

Toward a Turkish-Kurdish Peace

The Role of Education

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There have been many reasons offered for the failure of the Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process in 2015, some of which will be examined. Given the recent Turkish elections and the likelihood of renewed discussions, there can be no doubt that education will play an important role if a serious reconciliation is to be achieved.

The way we fashion our educational system tells us a lot about how we see the present and may also offer possible glimpses toward where we are heading. We impart values, knowledge and skills and chart goals for our children. So it is that a careful examination of what our children study often provides an instructive context for the direction of social and geopolitical development. In this sense, a culture's textbooks can help us understand much about that society's politics and strategies.

This paper focuses on one example of such a process. It examines the 2015 collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process against the background of the Kurdish elective courses offered within Turkey's national curriculum. It views the Kurdish electives as a distinct curriculum, reflecting Kurdish worldviews and existing parallel to the general Turkish educational system.¹ Consequently, there is an emphasis on the role of serious Turkish-Kurdish peace education in safeguarding any future reconciliation.

The 2015 Collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process

Turkey's elective Kurdish textbooks were authored, for the first time in the country's history, as an initiative during the Turkish-Kurdish rapprochement. Leading that peace process were then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. Both leaders had to overcome much opposition within their respective communities in charting a roadmap to peace. We also know, in hindsight, that the peace process began secretly in Oslo in 2009 against the background of an earlier thaw, turning public in 2011, and finally collapsing in 2015. This public Turkish-Kurdish "honeymoon" was, by 2014, supported by majorities in the two communities.² The June 7, 2015 general elections for Turkey's National Assembly resulted in 61.4 percent of the parliament's members supporting the peace process.³

Following the elections, however, the Turkish army launched a major offensive against the PKK forces, resulting in two thousand dead from both sides,⁴ hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, and the mass destruction of Kurdish neighbourhoods. Among those Kurdish politicians subsequently arrested were twelve parliamentarians and eighty-five mayors.⁵

Anger and fear among Turkey's Kurds had already heightened by late 2014, as Turkey failed to stop ISIS from launching the siege of Kobane, on the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border. The Turkish government also prevented its own citizens from sending support to Kurdish fighters and civilians, some of them Turks, who were trapped in the nearby city.⁶ Widespread Kurdish riots in Turkey ensued, leading to dozens of fatalities. In some cases, ISIS fighters attacked Kobane from the Turkish side of the border.⁷ The Turkish government, for its part, protested the US-led coalition's air support for the besieged Kurds, but was later convinced to allow reinforcements of Kurdish fighters from Iraqi Kurdistan to enter Kobane through Turkish territory.⁸ Turkey also accepted some 200,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees.⁹

But Turkish policy was not consistent, revealing the deep suspicions felt by Ankara toward Kurdish nationalism. Regardless of the peace process, Turkish leaders continued to refer to the PKK as terrorists.

I have told [US President] Barack Obama there is no way we can approve of the assistance they provide to the PYD since it is a terrorist organization just like the PKK.¹⁰

Kurdish leverage in being the only serious ground force capable of confronting ISIS, along with the solidarity of Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey was understandably seen as a danger by the Turkish government. In addition, cultural diversity, including women's liberation and pronounced left-leaning secularism within militant Kurdish groups are not particularly compatible with the AKP's penchant for political Islam.¹¹

The Kurdish victory in Kobane led to a wave of Turkish-Kurdish youths volunteering to rebuild the city. On July 20, 2015, an ISIS cell launched a major bombing attack on one such group of youths during a gathering in Suruç, not far from Kobane. A few days later, a renegade PKK group killed two Turkish police officers in retaliation. The Turkish Army then conducted a major offensive against the PKK, bringing the peace process to an end.

