

# Framing the Turkish-Kurdish peace process

A frame analysis of the Kurdish Movement's strategic  
communication during the "solution process" 2013-2015



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# Abstract

As groups previously engaged in armed conflict enter peace negotiations, they risk losing support and legitimacy with the people they represent. The Kurdish peace process in Turkey between 2013-2015 however enabled the Kurdish movement to reach unprecedented levels of support and influence. In this thesis, a frame analysis of the Kurdish movement's strategic communication during this period is conducted. Six interviews in Kurdish media of leaders of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) are analysed to explore how the peace process was framed to maintain and mobilize support. The findings indicate that the Kurdish movement framed the insufficiency and government instrumentalization of the peace process as a continuation of historical injustices. Moreover, the proposed solution was to view the process as continued resistance against the oppressive state and government, while also extending the issue to other historically oppressed groups in Turkey. Lastly, the consequences of inaction and Kurdish patriotism were used as a rationale for voting for HDP and engaging in non-violent resistance. This thesis contributes to the understanding of the strategic communication of the Kurdish movement as well as how insurgency movements frame peace processes to mobilize support.

*Key words:* Framing, Peace processes, Kurdish Movement, PKK, HDP, Turkey

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# 1 Introduction

Insurgency movements are dependent on popular support for legitimacy and ultimately their survival. Indeed, the very *raison d'être* of armed groups like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is that they are claiming to represent and fight for an oppressed or mistreated group of people (Malthaner 2015; Krause 2013). A recent turn in the study of how insurgency movements mobilize support has included the framing perspective (Malthaner 2015; Desrosiers 2012; Granzow, Hasenclever, and Sändig 2015), initially developed in the social movement literature (Snow and Benford 1988). To maintain and mobilize support, social movement organisations engage in constructing and deploying “frames”, that describe a problem, attributes blame, proposes a solution, and are geared towards mobilization of support and collective action (Benford and Snow 2000). This perspective has been used to explain how insurgency movements use collective action frames to legitimate and mobilize support for armed violence (Desrosiers 2012).

As armed groups enter peace processes however, they must motivate why armed resistance is no longer necessary or legitimate (Clubb 2016). They must describe why it is possible to negotiate with the party that before has been framed as an illegitimate enemy that must be fought with armed struggle. In other words, “while the terms of the conflict are familiar, the terms of negotiations are unfamiliar and cause discomfort for the parties” (Arévalo 2024, p. 8). Without efficient “collective action frames” geared toward non-violent struggle, armed groups cannot mobilize support for peace processes without hurting their legitimacy with the people they are claiming to represent, which also risks leading to internal conflicts and fracturing of the group (Clubb 2016).

## 1.1 Purpose and Research Question

The Kurdish peace process in Turkey however allowed both armed and non-armed elements of the Kurdish movement to attain unprecedented levels of influence and popular support with a rhetoric that emphasized peace (Ercan 2019, p. 115; Karakoc and Ozen 2020). There is a large literature on the Kurdish movement and the Kurdish peace process respectively, including studies on different representations of the process in Turkish media (Avcı, Cohrs, and Schreier 2023) and the government's communication during it (Dinc and Ozduzen 2023). However, there is no study that thoroughly analyses the communication of the Kurdish movement during the process. This study therefore intends to answer the following research question: *How did the Kurdish movement frame the Kurdish peace process in Turkey to maintain and mobilize support?*

To answer this question, a frame analysis is conducted based on media interviews of leading representatives of the Kurdish movement from the armed group PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane*) and the legal political party HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party, *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) in Kurdish media between February 2013 and July 2015. The choice to include interviews with representatives of the legal political party HDP is motivated by the fact that the HDP played a key role in the peace process (O'Connor 2017, p. 23). Furthermore, armed groups generally pursue objectives both to further the interest of the broader social movement they represent, while simultaneously pursuing objectives related to the survival and power of their organization (Krause 2013; Doudouet 2012, p. 101). Thus, considering the HDP's communication is relevant to understand the framing of the Kurdish movement.

The layout of the thesis is as follows. First, I provide a background to the ideological and organizational foundations of the Kurdish movement as well as a short overview of the peace process 2013-2015. Second, I discuss previous research on how armed groups mobilize support, how the framing perspective has been applied in conflict studies, and the theoretical concepts used in this thesis. I then discuss the research design, operationalize framing theory, and discuss the chosen method and empirical material. The analysis is structured around the

research question and the operationalization of framing theory. Lastly, I discuss the finding in relation to previous research.

# 2 Historical Background

## 2.1 The Kurdish Movement

The “Kurdish movement” can be defined as constituted by three elements: an armed group (the PKK), a political party (HDP) and “a multi-layered amorphous social movement” working towards increased Kurdish rights and Kurdish liberation (O’Connor 2017). Since this thesis will focus on the framing by PKK and HDP, this section will briefly describe their organisational and ideological foundations. The PKK was formed in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan and a group of university students and launched a Marxist-Leninist rebellion in 1984, with the stated aim of gaining Kurdish independence from Turkey. The purpose of the movement was to regain “ethnic consciousness” of Kurds in Turkey after decades of “a mixture of denial, assimilation, oppression, displacement, and persecution at the hands of the authorities often referred to as the centrist Kemalist-nationalist establishment” since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1924 (Savran 2022, p. 28-29). The conflict has been marked by widespread human abuses, and the PKK is labelled as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and the EU.<sup>1</sup> The goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state was however abandoned in 1993 as the PKK underwent a paradigm shift in its ideology, strategy and aims, setting the stage for peace negotiations with the Turkish state (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011).

