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THE “TERROR-FREE TÜRKİYE” POLICY AND ANKARA’S INFLUENCE IN KURDISH GEOPOLITICS

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Introduction

Türkiye’s “Terror-Free Türkiye” policy aims domestically to end the activities of the PKK and strengthen ties with the Kurdish population through democratic reforms, while regionally seeking to prevent PKK affiliates in neighboring countries from entering into alliances against Ankara and to increase Türkiye’s influence over the Kurds.

Unlike the “solution process” attempt that ended in 2015, the new process—developed with strong state backing—has emerged at a time when Ankara has largely ended the PKK’s activities inside Türkiye and has significantly constrained the organization’s activities abroad through a strategy of eliminating ter-

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rorism at its source.

Regionally, this process is unfolding during a period when Israel has extended its destabilizing influence all the way to the Syrian border through its aggressive policies following October 7, when the regime in Iran is being tested by Israeli and U.S. attacks and domestic protests. Its timing is also noteworthy since the possible withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq and Syria may open the door to new developments affecting the Kurds in these states.

Ankara’s insistence on establishing a “Terror-Free Region” alongside the “Terror-Free Türkiye” policy can therefore be interpreted as a pre-emptive move in a period marked by uncertainty and risky developments across the Middle East. The process, likely to evolve into a comprehensive framework in which Türkiye not only resolves its domestic terrorism problem but also becomes a decisive actor across the Kurdish geography, could generate a range of alternative scenarios depending on whether it succeeds or fails.

Despite various challenges—particularly those related to Syria and Israel—the process has been progressing gradually. However, a negative outcome could reintroduce a conflict environment and create new possibilities

including an equation in which the PKK is used within a broader anti-Ankara alignment. On the other hand, the ongoing process has already begun to reshape relations among the Kurds across the Middle East. If successful, it could enable Ankara to eliminate anti-Türkiye configurations within Kurdish geopolitics and position itself as a primary playmaker across the Kurdish region.

Strengthening the domestic front in the face of regional threats

The process¹—which began in October 2024 with an unusual and bold proposal by MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, the coalition partner of the ruling AK Party, suggesting that PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan could address parliament if the organization laid down its arms—has received strong backing not only from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but also from the AK Party, the DEM Party, several opposition parties, and state institutions and bureaucratic actors. Unlike the “solution process” that was centered on the AK Party between 2013-2015, the new process enjoys a broader political and societal support and within this framework, a parliamentary commission has been established to examine the legal dimensions of the process, while the PKK has announced its dissolution decision and taken steps toward disarmament.

The timing of the process is also striking for both Ankara and the PKK. Within Türkiye, PKK activities have largely been neutralized; in the north of Iraq, the organization’s presence has been pushed further south after being

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restricted; and in Syria, its operational space has been narrowed through military interventions and diplomacy. Against the backdrop of Türkiye’s rising military technology, the organization’s demands and struggle appear increasingly outdated and ineffective.

That Ankara has initiated such a process from a position of strength suggests—echoing Öcalan’s own statements—that goals such as “a separate nation-state, federation, administrative autonomy, or culturalist solutions” are no longer being pursued. Instead, the emphasis is on reinforcing a strong domestic front by ending terrorism and strengthening the brotherhood between Turks and Kurds through new arrangements.

The regional insecurity generated by Israel’s aggressive policies after October 7, 2023, has been one of the factors prompting Türkiye to

strengthen its internal front through negotiations with Öcalan at a moment when Ankara holds its strongest position against the PKK. Israel’s military actions in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and its twelve-day war with Iran have contributed to a regional transformation in which Iran and its allied groups have been weakened. The possibility that the Iranian regime could collapse in the war sparked by US-Israeli attacks—and that such a development could mobilize Kurdish actors—is being taken into consideration by policymakers.

