U.S.-Turkish negotiations over a proposed buffer zone continue.⁶² The opening could therefore be part of a new peace effort, or merely the product of political expediency as the AKP sought to peel away Kurdish voters ahead of Istanbul's mayoral election rerun in June 2019. PKK co-founder Cemil Bayik appeared to float a trial balloon on July 3, 2019, calling for a "political solution of the Kurdish question within Turkey's borders" in a *Washington Post* op-ed.⁶³ The PKK has often said that it is open to peace negotiations, and such messages have frequently amounted to little more than propaganda aimed at Western audiences, but the flurry of developments presents the possibility that it could be something more.

Begin a stepped confidence-building path

The general contours of such a path have been clear since 2014 and were outlined in CAP's 2014 report: Turkey would remove the threat of military intervention and accept the inclusion of the YPG/PYD's representatives in the Geneva process, or any follow-on Syrian peace process. The YPG would pledge to include other ethnic groups and Kurdish political entities—including those with ties to the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party, which Ankara has long held up as an alternative to the

leftist Kurdish PYD—in some form of political power-sharing arrangement.⁶⁴ In fact, the establishment of the SDF was itself an effort by the United States to drive this kind of ethnic and political diversification, and the civilian councils set up by the SDF in liberated cities such as Manbij, Raqqa, and Tabqa have continued this process.⁶⁵

These efforts at political reconciliation are essential to any wider accommodation—a result that would do far more to improve Turkish security than the current unrealistic demands for a buffer zone. But Turkey is only likely to agree to nonintervention and normalization in northeastern Syria if the area is not entirely dominated by groups that the Turkish government views as controlled by the PKK. This is where the U.S.-led coalition is crucial. Only by continuing its support for the liberated areas and the SDF can the coalition secure the leverage needed to push a broader political compromise. And it is only by securing a political compromise that the YPG/PYD's dominance can be reduced; as long as the military struggle continues and the cantons are threatened, the strongest militia will dominate. A political agreement and the end of Turkish military threats to the cantons could therefore benefit Turkey by allowing for some demilitarization of politics. Meanwhile, for the Syrian Kurds, reassuring Turkey of their ideological openness could secure a political understanding that would dramatically strengthen their position, allowing for socio-economic development, guarding against the return of Assad's brutal rule, and paving the way for permanent cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition.⁶⁶

A Syrian deal along these lines could feed into a renewed domestic peace process, but massive hurdles would remain, not least the public hostility on both sides of the Kurdish political question. Previous efforts at peace have been derailed in part by public blowback—or, more often, officials' fear of public blowback—around concessions. The 2018 CAP/Metropoll survey asked, “Is it possible for Turkey to co-exist peacefully with the YPG/PYD?”, to which just 15 percent of respondents said “yes,” with 84 percent saying it was impossible; even HDP voters were skeptical, with 39 percent saying that coexistence was possible and 61 percent saying that it was not.⁶⁷ But these attitudes are fluid; it was not long ago that strong majorities favored negotiations to secure peace. Political leaders have the ability to shift these perceptions and therefore change the political terrain they face. If the Turkish public is strongly nationalistic and hostile toward negotiation with the PKK, it is in no small part because the Turkish government has stirred up such sentiment. It has the power to slowly reverse those attitudes.

Given the complexity and mistrust on both sides, the Turkish government, as the stronger party, should begin down a stepped confidence-building path with a series of political concessions. So far, the lifting of the ban on visitation of Öcalan is the only public step taken down this path; and it is possible it will remain the only step taken.

Access to Öcalan is a prime demand of Kurdish political activists, from peaceful hunger strikers to PKK leaders such as Cemil Bayik. But it is a difficult question; if the Turkish government initiates a new peace process, it should not repeat its past mistakes by elevating Öcalan as the prime arbiter of the peace and tying the peace process to his personal status. While Öcalan's symbolic power is important, his actual operational control of the PKK apparatus—and therefore his ability to deliver on promises—is far from certain. Indeed, his support for a renewed push for peace is likely necessary but not sufficient. The Kurdish focus on Öcalan is also misplaced: Resting the fates of millions on the condition of one man for the sake of ideological purity does not make sense. Realistically, Öcalan's eventual release, which underpins the demands for access, is almost certainly politically impossible, given his association with so many terror attacks and the realities of Turkish politics. Öcalan's release would be politically untenable for almost any Turkish government. Indeed, as Kurdish expert Aliza Marcus has argued, the idea should be to build interlocutors aside from Öcalan, rather than reinforce his claim to leadership of the wider Kurdish struggle.⁶⁸

What follows is highly speculative and immoderately hopeful sketch of a stepped approach to peace; fully acknowledging the difficulty of such an approach, it is meant to demonstrate the possibility of peace. Just as the conflict has assumed a momentum of its own, so too could each peaceful gesture reshape the political possibilities. These recommendations are premised on a series of efforts to legitimize peaceful Kurdish political involvement within rejuvenated democratic structures, rather than the criminalization of Kurdish dissent and association of all Kurdish political activity with the PKK.

