

Terror-Free Türkiye: More than Eliminating Weapons from the Story

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ABSTRACT *The new political process in Türkiye, initiated by Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the aim for a terror-free Türkiye through the dissolution of the PKK, can be considered a result of both internal and external dynamics. Among the internal dynamics, the process has reached its current state through political steps toward a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue, albeit with occasional interruptions. Social memory regarding the problem and lessons learned from previous peace processes are also key dynamics of this path. Among the external dynamics, the events that unfolded, particularly the Gaza genocide, demonstrating that no people in the region are safe, have strengthened the will to resolve internal problems. The effort to eliminate the problems or pretexts that make the region and the country vulnerable to external interventions also accelerates these processes. If this process can be maintained steadily despite potential setbacks, it will not only eliminate terrorism and violence from daily life but also offer the possibility of a more just and peaceful socio-political order.*

Keywords: Terror-Free Türkiye, Terror-Free Region, Internal Dynamics, External Dynamics, Devlet Bahçeli

Insight Turkey 2025
Vol. 27 / No. 4 / pp. 41-52

Received Date: 15/9/2025 • Accepted Date: 5/12/2025 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2025274.2

Introduction

The process that began with Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli's call for a "terror-free Türkiye" and has since been debated across its social, legal, cultural, and political dimensions deserves to be described as a historic turning point. The fact that this initiative, which has unlocked the pathway to the resolution of the Kurdish question after a hundred years, has come from the largest organized force of Turkish nationalism and the leader symbolizing this movement is an extraordinarily striking event, and one that is not easily found in any other country.

This point has been reached after many ups and downs and, at times, issues that have set back progress. Ten years after the end of the "reconciliation process" in 2015, the National Solidarity, Brotherhood and Democracy Committee at Parliament decided to visit İmralı Island and meet with the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. While the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the MHP, and the pro-PKK Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), along with two small left-wing parties, supported the visit, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the nationalist Good Party (İP) announced they would not take part. The CHP's stance, after previously signaling support, caused disappointment in some left-wing circles. As a result, debates have arisen concerning with whom it will be possi-

ble to continue the path toward the goal of resolution and who might withdraw in the later stages of the process.

What does Bahçeli's call, which changed the overall political dynamics, mean? Considering internal and external variables, how can one answer the question "why now"? And when some eventually depart from this path, why must the journey continue, and who should serve as its leading actor? What does a terror-free Türkiye initiative promise beyond the absence of terror itself? It is useful to discuss the "terror-free Türkiye" plan within the framework of these questions.

"Let Him Come and Speak at the DEM Party Group Meeting in the Grand National Assembly"

When Bahçeli's call was initially heard in 2024, the first thought that came to mind, and has been repeated since then, was that the MHP leader's call was not a personal one but rather a call made "on behalf of the state." According to this interpretation, in contrast to the efforts of 2002 to 2015, during which the AK Party government was acting alone, a consensus that had not existed at the time had now taken shape. Metaphorically speaking, "state logic" had been convinced that the time was ripe for a new resolution to the Kurdish question. Thus, a new process was placed on the agenda through the voice of the MHP leader, the key political actor whose objection could stall it.

It is certainly possible to debate whether universal state logic exists independently of current political actors and their transformations over time. Beyond that debate, however, the transformation of political paradigms that dominate every state over a period can certainly be discussed. In this context, rather than seeing the formation of a fundamental policy in Türkiye as a process independent of political actors and leaders, it may be more accurate to view it as a multi-dimensional relationship in which these actors are also determinative and, at times, capable of altering the equations. In this context, explaining the MHP leader's call within this multidimensional relationship appears to be more accurate. Indeed, this is not the first time Bahçeli has made an unexpected move. He has always been a figure who prioritizes the state within the boundaries defined by his ideology and nationalist worldview. This unchanged stance may be the only common element in the different political attitudes and shifts he has adopted at various times in the country's political history.

This is not Bahçeli's first unexpected step on the Kurdish question either. In 2008, during a ceremony at the old Parliament building, he held the hand of Hasip Kaplan, an MP from the DTP, the political predecessor of today's DEM Party, inviting him to sit beside him, saying, "Come, Hasip, let us complete the colors of the Parliament."¹

This gesture was significant in showing that the MHP leader possessed a

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historical consciousness regarding the "colors" the country had lost, that he was aware of past mistakes, and that, although he supports a nationalist stance, he was capable of looking at the origins of the issue from a perspective that transcended the cliché narratives of national identities and worldviews.

