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Erdogan's dual Kurdish strategy: Peace talks vs reconfiguring Syria militarily

Turkiye's renewed push to resolve the Kurdish question – through a mix of delicate negotiations with an incarcerated separatist icon and military action in Syria – could either pave the way for peace or deepen divisions in a region facing collapse.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

“Conditions in Syria have changed. We believe it’s only a matter of time before PKK/YPG is eliminated.”

- Turkish Foreign Minister [Hakan Fidan](#) speaking at a news conference earlier this week.

In October 2024, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Turkish Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and political ally of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, surprised many with an unexpected proposal. He suggested that Abdullah Öcalan, the founding member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), could be granted [conditional release](#) if he renounced violence and dissolved the organization.

Öcalan, who has been imprisoned in Türkiye since 1999, has long been a symbol of Kurdish resistance. Despite persistent demands from Kurdish groups for his release or a reduction in his sentence, Turkish authorities have never responded positively.

The following month, Bahçeli expanded his proposal, presenting it as a potential solution to the decades-long conflict with Kurdish militants and calling for the pro-Kurdish Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) to engage in direct talks with Öcalan.

Erdoğan endorsed the idea, calling it a "[historic opportunity](#)." This proposal coincided with the political upheaval in Syria in which Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, overthrew former president Bashar al-Assad on 8 December after a two-week shock offensive that took the region by surprise. Julani, who now goes by his real name Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly led the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, which he founded in Syria under the direction of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2011. The Nusra Front later became HTS. The events in Syria and the collapse of Assad's Baathist rule bolstered Ankara's regional standing.

Representatives from DEM met with Öcalan, followed by a meeting between the party and Bahçeli earlier this month. Türkiye is now poised to leverage its strengthened negotiating position to address what it perceives as the Kurdish threat in Syria.

Türkiye–PKK conflict: Historical milestones

To understand Türkiye's stance on the Kurdish issue, particularly its position on the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its ties to the PKK, it is essential to examine the conflict's historical milestones. These moments have shaped the relationship between the Turkish state and the PKK over decades of violence and sporadic peace efforts.

The PKK was officially founded on 27 November 1978 in the Lice district of Diyarbakir province. Its founders, including Öcalan, were a group of Marxist students who sought to establish an independent Kurdish state encompassing Kurdish-majority regions in Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

However, this vision clashed with Turkiye's policies, which denied the existence of a separate Kurdish identity and restricted Kurdish cultural expression. The [military coup](#) on 12 September 1980 dealt a severe blow to the PKK, in which many of its members and leaders were arrested. Despite this setback, the PKK launched its first military operation in 1984, marking the beginning of a prolonged and bloody conflict with the Turkish state.

In the early 1990s, the PKK made its first notable attempt at peace. On 20 March 1993, the group declared a ceasefire after indirect talks, but this initiative unraveled after the sudden death of Turkish President Turgut Ozal in April of that year. By May, President Suleyman Demirel officially ended the peace process, reigniting hostilities between the two sides once again.

The arrest of Ocalan in 1999 marked a turning point in the conflict. On 15 February, Turkish intelligence [captured Ocalan in Nairobi](#), Kenya, and extradited him to Turkiye. Initially sentenced to death, his punishment was later commuted to life imprisonment after Ankara abolished the death penalty. Following his arrest, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire, but this truce ended in 2004, when the group resumed operations, targeting urban centers in Turkiye.

The following years saw significant military escalation alongside attempts at secret negotiations. In 2008, the Turkish military launched Operation Sun in northern Iraq, involving [10,000 soldiers](#). At the same time, secret talks were initiated in Oslo in 2010, but these negotiations failed to produce meaningful results.

In late 2012, then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced talks with Ocalan in prison with the aim of reaching peace. In March 2013, Ocalan called from his prison to ask his cadres to stop fighting and withdraw from Turkiye, stressing the need for politics to prevail over weapons. The party responded to this call and declared a ceasefire.