Current Explanations for the Collapse

Several explanations have been offered to explain the collapse of the peace process. The first allows that the two sides were not fully committed to peace. The election results of 2015 were less successful than expected for Erdoğan, and he needed the support of anti-Kurdish elements to secure a constitutional transformation of the country. An anti-Kurdish war was opportune and effective. On the PKK side, a declared withdrawal of armed PKK forces crossing into Iraqi Kurdistan never fully materialized. Another reason may have been that the Kurdish armed forces in Northern Syria offered an alternative path to freedom-seeking Kurds in Turkey. A third explanation suggests that radical elements among high echelons of the Turkish army may have been subverting the peace process. Another reason for the collapse might have been that the entire roadmap simply did not translate into a binding legal framework.¹² Finally, there is the unresolved issue relating to mechanisms and experiences of territorial control and rights.¹³

School Textbooks Reflect Unresolved Issues

The current discussion draws on two studies treating the general Turkish curriculum and Kurdish elective courses as independent curricula, each representing distinct voices: the Turkish majority and the Kurdish minority.¹⁴ Each curriculum was examined according to international standards for peace and tolerance.¹⁵ Among other things, these standards require respect for the Other (rival) nation or ethnic group; providing unbiased information; avoiding hate; and teaching peace-making. Of particular importance in conflict situations is the presentation of individual children and figures from the “Other” camp in a way that opens hearts for engagement and coexistence and encourages cooperation and prosperity.

What perhaps stands out most in both the general Turkish curriculum and the Kurdish electives is that they mirror one another in not recognizing the Other ethnic group.

Simply stated, the general Turkish curriculum does not recognize the Kurdish people. Yet, unlike the pre-2002 textbooks where the word “Kurd” was mostly avoided (except in a derogatory manner), it is no longer ignored in the curriculum.¹⁶ The Kurdish language is mentioned, but only incidentally. Newroz [Nevruz], widely known as a Kurdish holiday in Turkey, is represented in the texts as an ancient Turkic tradition.¹⁷ In the context of post-World War I arrangements, the allies plan to establish a Kurdish state is alluded to only indirectly.¹⁸ In the following example presenting Turkey as pro-Kurdish, the actual word Kurd is missing:

In 1991, around 300,000 Peshmergas, who escaped from the Iraqi central government’s [military] operation, were allowed to take refuge in Turkey; camps were formed for them and they were provided shelter. Likewise, the number of refugees escaping to Turkey in 2011 because of the civil turmoil in Syria, exceeded 900,000, as of April 16, 2014.¹⁹

While it is true that in recent years a few elective Kurdish language textbooks were released, (which is more than the Iranians or Syrians have done for their Kurdish populations), there is no discussion of Kurdish culture (including language) in the general Turkish curriculum.

The principle of nationalism, as stated by Atatürk, is to love the Turkish nation and try to dignify it. This principle attaches importance to the unity of language, emotion, culture and goals within national borders. Regardless of their religious faith and language, everybody who identifies themselves as Turkish and lives as a Turk, is Turkish. Atatürk expressed this by saying, “How happy is the one who can say ‘I am a Turk.’”²⁰

So, the general Turkish curriculum, which reflects what almost all citizens learn and teach, assumes a Turkish nation displaying a “unity of language, emotion, culture and goals within national borders.” There is a caveat for “religious faith and language. ” *But there is no ethnic or cultural Kurdish minority.*

In June 2012, the Turkish government announced for the first time the launch of a Kurdish elective language course entitled: “Living Languages and Dialects” [*Yaşayan Diller ve Lehçeler*].²¹ Unfortunately, Kurdish education was, from the outset, minimalistic and did not

accomplish the educational goals that many Kurds had expected. Many of the new schools are the religion-focused *Imam Hatip* branches that do not include the elective curriculum. Conversely, the government turned a blind eye to a number of illegal private Kurdish schools. However, these were closed down during the clampdown.

Despite its shortfalls, this Kurdish elective course should be treated as a pioneering *curriculum* that would have been unthinkable only a few decades ago. These textbooks proudly strengthen Kurdish identity and include elements of “nation-building.” A pan-Kurdish worldview is assumed, but the books do not foster hate toward Turks. Kurdish-historic places in Turkey, Iran and Iraq (but not Syria) are explored. Also featured is the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. Newroz, the Kurdish national holiday, is for the first time proudly depicted as a Kurdish national holiday, while conveying an eternal message of the struggle to overcome tyranny.

[The people] all attacked together. In doing so, they ended the tyrant's brutality. From then on, a new day had begun. This day was March 21 and was named: ‘Newroz.’ Since that day, Newroz has represented two festivals: the festival for the beginning of spring and festival of emancipation.²²

Children's names within the texts are exclusively Kurdish. Nevertheless while Turks are not represented in the elective courses, all Kurdish students learn about Turkey in the required Turkish curriculum. These electives are perhaps most distinguished in the areas of gender and religion; here, the Kurdish textbooks are generally more secular than the rest of the current Turkish curriculum.²³

The Peace Process and the Importance of Education

The general Turkish educational system, as pointed out above, largely ignores the Kurdish question altogether. The curriculum reflects and enables the lack of a serious commitment for reconciliation of the Kurdish population with the Turkish majority.

