

DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

Domestic and Regional Politics in Turkey's Proposed Kurdish Peace Process

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A supposed Kurdish peace initiative that was floated in Turkey presents an intricate strategic landscape, promising to shape regional and domestic political dynamics. While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan consolidates power domestically across the judiciary, media, and government institutions, often at the expense of democratic freedoms, former U.S. President Donald Trump's reelection adds another critical factor that could influence Ankara's approach.

Backed by unexpected support from the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the new peace initiative, supposedly aiming at addressing longstanding Kurdish issues, appears to be underway. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli^[i] has proposed granting parole to separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan if he renounces violence, a move Erdoğan has praised as "courageous and wise."^[ii] Internationally, Trump's potential foreign policy shift in Syria could create opportunities and risks for Turkey, particularly regarding the Kurdish issue.

What motivates President Erdoğan to initiate another peace process? Domestically, he faces a deepening economic crisis and declining popular support among voters. Additionally, under the current constitution, Erdoğan cannot run for a third term unless he calls for an early election. To circumvent this obstacle, he would need a constitutional amendment, which requires opposition MPs' support—a difficult task without risking a referendum. In short, Erdoğan's motivations for a new peace process appear tied to securing political advantages amid economic turmoil and declining voter support.

Internationally, Erdogan's popularity in Western capitals has diminished. A new Kurdish peace initiative could enhance his image as a constructive leader, especially in Europe, potentially restoring some international support. Success in the peace process might also bolster his domestic standing, securing a parliamentary majority for constitutional amendments that could pave the way for his presidency to extend for at least two more terms.

Bahçeli has reiterated his call for a greater role for Abdullah Öcalan, proposing constitutional amendments that would enable Erdogan to run for president again. Linking Erdogan's political ambitions with Öcalan's parole in the same proposal has raised skepticism about Bahçeli's true intentions.

While Bahçeli positions himself as a facilitator of the process, recent contradictory developments highlight Erdogan's strategic approach. The AKP government has unseated[iii] pro-Kurdish DEM mayors in southeastern cities and detained[iv] a main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) mayor in Istanbul for alleged ties to Kurdish militants—all under the guise of promoting a "terror-free Turkey." [v] Simultaneously, prosecutors have opened probes into CHP mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, citing "illicit expenditures," [vi] signaling potential plans to replace opposition leadership in these metropolitan areas.

Contrary to the democratization rhetoric tied to the peace process, these actions suggest Erdogan might exploit the initiative as a tool to suppress opposition voices and tighten control over major urban centers. By aligning the peace process with his political agenda, Erdogan aims to silence dissent while consolidating power for potential constitutional amendments and extended presidential terms.

The main issue with the supposed peace initiative is the lack of transparency, aside from Bahçeli's call for PKK leader Öcalan to play a greater role and the PKK leader's rumored phone call[vii] with the PKK leadership in Kandil—which was later denied. This new initiative seems to hinge entirely on Öcalan's influence over the PKK and potentially the broader Kurdish population in Turkey, thereby pressuring DEM MPs to support a constitutional amendment. However, this strategy previously backfired for both Öcalan and Erdoğan when Öcalan's letter urging for neutrality[viii] during the 2019 Istanbul mayoral elections failed to produce the desired outcome[ix], and Kurds overwhelmingly supported main opposition CHP candidate

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Previous Kurdish peace initiatives

Turkey has previously witnessed attempts to resolve the Kurdish issue through peace processes, but these efforts have consistently failed due to a zero-sum game mindset and the absence of contingency plans for potential setbacks. The 2009 peace process, commonly referred to as the Kurdish Opening or National Unity and Brotherhood Project, was essentially a test run. It collapsed because of the AKP's short-sighted conflict management strategy and the PKK's provocative return[x] of its militants to Turkey via the Habur Border Gate.

The second initiative, the Reconciliation Process, began with Abdullah Öcalan's Newroz declaration in March 2013, although preparations had been underway since 2012. This attempt was undermined by conflicting priorities, a lack of definitive steps supported by legislation, unrealistic objectives, and self-serving, short-term political motivations. Despite its failure, the process left a significant mark on Turkey's history by normalizing efforts to address the decades-long conflict.

In these past initiatives, Erdogan and the AKP regarded Öcalan[xi], the imprisoned leader of the PKK, and the PKK itself as pivotal actors in resolving the Kurdish issue. However, "the AKP has historically viewed Kurdish politicians as mere intermediaries between the government and the PKK", sidelining them from substantive roles in the process. This dynamic persists in the current peace initiative. Much like previous attempts at resolution, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), formerly known as the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), finds its politicians sidelined and excluded from leading roles in the process. Even more troubling is the exclusion of Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish HDP, who should be a key actor in the peace process. Demirtaş has emerged as a charismatic leader whose political style resonates with both Kurdish and Turkish youth, who view him as personable and inspiring. His unwavering opposition to Erdoğan's one-man rule turned him into a political nemesis, leading to his harsh sentencing of 42 years in prison[xii], where he has remained since November 2016.