Release political prisoners

To this end, and again acknowledging the political obstacles to any new effort at peace, the obvious political concessions are the release of non-PKK political prisoners such as Demirtaş and other jailed HDP leaders. Signatories of the Academics for Peace could also be released; calling for peace is no crime, and Turkey's Constitutional Court has ruled their rights were violated by their arrest.⁶⁹ The government could drop the hundreds of cases facing the peaceful activists of the Human Rights Association. These gestures would have a powerful public effect, and the Turkish government could then call on the PKK to reciprocate and declare a ceasefire, having demonstrated a new commitment to peace without giving up any military advantage against the PKK. The government could signal that if the PKK held the ceasefire for a certain period, municipalities under trusteeship would be gradually returned to the duly elected HDP mayors—and

parliamentary immunity for members of Parliament (MPs) would be returned, with current cases dropped. Again, the Turkish government would be doing nothing more than returning to a proper democratic process, in line with the calls of the EU, United States, and other partners. This process would need to proceed slowly, but it is essential to rebuilding trust in peaceful institutions of government and justice, as it represents the only solution to long-term militancy.

This approach would be the opposite of that employed last time. Instead of secretly negotiating with Öcalan or senior PKK leaders, often through intermediaries, thereby strengthening the guerrillas' power and sidelining legitimately elected Kurdish officials and Kurdish civil society, the government should negotiate with and consult these latter groups.⁷⁰ For too long, the government line has elevated the PKK, while repression of peaceful activism has made armed conflict a self-fulfilling prophecy. Normalization will undermine the PKK's ideology; in a peaceful context, it is unlikely that the group's archaic communalism on economic issues would resonate with southeastern businessmen keen to secure investment or with Kurdish workers trying to achieve a normal, middle-income life. This normalization and the effort to channel competition to the political field will require the government to allow the media to report freely on developments in the Southeast. Indeed, the government should seek to put out its own accurate—and nondogmatic—version of events around the breakdown of previous negotiations. Currently, the Turkish government's line on the Kurdish question is largely propagandistic, without nuance or self-criticism. For many Turks—and most Kurds—it bears little relation to reality and fails to resonate.

If the government were to take any of the steps outlined above, the HDP would need to reciprocate by doing more to separate itself tactically—and, if possible, ideologically—from the PKK. This would be extremely difficult and politically risky for the party, given the shared Kurdish nationalist constituency of both the HDP and the PKK. But the PKK's total rejection of the nation state can hardly be acceptable to a nation state;⁷¹ while the PKK nominally accepts the existence of the Turkish state, the group's stated ideology would require the effective dissolution of state authority—absent any democratic process—in many areas. Meanwhile, the HDP has every right to compete politically, win elections, and administer municipalities. It should unapologetically continue its efforts to return democratic government to the southeastern municipalities, to secure the release of political prisoners, and to ease overall political repression. However, it should also seek to separate its activism on these issues from the rhetoric of “democratic confederalism”—Öcalan's ideology rejecting the nation state and advocating for radical local autonomy at the communal level.⁷²

The HDP is within its rights to continue pushing for greater local control of things such as education and taxation but could emphasize that these changes would come about through a deliberative, democratic process of constitutional change—not through force. By demonstrating its commitment to peaceful, institutional change within the context of a democratic state, the HDP can improve the chances of a return to peaceful negotiation. And indeed, the HDP is well-positioned to succeed in such a normalized political context. In order for any negotiation to take place, the Turkish state must accept the existence and legitimacy of the Kurdish political movement, but the Kurdish political movement must also accept the existence and legitimacy of the Turkish state.