In Iraq, the anticipated withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from military bases may create a power vacuum. An additional attack aimed at collapsing the Iranian regime could further eliminate Iranian influence in Iraq and deepen that vacuum. While such a vacuum harbors the risk of being filled by Israel, it might also provide space for organizations such as the PKK or ISIS to thrive. For this reason, Ankara—already maintaining strong relations with the KDP, the largest party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)—aims through the new process not only to strengthen ties with Syria but also to improve relations with the Kurds including the PUK based in Sulaymaniyah, thereby positioning itself to fill any emerging power vacuum.

Perhaps most importantly, the new process seeks to pre-empt the emergence of a new anti-Ankara configuration backed by Israel that could mobilize the Kurds, particularly the PKK, in the context of broader regional conflicts and alliances. Following the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, the possibility that Tel Aviv could establish relations with the YPG in northern Syria

similar to those it has developed with the Druze in the country’s south—or even the remote possibility that such influence could extend as far as northern Iraq—has emerged as the primary source of security concern ringing alarm bells among policymakers in Türkiye. In this context, the inclusion of a “Terror-Free Region” dimension alongside the “Terror-Free Türkiye” process reflects Ankara’s evolving perspective shaped by its broader regional security concerns.

Despite the PKK’s dissolution and disarmament steps over the course of a process that has continued for more than a year, and notwithstanding the report prepared by the parliamentary commission on the issue, the new process appears to be facing several tests. In addition to the Syria dynamic—often cited as the main factor behind the collapse of the “solution process” in 2015—the possibility of an Israeli alliance with the YPG in Syria and the influence of Iran within the organization rank among the most critical risks confronting the current initiative. In this context, the effective implementation on the ground of the integration agreement reached on 29 January 2026 between Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazlum Abdi, commander of the SDF, could eliminate the risk that the new process might once again be derailed by Syria-centered dynamics. Moreover, the careful language adopted by the key stakeholders in Türkiye—including state institutions, political parties, and Abdullah Öcalan—their emphasis on the success of the process, and their willingness to manage Syria-related crises indicate that the current initiative is more resilient than the earlier “solution process.”

Implications of the process for inter-Kurdish relations

Within the framework of the process, Ankara's negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan regarding the dissolution and disarmament of the PKK, as well as the contacts held in İmralı Island—where he's imprisoned—by the DEM Party and the parliamentary commission, are reshaping not only Türkiye's relations with the Kurds but also relations among the Kurds themselves.

The activities of the PKK in northern Iraq—including attacks on Peshmerga forces, security personnel, and civilians in Erbil and Duhok, areas under the control of the KDP—have in recent years created the basis for cooperation between the KDP, led by Masoud Barzani, and Ankara against the organization. Clashes between the KDP and the PKK have at times spilled beyond Iraq, occasionally prompting the KDP to close border crossings with northwestern Syria controlled by the SDF. By contrast, the PUK has historically maintained an ideological proximity to the PKK. This relationship has also been reflected in Sulaymaniyah's ties with the SDF. Such closeness has emerged as a destabilizing factor in the Sulaymaniyah-based party's relations with both Ankara and the KDP.

In the KRI—which has come under the spotlight not only due to Türkiye's operations against the PKK but also because of clashes between the PKK and Peshmerga forces—the process appears to have led to the cessation of hostilities and the emergence of a relatively calm environment. As the organization's armed activities decline, the KDP has shifted its focus away from confrontation with the PKK and the SDF toward playing a mediating

role between Ankara and the PKK, while also promoting greater inter-Kurdish dialogue. In this context, Mazlum Abdi's appearance for the first time at a forum held in November 2025 in Duhok under KDP control—alongside numerous Iraqi leaders—and his ability to hold multiple meetings in Erbil with figures including Nechirvan Barzani, Masrour Barzani, and Masoud Barzani were made possible by the negotiation environment created through the Ankara-centered process.

