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Close, Yet Remote Chance for a Peaceful Resolution of the Kurdish Conflict

Five months after the Kurdish opponent armed group, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK; also known as Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress or KADEK) announced a ceasefire, the Kurdish conflict issue still paints a rather bleak picture of the future. In spite of the current context of opportunities for moving towards a dialogued and inclusive peace, there is the risk of tensions breaking out again and, above all, of delaying and further complicating the necessary transformation of this ongoing conflict which keeps taking away lives. Consequently, it is more than necessary to tackle with the present situation and seize the opportunities and the challenge of backing up peacebuilding in Turkey. Paradoxically, Turkey seems to be both close and yet so far away from attaining peace.

Reactions to truce: hopes and mistrust

It is no wonder that the ceasefire in October 2006 has triggered both hope and mistrust after more than two-decade confrontations between the Turkish Government and the PKK-KADEK and after around 37.000 casualties. On the one hand, hope raising especially among civil and political spheres in favour of a peaceful and democratic resolution of the Kurdish conflict has diminished; or it has not been properly conveyed thus failing to increase its critical mass and to encourage the adoption of a dialogued resolution. On the other hand, the initial governmental mistrust and the automatic rejection of the ceasefire by the army- the great power behind the scenes in the country- have resulted in a full ignorance of the ceasefire and in an active offensive against the PKK at various levels, especially at the diplomatic and military ones.

Actually, the Turkish army has continued and enhanced its military offensive against the PKK in the southeast of the country, while the Government led by R. T. Erdogan has intensified its requests of US's support in the fight against the PKK, especially in the dismantling of its camps in northern Iraq, a request that has also been made to the Kurdish leaders in Iraq. Even though for the time being it has only been at rhetorical level, the Turkish army has already launched signals that it reserves the possibility of attacking the PKK in the Iraqi Kurdistan if its demands are not fulfilled. And declarations made by the US meant to highlight the necessity of a major back up to the Turkish ally against the PKK seem to boost up despite the American up-to-now apparent reluctances towards a practical commitment to the resolution of Turkey's concerns. Those reluctances are in turn closely connected to the fears of destabilizing the Northern region of Iraq, the most stable area in the country under the current Iraqi armed conflict.

The truce has thus been ignored, being far from triggering any favourable reactions to rapprochement and negotiation on behalf of the Turkish political majority and the military power. Consequently, any peace opportunity that a ceasefire could bring about under certain circumstances has been put off in some way. In this sense, the previous dynamics of unsuccessful truces (1993, 1995, 1998, the appeals to end the armed fight in 2000, 2002, the ceasefire in August 2005) have inevitably tarnished PKK's latest announcement and its chances for success with a significant stage of upheaval preceding the truce in October. Directly connected with these unsuccessful experiences, the historical abyss between the two conflicting sides is being deepened both by the permissible global discourse on "the fight against terrorism" and its resulting recipe urging for imposition rather than negotiation. Above all that, the current scenario combining the dismissed truce with the multifaceted offensive against the PKK reflects both an inertia which is deeply rooted in years of armed confrontations and the lack of political will to redefine concepts such as security and identity in a more inclusive way.

From conflict to reconciliation between the parties

Nevertheless, the latest truce has offered, and in fact it still does, the possibility of approaching the conflict in a more constructive way than its traditional antagonistic dynamics. That is partly because, even if the sides involved in the conflict project each other as very remote or do not even consider one another, they are in fact close to each other, just as close as the steps toward peace are. In this sense, it is more than necessary to visualize the current context having the evolution of the conflict as framework.

For the PKK, the issues at stake have been the Kurdish identity and the recognition of Kurdish people's rights and liberties that had been approached at the beginning as a matter of territorial independence meant to provide Kurdistan with a state, and further on as a matter of self-governance within the Turkish state. The tendency at the level of successive Turkish governments was to approach the conflict with the PKK as a fight against terrorism and as the defence of the territorial integrity of the state from a perceived disintegrating threat. They were therefore initially denying the existence of the Kurdish issue though subsequently accepting it as a reality. Under this antiterrorist conceptualization, the army has played a key role in ruling out any non military way in the conflict basing its actions on the defence of the state and following its historical role as an institution intervening in the domestic affairs of the country and defending the *Kemalist* principles that set the basis of the Turkish republic with nationalism as one of them.

