

Rebel Keeps Kurds' Guns Close at Hand in Peace Talks With Turkey
By Tim Arango, New York Times
11 April 2013

ZARGALI, Iraq — In a safe house made of cinder blocks and surrounded by grazing goats and sheep, nestled high in the remote mountains of northern Iraq, a Kurdish fighter who has waged a guerrilla war against Turkey for nearly three decades remains defiant in the face of peace.

“Our forces believe they can achieve results through war,” said the fighter, Murat Karayilan, who commands the thousands of fighters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or the P.K.K.



Adam Ferguson for The New York Times

For all the costs of the long war, Mr. Karayilan, his fighters and millions of Kurds believe it helped them achieve something they never would have without armed struggle: a recognition of Kurdish identity and more democratic rights.

Now, as the P.K.K. negotiates peace with Turkey to end one of the Middle East's most intractable conflicts, it is clinging to its guns despite demands by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's prime minister, that it lay them down as a condition of talks. This defiance suggests that the peace process, despite the hope it has engendered on both sides, could be longer and more arduous than at first anticipated.

“Our guerrillas cannot give up their arms,” said Mr. Karayilan, in an interview here in the safe house, which had a freezer full of ice cream and satellite television despite its remote location. “It is the last issue, something to discuss as a last issue to this process.”

The shape of a peace deal is being negotiated in the Turkish capital, Ankara, and in the island prison cell of Abdullah Ocalan, the P.K.K. leader and philosopher-king of Turkey's Kurdish resistance. But it has fallen to Mr. Karayilan to manage the peace process from his mountain redoubt in this lawless nook of Iraq, where the only authority is that wielded by gun-toting Kurdish rebels who operate checkpoints and live in caves at remote outposts.

The skies above these mountains have gone quiet, for now, as the bombing runs by Turkish planes, their pick of targets aided by imagery provided by American drones, have ceased in order to allow the talks to proceed.

Since a cease-fire was announced in March by Mr. Ocalan, pausing a war that has claimed nearly 40,000 lives since it began in 1984, Mr. Karayilan has been holding meetings and conferences with his followers to convince them of the merits of a deal that many of them are reluctant to accept for one overriding reason.

The rank and file, he said, “do not believe and trust the approach of Turkey.”

Mr. Erdogan, whose efforts at peace could establish his legacy as a peacemaker and propel him to the presidency next year, has demanded that the thousands of fighters scattered around Turkey lay down their weapons before withdrawing to safe havens in these mountains.

“We don't care where those withdrawing leave their weapons or even whether they bury them,” Mr. Erdogan said in a recent television interview. “They must put them down and go. Because

otherwise this situation is very open to provocation.”

Mr. Erdogan has also resisted new legislation, demanded by Mr. Karayilan’s party, to ensure the safety of retreating rebels. Instead, he has created a so-called committee of wise men, including Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals and leaders, to promote the peace talks.

Mr. Karayilan criticized Mr. Erdogan’s tactics, saying: “It needs a serious approach. Erdogan does not approach it seriously; he doesn’t understand the deep history. Everyone has to know that our guerrilla forces have continued our struggle successfully to this day.”

But Mr. Karayilan’s defiant words are tempered by his desire for peace. The latest cease-fire is the ninth announced by the P.K.K., which was designated a terrorist organization by the United States and Europe in 1993. Years ago the party gave up its ambition to create a separate Kurdish state, and it now says it will exchange peace for the expansion of Kurdish rights enshrined in a new constitution and the release of thousands of political prisoners from Turkish prisons.

“We want to solve our problems through peace and dialogue,” Mr. Karayilan said. “That is what we believe.”

But, he said, “if they do not accept Kurds as equal citizens, this problem cannot be solved.”

As the commander of the P.K.K., Mr. Karayilan also has influence — if not outright authority — over the group’s offshoot in Syria, the Democratic Union Party, or the P.Y.D., which has taken up arms in that country’s civil war to defend Kurdish areas. He and many other Kurds believe that the close relationship between the West, including the United States, and Turkey has been at the expense of the Kurds.

“In Syria, Kurds represent more secular and democratic groups,” he said. “However, the West is not developing relations with the Kurds in Syria. Why? Because of their relations with Turkey.”

This region, high in the Qandil mountain range, is within Iraq’s territory but beyond the control of any government authority. The rubble of houses that residents say were destroyed in recent years by Turkish warplanes can be seen from the road. On the side of one steep and narrow mountain passage sits the gnarled mess of a car — a memorial, a sign posted nearby says, to a family of seven killed in a Turkish airstrike.

Civilians here say they trust the guerrillas to mediate disputes and provide services. “In the cities, if you have a problem, you go to court,” said Kadir Ibrahim, a villager who said his home had been destroyed by a Turkish airstrike. “Here, the P.K.K. solves the problems. They are very polite. It’s unfair to call them terrorists. They are very polite and peaceful. They are just asking for their rights.”

At a time of revolution across the Middle East, it is time, Kurds say, for them to seize their rights and secure a better future. Millions of Kurds are spread across Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran, and they have long dreamed of independence. “Now, the world is different,” Mr. Ibrahim said. “Everything is different than before.”

With his bushy mustache and easy smile, Mr. Karayilan, who became commander of the P.K.K. after Mr. Ocalan was arrested in 1999, has an avuncular manner that belies his designation by the American government as a terrorist leader and kingpin (a label the Treasury Department applied to him in 2009 after determining that his organization raised money by smuggling drugs to Europe).

He sat in a back room of the safe house, with a yellow banner of Mr. Ocalan fastened to the wall. The air was sticky, and guerrillas carrying rifles served him tea.

If the war ends, he said, he hopes to return to Turkey to play a political role in advancing Kurdish rights. "After we put violence aside, then a democratic society has to be formed," Mr. Karayilan said.

If the war does not end, though, he is ready to fight again.

"If this does not happen, there will be a great war," he said.

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