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As Ankara and Washington disagree over the future of Syrian Kurds, Israel warns of war with Turkey

Kurdish mayors detained amid negotiations with Öcalan

On Friday, Hoşyar Sarıyıldız and Nuriye Arslan, Co-Mayors of the Akdeniz Municipality in Mersin, which is governed by the Peoples' Democracy and Equality Party (DEM Party), were detained along with four municipal council members. A trustee is expected to be appointed to this municipality by the Ministry of Interior in violation of the Constitution.

The removal of elected mayors and the appointment of trustees is a clear attack on basic democratic rights. The Socialist Equality Group condemns this anti-democratic, police-state repression and demands the release and reinstatement of the elected mayors and councillors.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, shakes hands with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, Turkey, Monday November 6, 2023. [AP Photo/Jonathan Ernst]

On March 31, many mayors of DEM Party elected in local elections were dismissed and replaced by trustees. The Republican People's Party (CHP) mayors of Esenyurt, a

municipality of 1 million people in Istanbul province, as well as the CHP mayors of Ovacik district in Dersim, have been subjected to the same arbitrary measure. The government's recent escalation of police-state repression has included the arrest of May Day and Gaza genocide protesters, as well as numerous journalists, the linking of a left-wing political party to a fabricated "terrorist organisation", and the closure of many media websites and X/Twitter accounts.

The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been using this unlawful practice intensively since 2015, mainly to effectively abolish the Kurdish people's right to vote and be elected. The latest operations against DEM Party mayors come amid his government's attempt to force Kurdish forces to lay down their arms through the imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan.

On December 28, a delegation of DEM Party deputies met with Öcalan, who has been imprisoned on İmralı Island in the Sea of Marmara since 1999. The same delegation then held talks with Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and parliamentary political parties, including the CHP, and a "rosy picture" was painted.

The appointment of trustees and other attacks on democratic rights by the government show that the renewed negotiations between Ankara and the PKK, which Ankara has been trying to suppress for 40 years, have nothing to do with the claim of "peace and democracy". These negotiations are essentially part of the war in the Middle East—which has escalated with the genocide committed by Israel in Gaza, the struggle for the division of Syria, and the efforts of US imperialism to reshape the region.

On the one hand, Ankara wants the PKK to lay down its arms on Öcalan's initiative, and on the other it wants the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria—led by the Kurdish nationalist People's Protection Units (YPG)—to be liquidated.

Mustafa Karasu, a member of the executive council of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), to which the PKK belongs, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to which the YPG belongs, said in an interview with *Medya Haber TV*: "We support the efforts of our leadership [Öcalan]," but he stressed, "Of course, when it comes to the Turkish state, especially when it comes to the Kurdish question, there is nothing wrong with a cautious approach to state policy."

The Kurdish question, which is inherently an international problem due to the presence of the Kurdish people in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, has become an integral part of the imperialist struggle to divide the Middle East, especially after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the war for regime change in Syria in 2011.

The position of the SDF, which leads a de facto entity in Syria called the “Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria”, is critical because of the region’s oil reserves and its alliance with the United States, which continues to occupy the country with a force of 2,000 troops. Ankara’s initiative therefore requires an agreement not only with the Kurdish leadership, but also with the United States, once again under the presidency of Donald Trump, and with Israel, which is expanding its occupation of southern Syria and has declared the SDF its ally.

Ankara is also trying to use its influence with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has seized power in Damascus, to impose the dissolution of the Kurdish forces without any status and their subordination to the Damascus regime. While the HTS has decided to liquidate the armed groups in Syria and subordinate them to the central army, it remains unclear what will happen to the autonomous administration led by the SDF and its armed forces. However, the HTS, which does not want to confront the US and Israel, is postponing solving this difficult equation through dialogue with the SDF for now.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said in an interview on Wednesday that the PKK and the YPG had been given ultimatums through Washington and Damascus and that Ankara or the HTS would take military action if non-Syrian PKK members did not leave the country: “When we say ultimatums or conditions, we are saying that if you don’t want military action in the region, either by us or by the new government in Syria, the conditions are clear.”

In response, Washington had previously threatened Ankara with sanctions and increased its military presence in the region. During a visit to Paris on the same day, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken signaled that the US military presence in Syria would continue under the pretext of fighting ISIS, saying: “an even more acute danger would be if the more than 10,000 foreign terrorist fighters who are being detained under the vigilance of our Kurdish friends in Syria were to get out and reconstitute the very potent force that was Daesh in Syria, in Iraq, before it was defeated.”

Blinken stated the following about Ankara’s operation against the SDF: “We’ve been working very closely as well with our ally, our partner, in Türkiye—which has very legitimate concerns of course about the PKK and about terrorism—to navigate this transition, to navigate it in a way that I think leads to a resolution of many of those concerns, including over time with the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces into Syrian national forces, including with the departure of foreign members of that force to their own countries, including with a resolution of questions around oil, around borders, et cetera, but that’s a process that’s going to take some time.”

French President Emmanuel Macron also said on Monday that France would not abandon “freedom fighters like the Kurds” who are allies of the West in the “war on terror” in Syria.

Speaking recently to France’s TV5 Monde, SDF foreign affairs officer Ilham Ahmed called on France to send troops to the region, saying, “The US and France can indeed secure the entire border. We are ready for this military coalition to assume such a responsibility.”

In Syria, which has been ravaged by a war for regime change since 2011, Ankara may find itself clashing not only with its NATO ally Washington or the SDF, but also with Israel.

On 6 January, the Nagel Commission’s report, which was presented to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defence Minister Israel Katz and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, stated that “Turkey has become the most influential power in Damascus and that the Sunni-Turkish axis has replaced Iran’s Shiite axis.”

“Turkey’s interests in turning Syria into a client state and thereby increasing its regional influence are clear. It should be prepared for actions on the ground and potential threats that could escalate rapidly,” the report said, arguing that military capabilities should be strengthened in preparation for a possible conflict with Turkey.

The Trump administration, which will take office on January 20, will play a decisive role in the deepening US-led divide in Syria and the Middle East. In his speech on January 7, Trump avoided answering the question of whether the US would withdraw its troops from Syria, saying, “I won’t tell you that because that’s part of a military strategy. But I will say it was Turkey.”

Trump, who recently announced his own annexation and global hegemony plans for the Panama Canal, Greenland and Canada, mentioned Erdoğan with praise and stated the following: “President Erdoğan is a friend of mine. He’s a guy I like, respect. I think he respects me also.... if you look at what happened with Syria, Russia was weakened, Iran was weakened, and he’s a very smart guy. And he sent his people in there through different forms and different names, and they went in and they took over [in Damascus].”

“He [Erdoğan] is the one that didn’t go after certain people after I requested that he not. You know who I’m talking about? The Kurds. I don’t know how long that’s going to be, because they’re natural enemies. They hate each other,” Trump also said, suggesting he could rein in Erdoğan as he has in the past.

While Ankara hopes to advance its plans in the region by reaching an agreement with the new Trump administration, the Kurdish leadership is turning to the imperialist powers with the same bankrupt bourgeois nationalist perspective. In an interview with *The Guardian* on Friday, SDF leader Mazlum Abdi addressed Trump, saying, “the key factor for stability in the

region is the US presence on the ground” and calling for continued cooperation against the “ISIS threat” and the possibility of an attack by Ankara.

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