



CATS Network Roundup

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the CATS Network Roundup of news, developments, and assessments on relevant issues of Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy.

Syria has entered a new era of power dynamics with the fall of Bashar al-Assad. While the caretaker government is trying to stabilise and consolidate its hold on power, **the frontlines are far from settled in north-eastern Syria**. Heavy clashes continue between the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces led by the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). At the same time, **the Turkish government is holding talks with the PKK founder about the disarmament of the organisation**. We explore these seemingly contradictory events and shed light on Turkey's motivations and policy objectives. We also inquire about the conditions under which the People's Alliance initiative could lead to peaceful conflict resolution.

If you have any questions or suggestions, please e-mail us at cats@swp-berlin.org.

On the Spot



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A revamped Turkish-Kurdish peace process is set to go into effect in the wake of another watershed moment amid shifts in the Middle East's power dynamics. As in the past, both **Turkey and Kurdistan are facing the challenge of securing their interests in a region that is undergoing profound changes**. But what sets this latest attempt apart from the failed peace initiatives of the past?

In 1993, Turkish President Turgut Özal led the first peace initiative after the First Gulf War, followed by subsequent efforts in 2009 after the Iraq War, and in 2013 when the Arab Spring shook the regimes in the Middle East. Supposedly, these efforts were aimed at creating a **peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question in Turkey, which has been fueling an ethnic armed conflict since 1984**. However, consistency in the timing of and discourse in each case indicates that what inspired Turkey was primarily regional considerations rather than just domestic ones.

In the early 1990s, the unfulfilled objectives of the National Pact (Misak-ı Milli), which aimed to reclaim lost territories in Iraq, influenced Turkey's regional policy. In the early 2000s, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, neo-Ottoman aspirations reframed this goal with strong references to Islam. In both cases, **Turkey's approach fluctuated between viewing the Kurds as a "threat" to national unity and as a "partner" in broader regional strategies**.

This dynamic interplay of interests is reflected in competing narratives of betrayal and resistance. If the Treaty of Sèvres fuels Turkish hysteria about a "partition", from the Kurdish point of view the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Treaty of Lausanne symbolise "betrayal", as the former deprives the Kurds of a Kurdish state and the latter depicts the annihilation of the Kurdish nation and homeland. In that sense, **the Kurdish national movement can be summed up briefly as a hundred years of an anti-status quo struggle**.

As a result, **Kurdish-Turkish interests have paradoxically converged on the basis of a political stance against "imperial powers"** whenever a potential for change in the status quo arises in the region. The call for peace in 2013 by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, was actually a manifestation of that mutual understanding when he hailed the strategic partnership of the Turks and the Kurds "under the flag of Islam" against the "Western imperialists' interventions" in the Middle East.

Today, the Middle East is facing another violent cycle of change, beginning with the War in Gaza and extending to broader geopolitical shifts involving key players such as Syria, Iran, and Russia. **The erosion of the post-Arab Spring status quo, coupled with diminishing US influence, has created new opportunities for regional actors**.

Under such circumstances, the "Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood" once again comes in handy to seize upon another "historic" opportunity. **Turkey envisions a "New Turkey" with a posture of "two nations, one state" while leveraging Kurdish cooperation to achieve its regional ambitions**. For the Kurds, this partnership offers a chance to secure autonomy and protection within an unstable environment.

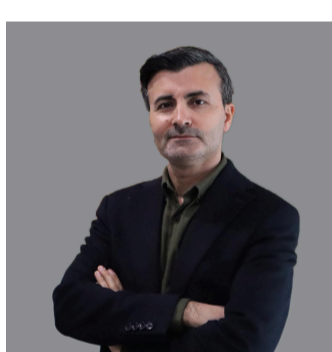
Although the idea of partnership may appeal to both sides, significant uncertainties loom. A regime change in Iran could fuel region-wide Sunni-Shia tensions, further complicating alliances. Even if the Islamic regime remains in place in Iran, we may yet witness the Gulf countries, Israel and Turkey turning against each other in search of a new balance of power in the region. Moreover, Western support for a Turkish-Kurdish alignment adds another layer of complexity.

For sure, all these scenarios are falsifiable. **But whoever partners with the Kurds – a strong political and military local power on the ground in Syria, Iraq, and Iran – would have the upper hand**. Thus, Turkey is investing in the "Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood" in order to arise triumphant in this historic moment and finally establish a "New Turkey". To this end, a Constitutional change might be the first step at home. Integrating the Kurdish administrations in Syria and Iraq into "New Turkey" could be the second step if the status quo in the region collapses.

The Kurds, having faced immense losses in Syria and receiving limited international support, may find strategic cooperation preferable to continued isolation. **In the worst case, the Kurds will buy time and reconsider their options and wait for a period when they can manifest their own proposals**.