Notably, the new relationship that the KDP has developed with the SDF has effectively enabled Ankara's closest Kurdish partner in the region to take over ties with the SDF that had previously been largely monopolized by the PUK. At the same time, this shift has contributed to the SDF being drawn toward a more pragmatic position by the KDP within the framework of the "Terror-Free Türkiye-Terror-Free Region" process and the Syrian domestic integration—particularly in contrast to the more hardline cadres based in Qandil and within the PUK. The meetings held by Mazlum Abdi in Erbil in January 2026 with KDP leader Masoud Barzani, other leaders of the KRI, and the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Tom Barrack illustrate both the mediating role played by the KDP in the process and how inter-Kurdish relations are being reshaped through it. Nevertheless, the KDP's efforts to support the process should not be viewed solely as a reflection of its close alignment with Ankara. They may also be linked to broader objectives, including strengthening its position among the Kurds, ending the presence of the PKK in the KRI, and—if possible—promoting the ENKS, which is comprised of Kurds more aligned with it, as

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Alongside the process, the strained relations between Ankara and the PUK also appear to have entered a phase of repair. Citing the PKK’s presence in Sulaymaniyah, Ankara had closed its airspace to the city in April 2023. Following the PKK’s dissolution and disarmament steps, however, Ankara has sought to minimize the risk that relations among the PUK, PKK, and the SDF could be used within an anti-Türkiye configuration. In a climate of peace when negotiations with Öcalan are underway, mending the relations with the PUK and intensifying the contacts could make it

possible to both benefit from the Sulaymaniyah-based party’s influence over the PKK and the SDF, as well as to reduce, on a broader scale, the influence of Iran in the city. In this context, the burning of weapons by a group of PKK members in July 2025 in the Casena Cave in the PUK-controlled Sulaymaniyah stands as an example of the constructive role played by the PUK in the process. Likewise, Türkiye’s decision in October 2025 to lift the airspace ban on Sulaymaniyah can also be seen as one of the positive outcomes of the process.

In conclusion, the steps taken by Türkiye within the framework of the process to strengthen its domestic front and its historical ties with the Kurds are reducing areas of conflict among regional Kurds while reshaping relations among the Kurdish actors and, in doing so, redefining the trajectory of Kurdish geopolitics in the region.

“Terror-Free Region” and Ankara’s influence in Kurdish geopolitics

Despite Ankara’s conflictual relations with the PKK and the PUK, its commercial, political, and military influence in Erbil and Duhok—areas within the sphere of influence of the KDP—has long been regarded as a successful example demonstrating Türkiye’s strength and potential within Kurdish geopolitics. Ankara’s leading role in promoting stability, investment, and economic growth in the KDP-controlled region is acknowledged and appreciated by the Barzani family. In Syria, Ankara’s influence over the administration of Ahmed al-Sharaa, as well as its strong relationship with Donald Trump during his second presidential term,

has positioned Türkiye as one of the key actors shaping the post-Bashar al-Assad order in the country—particularly regarding the future of territories controlled by the SDF. Indeed, the United States has supported the agreement of 29 January that preserves Syria’s territorial integrity—an approach also defended by Ankara as a red line—rather than backing the SDF’s demands for autonomy.

Within the framework of the “Terror-Free Türkiye–Terror-Free Region” process, Ankara has insisted on a plan for Syria that preserves a unitary state structure, integrates the SDF into central institutions, transfers border crossings to Damascus, and ensures the withdrawal of PKK cadres from the country. Ankara appears to have achieved progress toward this objective through the agreement of 29 January. Ankara’s continued insistence on the agreement signed by Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazlum Abdi—as well as its support for military advances by Damascus aimed at bringing the SDF to the negotiating table—indicates that, alongside diplomacy, Ankara has also kept elements of hard power in play. In this context, the transfer of Arab-majority areas such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor to Damascus and the de facto disintegration of the SDF after the Arab tribes switched sides—combined with the United States’ policy of advancing its engagement in Syria primarily through the Sharaa administration rather than the SDF—suggest that Ankara is moving closer to its objective of establishing a “Terror-Free Region.” At the same time, the absence of any potential direct support from Israel to the SDF points to the successful diplomacy of the Sharaa administration in managing relations

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with the United States, Israel, and Türkiye. It also indicates that Ankara’s growing security concerns centered on Tel Aviv have, at least for now, been appeased under the current circumstances.

