

ORION FORUM

# Another Kurdish Resolution Process Underway: Between Hope and Contradictions

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Another fast-track Kurdish peace process[i] is underway in Turkey. Is it aiming to resolve the decades-old Kurdish issue or pull together a minimum winning coalition for Erdoğan to maintain his rule? The peace process has already led to the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) announcement to disarm and dissolve as an armed struggle[ii], which raised hopes for a concrete and lasting resolution. Conflicting expectations among the major actors and their transactional motivations, along with a lack of transparency and engagement with the mainstream public, contribute to skepticism about the process. More importantly, concerns over the rule of law, judicial independence, rising authoritarianism, and the persecution of dissidents in Turkey lead to cautious optimism—if not guarded pessimism.

Sixteen years ago, on 1 August 2009, a team of academics and this author organized[iii] the first-ever workshop on the Kurdish resolution process in Ankara, Turkey. While receiving mixed reactions from the public, Devlet Bahçeli, the Chair of the far-right National Movement Party (MHP), declared the convening group as the “12 bad guys”—playing on the term “12 giant men”, referring to Turkey's basketball team. Then, Bahçeli accused the group of “encouraging division in Turkey under the pretext of democratic initiative... trying to create a local model of the Kurdish initiative for Turkey.”[iv] 16 years later, unexpectedly, the same Bahçeli invited Abdullah Öcalan [iv], the imprisoned leader of the PKK, to the Turkish Parliament to speak, and he has become a frontrunner and a staunch defender of the currently ongoing peace process

between the government and the PKK.[v] This is a welcome development, of course, but is it a result of the gradual transformation of this nationalist political actor and the government, in general?

While Bahçeli appears to be the public face of the process, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the one pulling the strings and serving as the real decision-maker, despite having kept a low profile. On the Kurdish side, the coordination group of the pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) appears to be highly active in the process; however, it is Öcalan and, to some extent, the PKK leadership in Qandil who are calling the shots.

A clear contradiction dominates the process. On the one hand, a sense of hope—albeit mixed with skepticism—is emerging following the PKK's announcement to disarm and dissolve itself. On the other hand, deepening authoritarianism and the ongoing persecution of dissenting actors cast doubt and create confusion about its true purpose.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

On the positive side, the prospect of reconciliation presents many opportunities that could elevate Turkey both domestically and in the region. PKK terror cost more than 40,000 lives while the economic cost of the conflict is \$1.8 trillion according to the Turkish Minister of Finance.[vi] The resolution could foster a more positive climate in society, potentially strengthening domestic unity. Regionally, Turkey could present itself as a peacemaker, which could enhance the country's outlook in the Middle East. It could also open a new chapter in Turkey-EU and Turkey-US relations.

On the other hand, however, the weaponization of the judiciary and law enforcement by targeting dissenting voices, mass arrests of political dissidents[vii], including mayors of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), and disregarding the rulings of the appellate court at the domestic level and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have become a common practice under the AKP's rule.

Turkey's arbitrary use of counterterrorism laws against "perceived government critics"[viii], prolonged pretrial detention, and politically motivated judicial rulings are among the key concerns frequently raised by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).[ix] The AKP

government and the judiciary have failed to implement the ECtHR's rulings on numerous occasions[x], including the release of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, who have been in prison since 2016.[xi] Another ECtHR ruling was ignored about Yuksel Yalcinkaya, who was imprisoned based on the arbitrary application of the law on "membership of a terrorist organization", following the 2016 coup attempt.[xii] The latter decision would have favorably impacted hundreds of thousands of victims of the post-coup purge in Turkey, who have been gravely affected by the government's crackdown since.[xiii]

The AKP Government effectively utilized the judiciary to imprison Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul, and President Erdoğan's potential top challenger in the next presidential election in 2028.[xiv] İmamoğlu was arrested in March 2025 on corruption charges and suspicion of terrorism.[xv] Following his arrest, a systemic and planned legal crackdown has intensified[xvi] against mayors of the main opposition CHP, including other metropolitan cities, aiming to take over CHP-governed municipalities [xvii]. Another noticeable example is Ahmet Ozer, the CHP mayor of Istanbul's Esenyurt district, who was arrested last year on charges of links to the PKK. While the terrorism charges were recently dropped, corruption charges remain in place and keep him in prison.

Another charismatic leader and one of Erdoğan's challengers in 2015, Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the HDP, was arrested in 2016 following the presidential election in 2015. Defying Öcalan's demand for remaining impartial during that election year, Demirtaş sparked Erdoğan's vendetta, when he delivered a short but notable speech in the Turkish Parliament and proclaimed, "We will not make you the President." Despite making comments on every other issue, significant or not, Öcalan refuses to mention Demirtaş's name during his meeting with the DEM MPs.[xvii][xviii] In the meantime, the AKP government does not show any change on the front of its policies against Kurdish culture and shut down the Kurdish language and culture association in Izmir, Turkey, in early August.[xix]

The ongoing process is distinct from the previous ones in the sense that there is no emphasis on democratization, advancing human rights, and the rule of law in Turkey. Instead, "terror-free Turkey" emerged as the focal point, referring to disarming and dissolving the Kurdistan

Workers' Party (PKK).

The government coalition wants to offer limited terms of resolution, which would free Öcalan and grant amnesty to some PKK members rather than a comprehensive undertaking that could address the fundamental underlying problems between the opposing parties to the conflict.[xx] In exchange, the pro-Kurdish DEM Party MPs are expected to support a constitutional amendment which will extend terms for Erdoğan's Presidency, all the while authoritarian practices and silencing dissenting voices in the country will continue.[xxi] Without fundamental changes in the status quo, and empowering democratization and the rule of law, the peace process may lead to another failure and even deeper resentment among Kurds.

### **Looking ahead**

When “The Resolution of the Kurdish Issue: Toward Turkey Model” workshop was organized as a kick-off event in 2009, a strong emphasis was placed on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Now, in 2025, the Kurdish peace process presents another opportunity to advance these principles, and this can only become a reality if the actors in the process prioritize lasting peace to quick but fleeting wins. Achieving that, however, requires a paradigm shift in Turkey—one that embraces the principles of democracy, the rule of law, judicial independence, and transparency.

As part of the new peace process, The Turkish Parliament established a commission titled “National Solidarity, Brotherhood, and Democracy Commission” represented by the major political parties.[xxii] The commission will not have the power to draft bills; however, its name and opposition parties' enthusiasm for transformative aspect of the peace process toward democracy, human rights, and rule of law offer some hope.[xxiii]

But the key questions remain: What does the ruling AKP-MHP coalition really aim to achieve? Is it to change the country's direction toward democracy or to justify their continued rule by leveraging and using the opposition to support the status quo?

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