This paradigm shift followed the changing international political landscape in the 1990’s and the imprisonment of Öcalan in 1999. In his defence texts, Öcalan developed a critique of the nation-state and advocated instead for radical democracy on the basis of local self-government, ecologism, anti-capitalism and gender equality in a system he called “Democratic Confederalism” (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, p. 5-9). Kurdish liberation would thus be realized through democratic self-government organized in local councils, “bottom-up” (Savran 2022, p. 48; Dinc 2020). Moreover, according to Öcalan, this would force

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<sup>1</sup> This labelling is contested, however. In this thesis, I will refer to PKK as an insurgency/armed group. For further discussion, see Çandar (2012, p.25-30).

the deepening of democracy in Turkey and the entire Middle East. Subsequently, political involvement, popular non-violent resistance and negotiations have taken precedence over armed struggle (Yegen 2016, p. 379-380; Savran 2022, p. 49).

HDP is the latest of a series of left-wing pro-Kurdish political parties that emerged in the 1990's following the politicization of Kurdish identity and continuation of the conflict, advocating for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and increased pluralistic democracy (Gunes 2021, p. 185). These parties have faced repression and have continuously been shut down over accusations of “conducting ‘terrorist propaganda’ or promoting ‘ethnic politics’” (Savran 2022, p. 35). While not shut down, HDP has been the target of repression with its politicians being jailed and its offices closed, particularly following the end of the peace process<sup>2</sup> (HRW 2023). HDP is organisationally separate from the PKK and denounce the use of violence (Savran 2022, p. 54). Like the PKK however, they adhere to Öcalan's conceptualization of radical democracy and followingly describes itself as an organisation that “starts from the streets and develops into local assemblies in our neighbourhoods” (HDP Website).

## 2.2 The 2013-2015 Peace Process

The Kurdish peace process, or as it was called in Turkey, the “solution process”, was initiated in the last days of 2012, when Erdogan, then prime minister, announced that the Turkish secret service were in talks with Abdullah Öcalan to resolve the Kurdish conflict. Earlier talks between PKK and the state had been secret and limited to pre-negotiations. (Savran 2022, p. 77). The new peace process followed a series of legal reforms by the AKP government in its first term in office in the early 2000's that allowed greater cultural and linguistic rights for minorities in Turkey (ibid, p. 62-67). In the peace process, HDP played a key role and acted as mediators between Turkish intelligence, the imprisoned Öcalan, and the PKK leadership in the Qandil mountains (O'Connor 2017, p. 23). Soon after reaching the Dolmabace agreement in February 2015, in which Öcalan called the PKK to disarm provided that the government respected a number of vague

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<sup>2</sup> HDP is currently (May 2024) facing threats of closure and participated in the 2023 elections under another party's election lists (HDP Website 2023).



demands that would lead to further negotiations, Erdogan denounced the agreement and claimed he had not been informed of its contents. The parties returned to conflict in July 2015 (Savran 2022, p. 127-130).

The regional developments, especially in Northern Syria, had a profound and negative impact on the peace process (Savran 2022; Baser and Ozerdem 2021; Dinc and Ozduzen 2023). Particularly the struggle of Kurdish PKK-related groups against the advance of IS (Islamic State) in 2013-15 had strong reverberations in Turkey. In October 2014, Kurdish forces in Kobani, close to the border between Syria and Turkey, were besieged by IS. PKK and HDP called on their supporters to protest the refusal to let Kurds in Turkey cross the border to help the besieged fighters and what they saw as Turkish support to IS. The massive protests that followed were marked by violence both between different Kurdish groups and from Turkish state forces (Amnesty International 2015) and created mistrust between the parties (Savran 2022, p. 124-125). Moreover, the establishment of the autonomous Democratic Federation of Northern Syria by a PKK-related group adhering to the ideology of democratic confederalism produced fears in Turkey of something similar happening in Southeastern Turkey (Dinc and Ozduzen 2023).

Another factor in the failure of the peace process was the authoritarian ambitions of Erdogan which were threatened by the election result in 2015, when AKP lost votes from Kurds (for its handling of the peace process) and from nationalist voters (for even engaging in negotiations with the PKK) (Günay and Yörük 2019; Dilek 2022; Dinc and Ozduzen 2023). This obstructed Erdogan's ambitions of a presidential reform that would substantially increase his power. In the same elections, HDP became the first pro-Kurdish political party to break the 10% threshold to enter parliament and thus challenged the ruling AKP's majority. Since 2015, intense urban warfare has led to thousands of casualties and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Kurds (Savran 2022, p. 133-134). An end of the conflict is not in sight.

# 3 Theoretical Framework

## 3.1 Previous research

### 3.1.1 Mobilizing strategies of insurgencies and social movements

Attempts to explain mobilization and support for insurgencies is mostly found in the literature on civil wars and political violence (Malthaner 2015). Influential perspectives to explain the appeal of armed groups have focused on structural explanations such as relative deprivation (Gurr 1970). To explain variation in support where structural conditions are similar, one perspective has focused on cost-benefit calculations of supporters and exchange relationships between armed groups and the local populations (Migdal 1974; Skocpol 1994), while yet others have focused on the role of territorial control and the coercive use of violence in support relationships (Kalyvas 2006). Another strand of literature rejects the instrumentalist perspectives and explain (particularly ethnic) mobilization with symbolic politics – the use of hostile group myths and adversarial identity constructions that legitimates violence (Kaufman 2001).

In an attempt to take into account both instrumentalist and socio-psychological aspects of mobilization of armed groups, the framing perspective developed in the social movement literature has recently been introduced to conflict studies (Desrosiers 2012; Malthaner 2015). For example, (Granzow (2015) attributed the failure of the Southern Movement in Yemen to mobilize support for armed violence to the insistence of peaceful methods and a peaceful identity in earlier communication, making subsequent calls for violence ineffective. In line with these findings, Johnston (2015) shows how previously non-violent groups that successfully mobilized support for violence did so by reframing not only their strategy, but also the definition of self and other, i.e. "who we are" and "who the enemy is".

While this literature has been able to explain variation in how successful different groups have been to mobilize support for armed violence, they have not focused on instances where groups that previously advocated for violence then engaged in peaceful mobilization. Clubb (2016) is a notable exception, as he used frame analysis to understand how the IRA managed to abandon terrorism and

armed violence as a tactic while keeping popular support. He found that the contents of the “disengagement frames” that mobilized support for peace negotiations with the state retained consistency with earlier frames that mobilized for armed conflict. They were in other words not contradicting previous communication. For example, the continued romanticization of violence helped maintain credibility of the disengagement frames and helped maintain support for the IRA during the process (Clubb 2016).