Long-term goals for a renewed peace process

If such a ceasefire held, the Turkish government could continue to lower tensions through social and political gestures. These concessions might now appear fantastic, but enumerating the possibilities is a necessary first step. Ankara could begin to allow limited cross-border trade with Syrian Kurdish areas, subject to reasonable security checks. As the domestic and Syrian Kurdish issues have become entwined, conciliatory gestures on either side of the border would be beneficial. Ankara could also reverse the crackdown on language rights. Turkish law permits private education in a person's mother tongue, but many private Kurdish-language schools were shut down in the post-2015 crackdown. Slowly, the government could push measures to investigate credible allegations of torture and impunity among the security forces. Eventually, the goal would be to move toward the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission and the reform of the overly broad anti-terror law to exclude crimes of thought or speech, but the government could initially commit to faster trials, limited pretrial detention, and open courtrooms in security trials.⁷³ These steps would build faith in the justice system and deflate PKK rhetoric that no Kurd can get a fair trial in Turkey. Again, while these changes seem fanciful in today's repressive environment, they offer the only true long-term solution to extralegal militancy. The total military eradication of Kurdish insurgency absent political compromise is just as unlikely; and yet, that represents current Turkish government policy.

If a hypothetical new peace initiative advanced, likely only after a lengthy period of mutually observed ceasefire, it could also benefit from tangible steps on the ground in the Southeast. The government might revisit the complaints of residents of Sur in Diyarbakır—heavily damaged in 2015 and 2016—about the heavy-handed urban renewal program, which largely excluded longtime residents and provided little compensation for their losses.⁷⁴ Other areas for consultation and moderation would include

the long-term issues of dam construction, forest-burning, checkpoints, and curfews. The government views these issues through a security lens, but Kurds feel the state's actions collectively constitute a systematic effort at cultural destruction and economic expropriation. Ankara's centralized, heavy-handed approach too often reinforces that view; addressing the concerns of residents is the only way to erode organic support for the PKK. Again, these steps are currently hard to imagine and could only become politically viable after a long period of ceasefire and careful confidence-building measures. Still, a wider effort to address the Turkish government's legitimacy and democracy deficit among the Kurdish population seems like the only way to secure a durable peace.

Eventually, the government would have to begin direct talks with PKK leaders over eventual disarmament and rehabilitation. A large-scale amnesty for low-level fighters would likely be necessary in the end, excluding a small group of leaders who would have to remain in exile or serve prison terms. Such talks would at least have a legal basis; during the last peace process, the Turkish Parliament passed a bill granting immunity to officials negotiating with the PKK and empowering them to grant amnesty to fighters who laid down their arms.⁷⁵ But this final stage should be undertaken in the context of a much broader, longer-term opening and easing of repression and tensions.

Conclusion

Assessing the potential for an easing of Turkish-Kurdish conflict is extremely difficult, let alone speculating about the potential course for such a process. But a confluence of political, military, and regional factors raises the slight hope that such a softening is possible. The military conflict has ground into a stalemate, with the PKK insurgency in Turkey severely reduced. Politically, President Erdoğan faces stagnation as his nationalist pivot runs out of steam; he must find new sources of support to secure the absolute majority needed to win his next election. Turkey's military is overextended, and the interventionist approach in Syria carries huge risks for Ankara—accommodation would better serve Turkey's interests. Massive political obstacles to a broader political compromise would remain, not least in Syria and in the domestic electoral math for President Erdoğan. Still, the destruction of the past four years has not served Turkey well, the benefits of a more moderate path are clear, and the contours of a new peace process remain visible.

The Turkish state has a reasonable, legitimate demand for public order, and the disarmament and withdrawal of militants will one day be necessary. In return, amnesty by a different name for all but the core leaders seems unavoidable. However, the government would be wise to first engage in a process of normalization to bring the Kurdish question out of the shadows and into the political sphere. The PKK's dogma is unworkable in a modern society, and multicultural liberalism presents a far more promising path. But for the HDP—or any other party, for that matter—to fully embrace this possibility, the state must allow peaceful alternatives to grow and for genuine political competition to take place. Instead of elevating PKK leaders and sidelining peaceful, elected Kurdish officials and civil society, the government should negotiate with and consult these latter groups. As part of this process, it should eventually reckon with its own complicity in making armed conflict a self-fulfilling prophecy by suppressing legitimate political discourse. For such a process of reconciliation to succeed, the Turkish government must allow citizens to freely contest these ideas—peacefully and publicly. Through the decades, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict has gone through violent and peaceful cycles, with peace initiatives repeatedly falling victim to nationalist politics, regional dynamics, and censorship. Whether the story

is about to enter one of its more peaceful chapters is far from clear, but reconciliation and political compromise will one day be necessary if Turkey is to achieve its full potential. President Erdoğan remains the preeminent figure in modern Turkish history and the necessary—if not sufficient—advocate for such a peaceful course. With the centenary of the Turkish republic in 2023 fast approaching, it is long past time for the country to reckon with its most fundamental fault line.

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