

Peace – the end of the beginning? – last week in Kurdish news

Öcalan has made his historic public call for peace and the dissolution of the PKK, crucially linking this to the recognition of democracy. The PKK has welcomed his call and given their conditions for its implementation. The ball is now in the Turkish Government's court. We know that many discussions have taken place under the radar, but the government has not yet made any visible concessions, and Kurds are caught between hope and fear. Grounds for optimism can be found in the international support for a peace agreement and in the engagement of other political parties. We can also recognise what the PKK has already achieved, and the persistence of ideas beyond the movements that created them.

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On Thursday, Abdullah Öcalan's long-expected peace statement was finally delivered to the public: not as a video, but read out in Kurdish and Turkish by two leading members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party, and accompanied by a group photograph with Öcalan sitting with his message at the centre of a long table, flanked by the DEM Party delegation as in a sombre last supper.

The original statement was [handwritten by Öcalan in Turkish](#), and approved by the Turkish authorities. Its message was simple: the PKK had run its course and should call a congress to agree on its own dissolution. It decried all forms of separatism, stressing instead the need for genuine democracy – what Öcalan calls “democratic society”.

The written message was followed by the announcement of a crucial sentence, which – the delegation explained – Öcalan added after reading out the text: “Undoubtedly,” it stated, “the laying down of arms and the dissolution of the PKK in practice require the recognition of [democratic politics and a legal framework](#).” This clarification, which we are informed was also approved by state officials but not included in the main text due to procedural delays, provides a vital link between the two parts of the written statement.

There was no mention of Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a separate organisation from the PKK, and their commander, Mazloum Abdi, while [welcoming Öcalan's message](#), made clear that its call to disarm and dissolve does not apply to them.

This statement followed a third visit to İmralı island prison by [a DEM Party delegation](#). This time, besides MPs Pervin Buldan and Sırrı Süreyya Önder, who had made the first two visits and also taken part in previous discussions ten years ago, the delegation included the party leaders, Tülay Hatimoğulları and Tuncer Bakırhan; the former MP and deposed mayor of Mardin, Ahmet Türk; Cengiz Çiçek who is now an MP and formerly worked as a lawyer for Öcalan, and Faik Özgür Erol, one of Öcalan's current lawyers. As well as Öcalan, they also met the other three prisoners on the island, Ömer Hayri Konar, Hamili Yıldırım, and Veysi Aktaş.

Öcalan read his message to the assembled group recorded by three cameras. The photograph we have seen appears to be a still from one of these videos. Afterwards, everyone had dinner, and the discussion continued for around four hours. The delegation then returned to Istanbul to make their press statement and read out Öcalan's message to a hall packed with people, including over 300 journalists from around the world. The statement was carried live on national television and broadcast from big screens in city squares, especially in the Kurdish cities in the southeast, where the expectant crowds created a carnival atmosphere.

The message was met with the whole range of emotions. People welcomed the potential for peace, and the hope of an end to generations of cruel suffering, but they questioned the absence of any stated concessions or peace moves from the Turkish side. A young woman told Bianet's Evrim Deniz, who had gone to witness the announcement in [Diyarbakir's Dağkapı Square](#), “Some people left this place happy,

some left heartbroken. We don't even know how to feel, but maybe this means there will be amnesty for political prisoners. I'm 27 years old. I've been hoping for as long as I can remember. My mother, my aunt, my grandmother, even my great-grandmother — they all spent their lives hoping. What can we say to them now?"

We are still left to guess what the Turkish government might have agreed to offer in return – or to rely on well-placed contacts. Amberin Zaman writes in [al-Monitor](#) that their sources have told them that there is talk of major changes to the conditions faced by Öcalan and other political prisoners; release of political prisoners including Selahattin Demirtaş; amnesties for PKK members; and asylum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for the PKK's senior cadres. None of this has been confirmed.

What we do know is that this week's [announcement](#) is the product of many discussions between Öcalan and the Turkish state, which has been free to talk with him whenever they wish, as well as of his recent meetings with DEM Party politicians, which will have been fully monitored by the authorities, and of meetings between those politicians and other political parties in Turkey and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The DEM Party has also been allowed to convey other written messages from Öcalan, which have not been made public, including to the acting leaders of the PKK in their base in Iraq; and Öcalan has been able to have – strictly limited – discussions with the other three prisoners in İmralı. What we have been allowed to see is only the tip of a large and fragile iceberg.