While not employing the framing perspective, a series of papers produced by the Berghof Foundation under the guidance of Véronique Dudouet have explored how groups have reformulated their strategies during transitions from armed conflict to peace negotiations (Dudouet 2012). For example, when entering into peace negotiations with the Colombian state, the M19 changed their previous strategy of “weapons at the service of politics” to “peace at the service of politics” (García Durán et.al. 2008; Dudouet 2012, p. 102). Similarly, the ANC in South Africa portrayed negotiations with the state as a “new terrain for struggle” and “primary site for contestation” (Maharaj 2008, p. 23; Dudouet, p. 102). CPN-M motivated negotiations with being “firm with principles and flexible with tactics” (Ogura 2008, p. 45). These studies indicate that armed groups portray peace negotiations as continued struggle, not as a radical change in principles or motivations.

The literature on how armed groups maintain support has however focused almost exclusively on mobilization for violence and not how they keep support when advocating for peace negotiations. However, as the study by Clubb (2016) exemplifies, the recent turn to the framing perspective in peace and conflict studies allows for exploring this question.

### 3.1.2 Kurdish movement’s communication during the peace process

Grigoriadis and Dilek (2018) analysed HDP rally speeches to understand how the party appealed to voters in the 2011 and 2015 elections. They identified a change from a narrow focus on Kurdish rights in 2011 elections to an emphasis on civil rights and freedoms in general in the 2015 elections (2018, p. 298). Though not focusing on the strategic communication of the Kurdish movement per se, Avcı, Cohrs, and Schreier (2023) analysed communication in Turkish media during the

Kurdish peace process in Turkey. They found that the Kurdish movement and pro-Kurdish media portrayed the peace process in a way that mobilized *for* social change, while pro-government actors and media mobilized *against* change. This finding was found to strengthen the widely held view that Erdogan and AKP instrumentalized the peace process to securitize the Kurdish question and to achieve its authoritarian ambitions (Dilek 2022; Dinc & Ozduzen 2023). While Avci, Cohrs and Schneider's (2023) analysis of communication strategies during the peace process contributed to an understanding of how the process was represented, an in-depth analysis of the Kurdish movement's communication has not yet been conducted.

## 3.2 Framing Theory

This thesis aims to explore the strategic communication of the Kurdish movement during the peace process by applying the framing perspective. Framing theory will thus be used to understand how the Kurdish movement successfully mobilized support during the peace process 2013-2015. In framing theory as developed by Benford and Snow (2000), social movement actors are actively engaged in the discursive construction of reality, constructing frames by which individuals filter "the world out there". These frames are constructed to emphasize some aspects of reality while obscuring others, thus directing the focus of target audiences with the strategic aim of mobilizing support and collective action to achieve political or social change (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 616; Krause 2013, p. 261). Collective action frames are thus understood as a communication strategy of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000).

### 3.2.1 Core Framing Tasks

According to this view, social movements need to attend to three "core framing tasks" to achieve mobilization and support (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 615), which will now be treated in larger detail. The first two, diagnostic and prognostic

framing, work to create consensus, while the last, motivational framing, works as a call for action.

*Diagnostic framing* concerns identifying the problem, its causes and who or what is to blame. (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 615). While problem identification is a rather straightforward process, it is often more difficult to reach consensus on the underlying causes of the problem (Snow and Benford 1988, p. 200). Within diagnostic framing, injustice frames are ubiquitous (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 615). Through the creation and insistence on “injustice frames”, which identify victims and injustices being done towards those victims. Framing a problematic issue as an injustice works to turn a problem into a political matter – something that needs to be addressed (ibid). *Prognostic framing* not only proposes a solution to the identified problem, but also the necessary strategies, tactics and goals to achieve the proposed solution. *Motivational framing* is described by Benford and Snow as a “call to arms or rationale for ameliorative collective action” (2000, p. 617). Motivational frames must work to turn ideological adherents (those who agree with the diagnostic and prognostic framing) into active supporters. This includes two challenges; overcoming the fear of risks associated with mobilization (repression, etc.) and the free-rider problem – how to get individuals to act towards a public good (Snow and Byrd 2007: 128).

The construction and deployment of collective action frames are by definition contested and contentious processes since they are constructed with the aim of challenging the dominant framing of a certain issue and mobilizing for change (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 617). Therefore, framing processes are always contested and spawn *counter-frames* by opponents who present differing problem definitions, attributions of blame and proposed solutions. This can lead to “framing contests” – a sort of discursive battle over the social construction of reality and what the appropriate responses to it are (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 625-6). A clear example in the Kurdish case is the Turkish state’s designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization and the PKK’s self-identification as a pro-democratic freedom movement.

### 3.2.2 Frame Resonance

To understand the functions of the diagnostic, prognostic and diagnostic framing, framing theory also outlines factors influencing the effectiveness of these, or how well they resonate with target audiences. This thesis will use three of these factors to analyse and understand the resonance of the framing; *frame consistency* (how well frames correspond with stated goals and actions of the Kurdish movement), their *empirical credibility* (how well they correspond with events before and during the peace process), and their *narrative fidelity* (how well they correspond to group identity and myths.) (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 619-622).

The consistency of frames and their empirical credibility is relevant to explore since this was the first official peace process for the PKK that for a long time insisted on the necessity of armed struggle. While the paradigm shift of the PKK began in the 1990's with the unilateral ceasefire in 1993, the group has continued to use armed violence, and to advocate for peace negotiations may thus create inconsistencies with earlier communication. Narrative fidelity is also a relevant factor to explore since the paradigm shift involved a reformulation of goals from ethnic-based struggle for an independent state to a more civic-based rights struggle for all peoples of Turkey and the Middle East. With this frame extension (targeting not only Kurds, but wider audiences in Turkey), narrative fidelity may be more difficult to attain, since the target audiences do not necessarily share the same group myths and cultural references.

