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## Mincing Words: The Three Layers of the AKP's Narrative on Kurdish Politics

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### ABSTRACT

In 2009–2015, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) put forward several initiatives to end insurgency in Kurdish majority areas. However, successive “openings” failed to make progress. The electoral and international goals of the AKP gradually became incongruent with the peace process, and the AKP espoused heavy-handed tactics in July 2015. The ups and downs of the process in 2009–2015 show that it was already fragile. Some causes of this fragility were external to the AKP, such as the opposition parties' eagerness to use the process to poach nationalist voters and the PKK's violence. However, I argue that the contradictory nature of the AKP's narrative was also a crucial factor. The party's earlier narrative required the strict separation of two layers: security policies to fight terrorists and democratization policies to address the legitimate grievances of citizens. However, the intersubjective strategies that it experimented later required a gray area between these two fields. The AKP, instead of changing strategies, has constructed a three-layered, contradictory narrative.

### Introduction

In February 2015, a representative of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Sırrı Süreyya Önder, read a declaration inviting the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) to lay down arms in a lavish room of the imperial Dolmabahçe Palace. Önder was accompanied by high-level government representatives from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). At that time, there was reason to believe that the long-lasting conflict was about to end. However, just five months later, in June 2015, the conflict reemerged, and the talk about negotiations and openings disappeared. Why did the peace negotiations collapse so suddenly, at a time when it seemed so close to bearing fruit?

As far as the government's calculations are concerned, there is little to explain as Erdoğan himself laid out these reasons explicitly on 24 July 2015. First, from his perspective, the PKK was not responsive to the government's goodwill as the protest wave of 6–7 October 2014 demonstrates. Moreover, Erdoğan held the PKK responsible for the AKP's electoral upset of June 7, 2015. On top of these, the developments in Northern Syria were approaching the point of no return, and Turkey's and the PKK's goals conflicted. Therefore, there were three reasons: the lack of trust between the sides, electoral weakening of the AKP and the situation in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the literature on the failure of the openings has emphasized all three. First of all, the lack of trust between

the sides has been analyzed from multiple angles and factors such as the opaqueness of the flow of the authority within the Kurdish secessionist and nationalist movement<sup>2</sup> and its commitment to violence, including deadly attacks on civilians,<sup>3</sup> establishment of an armed youth wing,<sup>4</sup> the architecture of negotiations<sup>5</sup> and lack of a mediator<sup>6</sup> were analyzed. Second, electoral mechanisms, which includes both the opposition parties' readiness to exploit the discontent among the nationalist segments of the AKP's electoral base<sup>7</sup> and the competition between the HDP and the AKP for Kurdish votes<sup>8</sup>, are also well understood. Third, foreign policy dilemmas stemming from the Syrian Civil War were also extensively examined.<sup>9</sup> All these points have been discussed extensively in the literature regarding the AKP's Kurdish policies. Still, a background factor had been neglected in the literature: the inner tensions of the narrative that the AKP produced about Kurdish Politics.

The explanations that focus on electoral and foreign policy calculations and the lack of trust between actors rely on the conventional tools of policy analysis based on the actors' rational calculations. However, such rationalist approaches fail to problematize why the AKP's foreign policy goals in Syria and electoral setbacks were worth wasting all the time and energy spent on the openings. Instead, they simply state that these separate objectives became increasingly incompatible. These explanations neglect to analyze the antinomies of the narrative the AKP constructed around its opening strategies and how these antinomies contributed to the ending of the peace process. It is often argued that the AKP's strategy was a deviation from the state's conventional security strategy and what happened in 2015 was a fallback to the tactics and narratives of the past.<sup>10</sup> However, the AKP, from the very start, had constructed a multi-layered narrative that sought to address different audiences and enable it to pursue several objectives at once. The AKP's narrative on Kurdish Politics did not replace securitization with democratization.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it built a contradictory narrative allowing itself to navigate a complex political environment. Those contradictions were already noticeable in 2009, so they precede the Syrian Civil War, the AKP's electoral apogee in 2011, and the subsequent decline that left it in need of nationalists' support. These antinomies did not flourish as a result of these developments. However, they made a reversal in 2015 possible when the strategic situation changed drastically. This article contributes to the existing literature by showing that the change in the strategic situation in 2015 opened the way for the end of the peace process so quickly and entirely because of the inner contradictions of the AKP's narrative.

To understand the causal role played by narratives, we need to deploy interpretivist methods. The field of policy analysis has been influenced by the "interpretive turn" that challenged rationalist assumptions at least since the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> Interpretivists have stressed the centrality of meaning in human life in all its aspects.<sup>13</sup> In the context of security policies, the Copenhagen School and its theory of securitization have been particularly influential.<sup>14</sup> For them, the key process regarding security policies is securitization, that is, the transformation of a policy field to a security issue that allows extraordinary—often coercive—measures to protect an "object" whose existence is threatened.<sup>15</sup> This transformation is done through "speech acts," a concept borrowed from Austin.<sup>16</sup> For Austin, a speech act is an utterance that has a performative function. An utterance is considered an action because it changes something in the world. Austin provides the

perfect example of a speech act: “I now pronounce you man and wife.”<sup>17</sup> When an individual with proper authority utters these words, he re-defines the two addressed individuals, transforming their legal status and the expectations of the people around them about the way they will behave. In the context of security policies, this theory reveals that a securitizing political actor declares the existence of a threat to an audience and the necessity of extraordinary measures. The audience, however, is not entirely passive; the securitizing narrative needs to be built in a way that would be convincing to its audience.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, several analysts used the concept of re-securitization to understand the AKP’s recent approach to Kurdish Politics.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, the end of the peace process was the re-securitization of a field that had been earlier de-securitized by the AKP.

