

Inside the Latest PKK Talks (Part 2): Implications for Turkish and U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

If Ankara seals the deal and preempts potential spoilers, the results could prove historic for Turkish politics, Erdogan's legacy, joint counterterrorism efforts, and wider U.S. regional interests.

Ankara's new dialogue with the PKK was born from nearly a decade of meticulous counterterrorism work, carried out by the country's security forces and National Intelligence Organization and based on a political plan formulated by Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who served as intelligence chief until 2023. The steps involved in this strategy have since become clear: (1) double down on pressuring and weakening the PKK via drone strikes and other effective tools, (2) bring the group back to the negotiating table from a position of weakness, and (3) negotiate the group's breakup via Kurdish political intermediaries, as described in [Part 1 of this PolicyWatch \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests).

The first phase of the plan achieved major successes against PKK militants in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, while phases two and three are seemingly being checked off as well amid reports that Abdullah Ocalan may soon ask his group to lay down their arms. To close the deal, end the PKK threat once and for all, and score a domestic political prize in the process, Fidan, Erdogan, and Turkey's national security elites have been actively engaging Kurdish actors at home and abroad, whether to increase pressure on the group or offer incentives for disbanding.

Erdogan's Political Calculations

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has a huge stake in making sure the plan succeeds—not only to cement his long-term legacy, but also to meet more immediate political goals. On the latter, he aims to dissolve the decade-old opposition bloc led by the pro-Kurdish DEM Party and the Republican People's Party, since they stand in the way of prolonging his already protracted tenure atop Turkey's government.

In 2017-18, when Erdogan had maxed out his legally permitted terms as prime minister, he pushed for a referendum that amended the constitution, installed a presidential system, and secured a fresh set of terms for him as head of the newly empowered executive branch. Today, he has once again reached his last term and cannot run in the next regularly scheduled election in 2028 without further contorting Turkish law. He has therefore been courting the DEM Party—his top domestic intermediary in the PKK talks—to help change the constitution and secure additional terms in exchange for enhanced constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights. The latter may be a tall order, however, given longstanding Turkish nationalist opposition to enshrining Kurdish rights, including among many Erdogan voters. Moreover, some DEM Party voters may be reluctant to bless Erdogan as de facto president for life.

Alternatively, Erdogan may seek DEM's support in calling for a snap election before 2028, since he would by law receive one more term if parliament dissolves itself before the end of his current term. In return, he would likely agree to reinstate elected DEM Party mayors in Kurdish-majority towns after he prodded the courts to sack them beginning in June 2024. He would also presumably offer the Kurdish community new cultural rights (they are currently limited to elective language courses in schools and some public broadcasting in Kurdish).

Whichever direction these political maneuvers take, the domestic dividends of ending the PKK conflict would be historic. Achieving Turkish-Kurdish peace would undoubtedly become Erdogan's lasting legacy, despite the many bitter controversies that have accompanied his long rule.

Better Peace Prospects Despite Potential Splinters

Dialogue with violent groups has a poor track record in global politics, and Turkey's new talks with the PKK could wind up failing. Yet Ankara seems to be following a different, safer diplomatic track this time, increasing the chances of success.

First, as described [in Part 1 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-1-kurdish-actors-and-interests), officials have learned from their negotiating errors in 2011 and 2015; this time, they are announcing progress to the skeptical Turkish public only after it becomes irreversible, thereby avoiding surprises or perceptions of setback. Second, Ankara has been leveraging dynamics better abroad—in Iraq, it has flexed its military reach and engaged the Kurdistan Democratic Party more deeply; in Syria, it has increased drone operations against PKK elements and cultivated strong ties with the new rulers in Damascus. Third, Erdogan has entrusted the coordination of these steps more openly to Fidan, who is particularly committed to ending the PKK conflict given his previous tenure as intelligence chief. Fourth, the timing seems better this round in light of Ocalan's growing desire to leave jail amid advancing age and worsening health problems.

Hence, barring a last-minute surprise, Ocalan seems set to publicly call on the PKK to disarm, and a wide range of actors will presumably support his plea, including the DEM Party leadership, significant portions of DEM's base, the YPG/SDF in Syria, and many of the PKK's lower and middle ranks. Top PKK commanders in Qandil may come on board too (at least initially), lest they be seen as disrespecting the group's "honorary chairman."