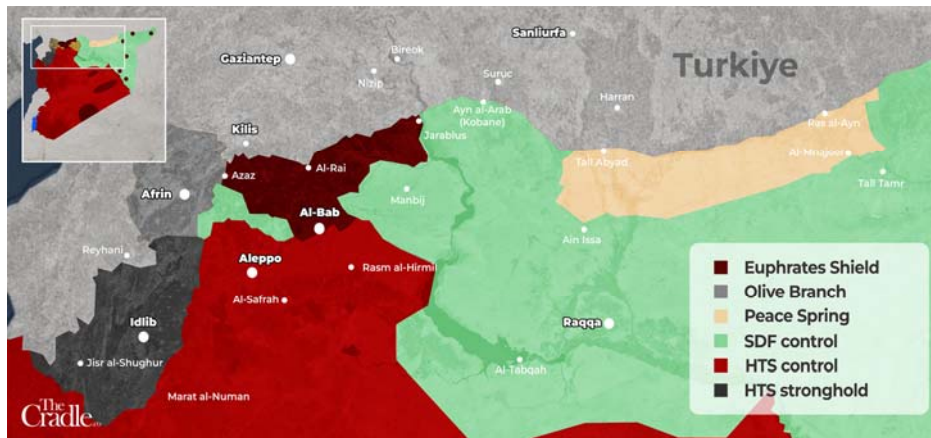
A renewed peace process began in late 2012, initiated by Erdogan, in which he announced direct talks with Ocalan aimed at resolving the conflict peacefully. In March 2013, Ocalan called for an end to hostilities and urged PKK fighters to withdraw from Turkiye. The PKK declared a ceasefire in response, but this period of calm was short-lived.

The peace process collapsed in July 2015 following the killing of two Turkish policemen by PKK members. The violence that ensued saw Turkiye launching extensive military operations and regaining control of Kurdish-held areas in the country's southeast. The clashes resulted in the deaths of thousands of PKK fighters and hundreds of Turkish soldiers.

Between 2016 and 2020, Turkiye shifted its focus to cross-border operations in Syria, launching a series of [military campaigns](#), including Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation

Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, and Operation Spring Shield, to weaken Kurdish forces in Syria.

These operations targeted the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Turkiye considers an extension of the PKK. To maintain control over recaptured areas, Turkiye reorganized Syrian opposition groups under the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), tasking them with enforcing security measures, particularly in Kurdish-majority areas.



Ocalan has expressed his readiness to contribute to peacemaking, considering that strengthening the Kurdish–Turkish brotherhood is a “historic responsibility.” He was quoted as saying he was “[ready to take the necessary positive steps](#),” noting that the delegation that visited him would convey its position to the Turkish state and other political forces.

However, the US-backed SDF remains adamant about [retaining its weapons](#) unless Turkiye halts its attacks, and Ankara has rejected SDF commander Mazloum Abdi’s [proposal to integrate](#) the SDF into the Syrian army.

Meanwhile, Ankara continues to exert military pressure in Syria, with the SNA targeting critical infrastructure controlled by Kurdish forces, such as the Tishreen Dam and Qaraqoq Bridge. These actions, while aimed at weakening Kurdish influence, reveal the deeply entrenched tensions between Turkiye, the SDF, and the interim Syrian government. Despite periodic negotiations, disagreements persist, making further conflict increasingly likely.

Adding to Kurdish anxieties are statements suggesting another potential reduction of US support under President-elect Donald Trump’s administration. In a post on his social media platform *Truth Social*, Trump exclaimed:

"Syria is a mess, but is not our friend, & THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THIS IS NOT OUR FIGHT. LET IT PLAY OUT. DO NOT GET INVOLVED!" (His caps)

Further comments by Trump's ally [Robert Kennedy Jr.](#) revealed that the US president-elect has privately advocated for withdrawing US troops from Syria, aiming to avoid turning them into “cannon fodder” in regional conflicts. Such rhetoric has left the SDF feeling vulnerable, given their longstanding reliance on US protection as a counterbalance to Ankara’s aggressions.

Diverging visions and regional uncertainty

In light of these uncertainties, the SDF has sought an arrangement with the new Syrian government.

During a [meeting](#) with Turkish-backed Syrian interim leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, the SDF proposed adopting a decentralized governance system, integrating the SDF into the Syrian army as a unified corps, and limiting its operations to the areas of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration.

While the SDF further requests equitable distribution of resources from the resource-rich regions east of the Euphrates, Sharaa’s response highlights the continuing stark differences between the two sides.

Damascus proposes redirecting 80 percent of oil and gas revenues to the central government, disbanding the SDF, dispersing its members across Syria, dissolving the Kurdish Asayish security forces, and reassigning urban security to the Syrian Central Police. These opposing visions leave little room for compromise and suggest an increased likelihood of Turkiye pursuing further military actions in northeastern Syria.

Erdogan’s willingness to engage in negotiations with Ocalan and the SDF is not solely shaped by regional dynamics but also by pressing domestic considerations. Constitutionally, Erdogan is barred from seeking another term unless early elections are called, which puts his political future at a crossroads.

Securing the support of the pro-Kurdish Equality and Democracy Party – the third-largest party in parliament – could be crucial for Erdogan to push through constitutional amendments that would extend his presidency.

Whether through diplomacy or military action, Erdogan’s approach to the Kurdish issue will shape not only the future of Turkiye’s internal politics but also determine whether Syria can achieve a [fragile unity or succumb to fragmentation](#) across ethnic and sectarian lines.

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