Despite its strengths, this framework of Copenhagen School has been criticized as too static: it essentializes both the “securitizing actor” and its audience while not paying attention to power relations and the context of the speech act.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, when we study the AKP’s policies, we see that such an approach does not capture the whole story. The complex relations between multiple narratives used by the same actor addressing separate audiences makes the relationship between policymakers and Kurdish politics much more dynamic. This dynamism and complexity stem from the AKP’s contradictory narrative on the relationship between security and Kurdish politics.

What is a contradictory narrative, and how does it work? As late Wittgenstein<sup>21</sup> and Geertz<sup>22</sup> show us, such utterances are context-dependent. Context shapes the meaning of the speech act. One can say, “I now pronounce you man and wife” in a mock wedding ceremony. In this case, the sentence does not have an impact other than entertaining people around. The rules of the language game are fluid, so we need to pay attention to the context as well. In political life, actors interact with their environment by building complex narratives, that is, an interconnected web of texts (platforms, press releases, campaign speeches, parliamentary speeches, interviews, etc.) that makes up the identity of a political actor. As they define the actor’s identity, such narratives are a set of speech acts. Such speech acts position some groups as allies, others as rivals, and others as enemies. In this sense, security policies are no exception.<sup>23</sup> The language game around the term “terrorism” is the most typical, even clichéd, example where someone’s terrorists are other’s freedom fighters. The simple act to refer to an individual as a guerilla or a terrorist is not merely a scholarly disagreement over the definition of terrorism or a philosophical disagreement on the morality of violence. It is a speech act that posits the speaker with someone against someone in a power struggle. In the context of political parties, these speech acts also seek to influence voting behavior and build alliances with social actors and other political parties. To form an alliance around a narrative, one does not need to be familiar with the entire narrative—many voters tend to use a few heuristics when deciding whom to vote for<sup>24</sup>—or even agree with the whole narrative, a partial alignment can be more than enough for a temporary alliance. Most important for our purposes, speech acts can be ambivalent and the narrative contradictory. The words could be carefully chosen in a way that can be interpreted in different ways to address multiple audiences and situations. Such narratives can be used to sustain broad alliances, but they also make such alliances fragile when a decisive action has to be taken.

From this perspective, the metaphor of a pendulum swinging between securitization and de-securitization does not capture the AKP's complex relationship with Kurdish politics. In fact, from the beginning, the AKP weaved two supposedly opposite narratives together: the narratives of democratization and securitization. For the AKP, the state has hitherto failed to distinguish between "legitimate" Kurdish grievances and the activities of the PKK. By neatly separating these two, it was claimed, the problem could be solved. The existence of a clear borderline between these two areas based on a correct analysis was a *sine qua non* for this strategy. This narrative had the benefit of attracting conservative Kurds without offending Turkish nationalist segments of the AKP's electoral base.

In 2009, another layer was added to the AKP's narrative. The party started to develop a strategy of negotiations and talks to uproot the violence, but such a strategy did not fit well with the established narratives that were already part of the AKP's identity. This new narrative claimed that the AKP could not merely solve the problem by applying the right policies. Instead, a common ground should be constructed through a process of societal dialogue. I call the former narrative the "analytical narrative" and the latter the "intersubjective narrative." The former narrative is analytical not only because the AKP posits itself as an analyst that seeks to understand the roots and symptoms of a problem, but also because it requires a constant endeavor of analytically separating legitimate grievances from the terrorist activities. The latter is intersubjective not because it is not the product of analysis, but because this new analysis sees the solution in the engagement of multiple actors that has different opinions on the roots of the problem and possible solutions. The intersubjective dialogue itself is a problem-solving strategy. However, the intersubjective narrative did not supplant the analytical narrative. Instead, the two narratives coexisted side by side. Thus, the new construct remained unstable. The coexistence of democratization and securitization strategies of the analytical narrative worked on voters because it was believed that these are intended for two separate policy fields and different people. However, the intersubjective strategy needed to cross such borders. PKK needed to be persuaded to lay down its weapons either directly or through some mediators that can influence it. This could be only possible if these groups' complete exclusion from the sphere of "legitimate politics" can somehow be loosened, as unlike inter-state conflicts, the legitimacy of the "other" itself is problematic in the domestic security narrative.<sup>25</sup> In other words, such an intersubjective process required the creation of a gray area where there could be a dialogue with the illegal actors. Indeed, that was what the government attempted by involving Öcalan and the HDP as mediators. However, the analytical narrative that enabled the AKP to talk with multiple audiences, especially to Turkish nationalist voters, was incompatible with the creation of such a gray area, making the AKP's position unstable.

To understand how these contradictions worked, this paper develops a method to track the AKP's position expressed in speech acts in critical moments. In other words, the way they "mince" words in response to concrete situations needs to be analyzed. In doing so, I refrained from relying on newspapers to avoid misquotes when possible. Instead, I relied on speeches and documents that were explicitly designed as speech acts to define the party: party programs, election platforms, and for more specific events, weekly parliamentary speeches of Erdoğan.

