

# Winds of Change: Ankara's Subtle Shifts Towards Reconciliation with Kurdish Elements in Turkey

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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 Brief Analysis

**Signs that Ankara is interested in a potential reconciliation with the PKK could lead an end to a decades-long conflict and have ripple effects across the region, although numerous obstacles remain.**

On November 11, Turkish Parliament Speaker Numan Kurtulmuş, from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), **[backed \(https://t24.com.tr/haber/numan-kurtulmus-bahceli-nin-abdullah-ocalan-cagrisina-iliskin-konustu.1195611\)](https://t24.com.tr/haber/numan-kurtulmus-bahceli-nin-abdullah-ocalan-cagrisina-iliskin-konustu.1195611)** an October proposal by hardliner Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to address the Turkish government's longstanding tensions with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) —a left-wing militant group founded in the 1980s that emerged in response to Turkey's ban on Kurdish identity and language.

Several weeks earlier, Bahçeli had **[proposed \(https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c1wj32r9dzvo\)](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c1wj32r9dzvo)** that the jailed leader of the outlawed PKK Abdullah Öcalan could be released from his life sentence in exchange for announcing an end to the group's insurgency, and could likewise be allowed to speak in Turkey's parliament. In his statement, Kurtulmuş underlined that the place "where all these negotiations should take place is the Turkish Grand National Assembly, the seat of the national will. I hope that we will enter a period where terrorism is no longer discussed, where terrorism has been eradicated."

Kurtulmuş's statement highlighted that there may be broader governmental support for the process initially outlined by MHP head Bahçeli. During his initial announcement, Bahçeli also shook hands with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), this while in the past he **[has repeatedly \(https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/mhp-leader-calls-for-the-closure-of-hdp-after-the-terror-attack-178538\)](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/mhp-leader-calls-for-the-closure-of-hdp-after-the-terror-attack-178538)** called for the closure of the predecessor of the DEM and opposed a peace process between the PKK and the state. After Bahçeli's speech, Öcalan's family was **[allowed \(https://bianet.org/haber/pkk-leader-ocalan-allowed-family-visit-for-first-time-in-over-four-years-301055\)](https://bianet.org/haber/pkk-leader-ocalan-allowed-family-visit-for-first-time-in-over-four-years-301055)** to visit him for the first time since March 2020, and Öcalan indicated he is ready to play a role to find a solution. However, shortly after, a new **[three-month visit ban \(https://anfenglishmobile.com/news/new-disciplinary-punishment-and-family-visit-ban-imposed-on-abdullah-Ocalan-76123\)](https://anfenglishmobile.com/news/new-disciplinary-punishment-and-family-visit-ban-imposed-on-abdullah-Ocalan-76123)** was imposed on Öcalan.

Nevertheless, Bahçeli's proposal—especially notable coming from the MHP, which formed the People's Alliance with the AKP in 2018 and in the past always had a hardline policy on the PKK, including **[calling \(https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iyi-party-leader-slams-bahceli-over-ocalan-remarks-201855\)](https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iyi-party-leader-slams-bahceli-over-ocalan-remarks-201855)** for Öcalan's execution in 2007—has resulted in many discussions in Turkey over the potential of a new peace process. Erdogan (and the PKK) had pursued such a process during his early years in office, but it collapsed in 2015 and resulted in new fighting between the Turkish state and the PKK. Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani **[noted \(https://presidency.gov.krd/en/president-nechirvan-barzani-we-need-to-acknowledge-the-existing-political-reality/\)](https://presidency.gov.krd/en/president-nechirvan-barzani-we-need-to-acknowledge-the-existing-political-reality/)** In October 2024 at the MERI conference in Erbil that this would mark the beginning of a new process, adding that the remarks of Turkish government officials are promising. "They indicate that a process is underway and that the issues at hand will be addressed." President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan welcomed the proposal on October 30 but underlined that Bahçeli's appeal was not directed toward the "terror barons" in Iraq and Syria (PKK)

and called on Kurds to accept Bahçeli's proposal.

### **Intertwining Motivations for Ankara's Outreach**

The motivations for a potential reconciliation are multiple. The first is to put a stop to the simmering political violence that has characterized the conflict; since July 20, 2015, 7,119 people have been killed in clashes or attacks in Turkey and northern Iraq, according to [the International Crisis Group \(https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkiyes-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer\)](https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkiyes-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer). This includes 639 civilians, 1,491 Turkish state security force members, 226 individuals of unknown affiliation, and 4,763 PKK fighters. Moreover, recent high profile attacks have brought the conflict to the fore of Turkish public awareness. Beginning last year on October 1, 2023, the PKK claimed an unprecedented suicide attack on the General Directorate of Security building immediately prior to the beginning of the Grand National Assembly's autumn session. They likewise claimed an attack on October 22, 2024 on a Turkish defense company.

