

What Does Turkey Gain from PKK Talks?

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On April 25, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) announced that it would withdraw its militants from Turkish soil after more than four decades of fighting against Ankara, including carrying out terror attacks inside Turkey.

The announcement follows recent news that Ankara has begun official peace talks with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan aimed at ending the long conflict in Turkey's southeast. A successful resolution would deliver peace to Turkey and bring the Syrian Kurds -- some of whom have indirect ties to the PKK -- closer to Ankara. This in turn would strengthen Ankara's hand as it strives to unseat the neighboring Bashar Al-Assad regime. Alongside Turkey's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds, the process could help Ankara build a "Kurdish axis" in the Middle East, or at least a friendly cordon. Yet rivalries with Iran could complicate any such plans.

The new peace talks are based on the premise that Ocalan continues to hold sway over the organization he founded and can therefore deliver a deal. After Turkish forces captured him in 1999, he was tried and sentenced to death, but the sentence was later changed to life imprisonment after Turkey abolished capital punishment in 2002 in order to qualify for EU accession. Ocalan has spent more than fourteen years in solitary confinement. Initial discussions have already made his imprisonment more bearable. For instance, Turkish media reports indicate he was recently given cable television.

Although Murat Karayilan became the PKK's leader after Ocalan's capture, the founder still holds sway over the group and is revered as a cult figure by the rank and file. Hence, many members would likely comply if he told them to lay down their weapons. For now, the PKK has pledged to withdraw its fighters, and Turkey will reciprocate with a broad amnesty for all but the top echelons. Ankara might also grant Ocalan house arrest; deputy prime minister Bulent Arinc came close to conceding as much during a June 2012 television interview.

There are potential stumbling blocks, however. Even if Ocalan delivers large parts of the PKK under a peace deal, the other leaders could form splinter groups in the mid to long term, most likely with support from Iran. Just as radicals broke away from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) after a ceasefire was reached in the late 1990s, forming the "Real IRA" and continuing to fight the British government, a "Real PKK" could arise in response to the talks with Ocalan.

For Tehran, Turkey's emerging rapprochement with the PKK raises acute questions. Ever since Ankara threw its lot

behind the Syrian uprising in late 2011, Iran has encouraged the group to target Turkey. Indeed, a number of last year's PKK attacks in southeastern Turkey are known to have originated from Iran; if the PKK disarms, Tehran will be deprived of this lever.

In light of these concerns, Iran will likely step up its support for diehard anti-Turkish PKK splinter factions with the hope that this will cause the talks to fail. On April 29, Turkish daily *Milliyet* columnist Asli Aydintasbas quoted PKK leader Murat Karayilan as saying that top Iranian intelligence officials had offered him heavy weapons in exchange for defecting on the peace process; an offer that the PKK field commander claims he refused.

Still, there are three key reasons which suggest that the talks will move forward.

The first is Turkey's strategic perspective: Until recently, Ankara had seen the "Kurdish card" in the region as a threat to its core interests. This view is changing. In recent years, Turkey has built strong commercial and political ties with the Iraqi Kurds, and it stands to reason that Ankara will seek something similar with the Syrian Kurds. If the PKK in Syria ingratiates itself with Ankara, Turkey will return the favor. The Turkish Kurds are the last piece of the puzzle. Should the recently-announced peace talks between Ankara and the PKK succeed, Turkey may be able to turn the "Kurdish card" to its favor.

A Turkey-PKK entente would also make it easier for Ankara to reach a better understanding with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the most powerful Syrian Kurdish grouping linked to the PKK. In fact, a deal with the PKK could open the door to cooperation with Syrian Kurds against Assad. There are signs that this is already happening; the PKK is pulling its militants out of Turkey and sending them into Syria, where the PYD is taking a more belligerent stance against the Assad regime. Such a turn was foreshadowed in March, when the PYD began to fight Assad in the Sheikh Massoud neighborhood of Aleppo.

As Syria crumbles into a weak and potentially divided state, Turkey's rapprochement with the PKK could make it easier to stabilize areas along its frontier with Syria. In the best case scenario, a cordon of friendly Kurdish communities could emerge on Turkey's long, porous borders with Syria, boasting some measure of local self-government.

Iraqi Kurdistan's strategic perspective is a second driver for peace: For Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its president, Massoud Barzani, a full-fledged Turkey-PKK accord would cement the strong bonds that have developed over the past few years between Turkey and the KRG. This would also advance the KRG agenda of helping Syria's Kurds achieve greater freedom by working with Turkey against the Assad regime, instead of the other way around.

A third factor driving the peace talks is related to Turkish domestic politics. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan hopes to become the country's next president in the summer 2014 elections. In the most recent elections, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won 49.5 percent of the vote.

Erdogan needs to build further support, without eroding his power base, in order to be elected as Turkey's next president.

Enter the PKK. After Turkey shifted its Syria policy in fall 2011 from quiet pressure on Assad to supporting the rebels, Turkey witnessed a spike in PKK attacks coming from Iran. In fall 2012, Tehran entered a ceasefire with the PKK, and the group's Iranian branch, Party for Democratic Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). This allowed the groups to attack Turkey, and gave Iran a proxy to strike back against Ankara for its shift on Syria. The PKK launched a number of brazen attacks aimed at capturing towns in southeastern Turkey. As the PKK gained ground, Erdogan's popularity seemed in danger of eroding.

According to Turkish media, many of these attacks were launched by PKK units who infiltrated from Iran.

Erdogan's response has been to enter peace talks with the PKK, stemming the violence, and eliminating a hurdle ahead of his presidential ambitions. This would also serve Turkey's domestic stability and its interests in Syria and Iraq. If the talks succeed, Erdogan's presidential moment and Turkey's Kurdish moment will have arrived. Only Tehran stands in the way.

Soner Cagaptay, author of the forthcoming book [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>), is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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