This move also inspired shock due to both the personal and institutional identity of Bahçeli, as well as the substance of his call, and constituted the seed of a transformation that could shake the status quo of the country and region at its core. Finally, Bahçeli's statement that if actors involved in the process show signs of hesitation, he would go to İmralı himself if necessary, conveys an important message. It indicates that the will that produced the call launching the new process backs the new initiative with even greater determination and self-confidence.

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By emphasizing that “if the goal of a terror-free Türkiye is sincerely desired, there is no point in dragging feet over going to İmralı,” and by raising the question “if contact is not made with one of the true interlocutors of the process, how will any result be achieved,”² and further by stating that if the commission does not decide and no one volunteers to go, he would not hesitate to take three colleagues and go to İmralı personally, Bahçeli has demonstrated that his support continues for the parliamentary commission’s potential decisions in the next phases of the process.

At this point, all actors across the political spectrum that openly declared themselves in favor of a solution are likewise expected to fulfill their commitments.

Convergence of Internal and External Dynamics

If it can be sustained with steps as striking and determined as its begin-

ning, which the MHP leader’s İmralı move already points to, this new process that could be described as a new milestone for Türkiye may be seen as the convergence of a series of internal and external factors. It could even be considered a unique historical moment in which those who view the Kurdish question based on justice and those who approach it on practical grounds of utility and benefit have converged.

If we first take a closer look at the internal dynamics, the terror-free Türkiye initiative emerged in a context shaped by the steps taken and reforms implemented in the Kurdish question since 2002, which also enabled the normalization of daily life by the elimination of violence. Through reforms carried out at various times under names such as the “Unity and Fraternity Project” and the “Peace Process,” the Kurdish question entered a path toward resolution. Although marked by progress and setbacks and periods of rise and decline, each new step taken over the years strengthened normalization and the will to live together. This made subsequent steps possible and facilitated the abandonment of entrenched official-bureaucratic reflexes. Despite tensions in politics and persistent problems in the areas of democracy, the rule of law, and political polarization, the positive atmosphere created by these reform processes over the years strengthened the societal consensus that makes today’s terror-free Türkiye goal attainable. This consensus also affected, to varying degrees, political actors who

in the past kept their distance from or opposed reconciliation efforts due to concerns over separatism. In this regard, each small or large step, such as the example of “Kurdish courses,” created relief to the extent that, although harshly debated at the time, separatism disappeared from the list of issues needing to be tackled and proved that the feared outcomes did not materialize.

Another important matter in terms of internal dynamics is that, despite the aspects of the presidential system that have been criticized regarding separation of powers, it has concretely facilitated steps that may be taken toward a solution to this issue. Under this new system, the requirement of securing 50 percent-plus-one to win the presidency eliminates the political space for an ultranationalist and sectarian position on the Kurdish question and makes it obligatory to support the commission set up for this purpose. The difficulty of gaining a majority without supporting steps toward a solution compels political parties, in proportion to the extent of their ambition for power, to adopt a constructive stance and to support the commission established in the Turkish Parliament, the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, with the objective of a terror-free Türkiye.

To these, one must add the last 30 years of experience showing that politics based on maximalist demands rooted in Turkish or Kurdish identities has not produced solutions. The process in recent decades, in which the events of the early 20th century

concerning confrontation, freedom of religion and conscience, ethnicity, and minority rights have begun to be openly discussed, has also brought with it a broader state of understanding and comprehension. Even if these issues do not take center stage in current political debates, it is possible to speak of an awareness regarding three core matters that are essentially as old as the republic: the Kurdish question, the issue of freedom of religion and conscience, and the matters related to minority rights. The question of what happened in the past is, of course, still answered differently. This answer may never be entirely uniform. However, it is still possible to speak of an understanding that everyone has a story worth listening to, and that reparative steps are needed for all communities, even if the general rhetoric of political parties has not changed in any fundamental way.