However, reconciliation may be motivated by political considerations as well; on November 11, President Erdogan [indicated \(https://x.com/ragipsoylu/status/1855652826396963106\)](https://x.com/ragipsoylu/status/1855652826396963106) for the first time that he is open to run for another term in the country's next elections scheduled for May 7, 2028 "if the public wants it" and in the wake of Bahçeli's [own calls \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-ally-floats-turkey-constitutional-amendment-let-him-extend-his-tenure-2024-11-05/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-ally-floats-turkey-constitutional-amendment-let-him-extend-his-tenure-2024-11-05/) for a constitutional amendment to this effect. "As long as God grants us life and our nation approves, we will continue to serve Turkey and the Turkish nation," he said. Because Erdogan is currently ineligible to run for another term under Turkish law, his future candidacy would require a constitutional amendment with a three-fifths parliamentary majority to put the amendment to a referendum or two-thirds majority for direct ratification. The AKP's current coalition hold 321 seats, and would therefore need at least 39 votes from the opposition to put a constitutional amendment to referendum as they did in 2017 to strengthen the powers of the president.

A number of [analysts \(https://en.majalla.com/node/323003/opinion/behind-bah%25C3%25A7eli%25E2%2580%2599s-olive-branch-pkk\)](https://en.majalla.com/node/323003/opinion/behind-bah%25C3%25A7eli%25E2%2580%2599s-olive-branch-pkk) believe Bahçeli is attempting to gain Kurdish support for such a constitutional shift with his proposal; "The first reason that comes to mind on Bahçeli's surprising Öcalan proposal is that he may aim to get the Kurds on their side and leave the CHP (Republican People's Party) alone so that Erdoğan can be re-elected as president," said [Bekir Aydoğan \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/bekir-aydogan\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/bekir-aydogan), an Erbil-based Turkish journalist.

In the 2019 municipal elections, the HDP supported the CHP, helping them gain control of Istanbul and Ankara from the AKP. In 2023, the HDP openly backed Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's presidential bid. Turkish authorities also [arrested \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-arrests-opposition-mayor-accused-being-member-pkk-2024-10-31/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-arrests-opposition-mayor-accused-being-member-pkk-2024-10-31/) Ahmet Ozer, the CHP mayor of Esenyurt, Istanbul, on October 31 [replacing \(https://bianet.org/haber/court-rejects-appeal-of-arrested-esenyurt-mayor-ahmet-ozet-trustee-appointment-upheld-301519\)](https://bianet.org/haber/court-rejects-appeal-of-arrested-esenyurt-mayor-ahmet-ozet-trustee-appointment-upheld-301519) him with a trustee. The CHP had collaborated with the DEM party in Esenyurt, and most likely the government targeted his position to create divisions between the CHP and the DEM party. The CHP leader Özgür Özel [has also \(https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-govt-appoints-trustees-to-oust-3-kurdish-mayors-news-65200\)](https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkish-govt-appoints-trustees-to-oust-3-kurdish-mayors-news-65200) criticized the removal of the three Kurdish mayor.

A third reason could be removing an internal point of tension that Ankara fears could be exacerbated by regional instability. Aydoğan added that "Ankara wants to strengthen its internal front in the face of potential repercussions of the Israel-Iran war. Fearing that Israel can end up having more influence on the Kurdish actors, particularly over the PKK, Turkey sees the PKK as its soft spot and seeks to somehow solve this issue."

The Director of Kurdish Political Studies at the University of Central Florida, Mehmet Gurses, likewise emphasized the importance of larger regional changes in evaluating Bahçeli's proposal in an interview with the author. "As the region experiences significant upheaval, the Kurds' strategic value may increase. This shift could lead various regional and global powers to deepen their engagement with the Kurdish populations in the area. Furthermore, any direct or indirect confrontation between Israel and Iran could create new opportunities for the Kurds, both in Iran and in the larger region," Gurses told the author.

Erdoğan's recent comments on regional dynamics appear to support this perspective. In [commenting \(https://www.duvarenglish.com/erdogan-points-to-new-constitution-for-possible-new-peace-process-with-kurds-news-65090#google\\_vignette\)](https://www.duvarenglish.com/erdogan-points-to-new-constitution-for-possible-new-peace-process-with-kurds-news-65090#google_vignette) on Bahçeli's proposal, Erdoğan stated on October 12 that "In a geography surrounded by terrorist organizations, in a period of tensions in Iraq, civil war in Syria and Israel's brutalization, it is important to establish peace at home."