# 4 Research Design

## 4.1 Frame analysis

The underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of frame analysis are similar to those of discourse analysis. In other words, text and language is seen as constitutive of social reality and is used to make sense of “the world out there” (Lindekilde 2014, p. 197; Bergström & Ekström, p. 255). Frame analysis is however used to emphasise the deliberate use of ideas, culture and ideology to mobilize support toward a strategic objective and not, as discourse analysis, to uncover the discursive practices in the construction of reality (Lindekilde 2014).

Frame analysis share methodological similarities both to content and discourse analysis (Lindekilde 2014; Aslanidis 2012, p. 16). In this thesis, frame analysis will be used as a qualitative text analysis. The conceptualization of collective action frames by Benford and Snow (2000) is used as analytical coding categories (see figure 1). These include diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, described in length above. This approach is advocated by Lindekilde to ensure a high degree of validity and replicability (2014, p.213). The subcategories of codes were however inductively created, allowing for flexibility in engaging with the empirical material to capture findings that are difficult to foresee beforehand; or, in other words, “letting the text speak” (Boréus and Kohl 2018, p. 80). Identifying frames from the empirical material requires interpretation on the part of the researcher, so to ensure transparency in how and on which grounds the findings were made, quotes from the interviews are presented throughout the presentation of findings and analysis (Aslanidis 2015, p.16; Bergström and Boréus 2018, p.41).

While frame analysis is geared towards studying causal relationship between framing and participation (Lindekilde 2014, p. 222-3), this study will not explore any causal relationship between the framing of the Kurdish movement and their support. Rather, the thesis uses frame analysis and concepts from framing theory to understand *how* armed groups communicate during peace processes to mobilize support – what frames are used and how they resonate with target

audiences. To use frame analysis without exploring causal relationships is common (Snow et.al. 2014, p. 33) and in this case relevant to answer the research question.

Furthermore, the theoretical concepts of frame consistency, empirical credibility, and narrative fidelity will be used to analyse and discuss the functions of the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames.

*Table 1 – Analytical coding categories*

<b>Coding categories (deductive)</b>	<b>Subcategories (inductive)</b>
Diagnostic Framing	Codes relating to problem, cause, blame
Prognostic Framing	Codes relating to solutions, goals, strategies
Motivational Framing	Codes relating to calls for action, support

## 4.2 Case study

To answer the question, a case study of the Kurdish movement’s framing of the Kurdish peace process in Turkey between 2013 and 2015 has been conducted. Case studies enable in-depth analysis and thus allow for high internal validity, which is suitable for the chosen method (Halperin and Heath 2020, p. 234; Lindekilde 2014) and framing theory, a middle-range theory with high empirical content at a relatively low level of abstraction. (Halperin and Heath, p. 231). It is also relevant to achieve a “rich textual description” (ibid, p. 237) since there is not much earlier research on the Kurdish movement’s communication during the peace process to rely on.

Interviews of representatives from both PKK and HDP are analysed to understand the framing of the Kurdish movement in whole. The PKK and HDP are separate organizations and differ in a number of ways. PKK is an armed, illegal organization while HDP is a legal political party that emphasizes non-



violence. However, they are both part of the broader Kurdish movement and adhere to the ideals of democratic confederalism as developed by Öcalan (Savran 2022, p. 53-54). Moreover, the HDP played a key role in the peace process as mediator between PKK leadership, Öcalan in prison and the Turkish government, as well as messenger of Öcalan's statements from prison (ibid, p. 107-8). It is therefore justified to treat PKK and HDP as one unit of analysis (the Kurdish movement) when analysing their framing of the peace process. During the coding process, I however noted slight differences in communication between the two which have contributed to further insights.

Because of the context-specific nature of case studies and attention to detail in qualitative analysis, generalizability is however generally weaker. These limitations of the method in combination with the lack of similar research in other contexts means that generalizability of the findings will be limited (Halperin and Heath, p. 197). This thesis will therefore be careful in drawing larger theoretical conclusions from this case, as more equivalent studies in other contexts would be necessary for such claims to be reliable. The aim of the study is thus gain in-depth knowledge about how the Kurdish movement mobilized support during a peace process. This can hopefully draw attention to and increase the understanding of the specific phenomenon of strategic communication of insurgency movements involved in peace processes.

### 4.3 Empirical material

To answer the research question, the analysis will focus on six interviews in Kurdish media of leading representatives of the Kurdish movement. The references of these interviews are found in the appendix. Three interviews are with PKK leaders: one with Murat Karayılan, one with Cemîl Bayik and one with Bayik and Besê Hozat interviewed simultaneously. They are all in the top leadership of the KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Communities Union) executive committee. The KCK is the umbrella organization of the PKK and acts as its government<sup>3</sup> (Candar 2020, p. 124). Three interviews are with HDP

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<sup>3</sup> When referring to the interviews with these three leaders, I will only use the term PKK.

representatives: one with Selahattin Demirtas, one with Pervin Buldan and one with İdris Baluken. Buldan and Baluken were part of the “İmrali delegation” that went to see Öcalan in prison and conveyed his messages, acting as mediators in the solution process. Demirtas was one of HDP’s co-chairs from 2014-2018 and played a pivotal role in the peace process as well as HDP’s electoral success in 2015 (Güney 2015). Demirtas was imprisoned in 2016 over allegations of incitement to violence during the Kobani crisis in 2014. The European Court of Human Rights have repeatedly called for his release from prison (Kucukgocmen 2020).

The interviews were found by searching for statements made by PKK and HDP leaders during the peace process (from early 2013- to June 2015). Given the illegality of PKK and the heavy restrictions on Kurdish media, interviews given by ANF News were chosen. The specific interviews were chosen based on their content so that it related to the peace process, as well as their dates (one in February 2013, two in December 2013, one in December 2014, one in May 2015 and one in June 2015) to consider the framing during the entire peace process.