In short, the article seeks to contribute to the existing literature in two ways. Firstly, it seeks to enlarge our view on what happened to the AKP's Kurdish strategy in the summer of 2015 and show that behind the strategic impasse that forced decision-makers to abandon the efforts of peaceful resolution lies the contradictions of the AKP's narrative that was developed to justify its policies to multiple audiences. Second, it seeks to contribute to securitization theory by emphasizing that securitizing and desecuritizing narratives can be entangled in ways that make switching between the two easy for decision-makers. In the first section, I examine the precursors of the AKP's position, that is, the Social Democratic and Islamist attempts of transgressing the boundaries of the official narrative in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the second section, I discuss the AKP's position at the very start of its career, expressed in its party program. In the third section, I analyze how this analytical narrative was consolidated between 2002 and 2009. In the fourth section, I examine how the "Kurdish Opening" was destabilized by the tension between the AKP's original narrative and the efforts in building a new, intersubjective narrative. In the last section, I analyze how the so-called "Dolmabahçe Agreement" is especially ambivalent and intersubjective in approach, but difficult to connect with the AKP's identity.

### **Before the AKP**

Since the foundation of the Republic, official state policy has denied the existence of a separate Kurdish ethnic identity.<sup>26</sup> These policies continued after the single-party period, and the denial was deemed a necessary condition for being accepted as a legitimate player in the realm of party politics in Turkey.<sup>27</sup> The word "Kurd" itself was taboo. However, there was an "Eastern Problem," which should be solved by economic development and education. The language used to describe Kurdish Politics was thoroughly securitized, and any breach was considered a security threat.

This denial policy was made possible by the weakness of Kurdish nationalism, but that does not mean that it was insignificant. Already on the verge of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, there were intellectuals as well as tribal leaders and local notables who were envisioning an autonomous and even independent Kurdish nation.<sup>28</sup> However, these ideas generally failed to supplant tribal and religious loyalties as a basis for action in the following decades when the Middle East's political map was redrawn. Later, between 1946 and 1970, Kurdish elites were more focused on working with Turkey: traditional elites wanted to benefit from their ability to deliver votes to major political parties<sup>29</sup> whereas the educated elites sought to work with the ascending radical left, often to end denial policies.<sup>30</sup> However, in the 1970s, the situation changed, and different organizations with a Kurdish nationalist stance aiming at secessionist policies were established.<sup>31</sup> One of them, the PKK, would be a significant player in regional politics in the following decades.

In the same decade, the mainstream parties in Turkey saw the roots of the emerging "Eastern Problem" in the economic sphere.<sup>32</sup> Even the leftist Republican People's Party (CHP) of 1976 conceptualized the 'Eastern Problem' as a problem of regional underdevelopment and the ascending Kurdish Nationalism as a symptom of regional economic disparities to be addressed by purely economic policies.<sup>33</sup> These policies were

rejected by the newly established PKK, which defined it as a national problem, a problem of self-determination, assimilationism and colonialism. It was positioning itself against the denial of Kurdish identity and went beyond: not only did the Kurds exist, but they were an entirely different nation whose right of self-determination was stolen in the 1920s. When the PKK became a power to be reckoned with in the 1980s, advocating 'revolutionary terrorism' as a political method, the analysis and even the naming of the problem became a language game that shaped Turkish politics. The labels "problem of terrorism," "South-eastern problem" and "Kurdish problem" became emblematic of the political identities of the people who use them. The PKK claimed that it was a national problem, a problem of recognition and self-determination. It was 'The Kurdish (National) Problem.' In the official narrative, it was "the South-eastern Problem," fueled by regional underdevelopment<sup>34</sup> and foreign support. From the state's perspective, the issue was two-fold: the security problem and the economic problem. The security problem was to be solved by military determinedness; the economic problem was to be solved through "the allocation of more money for schools, infrastructure, jobs, and living standards for the region's inhabitants."<sup>35</sup> Conceptualizing the issue as a political problem with an ethnic identity dimension amounted to treason. However, some players attempted to conceptualize the issue differently, as a political problem whose symptom was terrorism, a "Kurdish Problem" that is not necessarily a national problem. Within the realm of party politics, the players who tried to distinguish themselves from the official narrative were the social-democrats and the Islamists.

The Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) was one of the first actors that tried to define the issue outside of the official language within the realm of mainstream party politics. The famous 1989 Kurdish Report was their first attempt to transgress the boundaries of the official paradigm. This attempt resulted in an electoral alliance with the pro-Kurdish *Halkın Emek Partisi* in 1991. The electoral platform of the party in 1991 was timidly transgressive. It dared to use the word "Kurdish," albeit only once: "It will be ensured that all citizens of Turkey live in peace as equal human beings with equal rights regardless of their religion, denomination, language and ethnic origin. Especially the unfair practices and pressures targeting our citizens of Kurdish origin will end immediately."<sup>36</sup> This simple sentence was a transgression; not only did it dare to use the taboo word, but it also problematized the security policies in place. However, the SHP did not completely break away from the official narrative; it minced words to distinguish itself from the PKK's rhetoric carefully. The expression "our citizens of Kurdish origin" recognized an ethnic group with a different set of problems to be addressed but also underlined the SHP's rejection of Kurdish Nationalism, making the daring move more defensible as it implied an understanding of nationhood based on *jus soli* and utterly denied the existence of a separate nation. However, the SHP's posture, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s was erratic: while protesting the official line loudly, it also expelled several of its members for going too far in that direction.<sup>37</sup>