Israel's new foreign minister Gideon Saar has likely bolstered these concerns with his recent speech, where he [said \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-foreign-minister-calls-kurds-minorities\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-foreign-minister-calls-kurds-minorities) that his country should reach out to Kurds and other regional minorities as "natural allies." Although it is unlikely that the PKK—which has [called \(https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding/how-have-kurdish-movements-reacted-to-the-war-in-gaza/\)](https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/conflict-resolution-and-peacebuilding/how-have-kurdish-movements-reacted-to-the-war-in-gaza/) Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza a 'genocide' and [fought \(https://merip.org/2020/08/the-kurdish-movements-relationship-with-the-palestinian-struggle/\)](https://merip.org/2020/08/the-kurdish-movements-relationship-with-the-palestinian-struggle/) against Israel in Lebanon in 1982—would seek support from Israel, Ankara may nevertheless be worried about potential Israeli outreach to the country's Kurdish population. A senior member of PKK, Zubeyir Aydar, on Nov. 14 stated in an [interview](#)

<https://x.com/medyahabertv4/status/1857149142637625550>) that the PKK don't approve Israel's policies, but that they can establish relations with Israel.

### **Crackdown in Parallel**

Despite Ankara's conciliatory messaging, the Turkish government has not shifted its policies towards the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which has **57 out of 600** (<https://bianet.org/haber/pkk-leader-abdullah-ocalan-given-new-3-month-family-visit-ban-297737>) seats in the Turkish Grand Assembly. The **DEM party** (<https://www.demparti.org.tr/en/our-party/17736/>) is the successor of the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party). To circumvent the high risk of a potential closure verdict for the HDP by Turkey's Constitutional Court ahead of the general elections in May 2023, the HDP announced its participation under the banner of DEM. In the past, several pro-Kurdish parties have been banned, due to Ankara's perception that they had organizational ties with the **PKK**. **DEM has denied links to the PKK and also condemned the Ankara attack.** (<https://bianet.org/haber/pro-kurdish-dem-party-condemns-ankara-attack-amid-debate-over-potential-peace-process-301044>)

Earlier this month, Turkey's government dismissed **three Kurdish mayors** (<https://bianet.org/haber/pkk-leader-abdullah-ocalan-given-new-3-month-family-visit-ban-297737>) and replaced them with state trustees due to PKK-related investigations, replacing them with state-appointed trustees in Mardin, Batman, and Halfeti. Turkey is likewise **reportedly** (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-investigate-37-municipalities-run-pro-kurdish-party>) planning to investigate 37 DEM municipalities over alleged ties to the PKK. The crackdown came following a **PKK attack** (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/turkey-kurdish-militants-attack-defense-company-pkk-erdogan-rcna177234>) on the headquarters of a key defense company in Ankara, in which five people were killed. After the attack, the Turkish army carried out **airstrikes** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/24/turkey-strikes-iraq-syria-after-attack-on-defence-company-near-ankara#:~:text=Turkey%2520regularly%2520conducts%2520air%2520attacks.its%2520fight%2520against%2520Kurdish%2520fighters.>) in Syria and Iraq. Also senior Iraqi Kurdish leaders have **condemned** (<https://kurdistanchronicle.com/babat/3441>) the attack in Ankara.

Moreover, at least some Kurdish politicians are skeptical. Abdullah Demirbaş, former Kurdish mayor of the municipality of Sur in the city of Diyarbakir, told the author that "these actions do not serve any possible [peace] process. If the process was true and sincere, then the isolation imposed at Mr. Öcalan must be lifted." He also called for releasing imprisoned Kurdish politicians and removing state trustees.

Additionally, there is no consensus on how to respond to the recent overtures; while the DEM has in general welcomed the calls by Bahçeli, the PKK has so far responded negatively to the proposal. PKK's 's co-founder Cemil Bayik, has **not taken** (<https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/cemil-bayik-health-security-and-free-living-conditions-must-be-given-to-Ocalan-76255>) the proposal of Bahçeli seriously so far, claiming that the Turkish state motivated by an internal crisis due to the developments in the Middle East rather than a serious interest in reconciliation. Middle East Eye sources **suggest** (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-investigate-37-municipalities-run-pro-kurdish-party>) that Bahçeli envisions Ahmet Türk as a key figure who alongside Öcalan, could help distance DEM from the PKK leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In this context, Bahçeli has played an unusual role, **repeating** (<https://bianet.org/haber/mhp-s-bahceli-reiterates-call-for-ocalan-to-declare-dissolution-of-pkk-in-parliament-301436>) his call for reconciliation on November 5 during reports of continued investigations of DEM municipalities and expressing **disagreement** (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-investigate-37-municipalities-run-pro-kurdish-party>) with the removal of Kurdish veteran Co-Mayor Ahmet Türk of Mardin from his position, with whom he had spoken one week prior during a "peace dinner" (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/parties-come-together-to-end-family-feud-in-turkiyes-sanliurfa/news>) to end a family feud between two Kurdish families from rival political backgrounds with Turkish government officials.