As Benford and Snow notes, social movement actors usually don’t have control over how their claims are represented in the media (2000, p. 626). Using media interviews can thus be problematic; there might be a risk of inadvertently analysing the framing of the media outlet rather than the framing of the social movement under study. However, the interviews are published in full transcripts and are conducted and published by ANF, a Dutch-based Kurdish news agency that is pro-PKK. Its exact links to the organization is unclear, but it has been referred to as a news agency of the PKK (Candar 2020, p. 124). Moreover, communication and the production of texts should be considered contextually (Bergström and Boréus 2018, p. 22-23). To study the Kurdish movement’s framing in ANF interviews allows for analysing the communication *in situ*, since they are speaking to current and potential supporters of the movement.

Another issue to be aware of is that the material is translated from Turkish into English using the translation program Deepl. While the translation is generally correct, there is always a risk that certain phrases and words might be mistranslated. This risk was managed by i) noting syntactic errors and unclear phrases in a first reading of the interviews and ii) controlling them using other translation programs.

# 5 Findings and analysis

In what follows, the findings are presented and analysed. The section is structured around the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. In the end of each section, the theoretical concepts of frame consistency, empirical credibility, and narrative fidelity are engaged to analyse the findings. The findings are very briefly summarised in table 2 in the end of the last section (5.3).

## 5.1 Diagnostic Framing

### 5.1.1 Insufficient Peace process

*This problem [the Kurdish question] is not a problem that can be solved with ordinary approaches, a single call or a few meetings (Karayilan, 2013).*

This quote from the military leader of the PKK is emblematic of the main diagnostic framing of the peace process – it is insufficient. In December 2014, almost two years into the process, Demirtas even says that “negotiations have not started”. Since the Kurdish question is a centenary issue and the defining problem not only for Turkey but for the entire region, a peace process will need to address the political, social, economic, and cultural injustices behind it. This inefficiency of the peace process is framed as a continuation of the exclusion and oppression of Kurds, here exemplified by HDP representative Buldan:

*The AKP did not change mentally and politically just because a peace process started. It is the same AKP and the same state. (Buldan 2013)*

While for the Kurdish movement the peace process is a way to achieve democracy and peace, the government’s main goal is pacification of the Kurds, or as HDP representative Demirtas puts it:

*The government wants the Kurds to come down from the mountains [end the armed struggle], get out of prison, come from Europe, but stay at home and be good children! (Demirtas 2014)*

The pervading “fascist mentality” (Hozat 2015) within the state is perhaps most clearly evident in the deep and/or parallel state. References to a deep or parallel state are commonplace in the diagnostic framing of the Kurdish movement, particularly of the PKK. According to them, “there is a state on the surface and a parallel structure that organizes some things that the visible state cannot do” (Bayik 2013), including “psychological warfare” and violence against HDP representatives. Moreover, the parallel state also works to counter and sabotage initiatives for peace.<sup>4</sup>

*We have stated from the beginning that there is a parallel state. A group that emerged especially in peace processes, that wanted to sabotage the process, that did not want the process to develop, constantly stirred up Turkey. (Buldan 2013)*

The above quote from HDP representative Buldan exemplifies the diagnostic framing of a deep state that works to sabotage initiatives for peace.

### 5.1.2 AKP instrumentalization of peace process

While the anti-Kurdish oppressive state mentality originates in the very foundation of the Republic, it is now represented by AKP and Erdogan in their quest to install an authoritarian regime. To assign blame for the problem is a central aspect of diagnostic framing. In the framing by the Kurdish movement, the blame for the insufficient peace process lies squarely with the AKP government and Erdogan. Here, Karayilan (PKK) accuses the state for continuing the “system of oppression” during the peace process:

*...it is a great distortion for them to make it seem as if everything has been done and all that remains is for the Kurds to take steps. The state must first stop the colonial system of oppression and violence. If there is to be dialogue and peace with the Kurdish people, it must first stop this system of oppression. (Karayilan 2013)*

HDP and to a lesser extent PKK are however careful in not assigning blame to Turks in general – who would also benefit from the resolution of the Kurdish

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the deep state was accused of releasing audio recordings of the secret negotiations between PKK and the Turkish state in 2011 in an effort to sabotage the talks (Savran 2022, p. 78).

conflict and democratization – and only to the state and government. AKP and Erdogan and their instrumentalization of the peace process is on the contrary framed as a threat to everyone, even to Turkey itself, since the future of Turkish peace and democracy depends on the resolution of the Kurdish question. However, in the interviews during the early stages of the process, there is still flexibility in this frame in the sense that there might be potential in AKP's approach to the process, as exemplified in these two quotes:

*This is a problem that can be solved on the basis of a serious approach and a political perspective. I'm not saying, 'None of this exists in the AKP'; it might. If the AKP decides on this issue and takes truly decisive steps in practice, then this problem is certainly solvable. (Karayilan 2013)*

*Can the AKP government take steps for a solution? It is not possible to say anything at the moment. But their approach so far reveals that they have neither the mentality for a solution, nor the will for a solution, nor the intention for a solution. (Bayik dec 2013)*

As these examples show, there is flexibility which gives the government the opportunity to prove its political will to achieve a solution. As the peace process progresses without this sense of reciprocity, however, this flexibility is lost. In May 2015, a month before the elections that would be a success for the Kurdish movement but prove detrimental to the peace process, Hozat evaluates the process and conclude that AKP was never interested in a real peace process, instead only lying and attempting to deceive the public.

*This election process has clearly exposed the AKP's insincere, unserious politics on the Kurdish issue, which is based on deception, distraction, and uses its politics as a tactic to instrumentalize the issue. It dropped all the masks of the AKP. (Hozat 2015)*

The deceitfulness of AKP is insisted upon during the entire peace process, however. This can be seen as a process of counter-framing. As the government attempts to frame the process as the result of their own efforts and accuses the Kurdish movement for not taking the relevant steps towards disarmament, the Kurdish movement responds by attempting to discredit them, as Hozat says in 2015:

*AKP's politics is the politics of demagogy. It's based on manipulation and deception, that's what it is. This is the political philosophy of the AKP. It has based its entire politics on this.* (Bayik and Hozat 2015)

Much of the interviews are thus about counter-framing the narratives of Erdogan and his government, like in the quote above. One example of this regards the halted withdrawal of PKK fighters from the Turkish border. PKK claims to have stopped the withdrawal because of lacking response from the Turkish government and over accusations from Erdogan saying that the withdrawal was incomplete and only included women, the elderly and the sick (Butler 2013).