A similar process of awareness can be observed among circles that engage in politics based on Kurdish identity. Not only the past century, but also the 10 years following the end of the peace process clearly showed both Turks and Kurds that Western states are not reliable and trustworthy. The fact that the policies pursued by Western states on Syria during the 2013-2015 reconciliation period shattered a historic opportunity for peace is today expressed by various parties as a truth whose consequences are now more clearly seen. The realization that it is not a feasible option to be swept up by the winds urging the PKK to end the peace process rendered PKK leader Abdullah

Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan took part in the 16th meeting of the National Solidarity, Brotherhood and Democracy Commission, established in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye under the “Terror-Free Türkiye” initiative.

TBMM /AA



Öcalan’s long-standing approach of seeking resolution domestically the only viable alternative today. Even if the U.S. makes promises to the Kurds, at the end of the day, senior U.S. officials’ claims, using the language and jargon of marginal fanatical religious groups, regarding lands “granted to Israel by God” do not consist solely of Palestine. The so-called promised lands extend from the Nile to the Euphrates, encompassing a vast geography where Kurds live and there is no reason to believe that what is imposed on Palestinians would not tomorrow be imposed on Kurds or Turks. In such a context, one does not need great foresight to predict that whatever gains might come through them today will also be taken away by them tomorrow.

Furthermore, Öcalan’s views on global balances and on a series of

troubling regional developments parallel concerns expressed in Türkiye. His willingness to shoulder responsibility for a more comprehensive resolution that considers both the interior and exterior of Türkiye simultaneously, rather than focusing on a few tactical gains in Syria, creates a favorable opportunity for quicker steps to be taken.

External dynamics also feed a learning process, namely that finding a resolution to this matter domestically is in everyone’s best interest. The process referenced above, in which the 2013-2015 peace process was sabotaged by the U.S. and other states considered “allies of Türkiye” through developments in Syria, makes it clear that if these actors intervene again, a similar outcome is inevitable. The widely shared assessments arguing that dynamics that were functional

in conflict resolutions and ethnic peace in other cases, such as Ireland, Spain, and Colombia, do not play the same role in this case, point to finding a solution internally rather than through external dynamics and actors.

Global and regional developments also indicate the need to accelerate the resolution of internal issues. Israel's genocide in Gaza, its efforts to annex the West Bank, its activities aimed at subjecting the last remaining parts of Palestine to ethnic cleansing, its recklessness in attacking numerous countries, including Yemen, Iran, Lebanon, Qatar and Syria, and its occupation of territory within Syrian borders by exploiting the transitional situation in Syria have created an effect that alarms regional states, including Türkiye. In this regard, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's approach linking the Gaza issue to Türkiye's security is politically significant. Historical experience shows that ignoring the occupations of an expansionist regime is not a solution and that fanatical racist leaders such as Hitler and Netanyahu will not refrain from starting yet another war, regardless of whether they achieve gains. Israeli politicians have expressed that after Iran, it could be Türkiye's turn, which shows that peace in the region is constantly under threat. There is neither time nor need to debate the inconsistency of Israel committing genocide while simultaneously expressing sensitivity about the rights of Druze and Kurds in Syria and using this as justification for military intervention. The uncon-

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ditional support of the U.S. renders discussions on what the truth is or who is right and who is wrong meaningless. In other words, the official U.S. and EU statements fall short as mere diplomatic courtesy. As the killing of tens of thousands of children in Gaza is being carried out with U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic support, since these lives hold no value in their eyes, and that in the face of genocide, states like the U.S. and Germany may support the perpetrator, forcefully demonstrate that the peoples of the region must take matters into their own hands.

In this sense, an important external factor that hastens the return of internal issues to the agenda may be that the U.S. and Israel are shifting the regional balance in ways detrimental to the peoples of the region. Even if critical voices occasionally arise, the terror that Israel is unleashing in the region with U.S. support and supervision has reached a new level. The state of alert in regional countries is

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related to the fact that, with the genocide in Gaza, the U.S. and Israel have grown aggressive in a way that constitutes a clear and nearing danger. In such an environment, one of the most reasonable precautions appears to be reintroducing the resolution of issues that are already on a path toward settlement, leaving no room for external powers to exploit and instigate new tensions.

