

# HOW DID THE WAR IN GAZA PAVE THE WAY FOR A RENEWED PEACE PROCESS IN TÜRKİYE?

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**Abstract:** After a decade of hiatus, Türkiye is again undergoing a renewed peace process with the PKK. Hamas' Al Aqsa Flood Operation on October 7, 2023, dramatically altered geopolitics in the Middle East, paving the way for a revolution in Syria. In such a critical phase, to cope with the possible repercussions of the changing geopolitical landscape, Ankara has embarked on a new process with the PKK via the Nationalist Movement Party leader Devlet Bahçeli's groundbreaking statements to solve its decades-long Kurdish Question that has taken a heavy toll on the country's political scene. Overall, 2025 can be a decisive year to end this perpetuated conflict as a new paradigm seems to have taken place in Turkish politics through Bahçeli's initiative.

## Introduction

*"The 'democratic initiative' [process] has been left behind; the national unity and fraternity [project] has been left behind. As I said earlier, the resolution process is in the fridge at the moment. Why wouldn't it resume when we capture positive developments? There is no obstacle for this, but this process has unfortunately been torpedoed by the political party in parliament which is backed by the separatist terrorist organization"* stated President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in September 2015 once asked about the fate of the peace process with the PKK.

A decade later, following Erdoğan's remarks, Ankara finds itself navigating a renewed peace process with the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization by Ankara and has been fighting against Türkiye ever since 1984, and its political front, Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), without officially naming it the 'peace process.' Nobody could have imagined Devlet Bahçeli's handshake gesture<sup>2</sup> with the pro-Kurdish DEM Party leaders at the parliament on October 1, 2024, could lead to a new peace initiative in the country. So, how did we reach this point?

## The Changing Geopolitics in the Middle East after the 7th of October

The Israeli genocide in Gaza, followed by Hamas' Al Aqsa Flood Operation on the 7th of October 2023, has dramatically altered the geopolitics of the Middle East. The crisis escalated into the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon and the elimination of Hezbollah's top brass in Lebanon before a ceasefire was reached between the warring sides. A short while after the Israeli-Hezbollah ceasefire came the Syrian opposition's Operation Deterrence of Aggression<sup>3</sup>, which resulted in the December 8 Revolution in Syria after Türkiye greenlit the operation. What was initially considered a limited operation turned into a full-fledged popular revolution in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, as Israel's expansionist intentions towards its neighbors became clear, Ankara grew wary of the possible negative ramifications of the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, possibly shaping the scene in Syria and Iran. Thus, Ankara stepped up its diplomatic efforts to strengthen its posture vis-à-vis the upcoming projected ramifications. During this period, Ankara called<sup>5</sup> on the Assad regime to come to the negotiating table with Türkiye for an extended period, yet to no avail. Ankara's overtures were ignored by Damascus, ultimately paving the way for revolution.

The revolution in Syria also changed the calculus of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose leadership includes top members of the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the YPG. As a result of the revolution, the SDF's presence in the Western Euphrates largely ended through an operation of the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army. Türkiye also intensified its military pressure on the group through drone strikes.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the Assad regime with which the PYD/SDF had a working relationship was toppled. Another backer, Russia, withdrew<sup>7</sup> from Northern Syria, redeploying to Tartus and Lattakia/Khmeimim. In response, the US tried to fill this void by returning<sup>8</sup> to Northern Syria, where it withdrew from in 2019. Namely, the US returned to Northern Syria after more than 5 years. Yet, the US presence remains tenuous. A potential U.S. pullout under President-elect Donald Trump looms, further cornering the SDF. Facing mounting pressure, the SDF adopted the Syrian Revolutionary Flag<sup>9</sup> and issued statements aligning with revolutionary forces. The group now claims readiness to integrate into the new Syrian army at a time when Ankara demands its disbandment and the expulsion of non-Syrian cadres from Syria.

In sum, the War in Gaza and the December 8 Revolution have not only reshaped the Middle East but also profoundly altered Kurdish geopolitics.

