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Special Report

Despite Ongoing Protests, Cautious Hopes Persist in Kurdish Peace Process

By Marvine Howe



Kurdish parliamentarian Sebahat Tuncel of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party joins Turkish demonstrators in Istanbul's Taksim Square. (Photo M. Howe)

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“For 10 days straight, the Turkish public was able to watch on national TV groups of Kurds calling for peace and waving banners with the face of leader Abdullah Öcalan right here in Taksim Square,” a Kurdish parliamentarian told this writer exultantly.

The deputy, Sebahat Tuncel of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), said in an interview that if, as a consequence of the Taksim protests, the government puts a stop to negotiations with Ocalan, “we will understand that it was not sincere about the peace process.”

The process she referred to is a landmark agreement reached late last year between Prime Minister Recep

Tayyip Erdogan's government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), officially banned as a terrorist organization, which has waged a devastating rebellion for nearly 30 years, costing more than 40,000 lives and the destruction of some 4,000 villages in southeastern Turkey.

Because of the sensitivity of public opinion, the peace talks were carried out in utmost secrecy by the chief of the National Intelligence Organization, Hakan Fidan, and Ocalan, who since his capture in 1999 has been serving a life prison sentence as leader of a terrorist organization. The BDP, the main legal pro-Kurdish organization in Turkey, has been actively engaged in the peace process, serving as a link between the incarcerated nationalist leader Ocalan and the outlawed PKK. As of this writing, details of the accord still had not been made public, raising charges from the opposition that Erdogan was giving away land for peace or even planning to release Ocalan in return for Kurdish votes.

According to independent observers, however, Erdogan may succeed in ending the conflict where earlier attempts have failed, because he has established civilian control over Turkey's powerful military, which has adamantly opposed negotiating with "terrorists." Nevertheless, a significant sector of ultra-nationalists still refuses any kind of accommodation with the arch-enemy Ocalan.

Turks began to express hope in the peace process this past March, when, from his prison cell on Imrali Island in the Sea of Marmara, Ocalan proclaimed a cease-fire, to be followed by a pullout of all PKK forces from Turkey. Then on May 8, the PKK's military commander, Murat Karayilan, announced the start of withdrawal. Above all, there have been no Kurdish attacks since the beginning of the year. These Kurdish moves were to be followed by confidence-building measures from Erdogan's government, such as the release of PKK prisoners. The dialogue has stalled, however, over Kurdish claims that most of its estimated 17,000 armed forces have gone and Turkish intelligence reports that only 15 percent have left.

But by June, Erdogan's conservative, Islamic-inspired government faced the first serious challenge to its 11-year majority rule. The prime minister's dismissive attitude toward the ferocious police crackdown on a peaceful demonstration in Istanbul's central Taksim Square was widely condemned even in official circles. The victims were environmentalists and mostly young Turks outraged over development plans for Taksim and the transformation of Gezi Park into a shopping mall. Their protest won support from left- and right-wing opposition parties and snowballed into demonstrations around the country against Erdogan's "increasingly autocratic government" and demands for his resignation.

After a fortnight's standoff, the prime minister met with a delegation of protesters, agreed to let the court decide the fate of Taksim, and then ordered the forcible eviction of everyone remaining in the park. Shortly afterward, the court ruled in favor of the environmentalists, but the square remained closed. Young Turks, however, have found their voice and have taken their protests to other squares and parks in Istanbul and around the country.

Despite cooperating in the peace process, the BDP took part in the protests because it is critical of the

government's general policies on ecology. BDP deputy Sirri Sureyya Onder personally stopped bulldozers from cutting down the linden trees in Gezi Park. But BDP deputy Tuncel said the party's presence was about much more than trees. "Turkish protesters, who are reacting against oppression, are beginning to realize that our struggles are parallel," she said. "What we're saying to them is that Kurds are also fighting for freedom and democracy."

In fact, the Kurdish cause may have won some respect among the young protesters, who have grown up with the official portrayal of Ocalan and his organization as bloodthirsty terrorists. Initially, there were clashes between Kurds and ultra-nationalist Turks at Gezi Park, but they later marched side by side against "the authoritarian government."

"At first they didn't want to see us in the demonstrations, but then they saw they need us because we know how to fight against the police," explained a Kurdish protester in Gezi Park. Describing himself as "an ordinary Kurdish revolutionary," he said it didn't matter if the protests affected the peace talks. "We'll get our rights; we trust ourselves, the BDP and the PKK. Most of all, we trust Ocalan. He's the strongest leader in the Middle East. All Kurds trust him, not just in Turkey, but Iran, Iraq and Syria."

As the protests spread, Erdogan took time out from the daily crises to receive the Commission of Wise People that he'd sent around the country to promote the Kurdish peace process. The group of 63 respected academics, journalists and other prominent figures (minus two members who boycotted the meeting out of solidarity with the Gezi protests) reported back that there was "broad support" for the peace process, albeit concern over future proceedings. According to the report from southeast Turkey, the key Kurdish region, most people demand constitutional guarantees for Kurds' cultural and political rights.