Moreover, President Erdogan **announced** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-pressing-us-rethink-kurdish-alliance-syria-2024-11-11/>) on November 10 that Turkey may launch a new offensive in northern Syria to establish safe zones along its border, mentioning a discussion of a potential U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria with President-elect Donald Trump. Strains in U.S.- Turkey relations stem from longstanding U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). While both list the PKK as a terrorist organization, Ankara considers the SDF to be an offshoot of the former, and therefore likewise a terrorist organization. The U.S. has denied links between the SDF and PKK. Notably, calming domestic tensions with Turkey's Kurdish minority could have positive ripple effects on relations between the SDF and Turkey.

### **Influence of U.S. Elections**

Those monitoring the outcome of the U.S. elections have found room for cautious optimism regarding a Turkish-PKK reconciliation; A new peace process could support President-elect Trump's Middle East policies aimed at stopping wars, a goal expressed in his **victory speech** (<https://thenightly.com.au/politics/us-politics/donald-trumps-full-speech-read-what-donald-trump-said-in-full-after-winning-the-us-election-c-16661607>).

Joel Rayburn—the first Trump Administration's Syria envoy who is now on the National Security Council transition team—**argued** (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/393201/Former-US-official-advocates-for-enduring-partnership-between-US-and-Kurdistan-Region>) in 2023 that the United States should pursue a resolution to the Turkey-PKK conflict, which fuels instability in Iraq, Syria, and

southern Turkey. On the other hand, Professor Gerges noted that President Trump could also give a green light to the Turkish government to invade northern Syria, as with the first Trump administration in 2019. Çandar noted that Trump's Syria policy would likely influence the direction of Turkish-Kurdish relations, and that success "primarily depends on Trump's position on Rojava (Syrian Kurds) and how Ankara will react to it."

In an interview with the author, DEM Party Diyarbakır MP Cengiz Çandar warned that when it comes to the peace process involving the Kurds in Turkey, it is essential to be overcautious given the multiple failed attempts in the past. Nevertheless, he appeared very cautiously optimistic: "coming from Bahçeli, the arch-nationalist who is always identified by deep state, we can cross our fingers. [The reconciliation efforts] may survive the removal of Kurdish mayors. It may end up extending Erdoğan's presidency but it is much more than that. However, again let us be prudent to be on the safe side. Let us wait and see."

### Potential outcomes

A successful Turkish-PKK peace process could alleviate tensions between the U.S. and Turkey over the U.S.'s support for the SDF and give the opportunity for Washington to strengthen ties to both Turkey and the SDF without a backlash. As a result, the U.S. could focus more on stabilization efforts in Syria, counter-terrorism efforts, and managing Iranian influence, such in areas like Deir ez-Zor. During the previous peace process, Syrian Kurdish leaders Salih Muslim and Elham Ahmed [visited \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/syrian-kurdish-commander-wants-peace-turkey-will-fully-resist-attack\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/syrian-kurdish-commander-wants-peace-turkey-will-fully-resist-attack) Ankara for discussions. It could also stop Turkish military threats to northeast Syria, which have undermined the SDF's anti-ISIS operations. Turkish drone strikes have also killed SDF leaders in northeast Syria and significantly damaged energy and oil infrastructure, [disrupting \(https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity-enarkutr\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity-enarkutr) water and electricity for millions of people. Turkey has carried out several military incursions in 2016.

This development could also improve economic and cross-border relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdish-led AANES administration in Syria, which Turkey has opposed so far. A new peace process could also improve the security situation in Sinjar, where Turkey has hit PKK-backed local Yezidi groups and facilitate the return of Yezidis. Moreover, a peace process could strengthen a Syrian-Kurdish-Turkish opposition front versus the Syrian government in Damascus, which has so far not been open to concessions. In the past, Turkey has opposed any relations between the Syrian opposition and SDF-linked factions. The U.S. support for the SDF has also encouraged Ankara to improve relations with Damascus, Iran and Russia on Syria, [through the Astana process \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/384963\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/384963) versus the Kurds, and the U.S. presence, but domestic peace could strengthen US-Turkish relations.



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