

'Recognition of the Conflict and Political Dialogue': Speech Delivered by KHRP Chief Executive, Kerim Yildiz, at the Sixth International Conference on EU, Turkey and the Kurds at the European Parliament, Brussels, 3 February 2010

Brief Welcome Remarks

I am pleased to see so many people here who have a deep desire to find a way out of the conflict in Turkey. It's been such a pleasure to here the debates and discussion. Today, I want to discuss just that, the importance of all of voices... I will TRY to be brief.

Conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries have increasingly affected civilian populations, and the Kurdish conflict has been no exception. The people of Turkey have endured over 25 years of conflict and have experienced immense suffering. *This is why recognition of the conflict is so important.*

For such vast numbers of civilians and combatants, as there are in the armed conflict in Turkey and the region, to engage in dialogue and to trust that an end to conflict is in their interest, it will be necessary to openly acknowledge the full extent of these experiences. Progress towards a durable and deep-rooted peace can only come when both parties acknowledge the severe impact the conflict has had on Turks and Kurds alike, not to mention, the region.

The Turkish state has been reluctant to acknowledge the breadth of grievances that are at the root of the Kurdish conflict. This reluctance comes from a desire to view the conflict – and for many – the existence of the Kurds themselves, as a threat to state unity and security.

There are a number of reasons for Turkey's reluctance. As my time is limited I will mention only a couple:

- Firstly, recognition would place obligations on the state to acknowledge and rectify the injustices against its Kurdish population that have been allowed by the Constitution;
- Secondly, Turkey believes that recognition of the conflict may give undue legitimacy to the PKK, allowing it to be part of a negotiated resolution. Indeed, Turkey has been keen to link its operations against the PKK – both domestic and those across the border into Kurdistan Iraq - with global anti-terror measures, allowing it to hide behind the legal confusion that designation provides.

The PKK, on the other hand, has been more open to a negotiated resolution to the conflict – as long as the organisation is represented – either directly or indirectly, at the negotiating table. However, as it is not a recognised state actor, this is seen as a ‘big ask’. Although both accept that a military victory is unlikely, Turkey has long refused to enter into dialogue with even legal political parties representing Kurdish interests, such as the DTP.

The launch of the AKP’s *Democratic Opening*, aimed at developing proposals for the resolution of the conflict and political reform, has been a welcome move towards peace. However the AKP initiative does not appear to include opportunities for wider consultation or call for the substantive constitutional reform that is necessary to recognising the underlying issues of the conflict.

There are other obstacles working against the initiative as well. Institutions representing Kurdish interests are mistrustful of the government’s motives, and this can also be said of other opposition parties. Recent events, including the closure of the DTP and the arrest of Kurdish mayors, human rights defenders and others, have done nothing to convince sceptics *on all sides*, that the state is interested in substantive reform or working towards a negotiated peace. On the contrary, the government’s operations since December have further polarised both sides and increased tensions.

In its reluctance to recognise the underlying political, social and economic causes of the conflict, Turkey insists that the Kurdish conflict is a solely domestic issue. Yet the importance and urgency of finding a peaceful, political solution to the Kurdish conflict needs to be recognised not only by the parties to the conflict but by the larger international community including the EU and the United States.

Indeed, there are a number of reasons why greater international involvement is important – including the US and Europe’s close ties with Turkey. The geostrategic location of country at the cross roads of Europe and the Middle East should make the resolution of Turkey’s Kurdish issue of vital importance to the stability and peace of the region and to international community. Questions around migration from across the Kurdish regions which is of paramount concern to the EU would largely be answered. Stability would lead to economic growth, and Iran and Syria will have a much more difficult time continuing their programmes of oppression against Kurds without coordination with the Turkish military.

Of course, while a promising start, recognition will not be enough. All citizens will need to be galvanised in the project of peace, confident that both the causes and effects of the conflict are being addressed.

This entails a stubborn examination of the root causes of the conflict; substantive and democratic political reform; sustained political will; and

international support. Therefore, it is essential that there be an agreed framework from which a peaceful dialogue between the parties can begin. If the government's initiative is to be successful it must be receptive to outside ideas and consultation.

Laying the foundations for lasting peace and security in Turkey will be a complex process, and it is important that designing conflict resolution and post-conflict programmes:

- involve all parties;
- start early within the peace process;
- and take an integrated approach to the political, civil, social, cultural and economic context in Turkey.

The exclusion of a range of political voices and regional civil society groups from any formal negotiation process threatens the sustainability and durability of any peace agreement reached. This means that Turkey must address the historical suppression of Kurdish culture and identity.

The ongoing use of armed violence by both sides further complicates the issue. Both Turks and Kurds are divided over what resolution of the Kurdish issue should look like and serious divisions remain on both sides in regards to questions of self-determination, constitutional reform, amnesty and disarmament.

Whether described as a '*democratic initiative*' or a '*roadmap*', it is important to establish a formal basis for engagement between the parties. Such a plan should explicitly focus on building good faith and developing mechanisms to reach settlement on the contentious issues that currently divide – engaging journalists, civil society organisations and opinion makers to help shape public opinion in favour of political engagement and dialogue. Although my suggestions are only a few among many possible elements that could be included in a future peace process, I think they offer a starting place for the parties to the conflict and establish an environment for the negotiated path out of conflict.

Any framework for peace should be divided into phases, with benchmarks that must be met before moving on to the next phase. This will help ensure that all political and cultural dimensions of the Kurdish conflict are addressed and that no issue or group of people are sidelined within the peace process. The initial framework must be comprehensive, clear, and goal-driven. Achieving these goals will require discussion of, among other issues, restitution for IDPs, military and security sector reform, formal recognition of the Kurds.

The people of Turkey *and* the region – both Kurds and non-Kurds – have suffered greatly throughout the conflict. Without public support any

initiative or peace process, no matter how carefully planned, is doomed to failure.

The final phase of the framework will mark the implementation of the agreed upon measures. These measures must include:

- Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (or DDR);
- Security sector reform, and the building of a security force in the region that is seen as locally accountable, engaged, and effective;
- A constitutional reform process.

While this final phase may mark the end of formal peace process, it is by no means an end to the work that will need to be completed to ensure that the conflict in Turkey does not re-emerge.

The constitutional reform discussed will take time and continued political will. In addition, if there is any hope of successfully addressing human rights violations and healing some of the wounds of the conflict suffered by the people, both parties, as well as the international community, must remain committed to the reconciliation process. In order to build a lasting and inclusive peace, it will be necessary to consider a variety of mechanisms for justice and reconciliation – including criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programs, gender justice, and memorialisation efforts.

I suggest that truth commissions – which focus on past human rights violations and attempt to illustrate an overall picture of violations of human rights or international humanitarian law over a period of time – may be best for the Kurdish conflict in Turkey to establish a public record of events that occurred during the conflict is very important and would hopefully contribute to the necessary reforms needed for a lasting peace. *This is not to say that truth and reconciliation commissions are a cure-all.*

The success or failure of a truth and reconciliation commission, as with the resolution of the conflict as a whole, will ultimately be dependent on the level of consultation with civil society, the level of support – both financial and political – given domestically and internationally, and the political will present to implement any recommendations made by the commission.

In summary while the prospects for peace seem daunting, the success of peace processes in other states where conflict raged for decades, proves that with *continued* commitment, political will, and international support, peace, security, stability and a unified Turkey can be possible.