*Instead of taking the withdrawal seriously and taking steps, what has the AKP government done? It has taken an approach that trivialises and simplifies the will put forward by Leader Apo and the Freedom Movement, such as “no, they have withdrawn this much, they have not withdrawn that much, those who have withdrawn are old and sick”.* (Bayik 2013)

In this example, PKK leader Bayik argues that the AKP government had a chance to reciprocally take good-will measures but instead used the ceasefire to accuse the PKK of not doing enough.

### 5.1.3 Functions of the diagnostic framing

This suggests that the Kurdish movement had an elaborate yet coherent diagnostic framing of the peace process. The importance of the process could not be understated as it promised the democratization of Turkey and the liberation of all its peoples – in other words, it could have been the realization of the Kurdish movement's aims. At the same time, it was deemed insufficient in its current form and was threatened by instrumentalization by the AKP and Erdogan, who was representing the state traditions of oppression, fascism and exclusionary policies especially targeting Kurds. References to the deep state, who have previously been accused of sabotaging negotiations, strengthened the empirical credibility of this framing. Furthermore, the flexibility with regards to the government's attitude was lost as the peace process failed to deliver results. To frame the peace process as insufficient and instrumentalized by the AKP served several purposes. First,

this framing served to transform the peace process into the continuation of intolerable injustices that needed to be addressed. This also created narrative fidelity as it referred to historical exclusion and oppression of Kurds. Relatedly, it also created consistency with earlier communications and actions of the Kurdish movement, since they were still facing the same enemy, aiming for the same thing, only now in a peace process. Moreover, the articulation of the problem extended it to cover all peoples of Turkey.

## 5.2 Prognostic Framing

### 5.2.1 Continuation of Resistance

To mobilize consensus around the peace process, prognostic frames suggesting a way forward is also needed. The solution to the problem of an insufficient and instrumentalized peace process was to continue resistance and thus pressure the government. In other words, resistance is what created the peace process, and it is resistance that will make it work, as HDP representative Demirtas makes clear in this quote:

*...as long as people, Kurdish or non-Kurdish, do not engage in street resistance and do not see it as legitimate, they will be crushed under the dictatorship of the state.* (Demirtas, HDP, 2014)

This prognostic framing of “continuing the resistance” creates consistency with the historical struggle of the Kurdish movement:

*In this respect, no one should expect the guerrillas to withdraw until it is clear that they [the government] have a solution mentality and policy and clear steps are taken. It would also not be fair to expect it. We are waging a Freedom Struggle. We have not wasted this struggle for forty years. Twenty thousand guerrillas and twenty thousand people from the people have not been martyred in vain.* (Bayik 2013)

While both PKK and HDP representatives stress the importance of resistance, however, HDP are careful not to incite violence, while the PKK are more

ambiguous on this point. The PKK representatives say they are ready for the negotiation table, but also maintains that they are ready to continue the armed struggle. While the ambiguous position on continued armed violence can be a strategic tool to enhance the bargaining position at the negotiation table (Walter 2009, p. 245-246), the insistence on readiness for armed struggle can also strengthen the counter-framing of the Turkish government which accuses the HDP of inciting violence. Here, Demirtas from the HDP counters these accusations while still advocating for non-violent resistance as the solution.

*Whether there are negotiations or not, if you submit to oppression, if you remain silent, it means that you have lost the struggle. I also state this parenthetically; our call is not a call for violence on the streets. The Prime Minister insistently portrays it as such, but our call is not a call for people to pick up stones and Molotovs. (Demirtas 2014).*

### 5.2.2 Uniting all oppressed and democratic forces against AKP

The prognostic framing also suggests that resistance against the AKP government and the Turkish state should not only come from Kurds, but from all segments of society that have been historically excluded in Turkish nation-building, including Alevis<sup>5</sup>, women, pious Muslims, and left-wing people. Here, this is exemplified by HDP representative Baluken:

*We think that segments with this painful social memory [of state oppression] can come together over the hope of peace and put social pressure on political parties that want to approach this issue according to the current conjuncture (Baluken 2015)*

In this framing, the Kurdish movement, in particular HDP, is suggested as the key political actor that can achieve change. Elections become very important in this context as they are a clear way of showing resistance to AKP and pressuring the government. For example, in the local elections in 2014, HDP nominated non-Kurdish politicians to areas where they were in minority in adherence to the principle of localism (drawn from Öcalan's idea of local self-rule). Moreover,

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<sup>5</sup> A group in Turkey following a form of heterodox Shia Islam, constituting around 20% of the Turkish population, including both Turks and Kurds (Zarcone 2018).



there is a strategic goal of representing all peoples. This is also a way to transform the Kurdish Question into an issue that concerns all, as exemplified in this quote:

*We will emphasise localism. It is important that the HDP defends the principles, not an identity or sect (Demirtas 2014).*

Öcalan's political ideology of democratic confederalism thus covers not only the Kurdish question, but the liberation of all oppressed peoples of Turkey, something that the government wants to prevent to achieve its authoritarian ambitions:

*The Turkish state, AKP, and Erdoğan never wanted the Kurds and democratic forces to unite and integrate. Because this will mean the development of a democratic nation, it will mean the change of Turkey. It means the end of the nation-state approach, the monist approach, and the politics of destruction and denial. Building a democratic nation means that everyone can live freely with their own identities and values. It means the emergence of true brotherhood and unity. The Turkish state and governments are against this. (Bayik 2015)*

Thus, as exemplified by the quote above, the threat of disintegration of unity comes not from the Kurdish movement, but from the Turkish government and state. This is also a way of countering the narrative of Turkish nationalists, who argue that the Kurdish movement is a threat to the unity of Turkey (Avcı, Cohrs and Schneider 2023, p. 7).

