



## Turkish-Kurdish Opening Holds Implications for the Middle East

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On 1 March, the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) announced a ceasefire and pledged to abide by its leader Abdullah Öcalan's call for disarmament. The PKK's abandonment of hostilities is a chance to end the long-standing Turkish-Kurdish conflict, help ease tensions in the region and improve Türkiye's relations with the West.

Türkiye's Kurdish community numbers 16-20 million and is not a homogeneous group in terms of representation of political interests, differentiated by how they attempt to attain their goals. Those advocating the defence of Kurdish rights through non-violent, political methods are represented by the leftist pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM). The more radical ones support the PKK. The group has used terrorism in its armed struggle since the 1980s. In addition, there is a religiously conservative Kurdish electorate that supports the ruling AKP.

**Turkish Political Scene and the Kurdish Issue.** Öcalan's call for the PKK to lay down its arms was delivered on 27 February, preceded by a proposal for a new opening of a dialogue with the Kurds initiated by Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and a coalition partner of Türkiye's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The MHP leader last October called on PKK members to abandon their armed struggle in exchange for the release of Öcalan, who has been held in a Turkish prison since 1999. Bahçeli announced that "Türkiye's problem is not the Kurds but their separatist terrorist organisation," and then shook hands with DEM politicians. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed support for the initiative of his nationalist co-partner. Bahçeli's gesture marked the beginning of a landmark turn in the Turkish political scene as the MHP leader had indicated in the past that the DEM was an extension of the PKK and called outlawing it. Shortly after the MHP leader's speech, DEM parliamentarians Pervin Buldan and Süreya Önder visited Öcalan in prison. The PKK leader

announced that he was ready to support efforts to reach an agreement between the Kurds and the Turkish government. Bahçeli introduced the topic into the parliamentary debate about allowing Erdoğan to run in 2028 and extend his rule. Under the current constitution, he is serving his last term as president. Another term is possible in a situation of snap elections. That, however, requires a qualified majority, the approval of 360 deputies out of the 600-member parliament. The AKP-MHP alliance still needs 45 votes for this, so Bahçeli is seeking the support of the third force on the Turkish political scene, the DEM, which has 57 seats.

**Between Pragmatism and the Search for Peace.** The resumption of the dialogue with the Kurds initiated by the MHP leader is not the first attempt by the Turkish government to curry favour with the Kurdish electorate. Efforts to peacefully resolve the Kurdish issue in Türkiye gained momentum after the AKP came to power in 2002. Then, the grouping initiated democratic reforms, which had a positive impact on relations between the Kurds and the Turkish government. In 2012, Erdoğan, serving as prime minister, announced a peace process to normalise relations with the PKK, along with the participation of the party's leader. In 2013, the organisation announced the withdrawal of its forces from Turkish territory and the government established a consultative and advisory body on the Kurdish issue. In July 2015, the peace process stopped and the military conflict with the PKK escalated. Two main factors contributed to this. The first was the siege of the Syrian city of Kobane by ISIS and the Turkish side's lack of support for the Kurds fighting there, motivated by a desire to weaken

the capacity of the Kurdish forces. The second was the parliamentary elections in which the AKP grouping lost its ability to govern on its own for the first time since 2002, with the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP; its successor is the DEM) led by Selahattin Demirtaş overcoming the 10% electoral threshold. The HDP's rise to prominence became a threat from the AKP's point of view. The events of 2016, including the failed coup attempt, were also an important point in this process. After a state of emergency was imposed, repression of the legal Kurdish opposition intensified, with arrests of HDP politicians, including party co-chairs Figen Yüksekdağ and Demirtaş, who is still in prison.

While the 2013-2015 peace process was met with scepticism, especially from the opposition, mainly because Erdoğan led the initiative, the current proposal has received widespread support. For example, Özgür Özel, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main rival party to the AKP, has backed it.