Another group that transgressed the boundaries of the paradigm was Erbakan's National Outlook Movement. The issue did not appear in the narrative of the pro-Islamist National Outlook Movement before the 1980s even though the party received a sizeable portion of its votes from Kurds. As the struggle between the PKK and security forces unfolded, the National Outlook developed a critical stance against the existing

security policies. The 1991 platform of the Welfare Party (RP), National Outlooks' avatar at the time, was, like the SHP's, timidly subversive. The RP did not dare to use the word Kurd, but used an equally risky term, "state terrorism": "The wrong policies applied in the Eastern and South-eastern Anatolia are the causes of the rise of terrorism. We conceive the excessive pressures and injustices, the state terror against the region's innocent people as wrong policies."<sup>38</sup> This analysis was partly based on the unpublished report prepared by Erdoğan, the future leader of the AKP. Erdoğan suggested using the word Kurd and embracing ethnic pluralism.<sup>39</sup> However, the National Outlook avoided any reference to an ethnic problem but also refused to use the official language, a position it held throughout the 1990s.

Even the two center-right parties, the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the True Path Party (DYP) holding positions of responsibility, experimented with more liberal arguments. Most importantly, Özal, who was the head of the ANAP, occasionally hinted at the necessity of liberalization reforms, including the unbanning of the Kurdish language.<sup>40</sup> Demirel, the DYP's leader, went further by saying that Kurds should be allowed to develop their language and folklore.<sup>41</sup> Çiller, his successor, had initially taken a similar route, but her premiership was characterized by security policies advocated by hardliners.<sup>42</sup> Overall, the center-right never abandoned security policies and nationalist rhetoric even though it often pondered about the benefits of a more liberal approach.

To summarize, starting from the late 1980s, two major political parties in Turkey, the Social Democrats and the Islamists, made attempts to transgress the boundaries of the official vocabulary on Kurds. Both actors, instead of following the mainstream discourse that condemned terrorism and rallied behind the state's security apparatus, problematized the excess use of the security measures. Social Democrats went as far as ignoring the taboo around the word "Kurd." With this act, they disassociated with some of the security policies and presented themselves as the defenders of the ordinary Kurds separate from the terrorists. In the 1990s, the taboo gradually became untenable, and even center-right figures such as Özal and Demirel moved toward that direction. The narrative that defined the problem as a "security-slash-regional underdevelopment problem" was complemented by a narrative that included recognition and democratization dimensions. The securitizing narrative that was entangled with a democratization narrative was already present, and the foundations of a two-layered narrative were laid. When the AKP stormed the party system in the early 2000s, it was going to build on these multi-dimensional analyses.

## **Enter the AKP**

The AKP, in its establishment, did not make the problem its priority, preferring to focus on the raging economic crisis. Kurdish politics is not mentioned in any weekly parliamentary speech before the 2002 election. However, the issue is tackled in its platform by simultaneously acknowledging and avoiding the language game around naming "the problem." The first sentence of the section entitled "The East and the Southeast" of the AKP's 2001 Program reads: "Unfortunately, the problem that some of us call South-eastern, some of us Kurdish and some of us call terror is a reality of our country."<sup>43</sup> The title of the section was following the established official narrative. The first sentence

simply told that there were multiple ways to name the problem and legitimize the use of the “Kurdish Problem” without incorporating it into its own narrative. The subsequent analysis avoided the word “Kurd” but referred to the recognition of cultural differences and languages other than Turkish. It subtly made recognition of a policy goal while respecting the taboo. Security measures were briefly mentioned, and the importance of economic policies was discussed, but the problem was primarily defined as a democratization problem. The key paragraph reads:

Solutions grounded in bureaucratic-authoritarian understanding, as they are based solely on security logic, are aggravating the problem in the long-term. Approaches emanating from the framework of a democratic state, even if they create concerns at first, produce results that consolidate the unity and integrity of our nation in the long-term. [...] We need to reach the understanding that solely economic development policies cannot solve this problem entirely, and an approach that recognizes cultural differences in the framework of the democratic rule of law should complement it.<sup>44</sup>

This paragraph summarizes the fundamental pillars of the AKP’s narrative on the issue. The problem of economic underdevelopment, i.e., lack of infrastructure and investment, should be solved; the security measures should continue to be in place.<sup>45</sup> However, this should be accompanied by democratization and cultural recognition.<sup>46</sup> What do democratization and recognition entail? The party fleshes these out further. This involves eliminating the excesses of the security measures such as the state of emergency, respecting rights and freedoms and removing the barriers to the use of the Kurdish language. What it does not involve is an alternative to the unitary state.<sup>47</sup>

The platform emphasized the loyalty of “the people in the region” and separated the security problem from the problems of the people.<sup>48</sup> It went on to analyze security difficulties as a symptom of the broader social and political problems such as the state’s negligence, underdevelopment, the undemocratic character of security policies in place, and the state’s failure to recognize cultural differences.<sup>49</sup> The starting point of this narrative is its sociological approach: the symptom would wither away if the social problems were solved using the right policies. It uses the language of an analyst. The individuals who created the security challenges were criminals, but to deal with criminals, underlying social problems should be solved. Dealing with the criminals was necessary, but on its own was insufficient.<sup>50</sup>

We cannot characterize the AKP’s narrative as an attempt of desecuritization. However, it did seek to modify the existing narrative by adding another layer based on the analysis that loyal Kurds had problems related to their ethnic origins but unrelated to the PKK’s activities. Even in this early phase, the binary of securitization-desecuritization does not explain the language used by the AKP. The old narrative is not dismissed by a speech act; instead it is replaced by a complicated narrative that adds nuances to the existing narrative.