### 5.2.3 Functions of the prognostic framing

The solution proposed by the prognostic framing is thus continued resistance through pressuring the government to take steps towards peace and democracy. The idea of continued resistance creates consistency with the Kurdish movement's struggle that has been ongoing for decades. Again, the peace process is a new way to continue this struggle. Moreover, the strategy to achieve this goal is uniting all oppressed minorities and pro-democratic forces in Turkey in support of the peace process. Appealing to the "painful social memory" of state oppression in Turkey is a way to create narrative fidelity with not only Kurdish populations, but Alevi, pious Muslims, Turkish leftists, etc. State oppression is a cultural experience that

Kurds share with other groups in Turkey, to whom the Kurdish movement is now appealing.

## 5.3 Motivational Framing

### 5.3.1 Consequences of inaction (and promises of action)

The findings from the diagnostic and prognostic framing indicates that the Kurdish movement tries to mobilize consensus that electoral support for HDP and continued resistance by all peoples of Turkey is the answer to remedy the problems with the peace process. The motivational framing is however focused on what will happen if this is *not* done, or, in other words, the consequences of inaction. The reasons for supporting the Kurdish movement are many, but the most important reason is what will happen if you *do not*.

*Everyone should be mobilized, especially Kurds, Alevis, all peoples living in Turkey, all segments of society. Because if HDP does not succeed, the only thing that will happen in Turkey will be what is currently happening in Syria and Iraq. It is a big war. This is certainly the case.* (Hozat 2015).

In the above quote, PKK representative Hozat hints at the catastrophic alternative to supporting the peace process (which according to the diagnostic and prognostic frames equals supporting the Kurdish movement), namely that Turkey falls into war and disintegration. Motivational frames need to convince people that the risks involved with engaging in collective action and supporting the social movement are worth it (Benford and Snow 2000). Here, the strategy seems to be the insistence of the risks involved in *not* participating, *not* mobilizing, *not* supporting the Kurdish movement. This is recurrently framed in catastrophic images including war, chaos, and the disintegration of Turkey. In line with the diagnostic and prognostic framing, the motivational framing is directed towards all people of Turkey, in this case in an attempt to reframe Turkish patriotism:

*All those who love Turkey and are patriotic in the true sense of the word must first of all turn towards solving the Kurdish question correctly. Otherwise, it is clear that basing the future of Turkey on the destruction of the Kurdish people will lead Turkey to even greater disasters* (Karayilan 2013)

In other places, this can also be seen as a threat. PKK is still strong, so secessionism is not completely out of the question, as exemplified here:

*Today, we are theorising how Turkey's mosaic of peoples can be transformed into a permanent unity. But if this is not accepted, then the possibility of the disintegration of unity will come to the agenda. (Karayilan 2013)*

To a lesser extent, the motivational framing points to possibilities involved with contentious collective action. In other words, not focusing on the risks involved with *not* participating, but the possibilities involved *with* participating. The representatives point to the solution process as evidence that it is possible to make progress if you are able to pressure the government, as exemplified by this quote by Buldan:

*We did not expect the AKP to bring peace to us on a golden platter. We took to the streets, we shouted out, we demanded it from the AKP (Buldan 2013).*

The government will not do anything on their own, and it cannot be expected to, given its track record. Even the peace process is really a “deceitful initiative”, but with popular resistance and a strong Kurdish movement, it is possible to turn even deceitful initiatives into constructive processes. In June 2015, right before the definitive breakdown of the process, Baluken states that “ruling parties no longer have the power to resist against the increasingly socialised sense of peace and solution” (Baluken 2015), indicating that the successful mobilisation in support of the Kurdish movement will bring change.

### 5.3.2 Kurdish patriotism and romanticization of violent struggle

While the motivational frames extend to “all peoples living in Turkey”, Kurdish patriotism is still drawn from to mobilize support:

*Keeping silent about the mistakes made by the state and the government's policies of oppression weakens the Kurds. It weakens all opposition groups. Whether there are negotiations or not, if you submit to oppression, if you remain silent, it means that you have lost the struggle. [...] Resistance is the people's right to protest and demonstrate against oppressive laws and practices. If this is not done and the*

*Kurds retreat to their homes, then the negotiations will be jeopardised and there will be a risk of blockage* (Demirtas 2014).

Here, the motivational frame is geared particularly towards Kurds. It seems Kurds have a particular responsibility to continue the struggle, even if it is for the benefit of “all opposition groups”. Other references to Kurdish patriotism are even clearer, and also refer to martyrdom and militarism. For example, in calling for people to join a signature campaign for the release of Öcalan, one PKK leader says:

*I would like to state that all Kurds, especially those who are abroad, should participate in this campaign like a cadre; in other words, they should not be content with just signing the petition, they should see it as their duty to organise and spread the campaign, and I call all patriots to this duty. Every patriot from Kurdistan should be able to get the signatures of at least 50 neighbours in his/her street and neighbourhood* (Karayilan 2013).

Here, the signature campaign is described as a “duty” for all Kurds, to prove their Kurdish patriotism. These references to Kurdish patriotism perform a mobilizing function; being a Kurd is continuing the struggle of the Kurdish movement and therefore it is a duty for all Kurds to participate. However, this insistence produces inconsistencies with the proffered idea that all peoples of Turkey are concerned by the peace process and should be united behind the ideals of democratic autonomy. This has been noted in the rhetoric and practices of Kurdish groups adhering to Öcalan’s ideology before, where Kurds are treated as *primi inter pares* (Dinc 2020). In other words, while all peoples of Turkey are concerned by the peace process and should support the Kurdish Movement, Kurds are *more* concerned and their responsibility to participate is therefore stronger.

