

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Contested Borders and Fragmented Sovereignty in Kurdish Political Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

Kurds, who stand at the center of political, military, and social tensions between Türkiye and Syria, play a decisive role in the fate of both countries not only because of their ethnic identity but also due to their geographical concentration along critical borderlands and their evolving political agency. This study analyzes the intersectional role of the Kurds in the crisis management processes of both countries in light of the regional dynamics that have changed with the regime change in Syria and the withdrawal of US military support. The new political balances and autonomous structures in Syria, forcing a strategic defense reflex, have simultaneously found repercussions in Turkish domestic politics. The symbolic contacts initiated by MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, Abdullah Öcalan's call for disarmament, and the subsequent declaration of the PKK's dissolution, have shifted the issue from a security-focused crisis to a structural political initiative.

KEYWORDS

Türkiye; Syria; Kurds; PKK; PYD; Political Changes

Introduction

Kurds are arguably the largest ethnic group in the Middle East without a sovereign state of their own (Brown, 2018), and they frequently lack formal recognition as an ethnic minority within the countries they inhabit (Arakon, 2014). The Kurdish homeland, historically referred to as Greater Kurdistan, primarily spans across Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Contiguous communities also exist in Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly along Armenia's western borders, forming a compact Kurdish presence in the broader Middle Eastern context (McDowall, 2004; Tezcür, 2016). Within these states, Kurds have experienced varying degrees of forced assimilation, integration, and resistance (Jongerden, 2018; Skubsch, 2000). Long-term marginalization has significantly obscured Kurdish identity, complicating even rough estimates of the total population.

Recent research estimates that ethnic Kurds number between approximately 12 and 20 million in Türkiye, around 8 to 10 million in Iran, over 6.5 million in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (with additional populations in disputed territories), and roughly 2 to 2.5 million in Syria, while diaspora communities in Europe approach 1 to 1.5 million individuals (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025; Kurdistan Region Statistics Office, 2023; OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2024; UK Home Office, 2025; Kurdish Project, n.d.) Kurdish identity exhibits ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and sectarian diversity (Sunni, Alevi, Yazidi, etc.). Within Benedict Anderson's framework of "imagined communities," Kurdish identity has been alternately suppressed by states or reinforced through collective resistance (Yıldız, 2005). Moreover, the Kurdish diaspora in Europe estimated at over one million individuals in Germany alone has emerged as a

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significant transnational actor in the construction and mobilization of Kurdish political and cultural identity (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge [BAMF], 2023; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). As illustrated in Figure 1 Kurdish populations are distributed across multiple state boundaries, reinforcing the transnational character of the Kurdish question.