The Kurdish elective courses do not fare much better in that respect. While providing a purely Kurdish cultural experience for students, the textbooks ignore the common heritage and future of Turks and Kurds as citizens of one country. Thus, these books neither correlate with the worldview proposed by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, nor with stated Turkish aspirations.

Drawing on Öcalan’s prison writings, the PKK redefined its political strategy as securing autonomous regions for Kurds in their respective countries rather than establishing an independent and united Kurdistan. The road maps sent by Öcalan to the PKK and the AKP government identified democratization of Turkey as the ultimate goal of the Kurdish movement.²⁴

Unfortunately, this elective curriculum does not present Kurdish culture as an integral part of the “democratization of Turkey.” It includes only Kurdish, and pan-Kurdish perspectives. The textbooks depict Newroz as it relates to the myth of struggle against tyrants (implying the Turks) with no emphasis on common heritage and shared future prosperity.

A major positive turning point in the peace process was the 2013 open Newruz festival in the major Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, celebrated in Turkey legally for the first time by enormous crowds. During that historic event, a letter was read from imprisoned PKK leader, Öcalan.

Like his other writings, Öcalan's letter was interwoven with references to Kurds' ethnic identity, examples from history of the political unity of Kurds and Turks, and literary metaphors drawn from nature to emphasize their coexistence. Assuming the brotherhood of Kurds and Turks as a cultural norm, Öcalan blamed 'colonial imperial powers' and their 'local collaborators' for the establishment of modern nation-states, the drawing of superficial borders, and for planting seeds of animosity between the peoples of the Middle East.²⁵

Uniting against a common enemy is a strategy employed all too commonly across the region. The Kurdish curriculum, issued by the Turkish Ministry of Education, avoids this pitfall. No hate, demonization or incitement was detected; but there was also no common heritage and cross-ethnic cooperation, coexistence or recognition of the Other. No Turkish and Kurdish children are seen anywhere playing together.

In short, the two Turkish curricula—the general one and the Kurdish electives—reflect a strident reluctance within the two societies toward reconciliation and coexistence. There is no notion of a shared homeland. Allowing some Kurdish teaching was no doubt a groundbreaking step in the right direction, and yet far from the minimum needed to preserve an animated Kurdish culture. Mainly, the two curricula do not include peace education because they do not reference the Kurdish dilemma in Turkey and beyond. There is no recognition of the Other as an ethnic group, partner or stakeholder. And no shared vision.

Final Thoughts

Reading the textbooks can help us understand why the Turkish-Kurdish peace process collapsed. Established curricula are often good indicators of things to come. Textbooks, typically authored by a wide array of scholars and teachers, take their cues from politicians but must also consider the national culture, public opinion, parents, teachers and, most importantly, children. Curricula authors are also influenced by global trends and requirements of global competition. At their best, they reflect past and current deep trends and worldviews within a given polity, but also aspirations for the future. At the most basic level, official textbooks are used by students throughout the nation and constitute the material for exams and success in life.

Textbooks are created by the community's "wise men" and therefore carry an authoritative aura of uncontested truth for the youth who study from them. Certainly there is competition for their attention: social media, classroom and extra-curricular activities—even recess—must all be considered as part of the equation that influences young minds. But the written, certified and required curriculum of a country remains one of the clearest and most important voices to understand that nation, its people and its leaders.

Should Turkish-Kurdish negotiations resume, education will be high on the agenda. Being a key issue, the Kurds will surely raise the question of language and culture. A more delicate

issue, however, is that of peace education aimed at fostering mutual respect and coexistence. As demonstrated by this analysis, peace education is a critical condition for the success of any peace process. Ignoring it will assure that the untenable status quo remains.