Moreover, in the quote from Karayilan (2013) above, the call is to participate “like a cadre”, i.e., like a PKK militant. The romanticization of armed struggle mentioned above perform a motivational function, since it romanticizes the risks involved with mobilizing. This is perhaps best exemplified by the elevation of killed members of PKK/the Kurdish movement to “martyrs” and “heroes”, replete in the interviews of the PKK leaders. Snow and Byrd (2007) show how this elevation helps overcome the risk of contentious collective action,

in street resistance for example. Participation is worth it even if you face death, since you will become a martyr.

### 5.3.3 Functions of the motivational framing

The findings indicate that the motivational framing focused on the consequences of inaction. The catastrophic images about a future where people have not engaged in resistance and pressured the government emphasize the need for everyone, Kurdish or not, to participate and support the Kurdish movement. The empirical credibility of this frame is strengthened with references to the ongoing wars in Iraq and especially Syria. The motivational framing is however particularly directed to Kurds. References to Kurdish patriotism create narrative fidelity with the ideals of heroic resistance and martyrdom in especially the militant groups of the Kurdish movement.

*Table 2 – Brief summary of Findings*

Diagnostic framing	Insufficient and instrumentalized peace process
Prognostic framing	Continue resistance in unity with all progressive and democratic forces
Motivational framing	Consequences of inaction Duty for Kurdish patriots

# 6 Concluding discussion

## 6.1 Summary and methodological discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how the Kurdish movement framed the Turkish-Kurdish peace process 2013-2015 to maintain and mobilize support. The findings indicate that the Kurdish movement was able to keep support by framing the insufficient and instrumentalized peace process as a continuation of the problem that the armed struggle had sought to remedy for decades, namely state oppression and exclusion of Kurds. The solution was accordingly framed as continued resistance within the context of peace negotiations, but also appealing to other groups in Turkish society with a history of state oppression. Furthermore, the consequences of inaction (not voting for HDP and not engaging in non-violent resistance) were framed in catastrophic terms to mobilize action, while also drawing on Kurdish patriotism and militancy to engage supporters.

Frame analysis, the method used in this thesis, allowed for systematically analysing the strategic communication of the Kurdish movement. The mix between a deductive (predetermined analytical coding categories) and inductive (code generation) approach helped strengthen the focus of the study while simultaneously accurately representing the data from the interviews. Concerning the empirical material, it is safe to assume that it reflects the framing of the Kurdish movement, since it is collected from six different leaders of the Kurdish movement. However, only six interviews during a two-and-a-half-year period means that important phases in the communication may have been overlooked. For example, there is not much focus on the Kobani crisis (early October 2014) in the interviews, arguably the most contentious event during the peace process.

## 6.2 The findings in relation to previous research

Previous research on framing by social movements and armed groups have considered that changes in strategy from non-violent to violent or vice versa must be motivated by convincing reformulations of the movements' ideology, as well as

of its conception of self and other (Granzow 2015; Johnston 2015). In this case, this may have been facilitated by the paradigm change in the movement's ideology in the preceding decade, which as mentioned emphasized bottom-up democracy building and non-violent resistance (Savran 2022, p. 49).

The findings of this study also indicate that the Kurdish movement managed to frame the roles of themselves and of the government/state in familiar terms – as resistance movement and oppressor. This is similar to what earlier research on how armed groups have reformulated their strategies in transitions to peace negotiations have found (Maharaj 2008; García Durán et.al. 2008; Ogura 2008). Clubb (2016) similarly argued that armed groups may need to hold on to previous framings to be credible in the eyes of the people they represent, for example by continuing to romanticize violence and resistance.

The successful mobilization towards non-violence and negotiations may also have been facilitated by the presence of HDP, who have always advocated for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In this reasoning, the Kurdish movement could thus rely on earlier communication by the HDP to credibly advocate for non-violence.

With regards to research on the Kurdish movement's communication during the peace process, the findings support the suggestion that HDP focused more on general human rights than narrow Kurdish questions in 2015 (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2018). However, I also suggest that Kurdish patriotism was still included in the communication to mobilize Kurds specifically.

Although outside the scope of this thesis, the findings raise questions about framing processes' impact on peace processes. For example, the “flexible” attitude toward the Turkish government's handling of the peace process in early stages of the peace process was later replaced by a more intransigent rejection of the AKP as a trustworthy party.

Related to this, Clubb (2016) argues that what made the peace process successful in Northern Ireland was the ability of the state to give “space” to the reframing process of the IRA (Clubb 2016, p. 629). In this reasoning, the state “turning a blind eye” when the IRA used language that romanticized violence enabled the group to credibly advocate for peace negotiations, or to “sell the end of terrorism” (ibid). While such studies have not been conducted on the Kurdish peace process in Turkey, the existing research indicates that the Turkish state

showed little accommodation in this regard to the Kurdish movement and remained “intransigent and controlling” during the process (Baser and Ozerdem 2012, p. 1788).

### 6.3 Concluding remarks

The end of the peace process was followed by large scale violence, with intense urban warfare between the PKK and the Turkish state in 2015-2016 and continued fighting after that. The prospects for renewed peace talks seem bleak, as the Turkish government has adopted an increasingly repressive approach to what it considers a terrorism problem (Dilek 2022). This has also brought with it increased repression of Kurdish politicians. A few days before the submission of this thesis, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2024, 24 HDP politicians, among them Selahattin Demirtas, were convicted to between 9-42 years of prison on what Human Rights Watch calls “bogus charges” (HRW Website 2024), related to statements made during the peace process.

In this thesis, a frame analysis of six interviews in Kurdish media of leaders of the Kurdish movements during the peace process 2013-2015 was conducted. The study has provided an in-depth analysis of the strategic communication of the Kurdish movement during the peace process. In summary, the findings indicate that the Kurdish movement framed the peace process as a continuation of historical injustices and proposed that the solution was continued resistance against the state and government, appealing to broad segments of society. Furthermore, they relied both on Kurdish patriotism and a “painful social memory” shared with other groups in Turkey to mobilize resistance and votes for HDP. The findings support the notion in earlier research that mobilising support for peace negotiations might necessitate a framing that is consistent with earlier formulations of the struggle. Finally, the thesis raised questions about the implications of framing processes on peace negotiations.



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