SPEAKING POINTS

President,
Honourable Members,

This afternoon's debate on the Kurdish issue takes place only a few weeks after the terrible and brutal killings of three PKK activists in Paris last month. We share Parliament's profound shock at those killings. But they serve to underline to all of us the importance of settling the Kurdish issue. That is in the interests of all concerned. A settlement would play a vital role in helping ensure the security and stability of the region.

The Kurdish issue also has important implications for EU enlargement, which is a key policy of the European Union, and a particular priority for
the Irish Presidency. It is important for Turkey's accession process, and is raised regularly in the context of the accession negotiations. As a candidate country, Turkey has to meet the Copenhagen political criteria, including the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. The Kurdish issue has implications in all these areas, but also extends to related areas, such as cultural rights and socio-economic considerations.

The EU's Accession Partnership with Turkey includes a number of priorities which particularly relate to the situation in the East and Southeast of the country. These highlight the need for Turkey to develop a comprehensive approach to reducing regional disparities. This means improving the situation in the region so as to enhance the economic, social and cultural opportunities for all Turkish citizens, including those of Kurdish origin.

Clearly, the Kurdish issue constitutes a major and longstanding challenge for Turkey.

Continuing terrorist attacks make it harder to reach a solution. I wish to reiterate here that the EU and its Member States strongly condemn terrorism in all forms and are working closely with Turkey to combat the terrorist threat. The PKK is listed by the EU as a terrorist organization. Within the EU, the PKK is involved mainly in fund raising, including through criminal activity. This has led to arrests in a number of European countries. The EU and its Member States are also active in cooperating
with Turkey in combating terrorism and associated criminal activities via counter-terrorism training and information exchange. Whilst much of these activities are devoted specifically to addressing the PKK, we are also working closely with Turkey in tackling all forms of terrorism, including in the Global Counter–Terrorism Forum in which the EU and Turkey co-chair the working group on the Horn of Africa region.

Whilst the EU has consistently condemned PKK terrorism, it is clear that the wider Kurdish issue can only be addressed through a peaceful, comprehensive and sustainable solution. It is a conflict which has claimed far too many victims over the course of three decades and which has created a climate of instability and profound mistrust.

Against this background, the EU is fully supportive of the on-going talks between the Turkish Government and the PKK aimed at ending the conflict. This is a significant new initiative which offers a positive perspective for the future. We welcome these moves, and call on both sides to use this opportunity to make real progress. We also welcome the fact that there is cross-party support, and backing from civil society, for this initiative. This is a clear indication that there is a real desire for peace. We will continue to encourage an approach which is inclusive and broad-based. This is essential if it is to have a chance of success.

A successful outcome would also play a crucial role in Turkey's own reform process. It would help encourage further political and constitutional reform which is important for Turkey's EU accession.
President,
Honourable Members,

This is a courageous initiative - and we need to recognize it as such. We are only at the start of what is likely to be a lengthy process. Not everyone is committed to it succeeding. Indeed there will always be some who attempt to de-rail such a process for their own misguided ends. The killings in Paris remind us tragically that there is strong opposition to any negotiations from some quarters. But such events cannot be allowed to de-rail negotiations - our own experience closer to home shows that any peace process requires both courage and commitment. We should therefore give our full and unequivocal support to this initiative - I am sure that Members here will join me in also offering their own support.

Thank you for your attention.