The analytical approach inevitably carries an epistemological problem: how do we know that the problem is not of national loyalty, but is economic and social? The analysis is a speech act that posits the actor vis-à-vis multiple audiences; it is not the result of objective analysis. The declaration of loyalty made on behalf of the object of the analysis rejects the separatist argument and expresses the speaker’s loyalty to the national unity, whereas the acknowledgment of regional grievances speaks to the voter, implying region-specific policies intended to improve the voter’s situation. The potential problem

with the analyst's perspective and its attempt to take the floor on behalf of its subject was that there was no space for negotiations. In this perspective, democratization was not an intersubjective strategy, but a set of policies that would solve the problems of the policy's objects. This became a real issue for the AKP, who would later intend to solve the problem through negotiations.

### **Between democratization and securitization before 2009**

This narrative was maintained and consolidated by the AKP until 2009. The PKK was relatively inactive throughout the period despite some spikes in violence. The problem was not at the top of the AKP's agenda. Still, it was not entirely dormant, and the party was taking some measures. In 2003, a partial amnesty law that targeted active PKK militants was accepted by the Parliament.<sup>51</sup> The controversial "Prevention of Terrorism Act" was amended to be more in line with the EU's standards. Overall, the AKP's narrative was consistent.

One change concerned the word "Kurd." The effort to keep the problem nameless was still present, but the word itself was used more directly. In his famous Diyarbakır Speech in 2005, Erdoğan said: "We don't have to name all problems because these problems belong to all of us. If you insist on calling the problem something, the Kurdish Problem is not the problem of a part of this nation, but to its the problem of the whole nation."<sup>52</sup> While referring to this speech later, he complained that his gesture was not met enthusiastically:

I did express the fact that there is a Kurdish Problem in this country. However, unfortunately, there was no positive response to my claim from there, no democratic organizations, no NGOs came [to me]. Not only they didn't come, but they also tried to exploit my words.<sup>53</sup>

From Erdoğan's and the AKP's perspective, their sincere efforts were unanswered. This lack of enthusiasm was not seen as the failure of party policies, but the lack of sincerity of the players that were pushing for more autonomy. In other words, according to the AKP, the analysis was correct, but the problem persisted because of the unresponsiveness of pro-Kurdish politicians.

The very same speech also underlined the commitment to the analysis outlined in the party Program. The spike in violence in Spring 2006<sup>54</sup> was interpreted as an attempt to stop the positive steps the AKP has already taken:

They are very concerned about the progress we made in the economy and democratization in our entire country. The hopes of those who expect us to regress from the enormous distance we covered in the way of democracy and the rule of law are vain. They should know this; it won't happen. Those treacherous groups are emerging again because they are starting to understand that the soil is no longer fertile for them; their malicious plans are ancient history and can't be revived.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, it was concluded that the measures aiming at the roots of the problem were not enough. Security policies were also needed:

Of course, we're taking all possible security measures and will keep taking them. People who mistake the state's compassion towards its citizens will understand that they are wrong. If the people who produce the culture of violence and conflict think that they can neutralize our reflexes, they are wrong.<sup>56</sup>

So, the security measures were still a reflex, something natural that would not go away. The social problem, which fed the violence, was disappearing through economic development and democratization, and “the treacherous groups” were to be dealt with security measures.

Another recurring feature was the role of the word “terrorism.” Condemning the PKK as a terrorist organization was regarded as a necessary condition to be accepted as a legitimate player, a speech act to be performed. The legal pro-Kurdish parties were repeatedly invited to clarify their position vis-à-vis this threshold. As an example, Erdoğan told that: “The leader of a political party [Ahmet Türk, the head of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party] requested a meeting. You should first declare that the PKK is a terrorist organization. Only after that, we can talk.”<sup>57</sup> The threshold was necessary for the AKP’s narrative: a gray area between people who would be the object of democratization policies and terrorists, which would be the object of security policies remained at odds with the AKP’s narrative on the Kurdish Politics. A legal political party, which did not disassociate itself entirely from the PKK’s narrative, created a space where the security and democratization pillars of the AKP’s narrative overlap, and not clearly separated as they were supposed to be. This perseverance on the threshold did not allow any gray area between the legitimate and illegitimate fields and narrowed down the possible actors to be addressed.

Between 2002 and 2009, the AKP pursued its promised policies. This consistency required a clear-cut delineation of the security and democratization dimensions of the problem. In that sense, the securitizing narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not dismantled. Instead, another layer was built on top of it about the need for democratization. This two-layered narrative was based on the analysis that was developed in 2001 and did not have an intersubjective dimension. For the AKP, its success in elections was the affirmation of the analysis. In 2009, at a juncture where the AKP did not feel constrained by the Army anymore,<sup>58</sup> the party was going to change its course, but this would create tensions within its own narrative.

