

A 'new Kurdish opening' in Turkey: a bumpy road to peace

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On February 27, a statement from Abdullah Öcalan, the historic leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who has been imprisoned since 1999, was read out in Istanbul. In the statement, he called on the organisation to lay down its arms and dissolve itself. Öcalan's appeal is part of a process referred to in Turkish public debate as the 'new Kurdish opening'. The purpose of this initiative, which has been ongoing since October 2024, is to find a political solution to the armed conflict between Turkey and the PKK, which is designated a terrorist organisation. Negotiations, conducted with the approval of Turkish authorities, are led by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM). A two-member delegation from the party has met with Öcalan three times and has held a series of meetings with various actors in Turkish politics, representatives of Iraq's Kurdistan Region, and – unofficially – with senior PKK commanders.

The process of Turkish-Kurdish normalisation presents numerous challenges for both parties to the conflict. A lasting peace agreement would necessitate legal changes. The Kurdish side demands, among other things, constitutional recognition of minority rights, including native-language education, as well as the easing of imprisonment conditions for Öcalan. These demands could serve as a catalyst for constitutional amendments that might also enable President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to seek re-election. However, the government's escalating pressure on opposition groups poses a significant risk to the success of the negotiations. Furthermore, Öcalan's actual influence over the PKK remains difficult to ascertain.

The genesis of the new process

Öcalan's call for the PKK to demilitarise could mark a milestone in the path towards a Turkish-Kurdish agreement. The long-standing conflict between the state and its largest ethnic minority remains one of Turkey's most pressing challenges. The armed struggle with the PKK has persisted since the 1980s, claiming tens of thousands of lives on both sides. It remains a significant factor permanently undermining national security and contributing to social instability.

Previous attempts to resolve the conflict, including the 2013–2015 peace process, ended in failure and led to an escalation of violence (for more see '[The Kurds in Turkey – waiting for a turning point](#)'). Another round of negotiations is currently underway. The involvement of Öcalan, who holds significant authority among the Kurds, is crucial to their success. Statements from the PKK suggest the party's willingness to engage in talks but do not guarantee its unconditional adherence to Öcalan's directives.

The latest attempt at normalising relations between Ankara and the PKK began in October 2024, when Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the coalition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), urged Öcalan to dissolve the PKK in exchange for the possibility of a pardon. Subsequently, for the first time in over three years, Öcalan's isolation was officially lifted after he signalled his willingness to engage in negotiations.

The process was not derailed by the PKK attack on the headquarters of the TUSAŞ armaments company in Kahramankazan on 23 October 2024, which resulted in the deaths of five individuals and injuries to 22 others. At this stage, the negotiations are being led by a delegation comprising experienced DEM politicians, Pervin Buldan and Sırrı Süreyya Önder. Thus far, they have met with Öcalan on three occasions (on 28 December, 20 January, and 27 February). Following the most recent meeting, Öcalan issued a statement urging the PKK to lay down its arms. Furthermore, the delegation has met with major political forces in Turkey, prominent activists (including the imprisoned Selahattin Demirtaş, a key figure in the civilian wing of the Kurdish political movement) and, most recently, with the authorities of Iraq's Kurdistan Region.

Negotiations with the new constitution in the background

Turkish-Kurdish normalisation requires concessions from both sides. Ankara expects the PKK to disarm. On 14 February, the DEM submitted a written proposal for a new social agreement outlining four key demands:

- ending Öcalan's isolation and ensuring his direct participation in the negotiation process;
- ensuring the democratisation of the state and guaranteeing Kurdish rights in the constitution;
- ensuring equal rights for all ethnic groups, including the right to education in minority languages;
- ceasing Turkish military operations against Kurdish forces outside Turkey.

In its proposal, the DEM abandoned its previously contentious demands, such as Kurdish autonomy and a pardon for Öcalan. However, implementing these four points would still require amending the constitution. Given the strongly nationalistic nature of the Turkish Constitution, proposed amendments continue to provoke major controversy in public debate. Another challenge involves the reluctance of some members of the Turkish political scene to amend the constitution under the current circumstances.