At the end of the day, internal and external dynamics and considerations of morality and utility all point to the reasonableness of moving together in the same direction. Domestically, the “Silent Revolution,” which refers to the steps taken in the last 23 years, drained the swamp in which violence could take root and created a suitable ground for steps that could compensate for past mistakes. (This ground had in fact been formed during the first decade with the “Unity and Fraternity Project,” and the resurgence of violence after the end of the peace process represented an anachronistic situation.) In this sense, the conditions

are now suitable for carrying out the final requirements of resolution, and Bahçeli’s İmralı move indicates that the path is clear for continuing in this direction. External dynamics, on the other hand, signal that no actor has the luxury of delaying resolving internal issues. The growing severity of global and regional problems serves as an important catalyst, showing that there is no room for postponement in putting the domestic issues in order. President Erdoğan’s statement that “as long as we keep the internal front solid, neither the terrorist organizations nor the evil forces that feed them and set them upon us will achieve their aims” should also be evaluated in this context.

Türkiye’s Democratic Tradition Must Play Its Historic Role

When we consider MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli’s political tradition, his political line, and the nationalist worldview he represents, it can be said that he has taken far more steps than what could reasonably be expected in this matter. However, expecting the same hero to shoulder all stages of the process would not be reasonable. If this is a team effort or a relay race, Bahçeli has done the most, and now responsibility falls primarily on Türkiye’s democratic political tradition, on its mainstream political parties and actors. Taking further steps along the path he has opened, rediscovering the so-called “spirit of the First Assembly,” and transferring this spirit into practice in accordance with the requirements of the 21st

century world essentially falls to the Justice and Development Party, the main actor of the political line that Christos Teazis calls “the republic of the seconds.”³ (The “seconds,” that is, the Second Group, refers to the heterogeneous political group of liberals, conservatives, Islamically oriented actors, and left-wing figures who shared similar sensitivities, who criticized the government on the basis of democracy and freedoms during the First Grand National Assembly period established in 1920, and who were eliminated and kept out of power in 1923.)

Considering that the main periods of democratization and liberalization, after the republic was established, were realized under the governments of this political tradition associated with the “second group,” and that the dates symbolizing the beginning of a new era such as 1950 (Democrat Party), 1983 (Motherland Party), and 2002 (Justice and Development Party) emerged as products of this political tradition, it becomes clearer who bears the primary responsibility for carrying out the process forward.

It should also be remembered that the center-right tradition, socially and politically rooted in the “periphery,” in the lower and middle classes, represented by the mainstream political parties of these groups, does not always move in the same liberating direction. Some actors within this tradition became part of the socio-political structure they sought to transform, were influenced by it, tended over time to govern like it,

and at various points faced democracy, human rights, and rule-of-law-based criticisms that were rightly directed at them as well. In this sense, governments that created problems regarding freedoms and the law did not emerge solely from the Kemalist political tradition but could also arise from its opposing tradition. However, the influence of this base and this political lineage has shown itself in every period, especially in times of crisis, through its capacity to regenerate democratic political actors from its own ashes.

The critical or oppositional characteristics of this political tradition toward the official ideology, which once made its presence felt much more sharply, allow the idea for a solution to move beyond the nation state’s ingrained assumptions shaped by the fears produced by the devastations of the 20th century. Unlike statist, centralist, and nationalist perspectives, this political tradition, by historically emphasizing principles such as “individual enterprise,” “decentralization,” and “liberty,” also carries the hope that flexible and inclusive solutions beyond a monolithic and centralist mindset may be possible. In terms of a solution to the Kurdish question, this means that they are less encumbered by ideological baggage when it comes to taking the steps required for the subsequent stages of the process.

Kazım Berzeg, one of Türkiye’s senior liberal thinkers, said in the 1990s, when Türkiye was trying to come out of a crisis, “The Turkish right must remember and once again

assume its historical responsibility in democratization.”⁴ At that time, this was realized, and a way out was found. Taking this as a starting point, today this mission again falls to the principal political actor of the same tradition. In this respect, no matter what the CHP and other actors do on the path to a solution, the AK Party should not forget that it is the main locomotive of the process. As the main actor coordinating the process, it should make an effort to keep channels as open as possible. It should also be as inclusive as possible. This would allow the process to continue with broad participation and with the principle of “leaving no one behind,” so that everyone can have a say in this new consensus.