All in all, if the "Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood" script succeeds this time after having failed in each previous try, what Einstein once suggested – that it is sheer stupidity to try the same thing over and over again and expect a different result – will be proven false. (*Arzu Yılmaz*)

Three Questions for...



Reha Ruhavioglu is a Researcher and Analyst. He is the founder and director of the Kurdish Studies Center, which conducts political and social research on Kurds, especially those living in Turkey. He is also the coordinator of the Kurdish Barometer project, which monitors the agenda of the Kurds on a global scale.

What specific conditions or steps would be necessary to transform the initiative taken by the People's Alliance into a peaceful conflict resolution?

The conflict in Turkey and its ongoing resolution process are unique within global conflict resolution efforts. Currently, developments across the border appear to be the primary drivers of this initiative. In other words, relations between the Kurds of Turkey and the Turkish government are increasingly shaped by cross-border dynamics.

For meaningful progress, the process must evolve into a comprehensive resolution effort. A key moment may come if Öcalan calls for the PKK to disarm. If the PKK complies, it could foster an atmosphere of relief and moral ascendancy within Turkey, affecting both the government and society. At present, the People's Alliance justifies the initiative primarily on security grounds. If the PKK disarms, the People's Alliance might gain the political space to pursue regulatory changes, potentially leading to discussions on several critical issues, including expanded rights provisions, the release of political prisoners, and the status of militants with Turkish citizenship who lay down their arms.

How do various Kurdish actors other than Abdullah Öcalan and the DEM Party in Turkey – but also in Syria, Iraq, and Iran – see the initiative?

Kurdish actors in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq are optimistic about the initiative. Discussions and developments suggest Öcalan will call for the PKK's disarmament. Yet, the crux of the matter lies in the future relationship between Syrian Kurds and Turkey, with significant activity around this issue. On one front, relations between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkey are influencing the dynamics between HTS and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Simultaneously, there are ongoing conversations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. A third line of communication is unfolding among the United States, the KRG, and Rojava. Against this backdrop, SDF commander-in-chief Mazlum Abdi recently met with KDP leader Masoud Barzani in Erbil.

At present, Kurdish actors are prioritising unity, safeguarding Kurdish gains in Syria, and maximising political and cultural rights. Both supporters of Barzani and Öcalan in the region appear committed to this framework, though practical unity remains uncertain.

Turkey's attempts – both directly and through its support for HTS – to minimise Kurdish gains in Syria pose the greatest challenge. Whether these opposing positions lead to agreement or conflict remains unclear. Nevertheless, I believe a compromise and an agreement remain more likely than a deepening of the conflict.

Would a potential resolution of the armed conflict bring about democratisation in Turkey? What would be the necessary conditions for it?

A key pillar of authoritarianism in Turkey is the Kurdish Question, reinforced by a securitised approach. Resolving it could significantly reduce authoritarian practices.

For instance, the government justifies its pressure on the DEM Party by citing an armed organisation and its presumed connections to the party. Resolving the conflict could remove this justification, thereby strengthening democratic politics. Similarly, freedom of expression is frequently curtailed to establish boundaries around how the Kurdish issue can be discussed within Turkish society.

Interview by Sinem Adar and Çetin Demirci

Recommendations

In his analysis for the Middle East Institute, [Edgar Sar](#) focuses on the challenges faced by the Kurdish DEM party since the collapse of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in 2015. While describing the party's struggle to assert its political influence amidst state repression, shifting alliances, and internal divisions, he highlights the need for a new strategy to address its post-2015 crisis and regain political relevance.

In the latest Atlantic Council TURKEYSource, [Rich Outzen](#) sheds light on how the collapse of the Assad regime and the emergence of a transitional government in Syria could pave the way for the United States and Turkey to end their decades-long antagonism and cooperate on common interests such as stability, governance, and security in Syria.

[CATS Network project partner](#) affiliate [Özge Genç](#) analyses the recent shift in Turkey's approach to the Kurdish issue and how the success of the initiative depends on an inclusive process that avoids alienating key political factions. Although the proposal arguably offers a chance to address Turkey's internal tensions and strengthen its regional role, significant challenges remain.

In this edition of Turkey Recap's annual predictions for 2025, [Sinem Adar](#), [Çağdaş Üngör](#), and former CATS Fellow [Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar](#), among other experts, provide an outlook on Turkey's complex array of challenges, such as domestic politics, the war in Ukraine and Gaza, competition with China, relations with the European Union and the United States as well as with Syria, and more.

In this Foreign Policy article (paywall), [Galip Dalay](#) argues that Syria's future depends on a concerted effort by regional and international actors to avoid both state collapse and further conflict. An inclusive, non-sectarian political transition appears essential to ensure stability and legitimacy in Syria's reconstruction.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team

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