

Opinion – A Precarious Peace in Türkiye?

Written by Ayla Göl

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AYLA GÖL, JUL 29 2025

In a symbolic ceremony, thirty fighters of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) burned their weapons on 11 July 2025 in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan. Following their imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan's call earlier this year, the PKK declared an end to their over forty-year-long armed struggle against the Turkish state. During the AKP's tenure in power, there have been failed ceasefire and peace talks to resolve the Kurdish question; however, this time may be different because the circumstances might be ripe for negotiations towards a way out.

Öcalan's call for ending violence and transitioning to 'democratic politics' could be a turning point. Empirical examples such as Colombia Peace Process with FARC in 2016 and South Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 demonstrate that the 'ripe moments' framework is a useful analytical lens to understand when peace processes are likely to emerge and what conditions are required to end conflicts. Given the complexities of the Kurdish conflict, it is now a ripe moment for peace initiatives. Still, it is a precarious one that demands immediate strategic decisions and political will from both Kurdish and Turkish leaders.

This time is different because the cost of maintaining a decades-long conflict has exhausted both sides, reaching a 'mutually hurting stalemate'. The international pressure (US, EU and UK) on the PKK as a terrorist organisation has limited the group's political capacity and financial sustainability. Hence, compliance with Öcalan's call for disarmament and transition to democratic politics indicates an explicit acknowledgement of the hurt and unsustainability of the armed struggle. Although Öcalan stated that "Kurdish existence has been recognised, and therefore, our primary objective has been achieved" the PKK has been unable to achieve its fundamental aim, initially an independent nation-state in south-eastern Turkey, and later greater autonomy with increased cultural and linguistic rights. The pressure of Turkish military's cross-border operations in Iraq and Syria, as well as the superiority of drone warfare, diminished safe havens for the PKK fighters. All these calculations make the recent initiative more than a top-down strategic shift within the organisation.

For the Turkish state, nearly forty-thousands of human lives (soldiers, police, security personnel and civilians) are lost, and the estimated cost of the unresolved conflict is over \$4 trillion. The decades-long conflict has hindered economic development in the Kurdish-majority regions at home and influenced Ankara's relations with neighbouring states and damaged its international image. Despite the military superiority of the government forces, neither the PKK has been fully eradicated, nor have the root causes of the insurgency been resolved. The Kurdish issue has remained a bleeding wound, preventing Türkiye from fulfilling its full potential in regional and global politics. The ripeness of time is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for peace initiatives.

As a staunch nationalist and part of the Turkish political landscape longer than Erdoğan, Devlet Bahçeli's (MHP leader) call for Öcalan to declare the dissolution of the PKK in parliament is an unprecedented political move. It signals the domestic recalculations that the 'hurt' of the continued conflict is now heavier than finding a political way out. The agency of key political leaders, along with the facilitating role of the new Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), is crucial in seizing this moment.

The current mutually hurting stalemate is a zero-sum situation, which puts pressure on both sides to search for a perceived, albeit complex, way out. For the Kurdish side, Öcalan's call for replacing the phase of armed conflict with 'democratic politics and the rule of law' demonstrates the expectation of political participation and democratic

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engagement. The key for the PKK will be whether the Ankara government offers a genuine pathway for political engagement by addressing Kurdish cultural and political rights within the democratic framework, not only the PKK's disarmament, followed by continued marginalisation and expected surrender. The willingness of the AKP government to legislate expanded rights, including Öcalan's situation and integrate ex-combatants will define the direction of this phase.

As Erdoğan's speech articulated his vision of a perceived way out, "a Türkiye free from terrorism will unlock the path to a region free of terrorism." At home, it will allow resources to be allocated towards the economic development of Kurdish-majority regions and bring stability. It will enhance Ankara's regional leadership in the Middle East. The government's willingness to walk together with pro-Kurdish lawmakers to pass legislation to complete the disarmament process is a crucial step towards moving towards a political way out. However, the challenge will be how to navigate the ultra-nationalist backlash. The true success of this political pathway will depend on building trust between the two sides, addressing the root causes, and navigating potential spoilers of the negotiations to ensure that this 'ripe moment' translates into a sustainable peace.

The fragile situations in post-Asad Syria and Iraq, particularly regarding the Kurdish groups such as Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), People's Protection Units (YPG) and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, will need careful diplomatic manoeuvring to prevent them from muddling Turkish peace initiatives. The geopolitical shifts in the region, shaped by the US posture towards Kurds in Syria and reported Israeli approach to Kurdish groups, are also creating a sense of urgency to resolve the Kurdish issue at home. A stable domestic front will free up Erdoğan to pursue his geopolitical ambitions in making Türkiye great again, as part of his personal and political investment, such as his proposed 'development road' between Ankara and Baghdad.

The right moment is necessary, but not the only factor, for successful peace initiatives. Decades of conflict have not only left deep societal scars but also fostered distrust between the two sides. As highlighted earlier, one of the key facilitators of the peace process is the DEM party. Their role in acting as a bridge to communicate the political aspirations of the Kurds into parliamentary action will be crucial. In particular, the complexities of amnesty, reintegration for ex-combatants, and constitutional changes will require careful, deliberate, and inclusive legislative processes. Hardliners, both within Turkish nationalists and dissident elements within the PKK and their external affiliates, are the predictable spoilers of the process. Therefore, the challenge now lies in translating this initial 'ripeness' into sustained, transparent, and inclusive negotiations that address the root causes of the conflict and build enduring trust between the Turks and the Kurds.

In global politics, empirical examples demonstrate that while a mutually hurting stalemate is often a prerequisite, it is rarely sufficient to resolve conflicts. The path to a credible way out depends on structural and political conditions. A continued political will and committed leadership are equally essential for transforming a ripe moment into successful peace negotiations. Disarmament is the beginning, not the end. True peace depends on addressing the fundamental grievances: cultural rights, language use, equal representation, and local governance. If these are not politically resolved, the 'ripeness' will quickly disappear. For instance, the ongoing conflict in Sudan (post-2023) further illustrates how new 'hurting stalemates' can emerge, potentially creating new moments for negotiation, while also highlighting the difficulty of achieving lasting peace without addressing the root causes of grievances. The timing is ripe for the AKP government to grasp the moment to close a painful chapter in its history before grievances between the Kurds and the Turks hurt deeper. A united Türkiye, with peace at home, could contribute towards peace in the Middle East as such a window of opportunity presents itself to move forward in the twenty-first century.

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