The language of the process is also important. In this context, it should develop a language in line with inclusiveness, take the psychological aspects of the process into account, and try to ensure that a constructive peace discourse becomes dominant in everyday life and in public speech.

If in later stages the CHP withdraws its support or other types of problems emerge, perseverance is needed; the process must continue in one way or another. (Jonathan Powell, one of the architects of the Irish peace, said that one must keep turning the bicycle pedals and emphasized the importance of doing so in order not to fall.)

It is possible to note that the work of the commission at Parliament has so far presented successful results. However, when rights are at stake, one

must be self-confident, and reactions coming from a regressive standpoint, such as objecting to an expression in Kurdish or criticizing the speaker of the Grand National Assembly for making a statement in Kurdish, should not be allowed to slow things down. The agenda of the commission should not be decided by social media groups of racist parties and circles that act in an organized manner to sabotage the process. Every period of change and transformation, every comprehensive step taken toward resolving problems, can also create certain fears among various segments of society; this is understandable. A portion of society may fear what the change may bring. These fears must be understood, and a communication strategy aimed at alleviating them as much as possible must be developed. In addition, these fears must not slow down the process or act as barriers. In this sense, the psychology of the process can often become either a facilitator of politics or an obstacle to it. As such, one must not neglect the steps that need to be taken. Moreover, one should also expend energy on trying to end fears that will perhaps never fully disappear.

What Does It Mean to Set Out for Peace?

The goal of a terror-free Türkiye is expected to mean and produce a much more comprehensive outcome than simply eliminating the conflict and violence stemming from the Kurdish question. Firstly, this initiative paves the way for reconstructing a socio-

political order aligned with the spirit of the War of Independence and the First Assembly period and making the necessary constitutional and legal arrangements. This does mean, however, that it would automatically guarantee the making of an ideal constitution that enshrines justice, liberty, and historical rights in line with the telos of constitutionalism and that fulfills its requirements. Instead, it creates the necessary conditions for such a possibility.

At the same time, the easing of the political tensions creates a favorable atmosphere for discussing, once again, broader issues of democratization, freedom of expression, the functioning of the justice system, the Alevi question, and problems faced by minorities and other identities. In contrast to the stance of those who insist that “there can be no peace without democracy,” maximalists who set the bar so high from the outset that it becomes unreachable, or those who invoke the problems of democracy and freedoms in Türkiye as grounds to not support the commission solving the Kurdish question, the unity exhibited in this process is significant. It enables a deliberative environment and dialogue based on democratic communication. In other words, meeting and discussing the problems together and solving them through joint efforts lay the groundwork for a rapprochement that would make it possible to develop common perspectives for solutions to problems in other areas as well. A context in which weapons and violence are removed from the

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agenda also weakens the basis of the security-oriented perspective that has long strengthened its arguments through references to weapons and violence, and it implies that a number of administrative and legal practices, including the much-criticized trustee appointments, will no longer be justified.

This process must be regarded as an opportunity not only for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question but also for building a broader ground for meaning and emancipation. Civil monitoring and evaluation should be conducted so that the state, political actors in both government and opposition, the media, and academia can fulfill their respective roles in contributing to the resolution. In this context, it is important that the activities of political parties and the commission established for the solution are followed carefully and that civil society, when necessary, once again makes its presence felt strongly and generates bottom-up pressure.

In the final analysis, leaving behind the era built on the ruins of the upheaval experienced in the early 20th century and on the collapse of coexistence shattered by conflicts and wars along ethnic and religious lines, now represents a more attainable goal. In this sense, the terror-free Türkiye initiative promises more than simply the absence of terror. It offers a historic opportunity to rebuild, on the basis of justice and peace, a sociopolitical order in which everyone in the country can feel themselves included as equals in the society, regardless of their ethnic, religious, political, and cultural backgrounds and affiliations.

However, there is no “march of history” that unfolds independently of human beings and their efforts, and this historic moment could also be squandered. From this perspective, the days we are living through im-

pose a moral responsibility on everyone. Beyond ending violence, resolving ethnic, cultural, and political issues, and making the necessary legal arrangements, the country needs this process also for the contributions it can make in the long term toward establishing a more humane and peaceful social and political vision and ideal. ■

Endnotes

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