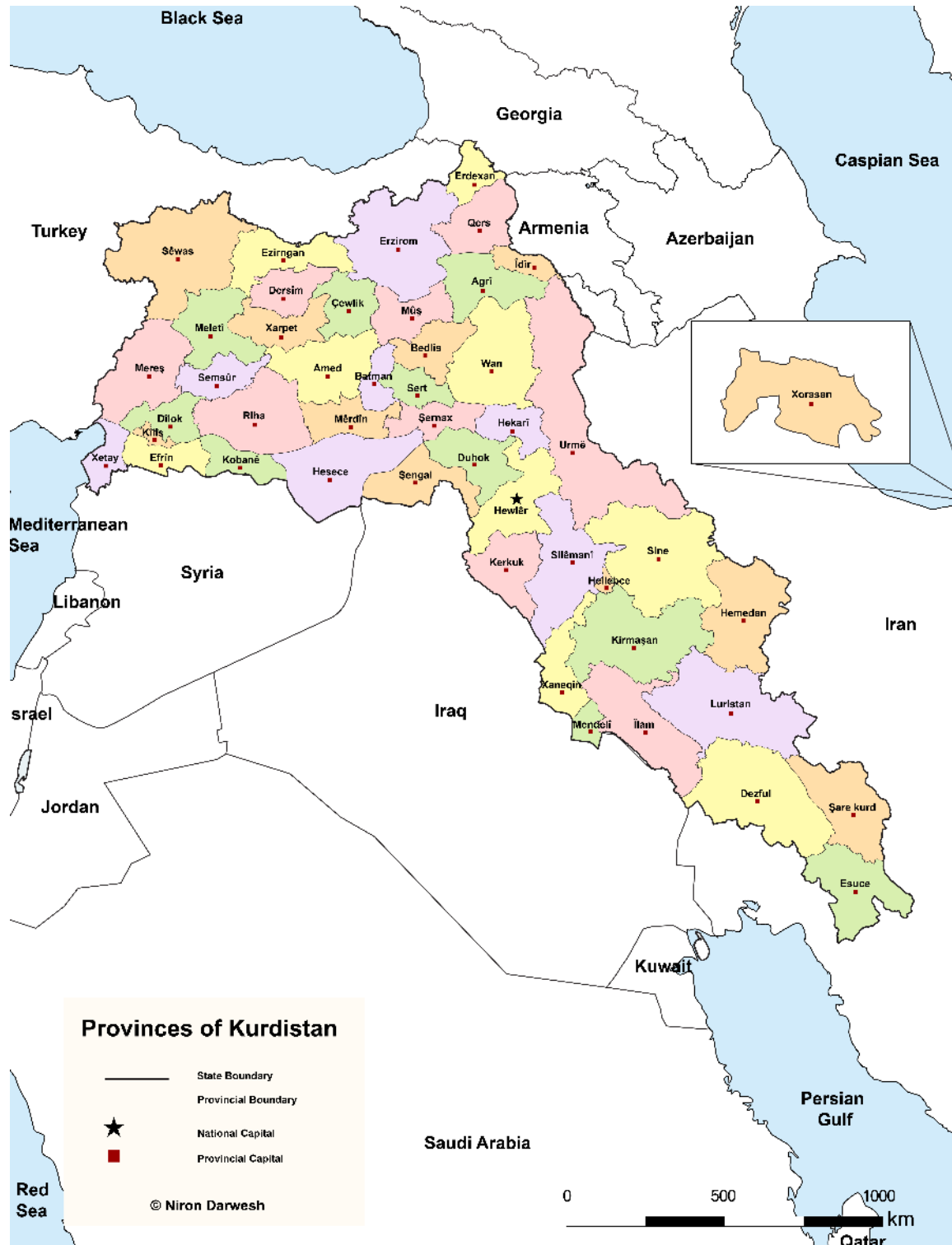


Fig. 1: Region of Kurdistan (author: Niron Darwesh)

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Building on this historical and sociopolitical background, this article analyzes the evolving role of Kurdish actors in Türkiye and Syria, analyzing how identity formation, state transformation, and regional geopolitical restructuring have reconfigured the Kurdish question as a central determinant of domestic governance and regional stability

Despite being one of the largest ethnic groups in the Middle East, the Kurds did not succeed in establishing an independent nation-state during the twentieth century. Although competing theories exist concerning their ethnogenesis, the dominant scholarly consensus identifies the Kurds as a Kurdish-speaking population within the Indo-European language family, historically inhabiting the mountainous regions of Upper Mesopotamia and the Zagros–Taurus belt (McDowall, 2004; van Bruinessen, 1992).

Under the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish communities maintained a considerable degree of local autonomy through tribal confederacies and hereditary leadership structures operating within the imperial framework. This relative autonomy began to erode in the nineteenth century with the centralizing Tanzimat reforms, which aimed to consolidate state authority and diminish the power of local Kurdish elites (McDowall, 2004; Van Bruinessen, 1992). These reforms marked a structural shift in state Kurdish relations, transforming negotiated autonomy into centralized governance.

Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, homogenizing nation-building policies were intensified to consolidate a singular national identity. In response to these assimilationist measures, the early Republican period witnessed a series of significant Kurdish uprisings. These included the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925, the Ararat (Ağrı) Uprisings between 1927 and 1930, and the Dersim Rebellion of 1937–1938 (McDowall, 2004; Yıldız, 2005).

As Uğur Ümit Üngör (2012) notes, the Turkish central government forcefully suppressed these movements and framed them not as expressions of ethnic grievance, but as reactionary threats to the secular and unitary integrity of the nation-state. Consequently, Kurdish identity became increasingly securitized, embedded within Republican ideology as a perennial internal security risk rather than a distinct cultural or ethnic category (Yeğen, 1996; Zeydanlioğlu, 2008).

This exclusionary paradigm reached its most institutionalized form following the 1980 military coup, which deepened repression and formalized assimilationist policies. The 1982 Constitution provided a legal foundation for expansive “Turkification,” leading to the dismantling of Kurdish cultural institutions, the effective prohibition of Kurdish in public life, and the criminalization of Kurdish personal names. By 1986, more than 2,800 village names had been officially replaced with Turkish equivalents (McDowall, 1997; 2000). Thus, a climate of structural repression emerged, fostering what Yavuz (2001) describes as a “siege mentality.” This environment, in turn, politicized Kurdish identity and contributed directly to the decision of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to launch armed struggle in 1984.

Moreover, the conflict rapidly acquired a regional dimension. Exploiting geopolitical tensions between Ankara and Damascus, the PKK utilized Syrian-controlled territories, particularly the Bekaa Valley, for logistical consolidation and training (Yeğen, 2016). Consequently, the internationalization of the conflict significantly expanded its scope during the 1990s. As Türkiye intensified counterinsurgency operations, both state forces and insurgents were implicated in widespread human rights violations, and civilian populations were disproportionately affected by displacement and violence (Oran, 2010). Although the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 facilitated through international intelligence cooperation temporarily reduced hostilities, it did not produce a structural resolution. Rather, the absence

of a comprehensive political settlement prevented durable conflict transformation (Çandar, 2013).

Within this broader historical trajectory, Kurdish political mobilization in modern Türkiye has consistently articulated demands centered on identity recognition, cultural rights, and meaningful political representation. These demands have been framed either within democratization discourses or, conversely, within securitized national security paradigms. Nevertheless, despite recurring waves of repression particularly during the 1990s and the post-2015 securitization period Kurdish political actors have contributed significantly to broader democratic debates, often aligning with pro-democracy and leftist platforms (Jasim, 2024; Watts, 2010).

Furthermore, socioeconomic disparities have compounded the Kurdish question. Predominantly Kurdish regions in southeastern Türkiye continue to face structural underdevelopment, infrastructural limitations, and comparatively restricted access to public services relative to western provinces. Although Türkiye has experienced overall economic growth, regional inequality has remained persistent (World Bank, 2023). These economic disparities reinforce demands not only for cultural recognition but also for equitable access to education, healthcare, and development opportunities (Güneş, 2012; World Bank, 2023). In this respect, the Kurdish question reflects structural socioeconomic justice concerns alongside identity-based claims.

Against this structural backdrop, the early twenty-first century marked a significant recalibration under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The state moved from an exclusively militarized framework toward limited political engagement, partly driven by European Union accession conditionality that encouraged reforms in minority rights and democratization (Yeğen, 2011). During the 2000s, restrictions on Kurdish-language broadcasting and cultural expression were eased; however, core demands such as local autonomy, mother-tongue education in public schools, and expanded political representation remained largely unmet (TESEV, 2008). Consequently, the reform trajectory remained partial and structurally constrained.

