

Turkey

Kurdish militant group PKK says it will disband and end Turkey conflict

Historic announcement could bring a close to four-decade insurgency that has killed more than 40,000 people



Kurdish youths with a poster of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in Diyarbakir, south-eastern Turkey, in March © Sedat Suna/Getty Images

John Paul Rathbone in Istanbul

Published 18 HOURS AGO

Updated 03:59

The Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), the militant group that has been in conflict with the Turkish state for more than 40 years, said it would disband in a historic move with major political and security implications for the region.

The PKK had decided to “end the armed struggle”, according to pro-Kurdish news agency ANF, which published on Monday the closing statement of a PKK congress held in Iraq last week. The group had [declared a ceasefire](#) on March 1.

The PKK, which is designated a terrorist group by Turkey and its western allies, has been linked with US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria. Its decision could ease tensions between Nato member [Turkey](#) and the US over power-sharing arrangements in Syria.

The peace process, if successful, could also boost domestic political support for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as he seeks to extend his two-decade rule for another term, beyond presidential elections scheduled for 2028.

More than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict since the [PKK](#) launched its insurgency in 1984.

The congress said in its declaration that the PKK's struggle had "brought the Kurdish issue to the point of resolution through democratic politics, thus completing its historical mission".

Ömer Çelik, spokesperson for the governing AK party, called the move "an important step in terms of the goal of a 'terror-free Turkey'". He added in a [post on social media](#) that "if terrorism ends completely, the door to a new era will open".

"This is a big deal. It ends an almost 50-year war . . . It may help Turkey unify as a society. And Ankara hopes it will smooth the way for peace in Syria," said Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, a Turkish journalist at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

"But it has not been accompanied by any promise of a major political opening, domestically. It also opens up the possibility that Erdoğan could peel away Kurdish voters from the opposition — and no doubt that has also been a government consideration," she said.

The process gained momentum in February, when PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned on an island near Istanbul since 1999, urged the group to convene and decide formally to disband.

His call for peace came after key Erdoğan ally and ultranationalist politician Devlet Bahçeli made the unexpected move last October of asking Öcalan to disband the group, potentially in return for being released into house arrest.

Negotiations have since been conducted behind a wall of secrecy, and it remains unclear how the process will proceed, including how weapons will be disposed of, who would monitor the process, the fate of PKK militants and if the group's leaders might be given sanctuary in third countries.

Any concessions the PKK might obtain in exchange for its decision to disband have

not been disclosed. There is also the broader question of what political rights Turkey's Kurds, who make up almost a fifth of the country's 90mn population, might gain.

The pro-Kurdish DEM party, Turkey's third-largest political party, has called for recognition of Kurdish identity and culture in the country's constitution, Kurdish language teaching in schools, and the devolution of powers to local authorities in Turkey's Kurdish majority south-east.

"Necessary measures will be taken to ensure that the process in question progresses healthily and fluently," said presidency spokesperson Fahrettin Altun. "All steps will be taken sensitively, transparently, with determination and meticulousness."

One open question is how the process figures in Erdogan's domestic political calculations. To run for another term, Turkey's 71-year-old president needs to modify the country's constitution — a move that could potentially be achieved if he brought Kurdish voters on board.

Ominously, the peace process has taken place alongside the jailing of star opposition politician and Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, [whose arrest in March](#) sparked a financial markets crisis and the country's biggest mass protests in decades.

Multiple previous peace efforts have ended with failure, most recently in 2015. But this latest decision comes against a backdrop of major changes in both Turkey and the wider region.

The Turkish military led an effective drone-led counterinsurgency against the PKK for several years, which increasingly pushed militants out of the country and into Iraq and Syria.

The overthrow of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad then cast uncertainty over the position of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a group led by PKK offshoots and backed by US troops. The SDF had fought against Assad and guarded jails holding thousands of detained Isis fighters.

As part of the SDF's realignment, encouraged by Öcalan and approved by Ankara, it

struck a deal with Syria's new government in March, under which it promised to cede control of the state institutions it controls in north-eastern Syria to Damascus.

Turkey has since suggested it could take over counter-terrorist operations against Isis, working alongside Syria, Iraq and Jordan. US officials have said that they expect Washington will maintain its roughly 900-strong troop presence in north-eastern Syria for the time being.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Turkish politics

Government of Turkey

Kurdistan Workers' Party

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Turkey