### **From objectivity to inter-subjectivity: the contradictory narrative**

In 2009, with the launch of the “Kurdish Opening,” the tone of the AKP’s narrative changed drastically and started to build a contradictory narrative. On the one hand, the AKP did not leave behind its dual strategy of democratization and securitization. On the other hand, another layer was added to this narrative that emphasized dialogue. In other words, the analytic approach was to be supported by an intersubjective approach. This new strategy could be easily spotted in Erdoğan’s speeches in the wake of the opening process. His first parliamentary group speech after the launch of the Kurdish Opening gives us a clear picture:

I am not talking about a package [of legal changes], I’m talking about a process. In this process, let’s meet with the leaders of the political parties, both in and out of the Parliament. Let’s meet with academics, various intellectuals of this country, members of media, civil society organizations, in short, with everyone who has a word to say on this subject.<sup>59</sup>

However, this intersubjective approach was facing significant challenges. Some of them, such as the PKK’s violent methods and parliamentary opposition that sought to

alienate nationalist voters from the AKP<sup>60</sup> were external to the party. Here, I will focus on its internal problems: the AKP did not supplant the old narrative with a new one but built a multi-layered, contradictory narrative to deal with these challenges. However, the analytic and intersubjective approaches contradicted each other, and this contradiction created the problem of partners: the previous narrative did not allow a legitimate partner, whereas the second one could not succeed without it.

This contradiction emerged because the AKP was unwilling to alter the analysis that it advocated until then. Erdoğan emphasized that the party was still true to its previous principles: “There is no difference between [our current policies] and the framework we put forward on 14 August 2001 and the framework we introduced in 2005 Diyarbakir speech.”<sup>61</sup> Erdoğan emphasized that the policies that the AKP had hitherto pursued were successful, both in its democratization and security dimensions. The persisting violence was regarded as the product of this success as the PKK simply tried to undermine the AKP’s policies through violence.<sup>62</sup> The intersubjective approach did not supersede the analytical approach. Instead, the rigidity of the analysis coexisted with intersubjective processes.

How would the intersubjective approach work alongside the analytic approach? The meetings coordinated by the Ministry of Interior involved brainstorming exercises. Anyone who had something to say was welcomed to contribute. There was one red-line: legality [*yasallık*]. Erdoğan said: he and his party can only address legal formations and cannot accept illegal formations.<sup>63</sup> Even though there were claims that the government was negotiating with the PKK at the time, it was not acknowledged in public. However, legality on its own did not make an actor necessarily a legitimate partner. The legal pro-Kurdish political party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), was not accepted as a legitimate partner either, because it could not represent the Kurds:

No one should pretend to be the representative of our citizens of Kurdish origin. Look, we are a party that received 47 percent of the vote. We are a party which won 37 percent of the votes in the latest [local] elections; we are the first party in all seven regions, we are the first party in the absolute majority of the provinces and the second party in all others. We are the Turkey party; we are Turkey’s party.<sup>64</sup>

The BDP had performed well in the Kurdish majority areas in 2011 elections,<sup>65</sup> yet the AKP was regarded as the actual representative of the people, including the ones “of Kurdish origin.” Therefore, the space for negotiation was still closed as far as the BDP goes: the AKP represented the Kurdish population more than they do. It should also be stressed that the BDP was unwilling to replace the PKK as the negotiator as “it had no tradition or experience of formulating policies on its own.”<sup>66</sup>

The Kurdish Opening, for the AKP, was an attempt to address Kurdish grievances through dialogue. Who was the AKP’s partner in the dialogue? Publicly, everyone other than the PKK, which was an illegal organization. Yet not all the legal actors were legitimate partners in this process because no political organization, besides the AKP, was allowed to represent Kurdish grievances. The dialogue did not amount to a negotiation. It was rather conceptualized as a workshop where everyone sitting at the table contributed. This situation ultimately led to the unsuccessful project of “the Wise Men Committee,” composed of intellectuals, artists, and NGO representatives, designed to tour the entire country, organize symposiums and panels, and ultimately became able to

speak in the name of Kurdish grievances. Unsurprisingly, the would-be moderator between the government and Kurdish grievances accomplished little: a committee hand-picked by the government dealing with explosive issues via academic exercises failed to gain wide acceptance. Therefore, until 2013, the subjects of the intersubjective process were absent.<sup>67</sup>

Under these circumstances, the success of negotiations required a gray area. The dialogue was only possible if there was a certain level of uncertainty over the boundary between the legitimate and the illegitimate. However, the AKP's prior analysis and policies were based upon the impossibility of such a gray area. Therefore, the government has systematically refused to accept that negotiations are underway with actors in the illegitimate sphere. However, it was also suggested that secret talks between the PKK and the intelligence service (MİT) were going on since 2005.<sup>68</sup> These negotiations were not publicized. Such secrecy is not an uncommon practice. Transparency during negotiations makes compromise harder. However, the language game built on the word 'terrorism' and its ritual condemnation had consequences. The legitimacy of the talks was not established. At this point, the AKP's narrative became contradictory. The AKP claimed to be open to an intersubjective approach to redefine its policies. Its Kurdish base and liberal intellectuals welcomed this message. However, its nationalist voters were alarmed by this new strategy. Therefore, they needed to be assured that nothing had really changed. Again, the security narrative coexisted side by side with other narratives that partially desecuritized Kurdish politics. Desecuritization worked in different ways in the analytical and intersubjective narratives. In the analytic narrative, the government was still the subject defining the content of the Kurdish Problem separate from the security problem whereas in the intersubjective narrative, its definition was left wide open. The coexistence between these two narratives was, at best, unstable.