The 2013–2015 “Solution Process” (Çözüm Süreci) represented the most comprehensive attempt at a negotiated settlement, aiming at PKK disarmament and the institutional integration of Kurdish political actors (Çandar, 2013). Direct dialogue with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan generated cautious optimism. However, the collapse of the process in mid-2015 amid renewed violence, domestic polarization, and shifting regional dynamics reinstated a securitized policy framework centered on counterterrorism and cross-border operations, thereby constraining prospects for a durable democratic resolution (Yeğen, 2016).

The collapse of the Solution Process cannot be adequately interpreted without reference to what may be conceptualized as a “Syrian spillover.” As the Syrian civil war reconfigured regional power balances, the locus of the Kurdish question increasingly extended beyond Türkiye’s territorial boundaries (Gunter, 2014; Schmidinger, 2018). The rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the institutional consolidation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria transformed Syrian Kurdish actors into territorially entrenched and internationally visible stakeholders (Allsopp, 2014; Tezcür, 2016). Consequently, Ankara assessed the institutional consolidation in northern Syria as reflecting cross-border organizational continuity, thereby integrating it into its counterinsurgency framework against the PKK. (Yeğen, 2016; Gunter, 2014).

Nevertheless, the Syrian Kurdish trajectory itself was rooted in a longer history of structural marginalization. Prior to 2011, an estimated 2 to 2.5 million Syrian Kurds faced systematic exclusion, most notably through the “Arab Belt” policy designed to disrupt demographic continuity along the border (Tezcür, 2023; UK Home Office, 2025). Thus, the termination of Türkiye’s domestic peace initiative coincided with an evolving regional environment in which Kurdish political and military actors were accruing unprecedented leverage. However, rather than remaining a confined domestic governance issue, the Kurdish question became embedded within broader geopolitical transformations, rendering it a structurally regional phenomenon shaped by cross-border dynamics.

The Syrian conflict markedly internationalized the Kurdish issue by embedding it within broader patterns of great-power intervention and alliance politics. The United States’ military partnership with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the campaign against ISIS conferred enhanced operational capacity, international legitimacy, and diplomatic visibility upon Kurdish armed actors (Gunter, 2014; Turan, 2025). At the same time, this cooperation generated strategic friction within the NATO framework, as Washington’s reliance on Kurdish forces contributed to the consolidation of a new security order in northern Syria that diverged from Ankara’s regional threat assessments (Yeğen, 2016; Babahanoğlu, 2024). The resulting divergence in strategic priorities deepened tensions in U.S.–Türkiye relations and became a structurally embedded feature of Ankara’s Syria policy.

Today, the Kurdish question remains a defining factor in both Türkiye’s domestic politics and the broader regional order. The coexistence of armed PKK elements and legally operating Kurdish political actors produces structural ambiguity in state responses, while the persistent tension between a security-centered state paradigm and rights-based Kurdish claims continues to obstruct institutionalized political inclusion, sustaining cyclical instability (Allsopp, 2014).

The Kurdish experience in Syria reflects a distinct yet comparably exclusionary model rooted in Arab nationalist state-building (Allsopp, 2014). Institutional marginalization intensified with the 1962 “exceptional census” in al-Hasakah, which stripped approximately 120,000 Kurds of citizenship, classifying them as *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktumin* (unregistered). This created a hereditary population of stateless persons deprived of civil and socioeconomic rights, including property ownership, public employment, and legal registration. Subsequent decades under the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party entrenched these exclusions through Pan-Arab ideology, while authoritarian rule under Hafez al-Assad reinforced Arabization policies and securitized governance structures, particularly in the northeast (Van Dam, 1996).

The “Arab Belt” (Hizam Arabi) project of the 1970s represented the most aggressive manifestation of these policies. Fertile lands along the Turkish border were confiscated from Kurdish farmers and redistributed to Arab settlers from Raqqa and Aleppo to fragment Kurdish demographic continuity across Syria, Türkiye, and Iraq. In parallel, the state banned Kurdish language in schools and workplaces and Arabized thousands of village names, framing Kurdish identity as a threat to national unity (Tezcür, 2016; Allsopp, 2014; Yıldız, 2005). Partial citizenship restoration under Bashar al-Assad in 2011 occurred after decades of structural exclusion, which had already reshaped demographic, economic, and political realities (Geopolitique.eu, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 1996; McDowall, 2004).