To be sure, splinter groups could form along the way, encouraged and backed by Iran. Qandil commanders have formed close ties with Tehran over the years—their mountain bases open up to Iran in the east, and PKK members travel there frequently, including when they need shelter from Turkish military threats. Moreover, Iran recently lost its longtime client in Syria to rebel factions backed by Turkey, its regional competitor, so the regime may have a special appetite to hit back by pushing Qandil to reject Ankara's peace bid.

On one hand, any PKK splinter factions would likely be small and lack a popular base. On the other hand, this could make them even more ideological and violent than their parent group, similar to the hardline "Real IRA" factions that broke away after the 1998 peace agreements in Northern Ireland. Such splinters could wreak havoc, perhaps to the point of undermining the peace talks. To counter this threat, Turkey could brand any breakaway groups as

Iranian proxies, undermining their legitimacy among Kurdish communities; indeed, this seems to be part of Ankara's game plan already.

Potential complications could arise next door if Syria descends back into civil war, since that could give PKK splinter factions another safe haven on Turkey's border. Here again, the "Real IRA" analogy is worth noting—that breakaway group was eventually snuffed out because neighboring Ireland and the United Kingdom denied it freedom of action.

U.S. Policy Implications

For the United States, the most immediate benefits of a PKK deal would be in Syria. Assuming the post-Assad transition [proceeds smoothly \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/status-syrias-transition-after-two-months\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/status-syrias-transition-after-two-months), breaking up the group could have a transformative effect on Turkey's relations with Syrian Kurdish leaders, whom it has long regarded as mere proxies of the PKK. If Ocalan's expected call for disarmament takes hold, Ankara would be open to working with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political wing of Washington's main counterterrorism partners in Syria, the YPG/SDF.

To this end, Turkey might encourage the new rulers in Damascus to foster PYD participation in Syria's political system. This could include supporting PYD candidates in mayoral elections and other local contests, similar to how Erdogan has reportedly offered to restore the DEM Party's mayoral seats in Turkey (though he may push the PYD to change its name before proceeding, thereby formally shedding its PKK connections).

The Iraqi Kurdish role. A PKK deal facilitated in part by Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party would pave the way for wider Kurdish power-sharing—namely, between the KDP in Iraq, the PYD in Syria, and the KDP's Syrian branch, the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (KDP-S). In addition to boosting longtime U.S. partners inside both countries, this could further encourage Turkey to establish peaceful relations with Syrian Kurds. In the long term, Ankara may even be willing to establish an economically driven relationship with Syria's Kurdish northeast, similar to what it currently has with the KDP in northern Iraq.

The Islamic State angle. On the security front, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey recently announced a [joint regional initiative \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-iraq-syria-jordan-aim-jointly-tackle-islamic-state-ankara-says-2025-02-05/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-iraq-syria-jordan-aim-jointly-tackle-islamic-state-ankara-says-2025-02-05/) to contain IS. If the PKK deal goes through, this new initiative could be expanded to include armed Kurdish factions in Iraq and Syria, which already have ample experience fighting IS. The long-term U.S. policy priority in Syria is [to prevent an IS comeback \(https://warontherocks.com/2025/01/in-syria-america-should-be-ruthlessly-focused-on-the-islamic-state/\)](https://warontherocks.com/2025/01/in-syria-america-should-be-ruthlessly-focused-on-the-islamic-state/), so Washington should encourage any proposed Kurdish role that strengthens the new security collective.

Preparing for a new era. The United States stands to draw even wider strategic benefits from the end of the PKK conflict, including beyond the Middle East. On the security front, Turkey would be free to devote its military resources—NATO's second largest—to other potential crisis zones in partnership with Washington. For instance, Turkey's [significant footprint in Africa \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-momentum-us-turkey-relations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-momentum-us-turkey-relations) could be enlisted to boost Western stabilization efforts in multiple countries. Perhaps most important, addressing the "PKK problem" in U.S.-Turkey ties would accelerate Erdogan's anticipated bilateral reset with President Trump, potentially affecting a broad range of issues in the NATO and Middle Eastern spheres.

Letting Turkey lead. One point of caution is in order: Washington should make sure to follow Turkey's lead in the PKK dialogue rather than trying to take the lead itself. If the deal collapses with Washington having played an active, public role, many in Turkey and the wider region would no doubt blame the United States for the failure.

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