



CATS Network Roundup

Two years after Bahçeli's opening, the PKK is disarming, but the Kurdish question remains unresolved

Dear Readers,

Our Roundup is evolving.

From now on, we are combining our previous "Recommendations" and "On the Spot" sections into a single, more focused feature. This means fewer separate sections, but more context, perspective and overview in one place.

Why the change?

We want to focus the Roundup even more on what is most useful to you:

- guidance on the key topics
- curated perspectives rather than simple lists of links
- an in-depth interview as a second strong pillar

Instead of a separate list at the end, you will find our recommendations woven directly into the main feature, contextualised, prioritised and linked to the topics.

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



When Devlet Bahçeli extended his hand to MPs from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) in October 2024, few expected what would follow. Weeks later, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) went further and invited jailed PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan to call on the organisation to disarm. Sceptics suspected tactical calculation. Others saw it as the possible trigger for a new peace process. Events then moved quickly. In February 2025, Öcalan called on the PKK to disarm and dissolve. Its general congress heeded that call in May, and in July fighters staged a symbolic weapons-burning ceremony in northern Iraq. A cross-party parliament commission, set up shortly thereafter, spent about six months drafting a report outlining recommendations for a legal framework and future democratisation. Half a year after the publication of the report, on 10 August 2026, a framework law, officially Law No. 7595 on Strengthening National Solidarity and Social Integration, was passed in the parliament by 468 out of 600 votes – one of the largest majorities in the assembly's history, though the vote count has been reported slightly differently across outlets. About two years after Bahçeli's initial gesture, Turkey has taken a historic step, but its political outcome remains uncertain.

Published in the Official Gazette on 18 August, the law formally entered into force. Its consequences under criminal and enforcement law, however, will only take effect once the security authorities have certified the complete dissolution and disarmament, and the National Security Council (MGK), chaired by the president, has confirmed this. A board chaired by Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz, comprising the ministers of justice, defence, interior and foreign affairs as well as the intelligence chief, oversees verification.

The law excludes those convicted of murder, as well as those serving certain life sentences for crimes committed before 1 June 2005. Sentences of up to 15 years can be suspended for five years and longer ones for ten, provided that no further terrorism-related offence is committed. [Zuzanna Krzyżanowska and Adam Michalski of the Centre for Eastern Studies \(OSW\)](#) see the law as an important legal step towards reintegrating PKK fighters, but not a comprehensive political solution to the conflict.

[Paul T. Levin, on the other hand, describes the whole process as a possible instance of the classic Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration \(DDR\) model](#), where the PKK's announced dissolution is followed by a legal arrangement. Levin sees the process as largely in Ankara's hands, because verification and implementation lie almost entirely with Turkish institutions, with hardly any international monitoring.

A changing balance of power

[Riccardo Gasco and Samuele C. A. Abrami take a closer look at the regional dimension](#): between spring 2025 and August 2026, international, regional and domestic developments increasingly reinforced one another, while Ankara treated the Kurdish issue in Turkey and Syria as a single security problem. The US withdrawal narrowed the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) room for manoeuvre as Ankara strengthened its ties with the new government in Damascus. A Syrian government offensive in January 2026 forced the SDF to accept a comprehensive integration deal that culminated in the SDF's dissolution in August 2026. Gasco and Abrami also underline, as a domestic factor, the weakening and split of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) as a consequence of the continuous lawfare targeting the party, its leadership and municipalities. This further increased, they argue, the distance between DEM and CHP. The result so far, they conclude, is what they call "a settlement of arms, not yet a settlement of the Kurdish question".

What the law does not resolve

Ankara and the PKK have sought to end the conflict before, most notably in talks that collapsed in 2015. The original demand for an independent Kurdish state gradually gave way to other formulations. In his February 2025 call, Öcalan explicitly renounced separate statehood, federation, administrative autonomy and culturalist solutions, while still emphasising respect for identity, freedom of expression and democratic participation, including at the local level. Ankara, on the other hand, calls the current process "Terörsüz Türkiye" ("Turkey Without Terror").

Levin warns that the end of the armed conflict does not automatically mean a solution to the Kurdish question. He points to language, culture, and centralisation versus devolution as unresolved issues. Krzyżanowska and Michalski agree and in particular emphasise that anti-terrorism legislation and the removal of elected local authorities remain unaddressed. Yet DEM has not abandoned these demands: the OSW authors expect the party to press for a further expansion of Kurdish rights and freedoms once the law is implemented as a first step towards normalisation. For Gasco and Abrami, the law emerged from a shift in political and military leverage rather than a shared vision of Kurdish rights – one reason these substantive questions remain unresolved.