Unlike the “peace process” that collapsed in 2015, the concrete progress to be achieved as part of the new process—under which the Syria dynamic appears to have been brought under control—could permanently increase Türkiye’s influence in the Kurdish geopolitics inside both Iraq and Syria. In this context, the PKK’s disarmament steps, the tangible work of the parliamentary commission, and the continued insistence on the success of the integration process between Damascus and the SDF could open the door to long-term Turkish–Kurdish cooperation in the region, thereby enabling the influence in question.

Türkiye, which already enjoys considerable influence in the KRI—particularly in Erbil and Duhok—could, through the ongoing process, establish similarly close relations with Syrian

Kurds affiliated with Damascus, with whom it maintains strong ties. In this regard, kinship links between Syrian Kurds and Kurds in Türkiye, as well as geographical similarity, may serve as facilitating factors. The absence of a regional rival such as Iran in the new Syrian landscape strengthens Türkiye’s position. However, unlike the relatively moderate stance of the KDP, the SDF’s past association with the PKK is likely to constitute the primary test for the development of such a relationship.

The environment of de-escalation, negotiation, and peace generated by the process in Türkiye could also encourage actors such as the PUK and even Mazlum Abdi—much like the leaders of the KDP—to orient themselves more closely toward Ankara, thereby providing Türkiye with significant influence in Kurdish geopolitics. A successful conclusion of the process—combined with the expansion of Türkiye’s investment and development initiatives to Kurdish-inhabited areas such as Afrin, Kobani, and Al-Hasakah, alongside other cities in Syria—and the realization of reciprocal visits and contacts fostered by the emerging atmosphere of trust could both strengthen Turkish–Kurdish ties and further underscore Ankara’s influence as the dominant actor within this relationship.

In addition to the Syrian context, the fact that the opportunities this process will open up for Ankara will also extend to Sulaymaniyah, where Iranian influence remains strong notwithstanding its weakened regional power due to U.S. and Israeli pressure, constitutes one of the important pillars of the aforementioned Kurdish geopolitics. The atmosphere of peace

that Türkiye can achieve domestically with the Kurds, alongside a climate of trust involving Syrian Kurds and Sulaymaniyah, will undoubtedly protect Ankara from being caught unprepared in the face of potential mobilization by Iranian Kurds should the regime in Tehran fall. The success of the “Terror-Free Türkiye-Terror-Free Region” process and Ankara’s development of steps to increase its influence in Kurdish geopolitics could, in the event of regime collapse, prevent Iranian Kurds from taking actions against Türkiye in possible scenarios. Moreover, it could provide Türkiye with the energy, capacity, and influence to shape the trajectory of this dynamic.

The opposite scenario, in which the process fails, would place all actors on the list of losers and could lead to a new conflict environment where the likelihood of the PKK and SDF entering an equation against Ankara increases, while Israeli and Iranian influence in the KRI could grow. Nevertheless, Türkiye’s strong relations with the KDP, its advanced military technology, the alignment achieved with U.S. President Donald Trump, its decisive position in Damascus, and additionally Iran’s weakened regional standing, all keep Ankara’s hand strong against this negative scenario. On the other hand, Ankara’s strong commitment to the process, along with its desire to strengthen the domestic front and regional stability against regional security threats and risks, stands out as the most effective factor weakening the likelihood of this scenario materializing.

In conclusion, if the process succeeds, it looks highly likely to open the door to a scenario in which Türkiye becomes the decisive actor in

inter-Kurdish relations and, most importantly, a major source of influence over Kurdish geopolitics. This outcome will depend not only on the success of the process itself but also on the continuation of the measures to

strengthen the domestic front as well as on Türkiye's ability to extend its already strong economic, military, and political influence in the KDP-controlled region to Sulaymaniyah and to the Kurdish regions inside Syria.

Endnote

¹ "Terörsüz Türkiye" süreci kararlılıkla ilerliyor", Anadolu Agency, 12 May 2025,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/terorsuz-turkiye-sureci-kararlilikla-ilerliyor/3564724>

² "Irak ile Suriye arasındaki sınır kapısı PKK saldırılarının ardından kapatıldı", Anadolu Agency, 23

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