

Is the Turkey-PKK Conflict Really Over?

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On October 8, the peace process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) took a major step forward. Turkish intelligence sources [confirmed](#) to the state-run Anadolu news agency that the PKK had withdrawn all its forces from Turkish territory and that "four PKK hideouts in the Metina and Baze regions of northern Iraq were evacuated." In an [interview](#) published on Sunday, senior PKK leader Murat Karayilan said the group had also ordered its clandestine units in Istanbul and other Turkish cities to withdraw. With each passing month, the process has overcome obstacles once thought insurmountable, offering growing confidence that the remaining hurdles can also be cleared.

The New Peace Process

The peace process, which began in October 2024, has already achieved unprecedented progress, with no violence occurring between the PKK and Turkey since its inception. The Turkish government has recognized the PKK's imprisoned founder, Abdullah Ocalan, who is serving a life sentence on the prison island of Imrali, as the Kurdish side's principal interlocutor in the negotiations. Recognizing Ocalan as the principal interlocutor meets a longstanding PKK demand for entering negotiations. It also reflects his continued standing as the movement's undisputed leader and the only figure with the authority to persuade its members to implement the steps needed to advance the process without splintering.

To further facilitate the process, Ankara has granted Ocalan greater access to both the movement and the public, including improved communication channels and a [new building](#) within the prison compound where he can live and work. There have also been [reports](#) that senior PKK leaders have been permitted to visit Ocalan and hold meetings with him on the island – an arrangement that could only have been made possible through the active facilitation of the Turkish state. In response, just over a year ago, the PKK began its disarmament by publicly [burning](#) its weapons in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Turkish Motivations

When the process first became public, the Turkish government's motivations for such an abrupt shift in policy were unclear. Over time, however, it has become increasingly apparent that its principal drivers lie beyond Turkey's borders. Turkish officials overseeing the process have repeatedly [warned](#) of a "fire engulfing the region" that threatens the country's national security. Conflicts in Gaza, Syria, and Iran are viewed as part of a rapidly changing regional environment that Ankara believes requires it to adopt a more assertive foreign policy while strengthening its internal cohesion. Within this framework, peace with the Kurds is seen as a way of "[fortifying the home front](#)," with the unresolved Kurdish question long regarded as Turkey's greatest internal vulnerability. The Turkish establishment sees a volatile Middle East taking shape and is seeking to improve relations not only with its own Kurdish population but with Kurds across the region before external powers – most notably Israel, which Ankara increasingly views as its principal regional competitor – are able to capitalize on the shifting regional balance.

The process has already produced significant regional effects. In Syria, it has [contributed](#) to the end of hostilities between Kurdish forces and the new government in Damascus, paving the way for the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the Ministry of Defense and the appointment of its

former commander, Mazloum Abdi, as an adviser to Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa. In Iraq, following a meeting between Iraqi Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Turkey [agreed](#) to transfer to Baghdad one of the military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan it was using in operations against the PKK. In both countries, a durable resolution of the Turkey-PKK conflict could substantially reduce Turkey's military footprint, creating more favorable conditions for long-term stability – an outcome that is particularly important as the United States seeks to reduce its military presence and enable regional partners to “[stand on \[their\] own](#).”

Despite the positive momentum in the process, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has maintained a relatively low profile, leaving it largely to his coalition partner, Devlet Bahçeli, to serve as the chief public advocate of what the government calls the “Terror-Free Turkey Process.” Erdogan has remained cautious, closely monitoring public opinion and uncertain about how the process will affect his electoral prospects. Bahçeli, by contrast, has shown far less concern for public sentiment throughout his political career and has consistently framed the peace process as a strategic necessity driven by regional developments rather than domestic politics. This divergence has shaped the pace of the negotiations, with Erdogan's political caution often slowing the process while Bahçeli's strategic urgency has repeatedly pushed it forward.

Recent Developments & Remaining Obstacles

That strategic urgency has resulted in a number of recent developments, with the October withdrawal of PKK forces just being the latest. It came after Turkey's parliament [passed](#) landmark legislation in August establishing a legal framework for implementing the peace process. Approved by 467 votes in the 600-seat legislature, the law represented a watershed moment by providing legal protection for those conducting the negotiations – a safeguard absent from the previous peace process in 2013-2015. Under its provisions, it allows thousands of PKK members based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to return to Turkey without facing prosecution and the suspension of prison sentences for many people convicted of PKK membership.

That is not to say, however, that there are no obstacles for the peace process to navigate in moving forward.

The biggest obstacle may be that no PKK members have yet been able to return to Turkey because implementation of the legislation remains suspended pending confirmation by the National Security Council that the organization has fully disarmed. In a [communiqué](#) issued after its first meeting since the law's passage in August, the National Security Council, which convened on September 30, reaffirmed that “efforts undertaken for the security of our country and our nation... would continue with determination.” The statement made no reference to the state of the PKK's disarmament. However, a [video](#) widely broadcast by Turkish media, whose coverage is closely coordinated, if not controlled, by the government, showed several empty PKK hideouts and PKK fighters clearing out others, leading many to expect that official government confirmation is imminent.

Yet, PKK leaders have pushed back against this sequencing, arguing that disarmament and implementation of the legislation must proceed in tandem if the process is to succeed. Previous sticking points have been overcome through backchannel negotiations and even direct meetings between the PKK leadership and Abdullah Ocalan. If widespread [reports](#) that Cemil Bayik – the most wanted man in Turkey – traveled to Imrali Island for several days of meetings with Ocalan are accurate, they reveal both the extent of engagement between the Turkish state and the PKK and the strategic importance both sides attach to bringing this process to a successful conclusion.

Another sticking point is the legislation's exclusion of the PKK's leadership and hundreds of its senior members, which Ocalan, the PKK, and the pro-Kurdish DEM Party in parliament have criticized for being drafted unilaterally by the government. Cemil Bayik, co-chair of the Executive Council of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella organization that includes the PKK, [described](#) the law as a positive first step but said it remained "incomplete," arguing that "if we lay down our arms, we must have the right to engage in democratic politics." As with many of the obstacles that have emerged since the process began, this latest hurdle will likely be resolved behind closed doors through what appears to be an increasingly extensive network of communication, coordination and negotiation between the Turkish government and the PKK leadership in the Qandil Mountains.

Peace Without Democracy?

For Turkey itself, the peace process does not necessarily promise a democratic transformation of what has become an increasingly authoritarian state under Erdogan. But Bayik's [warning](#) that "if this process does not advance through democratic steps, it will be obstructed," together with his description of parliament as the "decisive institution in resolving the Kurdish issue," suggests that the Kurdish side understands the limitations of relying solely on Erdogan and his government. The government's crackdown on opposition politicians and media, most recently through the appointment of a government trustee to run Halk TV, the most-watched pro-opposition broadcaster, appears to validate those concerns. In an interview with one such pro-opposition Turkish media outlet, senior PKK leader Bese Hozat asks, "When they don't even respect their own laws, what guerrilla fighter could confidently return to Turkey and say, 'I will engage in democratic politics, and they will give me the opportunity to do so'?"

Even so, these concerns have not displaced the Kurdish leadership's commitment to the peace process. In his interview with [Amargi](#), senior PKK leader and head of its armed wing Murat Karayilan calls on the Kurds to abandon rebellion and work toward establishing a democratic state. From Ankara's perspective, the regional pressures that prompted it to pursue peace with the PKK have only intensified since the process began. A return to armed conflict may well be out of the question for either side, once and for all. While peace alone may not deliver democracy, it is difficult to imagine a more democratic Turkey without peace.