



Can Turkey Learn Anything from Northern Ireland?

by Zeynep N. Kaya and Matthew Whiting



By James Gordon, New York City, USA, Wikimedia

Recently a group of politicians and commentators from Turkey visited Northern Ireland to learn about its peace process and explore any lessons this might hold for the ongoing fragile

negotiations between the Turkish government and the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. The visitors met with former rebels-turned-politicians from Sinn Féin as well as senior British and Irish political figures, in a trip that was endorsed by the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayip Erdogan.

But not all politicians in Turkey were happy with the direction of the peace negotiations – the leader of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kermal Kılıçdaroğlu, has claimed in the past that Britain's actions in Northern Ireland were of a fundamentally different nature and cannot serve as a model for Turkey. Today, he is more supportive of entering negotiations with Öcalan, but he is critical of the government for entering

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negotiations without working through cross-party parliamentary structures. Therefore, it is prescient to ask if the Northern Irish model has any lessons for Turkish officials to achieve peace?

It is easy to see why Northern Ireland has become a tempting model to look to. The IRA and their political wing, Sinn Féin (literally translated as 'We Ourselves'), emerged in Northern Ireland in 1969 and fought to unify Ireland in a 30-year ethno-nationalist war against the British army attempting to quell the rebellion along with British loyalists fighting to remain part of the United Kingdom. Yet, what was seen as one of the most intractable conflicts in post-World War II Europe was brought to a negotiated end in 1998 through the Belfast Agreement, which established a power-sharing settlement between the local adversaries. Given Turkey's own ethno-national insurgency led by the PKK since 1984, an organisation geographically concentrated in the southeast of the country, the appeal of the Northern Irish model is strong, especially when it is noted that the conflict there was resolved while still retaining it as part of the United Kingdom for the immediate future.

Looking for parallels in other peace processes can be valuable, and Northern Ireland's most immediate lesson appears to be that dialogue helps. In Northern Ireland, both secret and publicised meetings between Irish republicans and the British government were crucial to securing an IRA ceasefire. Indeed, any negotiated end to an ethnic conflict requires dialogue between the adversaries, and Turkey's İmralı process marks an important and potentially positive departure. Although there have been limited attempts to negotiate with the PKK in 1991-93 and 1997, for example, successive Turkish governments typically have eschewed open negotiations with the PKK given their ongoing attacks against both military and civilian targets. While today's negotiations have their roots in secret contacts between the Turkish National Intelligent Organisation and the PKK in Oslo between 2010-11, the current pursuit of negotiations is well known and publicised.

However, attempting to move beyond this most general idea that talking with adversaries helps negotiations, it soon becomes clear that the Northern Irish peace process is not open to easy emulation in Turkey. As early as 25 years prior to the negotiated settlement, Britain indicated that it accepted Sinn Féin's goals of a united Ireland as a legitimate aspiration as long as it was pursued democratically. In an earlier failed attempt to broker peace in 1973, the British government indicated a willingness to



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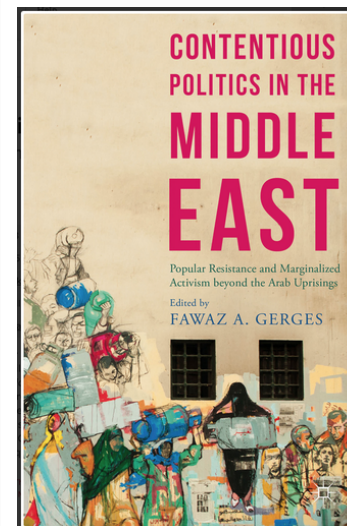
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allow Northern Ireland to secede if this was the majority will of its inhabitants. At the same time, the government reversed a previous ban on Sinn Féin and encouraged it to compete as a political party. When Sinn Féin decided to take part in elections from 1981 onwards, the British government did not suppress them, even though the IRA was conducting a simultaneous bombing campaign. Famously, in 1990, Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary declared that the government had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland'. The British government certainly implemented strong anti-terrorist legislation against the IRA, but also consistently aimed for encouraging greater political engagement by Sinn Féin. This meant that when it came to negotiations, republicans could moderate more easily, knowing that their goals could be pursued politically without being blocked by Britain and knowing that calling a ceasefire did not entail rejecting their ethno-national aspirations.

In Turkey by contrast, successive governments in Ankara have been much less encouraging of Kurdish politicisation. Most notably, a 10 percent electoral threshold was implemented in the 1980s, making it practically impossible for Kurdish parties to gain representation in the Turkish Parliament and forcing them to enter into elections as independent candidates instead. Demands for separation and engagement in separatist activities are banned in the Turkish constitution and this has led to the enforced dissolution of Kurdish political parties (and communist and Islamist ones too) and the arrest and imprisonment of many journalists, activists, academics, students, and lawyers for engagement in separatist activities. In fact, until recently, Erdoğan has insisted that the Kurdish independent parliamentarians and the BDP party members disassociate themselves from Öcalan and his ideals.

At least two reasons can help explain the different approaches by the central governments in Britain and Turkey. Firstly, Northern Ireland has never been an important source of political power for any major British party. Neither the Labour Party nor the Liberal Democrats ever fielded candidates in Northern Ireland and while the Conservative Party attempted this, they never received more than six percent of the vote share. This made it easier for all major parties to agree to a policy of allowing the people of Northern Ireland to decide their future, free of partisan or self-serving directives from the central British government. Secondly, the United Kingdom has always been an affiliation of different nations under one authority, accepting different and overlapping identities in the Celtic fringes to those in the centre. While it certainly

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used to be a strongly unitary state, in 1997 devolution to Scotland and Wales allowed devolution in Northern Ireland to appear as part of a normal political process, even if in reality it was undertaken in a very different scenario.

In Turkey, neither of these conditions is in place. Southeast Turkey is an important electoral battleground and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have built a significant support base there. The current peace negotiations could potentially strengthen the influence of the AKP and the BDP as electoral forces in southeast Turkey, much to the disquiet of their political rivals. Additionally, the opposition CHP remains sceptical towards these negotiations, in part because the process is linked to a bid by Erdoğan to rewrite the Turkish constitution in his own vision. Furthermore, although there are proposed changes for redefining Turkish national identity in more inclusive terms, Turkey remains a highly unitary and majoritarian state with a stronger commitment to a single overarching, civic-collectivist identity than exists in Britain. In short, the peace process is an issue of political contestation, in which the major parties in parliament have strong partisan interests, limiting the ability to find widespread consensus of how to pursue peace.

Perhaps the most important lessons from Northern Ireland for Turkey then, is that talking with 'terrorists' can be fruitful, but the success of such talks may well depend on being able to act beyond the confines of party politics and short-term partisan interests.

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