The opposition views the ongoing normalisation attempt as an element of a strategy to extend President Erdoğan's rule beyond the 2028 election. Under the current constitution, he is ineligible to seek re-election unless a snap election is called, a move that requires a qualified majority in parliament, which the ruling coalition does not possess. An agreement between the government and the DEM on Kurdish demands could facilitate the passage of a new constitution through parliamentary approval, as the pro-Kurdish party is the third-largest political force in the legislature. This scenario seems increasingly plausible, given that Erdoğan currently lacks an obvious successor, as previous attempts to groom one have failed. Meanwhile, the ruling coalition's waning popularity renders a constitutional referendum a risky endeavour.

Tightening the screw on the opposition

Alongside the ‘new Kurdish opening’ process, pressure on opposition groups is intensifying, primarily through the politicised judicial system. In recent weeks, hundreds of individuals with varying degrees of affiliation with the Kurdish movement – including politicians, activists, and journalists – have been arrested as part of ongoing counterterrorism operations. Some of these crackdowns have been directly targeting the DEM. Citing allegations of the party’s ties to the PKK, the Ministry of the Interior has installed government-appointed trustees in various local administrative bodies governed by the DEM in southeastern Turkey.

Numerous legal proceedings are also underway against the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the main opposition force, which won last year’s local elections. Municipalities governed by the party are under particularly intense pressure. The highest number of lawsuits has been filed against the popular mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who is considered a potential rival to Erdoğan in the next presidential election. The charges against him include defamation, insulting the head of state and other institutions, and irregularities in public procurement processes. These allegations could result in İmamoğlu being barred from holding public office or even imprisoned, effectively eliminating him from the presidential race. The crackdown has also targeted the media critical of the government, with substantial financial penalties imposed on specific outlets. Additionally, prosecutors have launched an investigation into the leadership of TÜSİAD, Turkey’s most influential industry and business association, which has been critical of the government’s economic policies. The organisation has been accused of “spreading false information”.

The escalation of pressure may be interpreted as an attempt by the authorities to strengthen their negotiating position or to silence dissenting voices against the agreement, as it could provoke social unrest. So far, the Kurdish side has demonstrated considerable determination and a willingness to compromise. However, if pressure on the DEM continues despite Öcalan’s statement, it could ultimately prompt the party to withdraw from the talks.

Outlook

Although the ‘new Kurdish opening’ remains in its early stages, several factors could already derail the process. One key issue is the lack of visible engagement from Erdoğan. Given Turkey’s authoritarian political system, it is clear that any attempt at normalisation could not occur without his knowledge and approval. However, the president has thus far kept his distance from the talks and has not directly participated in them. This is most likely because he wishes to avoid personal political responsibility should the negotiations collapse.

It is also uncertain how much actual influence Öcalan, who has been imprisoned for 26 years, still holds over the PKK leadership and whether his call for demilitarisation will be heeded. Additionally, there are doubts whether the organisation can maintain internal cohesion. At this stage, it remains unclear how the PKK’s self-dissolution would be implemented. Previous attempts at reconciliation, such as during the 2013–2015 peace process, ended in failure, partly due to internal divisions within the PKK, which were exacerbated by the perception that the government had failed to uphold its commitments to improve the social, political, and cultural rights of the Kurdish population. The challenge of maintaining discipline within the organisation was further underscored by the attack in Kahramankazan, which was likely carried out by a PKK faction opposed to resuming

negotiations with Ankara.

Since the Kurdish population spans multiple countries, peace negotiations with the PKK also have an international dimension. From Turkey's perspective, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the formation of a new government in Syria could create an opportunity to dismantle the de facto Kurdish autonomy in the region, known as Rojava. This region is governed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Ankara considers affiliated with the PKK. The dismantling of Rojava would weaken the PKK by depriving it of both human and military resources. Turkey is pursuing this goal by pressuring the new Syrian authorities, which has exacerbated tensions between them and the SDF. However, excessive pressure on the SDF could toughen its stance and negatively impact the PKK's willingness to engage in a peace agreement.