### **Devlet Bahçeli's Call on Abdullah Öcalan and the DEM Party**

While the region's geopolitics was changing rapidly, Türkiye intensified efforts to consolidate its domestic political landscape. Starting from October 2024, the Nationalist Movement Party Leader Devlet Bahçeli consistently extended an olive branch to the pro-Kurdish DEM Party, encouraging it to transform into a "Türkiye party," as he described. He also called on the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to announce the dissolution of the PKK. Namely, Bahçeli proposed that the PKK formally end its armed struggle against Türkiye, paving the way for the DEM Party to emerge as a legitimate political force. At one point, and in a shocking

move, Devlet Bahçeli even said Öcalan could come to the Turkish parliament<sup>10</sup> and speak at the DEM Party's meeting to declare the PKK's dissolution. Furthermore, he hinted at the possibility of Öcalan benefiting from the "Right of Hope," a mechanism allowing for conditional release, if he took this decisive step.

Bahçeli's remarks quickly set significant events in motion. Abdullah Öcalan's nephew, Ömer Öcalan, a member of parliament, along with a DEM Party delegation including Sırrı Süreyya Önder, Pervin Buldan, and Ahmet Türk, visited İmralı Island, where Öcalan has been imprisoned since 1999. Following these meetings, Öcalan issued a statement expressing his readiness to call for the PKK's dissolution, citing the dire crises in Gaza and Syria as motivating factors.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, the DEM Party delegation visited Bahçeli in Parliament and held discussions with the Speaker of the Grand National Assembly, Numan Kurtulmuş, as well as leaders from the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), Republican People's Party (CHP), and the Future Party led by Ahmet Davutoğlu. They also visited one of the heavyweights of Kurdish politics, Selahattin Demirtaş, in Edirne Prison.

These high-profile meetings generated optimism. Both Bahçeli&Erdoğan duo and the DEM Party delegation expressed satisfaction with the progress, signaling their hope for a positive outcome. Further discussions between Öcalan and the delegation are anticipated, likely including deliberations on the future of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The SDF leader Mazloum Abdi also claimed they would not be an obstacle in front of the process.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Masoud Barzani, also plays a positive role in the peace process by facilitating the dialogue<sup>13</sup> between the Kurdish National Council (pro-KDP Syrian Kurdish bloc) and PYD/SDF in Syria<sup>14</sup> aiming for a unified approach in negotiations with the new Syrian leadership. The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella structure of the PKK-aligned parties, also positively approached Öcalan's recent statements.

Despite this optimism, the process is not free from disruption attempts, as seen in the TUSAŞ terror attack.<sup>15</sup> This attack is attributed to a PKK faction opposed to peace, underscoring the internal divisions within the organization. Some elements, particularly its European wing, favor prolonging the conflict, anticipating strategic gains should Iran face military setbacks from a projected US-Israeli massive attack on Iranian soil. Due to this belief, the PKK reactivated its Iranian wing, PJAK, in 2024, which declared a ceasefire vis-à-vis Iran in 2011.

### **The Significance of Devlet Bahçeli's Call**

Since the early 1990s, starting with then-President Turgut Özal's efforts, Türkiye has intermittently pursued peace talks with the PKK. On the one hand, the state consistently used military force&pressure against the organization. On the other hand, knowing that the PKK had a sociological base, and some repressive state policies increased the organization's strength in and outside the country, Türkiye looked for a political solution through reforms. Today, this pressure and reconciliation attempt pattern<sup>16</sup> (stick and carrot approach) is again at play.

The abovementioned efforts increased, especially under the AK Party governments. In 2005, just 3 years after coming to power, the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan acknowledged the reality of the issue in Diyarbakır, famously declaring, "The Kurdish question is my question."<sup>17</sup> Türkiye's peace efforts gained momentum with initiatives such as the 2005-2009 democratic openings and the 2009-2011 Oslo talks with PKK representatives.<sup>18</sup> The process peaked between 2013 and 2015, culminating in a Newroz message from Öcalan urging the PKK to convene a congress on disarmament. The process peaked between 2013 and 2015, culminating in a Newroz message from Öcalan urging the PKK to convene a congress on disarmament.<sup>19</sup> However, the process ultimately faltered, primarily due to the PKK/YPG's aspirations for statehood in northern Syria, coupled with escalating PKK attacks and external destabilization, including ISIS atrocities and the 2016 attempted coup. President Erdoğan stated that the peace process was effectively "put in the fridge."