The PKK

The PKK has welcomed Öcalan's call. In a statement published this morning they say "we will comply with and implement the requirements of the call from our own side. However, we would like to emphasise that democratic politics and legal grounds must also be suitable for success."

They have declared a ceasefire and will only take armed action if attacked. They state their readiness to convene a congress, as Öcalan asked them to do, but they stipulate that "for this to happen, a suitable security environment must be created and Leader Apo [Öcalan] must personally direct and execute the congress", and they repeat their demand that "Leader Abdullah Öcalan must be able to live and work in physical freedom and be able to establish unhindered relationships with anyone he wants".

President Erdoğan and his government

Öcalan has been [calling for a peace deal](#) since the late 1980s, and there have been hopes raised and crushed in the past – most notably with the talks that took place between 2013 and 2015, which ended with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's repudiation of an initial agreement and his turn towards a policy of military annihilation.

A peace agreement requires both sides to participate with commitment and sincerity, and the ball is now in the government's court. The Kurds have every reason to be wary of the intentions of Erdoğan and his government. In addition to their experience of earlier negotiations, they must question the sincerity of a government that talks of

peace while ramping up its aggression. Not only is Turkey continuing their military attacks in Syria and Iraq, adopting the same style of gunboat diplomacy that Erdoğan employs in external relations, but they are also tightening the screws on democracy.

If they want the PKK to dissolve in favour of peaceful politics, they must allow space for peaceful politics to happen. Just this last fortnight, as well as further [Turkish military attacks](#), we have seen dawn raids in multiple provinces resulting in the detention of over fifty activists, / news that up to [6,000 people](#) are under investigation, courts blocking access to the internet broadcasts of Mesopotamya News Agency and [Kurdish Voice of America](#), the replacement of [another mayor](#) with an unelected trustee, / and a new turn in the attempt to disqualify the Istanbul mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, from challenging Erdoğan for the presidency – now [by questioning](#) his educational qualifications.

Even the manner of presentation and the reception of Öcalan's message give cause for concern. Back in October, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Erdoğan's vital political ally, startled everyone with his suggestion that Öcalan could come to the DEM Party meeting in parliament and announce the dissolution of the PKK. For this week's announcement, Öcalan was still under tight control in İmralı and not even allowed to speak himself on video. (He was filmed reading the statement to the DEM Party delegation, but this film has not been released.)

Vitality, at no point so far has Öcalan had the opportunity to take part in any communication that is not completely monitored by the Turkish State. If current developments are to become a peace process, this will have to change.

With these conflicting approaches of peace and war, Erdoğan's game plan seems elusive; but perhaps rather than thinking in terms of a single planned scenario it is easier to understand his actions as guided by the pursuit of power, and ready to explore all options for getting there, including seemingly opposing options at the same time.

He uses anti-Kurdish racism to divide-and-rule, and nationalism to rally support, but history shows that he will experiment with peace talks as well if these might benefit him. The main trigger for abandoning talks in 2015 was the realisation that these were garnering support for the pro-Kurdish HDP (the DEM Party's predecessor) rather than for his Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Erdoğan has [welcomed Öcalan's message](#) as providing a historic opportunity to destroy "the wall of terror", saying they will keep a close watch to ensure the talks are "brought to a successful conclusion." The AKP insists that the SDF must also dissolve itself, and Erdoğan's only public concession to the cause of democracy is a claim that without "terrorism" "the space for politics in democracy will naturally expand."

A peace dividend?

Like the empires in George Orwell's 1984, Turkey has used the constant state of war as a way of controlling the masses through authoritarian rule and jingoism. However, the

government could, instead, benefit from a peace dividend. The struggling economy could gain both directly, from public investment in civil infrastructure, and indirectly, through the country becoming a safer place to invest. Public support for the end of hostilities could also translate into more support for Erdoğan, who is looking for mechanisms to game the system and continue in the presidency.

While Turkey may seem to have gained wider powers thanks to the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, they have also become exposed to new forces and unknown consequences.

The situation in Syria is far from the stability that Western leaders like to portray. Resistance to Ahmed al-Sharaa's centralisation is not restricted to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and the hastily convened [National Dialogue Conference](#) – with no representation from North and East Syria – has failed in its attempt to demonstrate the new government's inclusivity. Meanwhile, severe economic deprivation is feeding discontent.

