

Is Turkey Finally Ready to Make Peace with the Kurds?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Jan 23, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Prime Minister Erdogan seems more willing than ever to compromise, if only to improve his chances in next year's presidential election.

Last week's massive funeral in Turkey of three Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) activists killed in Paris speaks volumes about the PKK's appeal among the Turkish Kurds in Turkey's southeast.

Turkey recently entered peace talks with the PKK, and if these talks succeed, they could bring an end to the bitterest aspects of the four-decade-old conflict between Ankara and the group. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems determined to achieve a settlement with the PKK, if for no other reason than that brokering a peace deal will effectively eliminate the last hurdle to achieve his goal of getting elected as the country's next president in 2014.

Turkey has engaged in talks with the PKK before, but they were always in secret. This time, however, Erdogan is comfortable going public with the negotiations, suggesting that he is confident the talks will succeed. This optimism most probably stems from the predicament of his counterpart, the PKK's jailed founder and leader Abdullah Ocalan, who was caught by Turkish security forces, with U.S. assistance, in 1999, and sent to solitary confinement after standing trial. Ocalan, who has spent over a decade by himself on the Imrali island jail in the middle of the Marmara Sea, is aching to go free, and hence wants to strike a deal with Erdogan.

Such an agreement would involve a "ceasefire" between the Turkish government and the PKK, after which the PKK would pull its estimated 3,000 members out of Turkey. The PKK would then disarm. Next, Turkey would allow the PKK's top leadership to find a home in Europe while the group's rank and file would be allowed to return to Turkey and integrate into civilian life and politics.

In return, Ocalan would get his freedom, most likely entering house arrest. Even if Erdogan publically denies he will make this concession, the writing is on the wall.

For Erdogan to maximize his gains from the deal, the PKK needs not only to lay down its arms, but also to stay quiet.

Fighting with the PKK has resulted in over 900 deaths since August 2011, according to a tally by the International Crisis Group, constituting the heaviest toll on Turkey in more than a decade.

This makes PKK violence the salient political challenge for Erdogan. The Turkish prime minister has almost all the pieces in place to be elected as the country's next president. He has defanged the once staunchly secularist Turkish military, eliminated many elements of Turkey's secular state, and neutralized the formerly anti-AKP business community and media. Still, Erdogan is not guaranteed to surpass 50 percent of the popular vote in the presidential race, and more PKK attacks will only pull him further from this mark. Hence, Erdogan needs the PKK to stay quiet during the run-up to the country's election in 2014.

Another factor suggests that these talks may work. This time, Erdogan has chosen the PKK as his negotiating counterpart rather than the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the political wing of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey. The PKK is the mother ship of Kurdish nationalism in the country, out of which the BDP was born. This is essentially the reverse of the Irish case, wherein the IRA was born out of Sinn Fein. So for Ireland, talks with the Sinn Fein made sense, whereas in Turkey, the PKK runs the show.

Peace between Ankara and the PKK would have ramifications beyond Turkey. Ankara's support for the Syrian uprising has not been entirely successful, due in some part to the fact that Ankara abhors the PKK presence among the Kurds in Syria. This has become a wedge issue between Turkey and the Syrian Kurdish opposition. A Turkish-PKK rapprochement could pave the way for better ties between Ankara and the broader Syrian opposition by bringing the Syrian Kurds into the fold.

The stumbling blocks are many, however. PKK hardliners, including the group's seasoned leaders such as Cemil Bayik and Duran Kalkan, might refuse to buy into Ocalan's personal deal to set himself free. This leadership is committed to the maximalist political goals of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey: the formation of a separate Kurdish state. What is more, Bayik and Kalkan are known to be close to Iran, and Tehran does not want to see a Turkey-PKK deal now. Ever since Ankara threw its lot behind the Syrian uprising in late 2011, Iran has encouraged the PKK to punish Turkey for its stance against Assad. If the PKK disarms, Iran will be deprived of this lever.

Even if Ocalan delivers the large parts of the PKK under a peace deal, splinters from this group will likely remain committed to fighting Turkey, and they will enjoy support from Iran. Just as radicals broke away from the IRA after the peace deal in Northern Ireland, forming the "Real IRA" and continuing to fight the British government, a "Real PKK" could arise.

Unless Ankara's deal with Ocalan includes substantial cultural and political rights for the country's Kurds, such as Kurdish language education, a potential "Real PKK" would find some support among the Kurds in Turkey. In other words, Turkey's terror problem would not disappear, although it would become a smaller threat. This is still better for Turkey than the alternative. Importantly, this might be all that Erdogan needs to get elected as Turkey's next president in 2014. But this will require outmaneuvering PKK splinters and their Iranian patrons.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

The Atlantic

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](/policy-analysis/turkey)