

One step forward, one step back – a year of the Turkish–Kurdish peace process

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In 2025, the Turkish–Kurdish peace process witnessed several breakthrough developments, most notably the disarmament of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the organisation's self-dissolution, and – above all – the withdrawal of its fighters to northern Iraq. Despite this, negotiations have reached an impasse, with any agreement requiring significant concessions from both sides. The Kurds are demanding an expansion of ethnic minority rights, which would necessitate amendments to the current constitution. Other key demands, such as the release of Abdullah Öcalan (the historical leader of the PKK) or an amnesty for fighters, remain unpopular with the public. Ankara has made its willingness to meet Kurdish demands conditional on the full demilitarisation of the PKK. It also considers the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to be part of the organisation. The SDF controls the Kurdish de facto autonomous region in northern Syria, known as Rojava, and Turkey insists that this area be reintegrated into Syria's state structures.

The most important element of the negotiations is the dialogue with Öcalan, who has been held in a high-security prison on İmralı Island in the Sea of Marmara for the past 26 years. Talks are being conducted by representatives of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which holds seats in the Turkish parliament. On 24 November this year, members of a parliamentary commission met with Öcalan for the first time. The commission was established in August to draft the legal framework for the peace process. Its final conclusions, along with the evolving situation surrounding the SDF in Syria, will be key factors influencing the pace of Turkish–Kurdish negotiations in the coming months.

Between İmralı and the parliament

The current phase of the peace talks began when Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the coalition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), called on the PKK to disarm during a parliamentary session. According to unofficial reports, however, Turkish intelligence services had been engaged in dialogue with Öcalan much earlier, facilitating his contact with the PKK leadership. Bahçeli's speech marked the start of a series of meetings between politicians from the DEM party and Öcalan, who had long been held in isolation and expressed a willingness to take part in negotiations.

On 27 February, following another meeting, the DEM delegation read out a statement from the PKK leader, in which he called on the organisation to abandon armed struggle (see '[A new 'Kurdish opening' in Turkey: a bumpy road to peace](#)'). In response, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire on 1 March. On 12 May, it announced its decision to dissolve itself,

stating that its mission had come to an end owing to the emergence of a political solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. A special ceremony was held on 11 July in a cave near Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan to mark this decision. During the event, which was attended by the media, 30 PKK members symbolically burned their weapons in a bonfire. On 26 October, the organisation announced its complete withdrawal from Turkey to Iraqi territory.

For a long period, the Turkish side refrained from taking any official steps, arguing that disarmament was being verified by the National Intelligence Organisation (MİT). On 5 August, the parliamentary National Solidarity, Brotherhood, and Democracy Committee commenced its work, tasked with providing a legal framework for the peace process. The commission includes 51 representatives from parties with seats in parliament – all except the opposition nationalist Good Party (İYİ), which opposes any attempt at reconciliation with the Kurds. A turning point in the commission's work, and in the broader process, was expected with the commission delegation's visit to İmralı, which took place on 24 November. Three MPs held talks in prison with Öcalan: Hüseyin Yayman from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Gülistan Kılıç Koçyiğit from DEM, and Feti Yıldız from MHP. Other parties, including the main opposition force, the Republican People's Party (CHP), chose not to participate in the meeting. The conclusions of the visit were due to be presented to the public at the commission's next session on 4 December. However, the document submitted proved to be merely a summary of the meeting protocol. DEM disputes its contents, particularly with regard to Öcalan's views on the future status of Rojava (see below). The commission is set to be dissolved at the end of the year, although its members may vote to extend its mandate by a further two months.

A tug of war

The peace process has reached a stalemate, with each side expecting the other to make the next move. A lasting agreement would require legislative changes in Turkey, including constitutional amendments. The Kurds' core demands include the recognition and expansion of ethnic minority rights, particularly education in mother tongues, as well as either the release of Öcalan or an improvement in his living conditions. They are also calling for an end to repression of the Kurdish political movement, including the removal of government-appointed trustees who replaced elected mayors from DEM in several cities in south-eastern Turkey, where local leaders were accused of links to the PKK (notably Van, Batman and Mardin). The Kurdish side is also demanding the release of political prisoners such as Selahattin Demirtaş – an icon of the civilian wing of the Kurdish political movement and a former presidential candidate – along with other senior figures from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the predecessor to DEM. One of the most controversial issues remains the future of those convicted on terrorism charges. While the PKK avoids using the term 'amnesty', it advocates legal measures that would allow fighters to reintegrate into society. Such proposals face strong public opposition and risk undermining support for efforts to resolve the conflict.

At present, most of Turkish society is supportive of the negotiations, yet remains pessimistic about their outcome. This is partly due to poor government communication and the opaque nature of the process. Public opinion polls show that between 55% and 65% of respondents are in favour of talks with the PKK. At the same time, the majority believe the negotiations will ultimately fail; only one in three expects the organisation to abandon armed

struggle. A majority (66%) also opposes meetings between the parliamentary commission and Öcalan, and eight in ten respondents are against his release.

The peace process, referred to in government statements as a 'terror-free Turkey', is highly non-transparent and relies heavily on the involvement of Turkish intelligence services. So far, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has kept his distance from the initiative – likely to protect his image in the event that the talks collapse – leaving Devlet Bahçeli to represent the state's position.

The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) remains sceptical of the negotiations. Over the past year, it has come under significant pressure from a politicised judiciary (see '[Awaiting a verdict. Turkish opposition under pressure](#)'). The party fears that a peace deal would consolidate the ruling AKP's power and be used to push through a new constitution that would enable the president to seek additional terms in office.

The Syrian deadlock

Ankara's unwillingness to make concessions has sparked growing impatience within the PKK. Senior figures in the organisation, such as Murat Karayılan and Besê Hozat, have recently declared that the Kurds have taken all possible steps and are now awaiting decisions from Turkey. Turkish officials, for their part, describe the current phase of the process as 'the most risky to date'.

From Ankara's perspective, a complete cessation of the PKK's military engagement is a prerequisite for normalising domestic politics. In the Turkish view, disarmament must also apply to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control Rojava and are regarded as the PKK's sister organisation – and thus as a security threat. So far, SDF leadership has maintained that Öcalan's call for disarmament does not apply to their forces. The issue of Kurdish forces in Syria is said to be the most significant point of contention in the summary of the meeting with the PKK's historic leader. According to DEM, Öcalan stated that the SDF should integrate with Syria's central government only if the country embarks on a democratic path – a condition omitted from the official document.

Ankara, which is pushing for the unification of Syria, has highlighted the agreement reached on 10 March this year between the SDF and the Damascus authorities. Under the deal, Kurdish-run institutions were to be integrated into Syria's state administration by the end of the year, and the SDF absorbed into the national army. Meeting that deadline now appears impossible. The Kurdish forces in Syria fear for their own security and are seeking to maintain Rojava's autonomy. In recent months, Turkish politicians and military officials have repeatedly threatened military intervention in northern Syria should the SDF fail to uphold the agreement. In early December, unconfirmed reports surfaced online of Turkish military convoys crossing the border. Such an intervention would undermine mutual trust and could derail the peace process.