### Negotiations in public

The clandestine talks between the MİT and the PKK have been finally made public in December 2012.<sup>69</sup> This was a risky move for three reasons. First, previously, the government had insisted that such negotiations were impossible as it would mean granting some legitimacy to terrorist groups, and it was inconsistent with the nationalist identity it had forged. Second, the negotiations were unpopular with nationalist voters.<sup>70</sup> Third, its success was uncertain. The AKP was forced to use ambivalent language, without legitimizing the other side. Negotiating with Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, without recognizing him as a legitimate actor in a dialogue proved to be a delicate task. The AKP had to develop a narrative strategy that would minimize the damage and enable it to pull out of the negotiations as soon as it was deemed necessary. The strategy was to make a distinction between the state and the government. However, such an approach put the identities of the sides of the dialogue in flux and laid the ground for the cessation of the process in June 2015.

Erdoğan, from the very beginning, tried to keep himself and the AKP isolated from the process by making a strategic distinction between the state and the AKP. The first time he acknowledged the negotiations, he said that himself and, by extension, the AKP was not involved: "I cannot hold such meetings myself as a politician, but the state has

agents, and they do.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, it was the MİT which was negotiating directly. However, it can be argued that the MİT did not have any decision-making authority, and it is inconceivable that it could act on its own without the approval of the government. Yet it was repeatedly stated that there was a distinction between talking with the AKP government and talking with the state, and the talks did not amount to a negotiation:

The people who present our struggle to end the terror, stop the bloodshed, and comfort the mothers as negotiating with the terror don't have a heartfelt bond with the nation; they can't have. To those who can't see, who can't hear, and especially to those whose hearts are closed, I'm telling from here: we don't sit on the table with the terror, we will never, never negotiate with the terror about anything. I underline that it is the state which talks with the terrorist's head in İmralı [Öcalan], and this isn't a negotiation, this isn't sitting on a table.<sup>72</sup>

This speech, made two months after the publicization of the talks, summarized Erdoğan's position. He nor his party had any connection to the talks, and the talks did not amount to a negotiation. This distinction was crucial on a strategic level. Not only did the AKP try to mitigate the damage to its nationalist vote, but it also did not commit itself to the results of the talk. Erdoğan emphasized the importance of ending the bloodshed and the political courage necessary to stop it but did not accept any responsibility for the talks. Even though the addressee of the quote, “those who can't see” were the opposition parties, it is safe to assume that the real audience was the nationalist voter and the PKK. Both were told that the decision-makers refuse to commit to anything.

However, negotiations themselves were not an impossibility. As Erdoğan explained: “We will negotiate under the roof of the Parliament, we will struggle with the terror.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore, negotiating with the BDP was a possibility. However, the BDP declined to replace the PKK as a side in the negotiations, in a move characterized as a lack of courage and will by Erdoğan. Rather than acting as an independent actor willing to take the leading role in the process, the BDP tried to play the role of a mediator and choose to avoid any moves that would put itself into conflict with the PKK. It should be kept in mind that if the BDP had agreed on negotiating on behalf of the PKK, the allegations of it being a part of the PKK would gain substance from a legal point of view, and would put the party in a difficult position if the negotiations fail.

The coexistence of the security narrative with the intersubjective narrative continued, especially in the framework of the Kobane Protests of 6–7 October 2014<sup>74</sup> and the “Domestic Security Package,” a new legislative piece intended to empower police against similar events. A good example of this uneasy co-existence can be found in the speech Prime Minister Davutoğlu made a month after the events: “Our government's will on the Solution Process is complete and unequivocal, no one should doubt that. However, for the success of the process, our will to protect the public order is equally unequivocal and stout. If we reach a consensus on these points, if all actors do whatever they can, everybody is a partner for us.”<sup>75</sup> Again, the identity of the actors in the process was left open-ended and all-inclusive, but without specific content.

The process eventually culminated in the so-called “Dolmabahçe Agreement,” in February 2015. Dolmabahçe Agreement was intended to be a game-changer, and it was a step that the government was previously unwilling to take. In its carefully designed setting, it was communicated as a text agreed upon by the two sides. However, the text itself was anything but an agreement. The word agreement or anything that implied an

agreement was absent. Three representatives of the government and three representatives of the HDP<sup>76</sup> were sitting on the table, but the identities of the sides of the agreement were left open. The heart of the text is the list of ten titles [*başlık*] read by Önder, the HDP representative. Those titles were very abstract, such as “Defining the national and local dimensions of a democratic solution,” but they were intended to be the beginning of something more concrete. The more problematic aspect of the titles was that, nowhere in the text, it was said that both sides agreed upon those headings. It was “a statement of intention” made by Öcalan, who invited the PKK to disarm. The HDP committed itself to those titles by the simple fact of reading them, and Önder referred to them as “our titles.” The PKK was simply invited to comply, along with “all democratic circles and sections of society which support peace.” The Government representative, Yalçın Akdoğan, carefully avoided identifying the government as one side of an agreement. Akdoğan said: “We think that the statement about the speeding up the process toward disarmament, the actualization of total inactivity, and the emphasis on democratic politics is important.” Overall, when given full consideration, one could see that Dolmabahçe Agreement was not an agreement but a declaration of intent made by Öcalan and the HDP that the government supported, and the PKK was expected to comply.<sup>77</sup>

Even at a point where the results of the negotiations were made public, the identities of the parties involved remained unclear. The government did not define itself as a side of a negotiation process. The PKK was not listed as one of the actors; Öcalan was mentioned as long as he committed himself to disarmament. And of course, within months, the process was completely abandoned.