With Devlet Bahçeli's call, the hopes for a substantial change in the domestic politics of Türkiye have been rejuvenated. Remarkably, Bahçeli, who once vehemently opposed the 2013-2015 peace process, has emerged as a key proponent of reconciliation. His leadership in this initiative has added credibility, preempting potential accusations of undermining the process. Bahçeli, acting as a serious statesman, took the lead in the new process, decisively stood behind it, and doubled down on his rhetoric despite heavy criticism from some small Turkish nationalist parties such as Good (İYİ) Party, Victory (Zafer) Party, and Great Unity Party (BBP) circles. For the time being, even the PKK leaders confirm Bahçeli's seriousness, claiming that he is even more serious than President Erdoğan.

This shift could have far-reaching implications, not only for Türkiye's Kurdish population but also for Kurds in Iraq and Syria. For now, even PKK leaders acknowledge Bahçeli's resolve, asserting that he appears more serious about the process than President Erdoğan.



### **Facilitating Factors for the New Peace Process and Concluding Remarks**

The current atmosphere in Türkiye and the shifting geopolitics of the Middle East offer renewed hope for a political settlement of the Kurdish Question. Most major political parties (including CHP) support the ongoing process, albeit with some reservations.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the 2013-2015 peace process, which faced disruption from Gülenists (FETÖ), such internal sabotage is no longer a concern in today's Türkiye. Additionally, the PKK's capacity to operate within Türkiye has been significantly diminished. It is now nearly inactive within Turkish borders, struggling to attract new recruits, and its activities have primarily shifted to Syria and Iraq.

Sociological changes among Türkiye's Kurdish population further bolster prospects for peace. Many Kurds now recognize that continued conflict with the state yields no tangible benefits. Increasingly, they see themselves as integral to the fabric of Turkish society while maintaining reasonable cultural and linguistic demands. At the same time, they remain critical of state-appointed trustees to municipalities in Kurdish-majority southeastern regions.

Other destabilizing factors from the past, such as the threat posed by ISIS and the chaos of the Syrian crisis, which poisoned the previous peace process, have been largely neutralized. Türkiye is far safer now than during the tumultuous 2015-2016 period. Türkiye also has the upper hand in the Syria file. European countries are also adapting to this new reality, urging the SDF to integrate into a restructured Syrian army under a political arrangement. These developments create an environment conducive to resolving the Kurdish Question, which has long transcended Türkiye's borders encompassing Syria, Iraq, and Iran, thus becoming a regional and, to some extent, an international issue. The intricate nexus of the Kurdish Question can be unlocked in 2025 in Türkiye, where it originated from.

Turkish officials appear to have drawn many lessons from previous peace attempts. This time around, the process is being managed by a tiny circle. The state is also looking for a swift resolution without involving many local or foreign actors. The government also refrains from forming public committees, such as the "Wise Men Committees" initiative of 2013, to persuade different segments of society. Instead, the MHP has taken on the role of addressing public reservations, signaling a more centralized and streamlined approach. The reservations of various segments of society are tried to be eliminated via MHP's initiatives.

Overall, it is known to anyone that no military conflict continues forever. The PKK-Türkiye conflict has continued for too long, more than four decades. 2025 can be a decisive year to end this perpetuated conflict as a new paradigm seems to have taken place in Turkish politics through Bahçeli's initiative.

While the PKK's anticipated declaration of laying down the weapons vis-a-vis Türkiye will not instantly resolve all of the country's challenges, it will undoubtedly contribute to the democratization process, fostering a political and social environment free from the stigma of terrorism. This achievement alone would represent a significant milestone, bringing broad-ranging benefits, including reduced military expenditures, improved international relations, and reinvesting human capital.

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