

GREEN LEFT

Anticipating the PKK's first disarmament

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The establishment of a mechanism to lay down the arms will take the process forward.

Imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan (centre, bottom row) delivering his message from İmralı prison on July 9. Source: ANF News

An event will take place on July 11, in Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq that — even by today's standards — will be extraordinary and of historical importance.

Twenty to thirty Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerillas will come down from the mountains and destroy their weapons. This destruction of arms will be carried out in front of [witnesses from many political parties and civil society organisations](#), including international politicians, and will be recorded on video. The guerillas will then return to their bases.

It will be a dangerous operation and will be carefully protected. Security concerns have led to the banning of journalists and the cancelling of the planned live broadcast.

This act is a symbol of the PKK's commitment to its disarmament and dissolution, in line with Abdullah Öcalan's [February 27 call](#). In response to that call, the PKK declared a ceasefire on March 1, and on May 12 they [announced](#) that they had held a congress and agreed to lay down arms and dissolve the organisation.

Turkey continues attacks

This congress had not been easy to organise as, despite the ceasefire, Turkey has not stopped its attacks. In fact, they have increased in intensity. The PKK has not carried out any attacks, in line with their ceasefire, but they have had to continue defending their bases.

[Twelve Turkish soldiers died from exposure to methane gas](#), on July 6, while searching PKK tunnels for the remains of a soldier killed three years ago. Turkey has been accused many times of using gas in their attacks, but this is being treated as an accident. However, tensions have been raised.

Even while continuing to attack, and without making any concessions themselves, the Turkish government insists that the PKK carry out the promised disarmament. This is not how peace processes generally work. Disarmament would be expected to come at the end of the negotiation process not at the beginning — the Irish

Republican Army didn't destroy their weapons until 2005, seven years after the Good Friday Agreement — but the PKK wants to demonstrate their determination to move from armed struggle to democratic politics.

In fact, the PKK has been [trying to negotiate a peace agreement](#) since the early 1990s. They have called many ceasefires that were not reciprocated and even sent peace delegations, which were detained and imprisoned.

There have always been people within the state who have not wanted peace to succeed: who have preferred to keep the Kurds as a perpetual enemy and scapegoat. In the past, most politicians, but also the deep state — the power behind the scenes — were not supportive of a peace deal. When Turkey's President Turgut Özal agreed to negotiate with the PKK in 1993, he died of a heart attack, and an autopsy carried out 19 years later found high levels of poison in his body.

War of attrition

But now the situation appears to have changed. The long war of attrition has taken its toll on Turkey's hard-pressed economy, and the rise of Israel's Middle Eastern hegemony has made many people keen to secure the Kurds as part of the Turkish state, rather than make them enemies.

Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party exemplifies this new outlook and has become the unlikely leader of the new process, and the Republican Peoples Party (CHP) has also changed its tune to support negotiations. However, there are still powerful people who would prefer the fighting to continue and could try and sabotage any agreement.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seems only interested in what might best serve his own political ambitions. As we saw with the collapse of the 2013–15 peace process, this could lead him to make a 180-degree turn in his approach, if he feels that will be to his personal advantage.

To prevent the current process from being so easily derailed, Öcalan has called for the widest possible involvement; and many political parties have supported the

establishment of a special commission in the Turkish parliament. How much this will be allowed to do is not yet clear, but it will be able to continue functioning through the summer recess.

Meanwhile, the government is resisting calls for the involvement of a neutral third party.

It is impossible to know what is being discussed behind closed doors, but, so far, the only movement on the government's side has been the granting of (still limited) permission for communication with Öcalan, and for three further prisoners to be brought to İmralı Island prison to help him in his vital work. Öcalan still does not have the basic rights he should be due according to international law, never mind the freedoms needed for his central role in any peace negotiations.

As already noted, the Turkish military has not stopped attacking the PKK's bases.

It is thought that the current peace process (if one can call it that) was instrumental in persuading Turkey to implement a ceasefire in Syria and to stop their attacks on the Tishreen Dam.

However, Turkey has not stopped its pressure on Syria's President Ahmed al-Sharaa to force the integration of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria into a centralised state. In this, they appear to have [found an ally](#) in Tom Barrack, the US ambassador to Turkey and special envoy for Syria.

Although the Turkish government is demanding the PKK's disarmament, it has done nothing to make this possible. The guerillas need to be sure that they will not face future attacks, and, on top of this, they need legal changes and guarantees to enable them to return to civilian life and not be arrested and imprisoned.

No democracy without peace

Öcalan did not call for the guerrillas to end their struggle, but for them to take it into a new democratic phase.

When we look at the bigger picture, there is even more cause for concern.

While the Turkish government persist in portraying this process in terms of ending “terrorism” and creating a “terror free Turkey”, the Kurds describe it as for peace and democracy. The Kurds are clear that without peace there can be no democracy, and that democracy is vital to allow politics to be pursued peacefully.

However, not only has Turkey failed to salvage its vanishing democracy, it is currently making the situation much worse. For the moment, the government is no longer arresting Kurdish DEM Party mayors, but it is detaining and arresting mayors from the main opposition CHP.

There is clearly an attempt at divide and rule here. Erdoğan wants to buy support from the Kurds through the peace process, while using the judiciary to destroy his main opponents; but the DEM Party has [been very clear](#) that no political arrests are acceptable. The attack on the CHP mayors is an attack on democracy. It is thus also an attack on the peace process.

Democracy requires freedom of speech and an independent judiciary. There is no sign of Turkey seeing either of those; and speculation over the release of political prisoners has so far been disappointed.

From armed struggle to democratic struggle

In anticipation of the first destruction of PKK weapons, Öcalan released a [short, videoed speech](#) from İmralı on July 9. This was the first time in 26 years that the public had been able to hear his voice. In it, he explained that “The PKK movement and its ‘National Liberation Strategy’ — which emerged as a reaction to the denial of the existence [of the Kurds] and thus aimed at setting up a separate state — has been dissolved. The existence [of the Kurds] has been recognised; therefore, the basic aim has been achieved.”

And with respect to disarmament, he said: “You should take it in your stride that your ensuring of the laying down of arms, before the witnesses of the public and related circles, would not only count with the TBMM [Turkish Grand National Assembly] and the Commission, but also reassure the public and honour our promises.

“The establishment of a mechanism to lay down the arms will take the process forward. What has been done is a voluntary transition from the phase of armed struggle to the phase of democratic politics and law. This is not a loss, but has to be regarded as a historical gain.”

This first disarmament is intended to break the log jam of who moves first. If the government is serious and doesn't want to lose this unique opportunity for peace, then it must respond with concrete actions.

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