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Copy to
Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP
Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

OPEN LETTER ON THE DE-LISTING OF THE PKK

Dear Foreign Secretary

We write to you following the publication of a report entitled ***Kurdish Political Representation and Equality in Turkey*** by the UK Parliament's APPG on Kurdistan in Syria and Turkey in June 2021. The report can be accessed using the following link: <https://russell-moyle.co.uk/a-report-from-the-uk-parliaments-all-party-parliamentary-group-on-kurdistan-in-syria-and-turkey/>

Amongst other matters the report contains a list of recommendations addressing the legal basis of the proscription of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). We at Peace in Kurdistan have been campaigning for a peaceful political solution to what is known as the Kurdish Question since our formation in 1994 and one of the key concerns in this context is the need for a fresh examination of the appropriateness of including the PKK on the list of proscribed organisations. We call on the British Government to reconsider this issue here in the UK as recommended by the APPG.

We believe there is a window of opportunity to revisit this question as both the Belgian High Court and institutions of the Council of Europe, having considered the original factual nexus for listing, have arrived at the conclusion that the evidence is in large part either inaccurate or insufficient to warrant listing.

There is also an increasing understanding that the listing of the PKK is a fatal blow to any potential peace process. If one's opponent is a terrorist the obvious strategy is to attempt to crush them and criminalise them. If however one's opponent is a legitimate actor in a conflict, as the Belgian judges found that the PKK was, then the strategy is different. It becomes one of negotiation and discussion with the end game being an attempt to find a peaceful, political solution; one which acknowledges the grievances of both sides and which leads to a lasting peace, based on equity and human rights. That is of course a long process but the starting point is to have both sides at the table, and while the Kurdish freedom movement is classified as 'terrorist' it's difficult to see how that can be achieved.

In fact, as you are aware, there was a period between 2013 and 2015 during which talks towards a peace process were held between representatives of the PKK and the Turkish government at Imrali Island prison, where Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish movement, is imprisoned.

These talks initially appeared to hold great promise for a peaceful reconciliation between the parties and a political resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey, but unfortunately these talks broke down and the violence resumed, with the Turkish government again using the label of ‘terrorist’ to justify their crack down on all forms of Kurdish political expression. This period shows both the possibility of a peace process in Turkey, as well as the limitations for realizing such a process so long as the Turkish government continues to approach the political mobilisation of the Kurdish people as an issue of ‘terrorism’.

There is too an adverse impact on the Kurdish diaspora in the UK. The effect of the listing of the PKK creates ripples experienced by the Kurdish community as harassment. Raids on community centres, port stops and disproportionately violent policing of demonstrations are common complaints, and it all springs at some level from the fact that a very broad-based movement for basic rights for Kurds in Turkey and Syria is conflated with an organisation, the PKK, that is proscribed.

The Foreign Affairs committee recommended in February 2018 that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office should “support meaningful political participation and representation of the Kurds, as well as cultural recognition, equal rights and economic opportunities for them, underpinned by national constitutions and achieved through negotiation, as a means of fulfilling Kurdish aspirations.”

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfa/518/51805.htm>

The stark reality, as things stand, is that political participation and representation for the Kurds in Turkey and Syria is impossible as every attempt to achieve this is simply deemed to be some new iteration of the PKK.

Two prime examples of this are first the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) which the British Government has regular meetings with. The HDP is the third largest opposition party in Turkey, but now, as you are aware, it is being closed down through a judicial process in Turkey because, it is alleged, it is linked to the PKK.

Second, the Kurdish majority YPG/J forces in Syria which were the UK’s and NATO’s strong allies in the fight against ISIS. These forces are also condemned by Turkey as actually being the PKK in another guise, and therefore terrorists who should be wiped out.

So, two political or military organisations with whom the British Government has close relations are smeared by Turkey with the terrorism brush.

These kinds of tensions require the question of whether or not the PKK is actually a terrorist organisation to be revisited as a matter of urgency. It is the listing of the PKK that gives Turkey the tools to take the deeply repressive measures against Kurdish and pro- Kurdish organisations that it does.

The full list of APPG recommendations on the listing of the PKK is as follows:

Recommendations

XXIII. The APPG urges the UK government to make clear that the application of the label of 'terrorism' can not be applied to a broad range of Kurdish political and cultural organisations just because they are Kurdish or support Kurdish self-autonomy.

XXIV. The APPG urges the UK government to consider the reliability of the Turkish government's rhetoric in HDP prosecutions, and in regard to the PKK itself.

XXV. The APPG recommends that the UK government unreservedly diverge from Turkey on its definition of the PYD-YPG as terrorist organisations in line with its current practice to not list them and to work with them on the ground.

XXVI. The APPG recommends that the UK government recognise the PKK's aim to move away from a violent sphere and into a political one as seen in the recent peace process.

XXVII. The APPG urges the UK government to support the opening of international and domestic democratic channels for the PKK to distance themselves from violence and move towards reconciliation with the Turkish government.

XXVIII. The APPG urges the government to use experiences in Northern Ireland to support a process in which the PKK and Turkish government are able to come to a peace agreement.

XXIX. The APPG recommends that a clear process for the PKK and the Turkish government to politically resolve this conflict is suggested by the UK government.

XXX. The APPG suggests that the process of listing terrorist organisations should be constantly subject to review and based on public criteria.

XXXI. The APPG urges the UK government to review the classification of the PKK as a terrorist organisation based on contemporary evidence, recent legal cases in both Belgium and the European courts and to outline its findings.

XXXII. The APPG urges the UK government to clarify how organisations can distance themselves from violent pasts.

We find this to be a helpful approach to this difficult question and welcome your comments on how political representation, democracy, peace and stability can be improved in Turkey and beyond by reconsidering the question of the proscription of the PKK in the UK and elsewhere.

Yours sincerely

Peace in Kurdistan on behalf of patrons

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Peace in Kurdistan

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