Veteran journalist Fehmi Koru was a member of the delegation to the Aegean region, where many Kurds have migrated to escape the violence in the southeast. In their two-month mission, Koru told the *Washington Report*, his group of eight "wise people" visited eight cities and spoke to about 50 NGOs in each city. Their conclusion was that Kurds are "fed up with injustice," above all not being able to use their language. "Kurds even in the West feel like second-class citizens and are exploited everywhere," he said.

Then came the news on June 28 that Turkish soldiers had killed a Kurdish teenager and wounded nine other civilians protesting the construction of a gendarmerie post at Lice, the center of Kurdish nationalism. The BDP immediately organized demonstrations against the killing in various cities. In a rare display of Turkish solidarity with Kurds, some 200 Gezi Park protesters joined the BDP march in Istanbul.

Prime Minister Erdogan suggested that the continuing protests were the work of "forces that sought to sabotage the peace process." Reaffirming his determination to pursue peace talks, he told his party's parliamentary group: "We set our hearts on the process. We risked our lives for this process. No sabotage or provocation can deter us from this blessed journey and seeking a solution."

A Visit to BDP Headquarters

To find out what the Kurds want from peace talks, I visited BDP headquarters in Ankara. Initially, Turkey's Kurdish nationalists had sought independence and union with Kurds from neighboring Iraq, Iran and Syria, but of late, they had spoken of autonomy and equal rights.

BDP spokesman Evren Cevik can see both sides of the cruel conflict, because his father was a Kurdish officer in the Turkish air force. Summing up the Kurdish problem, he said: "You can be a policeman, doctor or military officer, but you can't be a Kurd in Turkey."

On six occasions, Kurds have initiated peace talks with different Turkish governments, Cevik noted—but something always occurred to disrupt the talks. He pointed out that the Kurds made their first cease-fire offer in 1993 to President Turgut Ozal, "who was considering it positively" when he died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Kurds and others have suspected Ozal was poisoned, but subsequent investigations failed to confirm the allegations.

According to the BDP spokesman, in Ocalan's latest peace offer the PKK agreed to disarm after the government provided guarantees of basic human rights: a new constitution with equal rights for all citizens of Turkey, education in the mother tongue, and democratic decentralization. Cevik acknowledged that the PKK's aim in the beginning was a free Kurdistan, but explained that "Now borders don't matter anymore; what counts is the Kurdish identity."

While Ankara and most of the country were still fixated on the fallout from the Gezi Park protests, the PKK held its annual congress on Kandil Mountain in Iraq, near the Turkish border. On July 9, the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella group that includes the PKK, announced leadership changes. Ocalan, formerly honorary leader, was named supreme chief. The new co-chairs are Cemil Bayik, a member of the KCK's executive, and Bese Hozat, a leader of the PKK's women's organization. Murat Karayilan was appointed head of the military wing.

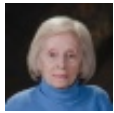
Turkish political circles suggested the KCK reshuffle could mean the end of peace talks, since Karayilan had been Ocalan's main partner in the negotiations. Cengiz Candar, an expert on regional conflicts, interpreted the changes as a message from Ocalan to Prime Minister Erdogan to live up to his part of the accord. Writing in the Turkish daily *Radikal*, Candar pointed out that Bayik was a founder of the PKK in 1978, and since then Ocalan's second in command. He suggested that the nomination of Ms. Hozat, a well-known member of the Alevi, who follow a Shi'i branch of Islam, could be an attempt by the PKK to woo that important minority away from the socialist opposition.

Most people agree that for the peace process to succeed, Turkey needs a new constitution with basic human rights for all. A parliamentary commission has been working for a year and a half to revise the present charter, drafted under martial law in 1982. Consensus has been reached on 48 of a total of 177 articles, but the process will take time.

But the Kurdish Peace Process nevertheless remains linked to outside developments. Ankara has successfully engaged in good neighborly relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, which supports Turkey's peace talks with the PKK. In the civil war to the south, however, Syrian Kurdish forces have been making gains against the Syrian opposition, which is backed by Turkey. Reports of a plan to set up an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria with the blessings of the Assad regime are seen as a threat to Turkey's security and, of course, the peace process.

Meanwhile, things are happening on the ground. The independent MetroPOLL reported in July that Turkish public opinion is "warming" to the idea of Kurdish instruction in mainly Kurdish areas, with 48.2 percent in favor, and opposition coming essentially from ultra-nationalist voters, with 71.4 percent against. And for the first time, the Supreme Court ruled the same month that a Kurdish couple from Sanliurfa has the right to name their baby daughter "Kurdistan"—a word heretofore considered taboo.

Marvine Howe, former New York Times bureau chief in Ankara, is the author of Al Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia's New Muslims and Other Minorities (available from the AET Book Club).



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