What happened at this point was not merely a switch from a democratization narrative to securitization narrative, but a reconfiguration of the narrative on Kurdish Politics by eliminating its intersubjective part and widening the scope of securitization as much as possible. This reconfiguration was made possible by the multi-layered nature of the existing narrative. The AKP’s word-mincing sought to preserve the boundaries drawn by the analytic approach while developing an intersubjective strategy. However, this created insurmountable contradictions. The government negotiated without admitting it was negotiating, without recognizing the legitimacy of its addressees and without committing to its concessions. The government’s analytical narrative was incompatible with an intersubjective approach. 2015 was a particularly unfortunate juncture for the peace process for two reasons. First, on the international level, the Government’s goals in Syria were entirely at odds with the intentions of the PKK and its affiliates. Second, the electoral success of the HDP wounded the AKP’s electoral hegemony in June 2015, and the AKP failed to secure a parliamentary majority. The process, which was already unsustainable because of its inner contradictions, collapsed as the government moved to reclaim nationalist voters for the renewed elections and reoriented its Syrian policy without the complication of negotiations.

## Conclusion

The continuation of the intersubjective approach and negotiations required the creation of a gray area between the legitimate and illegitimate as the AKP defined them. The AKP wanted to divide political organizations into two, terrorists and their

supporters who belonged to the illegitimate area, and organizations voicing concerns of Kurdish citizens belonging to the legitimate area. It could directly engage the latter but not the former. The PKK clearly belonged to the former; however, the AKP needed to persuade it to lay down arms. The AKP was aware of this paradox and the need for the creation of a gray area. The mincing of words and meticulous attention to detail in the Dolmabahçe press release targeted its creation. The mincing of words besides, the relatively joint nature of the press release and the indirect address to the PKK for disarmament were timidly shared by the government.

However, the creation of such a gray area was at odds with two fundamental characteristics of the AKP's narrative, and it was destined to fail. First of all, the AKP's narrative was based on an analysis that was required to build distinctive, neatly distinguishable fields: a legitimate field that was the object of democratization policies and an illegitimate field, an object of security policies. Blurring the boundaries between these two areas brought a risk of destabilizing the narrative build by the AKP: this is why the AKP engaged in a policy of mincing words after it moved from an analytical to intersubjective approach. Indeed, such a clear-cut distinction, once you move from an analytical to an intersubjective approach, is not sustainable. Players might question the boundaries of the fields, displace them, making them fuzzy. A boundary condition, such as the ritual condemnation of terrorism, becomes difficult to sustain in the intersubjective approach. Built on such contradictions, the peace process was already fragile. As it became apparent that the intersubjective approach was at odds with the AKP's own narrative and its electoral and foreign policies, it did not stand a chance.

Explaining the failure of the opening strategy based on the antinomies of the AKP's narrative on Kurdish Politics does not entirely supplant the existing rationalist approaches that focus on the AKP's decision-making. Indeed, on its own, these antinomies cannot explain the timing of the collapse in July 2015. The configuration consisting of the AKP's disappointment with electoral results, the developments in the Syrian Civil War, and the aftereffects of the Kobane Protests pushed the decision-makers to abandon the entire project of the Kurdish Opening and all the efforts put into it. However, this calculus should not be considered in isolation. The analysis of the multi-layered, ambiguous nature of the AKP's narrative shows us that the peace process was always vulnerable. In its effort to satisfy multiple segments of its electorate and develop a peacebuilding strategy without abandoning its commitment to security measures, the AKP had committed to a narrative that was rife with contradictions and an opening policy that was ultimately expendable in favor of a securitization strategy.

From a theoretical perspective, this process shows the shortcomings of securitization theory. The problem does not only lie in the essentialization of securitizing actor and its audience, but also in the ability of actors to keep securitizing and desecuritizing narratives at tandem in their effort to gain support from multiple audiences or at least gain the support of an audience without losing the support of another. When we perceive securitization as a speech act, we picture a power that makes clear-cut and irrevocable decisions. However, the AKP's Kurdish policies show us that it is best to talk complex securitizing and desecuritizing narratives that are often entangled to each other.

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

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72. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Parliamentary Group Speech," February 19, 2013, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/tbmm/grupkon.asp>.
73. Ibid.
74. In September 2014, the Islamic State laid siege on Kobane, a Kurdish majority town in Turkey's Syrian border, guarded by Kurdish groups. Turkey's unwillingness to help these groups triggered a wave of riots led by the HDP, which turned violent on 6–7 October 2014. For a thorough analysis, see Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey: Genesis, Evolution and Prospects," in *Global Turkey in Europe*, ed. Senem Aydın-Düzgüt et al. (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2015), 173–74.
75. Ahmet Davudoğlu, "Parliamentary Group Speech," April 4, 2014, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/tbmm/grupkon.asp>.
76. The HDP was founded in 2013, not to replace the BDP but to function as an umbrella group that addresses both the Turkish leftists and the Kurds. As the electoral strategy of the Kurdish movement evolved and became more ambitious, it became the main party that represents the movement instead of a side-project.
77. For the full text of the agreement, see <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/ortak-aciklamanin-tam-metni>