The antagonistic presentation of the essential issues -the Kurdish issue and independence on one hand, and state unity on the other hand- hindered negotiation opportunities for years and excluded any non violent approach to the conflict because of its virulent armed manifestation. Nevertheless, this antagonism started to diminish at the end of the XXth and the beginning of the XXIst century. The PKK gave up on the idea of the Kurdish independence and reduced its armed manifestations accepting the Turkish State as the framework for addressing the identity demands; and the Turkish Government represented by the Party for Justice and Development (AKP) has admitted from the mouth of PM R. T. Erdogan, the existence of the Kurdish issue, even though sometimes rather ambiguously.

The challenge of visualizing a favourable context for peace

Therefore, the new context is not just the same if a historical perspective is adopted. In this sense, it is important to take into account that the October ceasefire is part of the roadmap proposed on August 20th in the "Declaration for the Democratic Resolution of the Kurdish Question" of the KKK platform, created by PKK-KADEK. Among the steps proposed by the roadmap as a continuation to the ceasefire and as a framework for carrying out the subsequent negotiations in case of a possible ceasefire, the PKK proposed the following: 1) the acknowledgement of the Kurdish identity and the constitutional guarantee of all identities under the identity of a Citizen of Turkey as the main identity; 2) the development of the Kurdish language and culture, the acknowledgement of education in the mother tongue, and Kurdish acknowledged as the official second language in the Kurdistan region, and with this to show respect to other minority cultures; 3) the acknowledgement of the right to thought, belief and freedom of expression, the lifting of all inequalities in the Constitution and laws, starting with those related to gender discrimination; 4) a social reconciliation project and on this basis the release of political prisoners including the PKK leadership, and no obstacles to them participating in politics and social life; 5) the removal of the forces in Kurdistan there for the purposes of special war, the abolition of the village guard system (paramilitary forces in some south-eastern localities) and the necessary social and political projects to be developed for the return of displaced villagers; 6) in parallel to the realization of the above steps, the initiation, with a timetable determined by both parties, of the gradual disarmament and legal participation into the democratic social life. The Declaration states as well that in order to reach a solution, it might be fundamental to consider the option of a democratic autonomy within Turkey's borders.

Even if there has been a tendency to separate both politically and analytically the *Kurdish question*, in its broadest sense, from its armed manifestation between the Turkish Government and the PKK, it will be really difficult to solve the first one without taking into account the latter or

just by assuming that the PKK has already been defeated, while confrontations still occur. In that sense, there are two unavoidable and necessary issues to deal with. On the one hand, the negotiation for demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of the PKK's members and, on the other hand, a commitment to fully approach the Kurdish issue at all its dimensions: ethnical and cultural, political, economic, social and ideological. KKK's Declaration – with its ambiguities and without considering it as an unquestionable guiding document- deals with both pillars without rejecting principles that have traditionally been key elements for the Turkish army and politicians: Turkey as main territorial and citizenship framework, something which involves building bridges that could be crossed.

Under the given long- term democratization and reform process in Turkey (related in turn to Turkey's potential accession to the EU), it is shocking that the Turkish elites do not take up the challenge and seize the opportunity to tackle the conflict with PKK -now that the situation is very favourable-, and the Kurdish issue -now that bridges have been built. Progress in this dispute would in turn enable flexibility and negotiation dynamics in other conflicting areas that Turkey is interested in, such as the conflict in Cyprus. Nevertheless, apparently, the Turkish Government has no intention of facing up to these challenges, even less during this year of elections. Yet, there is the risk of wasting the opportunity created by current favourable circumstances, and of deepening divisions. The PKK has warned that it will break the truce if offensive acts still go on; and the radicalization of its position and actions under a no-way-out scenario cannot to be ruled out. Besides, the perceptions and interests of various sectors within Turkey might move toward more distant and more excluding spheres. Consequently, while the governmental elites do not take an interest in peace, further actors are needed both inside and outside Turkey to visualize that conflict transformation may be very close and therefore commit themselves to it.