Turkey is not the only local power trying to impose their control on Syria. Israel, as well as destroying Syria's military assets and encroaching into the Golan Heights, has been lobbying against [Turkish influence and Syrian centralisation](#), and making friendly noises towards the Kurds, who they regard as a useful buffer. From Erdoğan's perspective, peace with the Kurds may thus be seen as the least bad option.

A Kurdish perspective

From the Kurdish perspective, when we look at the PKK guerrillas, we can see that they have become stuck in a form of stalemate. Their actions in Turkey itself are limited. In the Iraqi mountains they are bogged down in a defensive war in which, thanks to support from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Turkey has been gradually emptying out more villages and extending their network of military bases, despite the PKK inflicting significant losses.

Meanwhile, Turkey is using the threat of "terrorism" to justify crushing every example of Kurdish organisation. If the PKK disarms, the purported reason for Turkey's assault on the Kurds and their structures vanishes, and this becomes much harder to justify. Neither Kurdish political parties, such as the DEM Party, nor the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have ever posed any actual security threat to Turkey, but perceptions matter, and the removal of Turkey's excuse to attack them could have real consequences.

Currently, Turkey is both carrying out military attacks against North and East Syria through their mercenary militias, and intervening to prevent any agreement between al-Sharaa's government and the Autonomous Administration. [Mazloun Abdi](#) has commented, "If this process succeeds... Turkey will have no justification to attack our region."

And [Salih Muslim](#), co-chair of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which dominates the Administration's politics, told Green Left that if the Syrian Government were to stop taking directions from Turkey, then "it will be okay."

Öcalan states that the PKK has run its course. The conditions that existed when it was established are no longer there. They had already gone in the 1990s, but earlier attempts to make peace, and even – in 2002 – to dissolve the organisation, failed to elicit the necessary response on the government side.

Whether it will be different this time we can't know, but there are some grounds for optimism in the breadth of support Öcalan's message has received. Within Turkey, in line with Öcalan's request at his first meeting with the DEM Party delegation, care has been taken to include all political parties in the discussions – apart from the İYİ Party and the Victory Party, which reject the idea of making peace. Yesterday's words from Özgür Özel, [leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party](#), were fully in line with that vision: "In order to come up with a solution to this question, it is absolutely necessary to carry out work in the Parliament in which no party is excluded and civil society and all segments of society are represented. The beginning and end of this work is democratisation."

Internationally, there has been wide interest, with official messages of support from the EU and UN, and from individual countries including the United States, China, Germany, and the UK. The more people there are invested in a positive outcome the harder it becomes for the Turkish government to back away.

While the emphasis tends to be on ending violence, we can't forget why it was deemed necessary to resort to violence in the first place. Any peace deal would have to allow Kurds to live in dignity with their cultural rights respected. And while it would be completely unrealistic to expect it to result in the sort of grassroots democracy envisaged by Öcalan, it would need to provide enough democratic space to allow the struggle for deeper change to be pursued on political lines. The fight for democracy is a fight shared with many outside the Kurdish movement.

When a phase of struggle ends, that struggle doesn't vanish. It's ideas can live on and come to light in new ways. A well-known example of this is the Chartist Movement for political reforms that radicalised mid Nineteenth-Century Britain before seeming to disappear without achieving its aims. In the following decades, almost all of its demands became realities. The PKK note that it is their own struggle that has made a peace deal a possibility.

Crucially, Öcalan can call for the dissolution of the PKK because the PKK has given birth to a much bigger movement beyond itself – a movement that includes the social and political struggle for Kurdish rights in Turkey, the lived experiment of grassroots, feminist, multiethnic democracy in Rojava [Kurdish-led northern Syria], the Jin Jiyan Azadi [Woman, Life, Freedom] revolution in Iran, and an international following of people looking for a better way of being and of organising society. These are huge achievements that need to be maintained by constant struggle.

At this historic juncture, international support becomes especially important. Support that puts pressure on international governments to put pressure on Turkey, and support for a renewed effort to end the terrorist listings of the PKK and allow the organisation the freedom to make peace.

Already International Women's Day, on 8 March, and Newroz, the 21 March Kurdish New Year, have been marked as occasions for celebrating and promoting the peace process.

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*Winston Churchill famously said, “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” He made this remark in a speech on 10 November 1942, following the Allied victory at the Second Battle of El Alamein, marking a turning point in World War II.