There are other notable similarities between previous attempts to build peace and the ongoing initiative. First, the strategy again hinges on the expectation that PKK leader Öcalan will persuade the PKK cadre in Kandil to abandon their armed struggle. Second, much like before, the pro-Kurdish HDP has been sidelined by both the AKP and Öcalan, leaving it with minimal involvement in the decision-making process. Furthermore, a significant disconnect remains between how the AKP government defines the objectives of the peace process and the expectations held by Öcalan and the PKK.

Each party approached the process with differing objectives and timelines, which undermined its implementation. For example, by employing strategically calculated maneuvers[xiii], the AKP aimed to secure the support of Kurdish voters and negotiate a ceasefire with the PKK during election cycles or referendums.” On the contrary, the PKK strengthened its presence in cities and towns across the south and southeast of Turkey, culminating in months-long urban clashes between the PKK and the Turkish military. This history of instrumentalizing the initiative likely explains why AKP officials are reluctant[xiv] to label the current effort as a ‘peace’ or ‘resolution’ process, wary of another backlash if the attempt fails.

The U.S.’ role

The second, equally critical and impactful development is the re-election of former U.S. President Donald Trump, who advocated for withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria during his first term. Since then, the U.S. military objective in Syria has remained consistent, focusing on preventing the re-emergence of the Islamic State. To achieve this, the U.S. has continued its collaboration with the pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers a branch of the PKK.

During his first term as president, in 2019, Trump initially decided to pull out of Syria[xv]; however, he later reversed this decision, opting to maintain a limited U.S. military presence in the country. Similarly, despite considering a withdrawal, the Biden administration[xvi] ultimately increased U.S. military reinforcement[xvii] in Syria to address rising tensions. Like his predecessor, President Biden’s administration continued to invest in strengthening cooperation and collaboration with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is predominantly composed of Kurdish forces.

In his second term, Trump may face three options regarding his Syria policy, each carrying significant implications for the actors involved in the conflict. If Trump chooses to completely withdraw from Syria, it could create a power vacuum, opening the door for actors like Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime to expand their influence. More importantly, such a vacuum could lead to instability, providing ISIS an opportunity to reclaim the territories it once controlled. Without a deterrent force, the Assad regime may also engage with Kurdish forces militarily, a scenario long supported by Ankara. This instability could force millions of internally displaced Syrians to flee, triggering another exodus of refugees toward Turkey, Iraq, and the EU. In the absence of U.S. forces, Iran and its proxies could further expand their influence, which could also affect U.S. interests in Iraq. Furthermore, this situation might elevate Moscow's position as the dominant foreign actor in Syria.

The second scenario, which could be seen as an extension of the first, involves U.S.-Turkey collaboration to prevent the resurgence of ISIS. However, this scenario carries its own set of risks. A potential conflict could intensify between the Turkish military and Kurdish YPG forces, either through clashes between the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)—formerly the Free Syrian Army—or a direct confrontation between Turkish forces and the YPG. Another complication is that Russia could impede Turkey's expansion further south and southeast in Syria. Without access to these areas, Ankara may struggle to contain ISIS. Additionally, Russia and Iran could leverage their proxies, further complicating the situation.

The third scenario would involve maintaining the status quo, with the exception of reducing U.S. military presence in Syria or delegating responsibility to U.S. forces based in Iraq.

While the more likely scenario may be the first one, the Trump administration could encourage Turkey to find a way to avoid military confrontation with the Kurds in Syria. To prevent such a conflict, the United States might mediate a deal between Ankara and the PYD, facilitating cooperation between these actors. Although this scenario may seem distant, it could also strengthen Erdogan's position domestically, particularly in his efforts to gain Kurdish support in parliament through the peace initiative.

Looking forward

For Erdogan, the new initiative could provide a more advantageous position due to his one-man rule over government institutions, the judiciary, and media. This centralized power would give him a free hand in setting the agenda and determining how to execute it. Regionally, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran presents an opportunity for Erdogan, especially as Assad faces mounting pressure and Iran appears weaker than anticipated. Additionally, a potential U.S. withdrawal could further strain Kurdish forces in Syria, who may then seek an agreement with Ankara to secure their position in the changing regional landscape.

However, the success of the peace process will depend more on domestic dynamics than on external factors. The Kurdish issue goes beyond whether Öcalan will be released from prison or whether Erdogan will secure enough votes to amend the constitution. A successful peace initiative will require substantial policy reforms, including strengthening an independent judiciary, abolishing draconian anti-terror laws[xviii], and revitalizing the rule of law. Additionally, the process should be transparent and inclusive, involving civil society organizations, political parties, and key actors like Demirtaş. In short, the initiative should not be reduced to a quid pro quo, where Öcalan's release ensures Erdogan's continued rule. A self-serving, individual-centered approach will only deepen political tensions in the long term.

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