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Bitter Pill

On 27 February, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – which had been engaged in a four-decade independence struggle against the Turkish state – made a dramatic announcement. He called for the dissolution of his organization and the disarmament of all groups fighting for Kurdish liberation, abandoning previous demands for a federal solution, and instead advocating democratization within the country's existing political structures. Two days later, the PKK declared an immediate ceasefire, all but giving up on its ambition for autonomy. Kurdish forces in Rojava welcomed Öcalan's intervention, with the Democratic Union Party offering to lay down its weapons so long as it could continue to exist as political organization.

This was the culmination of a negotiating process between state actors and Kurdish politicians which began in late 2024, on the initiative of Erdoğan's ally Devlet Bahçeli, chairman of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party. It is unclear what the Kurds stand to gain from the deal, apart from Öcalan possibly being transferred from prison to house arrest. Whereas previous negotiations were billed as a 'peace process', this time they proceeded under the banner of 'terror-free Turkey', bypassing parliament as well as third-party mediators. Erdoğan evidently feels little need to offer concessions. Unverified reports suggest that he may end the widespread practice of replacing elected Kurdish mayors with AKP-appointed officials, while reining in aggression against Kurdish-dominated northern Syria and perhaps releasing certain prisoners. But none of this is particularly significant, and so far the government had not made any firm commitments. It has gotten a lot and given nothing.

Öcalan's statement received unanimous praise from mainstream intellectuals, liberals and the pro-government press. On the left, however, the reaction was more equivocal. Had he

betrayed the Kurds? Could the self-dissolution of the PKK be understood as anything other than a total capitulation? What factors prompted the decision? To arrive at an answer, we must look at the power relations among the key actors and their possible strategic calculations. Although Erdoğan's regime has been mired in a years-long hegemonic crisis, rocked by financial volatility and political mismanagement, it has also undergone a process of authoritarian consolidation. The state has been restructured along hyperpresidential lines, enabling the mass persecution of dissidents, who have been jailed in their thousands. It has used clientelist tools to entrench its support among small and medium-sized enterprises along with their workers, seeing off electoral challenges from the opposition. And it has reasserted its legitimacy by claiming credit for the toppling of Assad, casting the victorious Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as little more than a Turkish proxy.

At the same time, the PKK has been forced into retreat. Its allies in Syria face a bleak future under a hostile regime, strongly oriented towards Turkey. American support is no longer guaranteed with Trump back in the White House. Indeed, Erdoğan is already threatening Rojava with a full-scale invasion once it is withdrawn. As its emancipatory horizon has receded, the Kurdish population has become increasingly keen on securing peace, even if the terms are unfavourable. Öcalan may have therefore calculated that if he did not respond positively to the government's offer of a ceasefire, however cynical and dishonest it might be, he risked alienating millions of Kurdish voters and driving them back into the arms of the AKP. After all, Erdoğan's party had become dominant in Turkey's Kurdish regions in the early 2000s with its promises of democratization and peace – a scenario which Kurdish leaders do not want to see repeated.

The Kurdish forces, then, appear to believe that swallowing this bitter pill is the only way to preserve their social base and avoid a violent end to Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria. In so doing, they hope to put themselves in a stronger position in future negotiations, either with the government or the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). Yet questions remain about how the PKK's prospective dismantling will play out. Öcalan has insisted that it must take place within a proper legal and democratic framework. But will the state agree to this? Will the PKK officially dissolve while retaining unofficial shadow structures in Iraq and Iran in case subsequent talks break down? The example of the Colombian FARC – the state giving guarantees to militants which were only partially honoured, and the group continuing with its armed campaign – is still fresh in everyone's minds.

For Erdoğan, the final objective is clear: to divide the opposition and prolong his presidency. By holding out the prospect of less repression over the months and years to come, he hopes to

convince the Kurds to support a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for office again, on conditions that will make it easier for him to win in the first round. If he succeeds, he might confirm the suspicions of many CHP voters that the Kurds are willing to betray Turkey's democratic future to advance their own ethnic interests. This kind of rift would make it considerably harder for any presidential challenger – most likely the current CHP mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu – to forge unity between the Turkish and Kurdish opposition.

While the Kurds are trying to make the best of a deeply asymmetrical balance of power, then, it is clear that prospects for sustainable peace under Erdoğan and Bahçeli are nil. Only a democratization agenda which makes no concessions to the forces of nationalism and reaction, and which is embedded in social struggles that cut across ethnic lines, would be capable of changing the equation. The main opposition parties have no appetite for such a movement. Until one emerges, it is likely that Erdoğanism will continue to dictate the terms of peace.

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Read on: Cihan Tuğal, 'Erdoğan's Syria?', Sidecar.