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http://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Strategic-Analysis_Toward-a-Turkish-Kurdish-Peace_Eldad-Pardo.pdf

¹ For an extensive analysis of these curricula: Eldad J. Pardo, “Two Languages One Country: Turkey’s Elective Kurdish Curriculum,” Jerusalem: IMPACT-se, April 2019,

<http://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Two-Languages-One-Country-Turkeys-Selective-Kurdish-Curriculum.pdf>;

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, “Turkey’s Curriculum Under Erdoğan: The Evolution of Turkish Identity.” Jerusalem: IMPACT-se, Nov. 2016,

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² Serra Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process with the Kurds: A Different Explanation,” *Middle East Brief*, no. 3 (June 2017): p. 4 (support among Turks was 57 percent, with 83 percent among Kurds).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ “Between July 2015 and December 2016, some two thousand people were reportedly killed in the context of security operations in southeastern Turkey. According to information received, this would include close to eight hundred members of the security forces, and approximately 1,200 local residents, of which an unspecified number may have been involved in violent or non-violent actions against the State.” “Report on the Human Rights Situation in southeastern Turkey, July 2015 to Dec. 2016.” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, February 2017, p. 2,

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf.

⁵ Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed,” p. 1. According to the above OHCHR report (p. 4), “The number of reported displaced persons (IDPs) in southeastern Turkey is estimated between 355,000 to half-a-million people, mainly citizens of Kurdish origin.”

⁶ Constanze Letsch in Suruç and Istanbul, Ian Traynor in Brussels. “Kobani: Anger Grows as Turkey STOPS Kurds from Aiding Militias in Syria.” *The Guardian*, Oct. 8, 2014,

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⁷ “IS-Kämpfer greifen Kobane aus der Türkei an.” *Der Spiegel*, Nov. 11, 2014,

<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/kobane-islamischer-staat-greift-von-der-tuerkei-aus-an-a-1005699.html>.

⁸ Humeyra Pamuk, Raheem Salman, “Kurdish Peshmerga Forces Enter Syria’s Kobani after further Air Strikes,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2014.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis/kurdish-peshmerga-forces-enter-syrias-kobani-after-further-air-strikes-idUSKBN0IK15M20141031>.

⁹ “Turkey Hosts 200,000 Refugees from Kobane, Emergency Agency Says.” *Hurriyet Daily*, Dec. 21, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-hosts-200000-refugees-from-kobane-emergency-agency-says-75866>.

¹⁰ PYD, or Democratic Union Party, is an armed confederalist Kurdish movement in northern Syria, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/10/26/erdogan-there-is-a-superior-mind-in-pyds-kobani-plots>.

¹¹ Darya Najim and Krekar Mustafa. “Turkey and Rojava: The Clash of Two Projects.” *The Jerusalem Post*, April 28, 2018,

<https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Turkey-and-Rojava-The-clash-of-two-projects-552965>.

¹² Based on analysis and literary summary by Serra Hakyemez, who proposed the fourth explanation presented. Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed.”

¹³ Dilan Okcuoglu. “The Elusive Quest for Peace between the Turks and the Kurds,” *The Conversation*, January 3, 2019,

<http://theconversation.com/the-elusive-quest-for-peace-between-the-turks-and-the-kurds-107646>.

¹⁴ Pardo, “Two Languages.”

¹⁵ “Our Methodology,” IMPACT-se, <http://www.impact-se.org/methodology/>.

¹⁶ Yanaracak, "Turkey's Curriculum," p. 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Komisyon, *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İnkılâp Tarihi ve Atatürkçülük* [The Republic of Turkey's Revolution History and Atatürkism] (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2014), p. 42.

¹⁹ Erdoğan Sağdıç and Zafer Araz, *Uluslararası İlişkiler -Ortaöğretim Ders Kitabı* [International Relations, Secondary School Textbook] (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2014), p. 103.

²⁰ Erol Ünal Karabıyık, *Sosyal Bilgiler - 5. Sınıf Ders Kitabı* [Social Studies, Fifth-Grade Textbook] (Ankara: Evren, 2015), pp. 44–46.

²¹ "MEB, İlkokul ve Ortaokul Derslerini Belirledi" [Ministry of Education Has Decided on the Courses for the Primary and Secondary Schools], *Sabah*, June 27, 2012,

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²² Kadri Yıldırım et al, *Kurdî 7 Kurmancî* (Kurdish 7, Kurmanji Dialect). Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (Ministry of National Education), 2015, p. 59.

²³ Pardo, "Two Languages," p. 1.

²⁴ Bold added; Hakyemez, "Turkey's Failed Peace," p. 4.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 5.