

# THE NATIONAL

## COMMENT

# Waiting for peace in Kurdistan with hope and fear for the future

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Kurds are riding a rollercoaster of hope and fear for the future

**KURDISH émigrés talk about the possibility of one day returning home to Turkey – and if dedication to hope were enough to bring about change, they would be there tomorrow. In the real uncertain world, their future sits on a knife-edge.**

There are clearly competing views among different parts of Turkey's state and government, but there is still a possibility that what – for want of a better word – has

come to be called a peace process, could bring some kind of peace to this crucial corner of the turbulent Middle East.

For Abdullah Öcalan and the millions of Kurds who look to his leadership, the goal is “peace and democratic society”. For Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his government, the framing is “terror-free Turkey”. Could they find a common path?



**Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan**

The public face of the current process dates from October 2024, when Devlet Bahçeli, leader of Turkey’s far-right National Movement Party and Erdoğan’s ally, shook hands with the co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party. But this was preceded by many discussions in Öcalan’s high-security island prison between the Kurdish leader and the state.

It is 42 years since Öcalan’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) took up armed struggle against a Turkish state that brutally suppressed all expressions of Kurdish culture and persecuted those who resisted. For the last 33 of those years, Öcalan has demanded peace negotiations, underlining his call with numerous unilateral ceasefires, and there have been previous attempts at talks.

The Turkish authorities have now lifted the isolation imposed on Öcalan sufficiently for him to meet with delegations from the DEM Party, and in February, he released his call for the dissolution of the PKK and the end of armed struggle, arguing that the current situation allowed the struggle to proceed by political means.

This path was confirmed at a PKK congress in May, and in July, PKK members symbolically destroyed some of their weapons. Last month, the PKK announced they were withdrawing the fighters they had in Turkey back to their bases in Iraq. For the moment, Turkish attacks on those PKK bases have largely stopped, and the Turkish government has established a cross-party commission to hear evidence and eventually – it is hoped – create the legal framework that would allow guerrillas and political refugees to return to Turkey and play their part in political life.

But, as has been said many times, the ball is now in the government's court, and they seem in no hurry to play it. Notably, Öcalan is still severely restricted in the communications he is allowed, and none of the thousands of political prisoners has been released. It was expected that Turkey would respond to the final demand of the European Court of Human Rights and release the co-chairs of DEM's predecessor party, the HDP – but they are still waiting.

Journalists continue to be arrested, and the politicised judicial system has taken their attack to the mainstream opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). The CHP mayor of Istanbul, who is Erdoğan's main rival for the presidency, was indicted this week and faces a potential sentence of more than 2000 years.

Nevertheless, Kurdish optimism does have some basis. Erdoğan has allowed himself to show support for the peace process, which could benefit him in many ways. The fight against the guerrillas was deadlocked and failing to produce the victories he demanded. Peace would have both a social and an economic dividend, and he hopes to win Kurdish support – though that is by no means guaranteed.

The major objective change is the evolving power balance in the Middle East, and especially in Syria, where the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, built by the Kurds and their non-Kurdish neighbours, controls about one third of the country.

Turkey has twice sent their violent mercenaries to invade and occupy Kurdish areas, and is now pressuring Syria's interim president, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, to insist on centralisation and the complete assimilation of the autonomous region and its forces into his Arab and Islamic state.

However, Turkey isn't the only power competing for control in Syria, and they are worried that Israel could act to promote the Kurds as a counter to Turkish influence. Backers of the peace process call instead for a new brotherhood between Turks and Kurds to benefit both Turkey and Syria.

As we saw this week, the pivotal role in Syria is now being played by the United States who will, of course, act in their own interests, and will want to placate both Turkey and Israel.

This time, and despite government attempts to divide the opposition, the CHP is explicitly behind the peace process, though its hyper-nationalist wing is still seduced by the arguments of those who profit from war or from scapegoating others. In their turn, the DEM Party has made clear their support for CHP politicians targeted by the government.

Kurds argue that the removal of the armed struggle makes it harder for Kurdish politicians to be portrayed as terrorists, opening the possibility of agreements.

No-one realistically expects a “peace agreement” to bring with it the “democratic society” that Öcalan describes, but the absence of violence and the possibility of pursuing politics democratically would be a huge step in the right direction. Meanwhile, Kurds ride a rollercoaster of hope and fear for the future.