In an interview with the Turkish outlet Stüdyo recap, [DEM deputy co-chair Mehmet Rüşü Tiryaki said that the party was planning a "transformation congress"](#) that would bring "very important names" into the party's leadership, guided by the vision of a party in which people "of every faith, every origin, every identity" across the country would feel at home. No date had been set; the timing appears to be linked to the implementation of the framework law and the broader disarmament process.

Taken together, these assessments point to a question that still remains unanswered: is the issue no longer simply whether the PKK disappears, but whether the decades-old security-based definition of the Kurdish question disappears with it? The law enables a transition from armed struggle to civilian reintegration of PKK cadres. Whether this will also lead to broader political and legal recognition of Kurdish rights and representation, as autocratisation in Turkey accelerates sharply, remains the crucial unanswered question.

Three Questions for...



Dr. Salim Çevik is a CATS visiting fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin and an associate fellow at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague. His research focuses on Turkish domestic politics and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and Africa. In his new report, "Disarmament without settlement", he examines the Turkish-Kurdish process launched in 2024 and argues that it was driven by domestic political calculations, while regional shifts merely made it easier to sustain.

You read the absence of steps such as the release of former pro-Kurdish party leader Selahattin Demirtaş as evidence that Ankara does not want reform. Could it not simply be tactical caution?

It could be. But my argument rests on the pattern of the process as a whole, not on Demirtaş's continued imprisonment alone. Ankara has pursued PKK disarmament without a credible roadmap linking it to broader reform. Meanwhile, measures that require no new legislation remain unaddressed, such as implementing the ECHR ruling on Demirtaş or stopping the replacement of elected mayors with trustees. Tactical caution would be a more convincing explanation if the government had committed to broader reforms and set out which reforms would follow which verifiable steps. Without such a commitment, the appeal to tactical caution risks becoming an open-ended justification for withholding reform. The report does not rule out a change of course. It argues that the evidence so far points towards controlled accommodation within the existing authoritarian order.

Your report argues that Kurdish actors have limited leverage and that the government has conceded little. What concrete, verifiable commitments from the Kurdish side would make broader reform politically sustainable for a Turkish government?

The difficulty is not a shortage of Kurdish commitments. The PKK has taken unilateral steps towards dissolution without securing legal or political guarantees. Ankara has offered a narrow legal arrangement granting conditional relief to some PKK members, but nothing beyond it. It has made no reciprocal reform commitments and has not said what further steps would unlock them. The government calls the initiative "Terror-Free Turkey". That name shows it sees its task as eliminating an armed organisation, not as addressing a Kurdish question that requires a political reform. Broader reform therefore lies outside the government's own understanding of the process. It is not something it has promised once Kurdish actors meet additional conditions. In principle, citizens' democratic rights should not be bargaining chips in negotiations with an armed organisation. But we have not even reached that point: there is no broader reform agenda waiting on sufficient Kurdish commitments. And with the MHP sponsoring the opening, the government also has substantial political cover for reform, should it choose to pursue it.

What developments, domestic or regional, would lead you to revise your view that the process is primarily a mechanism of authoritarian consolidation? Would Demirtaş's release or an end to the trustee practice be enough?

Not on their own. Both would be important and welcome, but neither would establish that this is a democratisation process. In the short term, the process aims to divide the opposition over the Kurdish question. Its ultimate political purpose is to incorporate the Kurdish movement into the governing bloc. If that succeeds, releasing Kurdish politicians and ending their removal from elected office would be entirely compatible with authoritarian consolidation. Politicians aligned with the government would no longer face the repression directed at its opponents. That same logic applies regionally. Improved relations, or even cooperation, between Turkey and PKK affiliates would not in themselves demonstrate democratisation. They could instead extend this strategy of authoritarian incorporation beyond Turkey's borders. I would revise my assessment if Kurdish actors gained enforceable rights to organise, to govern municipalities they win and to compete in elections, including when they oppose Erdoğan. The decisive test is whether Kurdish political space is protected by law and institutions, or remains dependent on continued accommodation with the government.

Kind regards,

The CATS Team

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