**The Kurdish Issue and Türkiye's Relations with Other Countries.** The long-standing conflict between the Kurdish community and the Turkish government is not limited to Turkish territory, but affects the regional situation. Turkish policymakers perceive Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria as a threat to the security of the Turkish state. They view the [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (SDF), the Kurdish-dominated quasi-army of the autonomous region, as an extension of the PKK and therefore a force supporting separatism in Türkiye. The attitude toward the Syrian Kurds is also one of the main axes of contention in Turkish-American relations. The U.S. has cooperated with the SDF in fighting ISIS and currently has troops operating in the region. Türkiye has been conducting military operations against the PKK in [Iraq](#) since the 1990s, which has provoked criticism from the authorities in Baghdad, who accuse Türkiye of violating the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. The impetus for closer bilateral relations came in March 2024 when the Iraqi National Security Council recognised the PKK as a "banned organisation", and reached an agreement on military cooperation with Türkiye. This gave the Turkish military presence in Iraq a legal basis.

The Kurdish issue also became a point of contention in Türkiye's relations with Finland and [Sweden](#) when those countries decided to join NATO. Erdoğan was particularly critical of Sweden, calling it a "nest of terrorists", pointing to the presence of PKK-linked organisations, including the YPG, in the country. He threatened to block Sweden's accession to the Alliance if it did not sever relations with the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia that is part of the SDF. In addition, Türkiye demanded the lifting of the arms embargo imposed on it after the *Peace Spring* military operation (2019), which aimed to push Kurdish militias away from the Turkish border. In a joint memorandum, Sweden and Finland, against which Türkiye also brought accusations of supporting factions that are part of the SDF, agreed to

cooperate against suspected PKK members. The countries also tightened their anti-terrorism laws.

Repression of Kurds in Türkiye and Syria is affecting the state of Turkish-German relations. The arrest of leftist politicians Yüksekdağ and Demirtaş of the HDP in 2016 and the Turkish intervention in Syria in 2019 sparked Kurdish protests throughout [Germany](#), home to more than 3 million people of Turkish descent, about 1 million of whom are ethnic Kurds. Conflicts in Turkish politics spill over into German streets, where clashes between AKP supporters and Kurds have repeatedly occurred (five German police officers were injured in one riot in 2019) at the same time, German Foreign Ministry spokesman Rainer Breul stated that "Türkiye has legitimate security interests along its border with Syria" but also called on the Turkish government to exercise political and military restraint.

**Conclusions and Outlook.** The Turkish government has tried peace negotiations with the PKK in the past but they have not been successful. A new agreement between the Kurds and the Turkish government will be a lengthy process, with success uncertain. Öcalan's call to the PKK to lay down its arms and disband may be boycotted by PKK factions in Syria and Iraq. If so, the Kurdish armed struggle will not end.

The revival of a new dialogue with the Kurds in Türkiye is dictated by the immediate political calculation of the government camp oriented toward ensuring Erdoğan's eligibility for the next presidential election in 2028. This would consolidate his authoritarian rule for the long term.

The PKK is demanding that the government provide a suitable environment for democratic politics, but it seems unlikely that the Turkish government has sincere intentions to implement reforms with respect to the Kurdish community. While the MHP leader has initiated rapprochement with the DEM and the PKK leader, at the same time, legitimately elected local Kurdish politicians have been removed from their posts (this includes 82-year-old Ahmet Türk, the mayor of the city of Mardin in southeastern Türkiye, elected on behalf of the DEM party) and replaced by government appointees.

In the long run, however, even incomplete normalisation would improve Türkiye's relations with the U.S. The Turkish government is counting on PKK-linked members of the SDF to lay down their arms and the Donald Trump administration to decide on a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria. Poland should support a peaceful dialogue process as long as it involves the Turkish authorities expanding freedoms for the Kurdish community. This would ease tensions in the region and improve Türkiye's relations with its Western allies, as well as with the European Union, which is demanding, among other things, that Turkish policymakers respect the European Court of Human Rights' ruling to release Demirtaş, a former presidential candidate who is popular among the Kurdish community in Türkiye.