This long history of marginalization laid the groundwork for Kurdish autonomy demands in Rojava (Western Kurdistan). The 2011 Syrian Civil War created a power vacuum that allowed historically suppressed and fragmented Kurdish communities to mobilize longstanding grievances, form new alliances, establish autonomous administrations, and emerge as visible

actors in the international arena. Consequently, Kurds evolved from a marginalized population defined by statelessness into a strategic actor capable of influencing regional power balances (Gunter, 2014; Schmidinger, 2018).

The Baathist regime initially achieved national stability through economic development and infrastructure projects, but these gains were overshadowed by widespread human rights violations and systemic repression. Following Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, power transferred to his son, Bashar al-Assad, who briefly raised hopes for reform during the "Damascus Spring." However, most reforms remained superficial, and Bashar continued his father's authoritarian legacy, centralizing power within the Baath Party and security apparatus (Phillips, 2016). This authoritarian continuity set the stage for the political and social unrest that erupted into the Syrian Civil War in 2011, which rapidly evolved into a complex, multi-sided proxy conflict (Lister, 2015).

Amid this fragmentation, historically marginalized Kurdish communities in northern Syria seized the opportunity to assert political and cultural agency. Years of state-imposed Arabization and rights denial had fostered a strong collective identity, which facilitated the establishment of autonomous administrations in Rojava. The withdrawal of Assad regime forces from Kurdish-majority areas in 2012 created a security vacuum filled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wings, the YPG and YPJ, culminating in the formation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The AANES implemented a decentralized governance model based on "Democratic Confederalism," emphasizing grassroots democracy, gender equality, and ethnic pluralism, influenced by the writings of Abdullah Öcalan (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016).

Kurdish-led administrations consolidated both security and civil governance, but their expansion complicated relations with regional powers, particularly Türkiye, which views the PYD as a PKK extension and a national security threat (Gunter, 2014). Large-scale displacement and repeated conflict tested the Kurds' capacity to provide services, yet their pivotal resistance against ISIS especially in Kobani (2014–2015) elevated them to global prominence. This success facilitated the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015, a multi-ethnic coalition largely led by Kurdish commanders, positioning them as key partners in Western military strategy against jihadist extremism (Balanche, 2018; Phillips, 2020).

Since the 1980s, Kurdish movements across the region have increasingly adopted ideological frameworks to pursue political representation. The PKK's transnationalization of the Kurdish issue extended Türkiye's domestic conflict into a regional phenomenon, shaping the emergence of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in the early 2000s (Gunter, 2014; Allsopp, 2014). This transnationalization also attracted the attention of external powers. Israel historically cultivated relationships with Kurdish actors, particularly in northern Iraq, as part of broader regional strategy, while the United States has intermittently supported Kurdish groups to advance strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria (Phillips, 2020; Mondoweiss, 2017). These interactions illustrate that the Kurdish question has long functioned as a site of regional contestation, where local grievances intersect with international strategic calculations.

The Kurdish political landscape remains internally diverse. Tensions persist between the dominant PYD and the rival Kurdish National Council (KNC), as well as strategic differences with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Nevertheless, Kurdish actors across Syria, Türkiye, and Iraq have increasingly coordinated against shared existential threats, notably ISIS. This regional collaboration, together with growing influence in both local and international arenas, demonstrates the transformation of Kurdish movements from marginalized populations into

central actors shaping the Middle East's political architecture (Schmidinger, 2018; Balanche, 2018).

From Historical Marginalization to Strategic Agency: Deepening Regional Dynamics and Contemporary Recalibration

The transformation of Kurdish political movements in the 21st century cannot be understood solely through the lens of armed insurgency or state repression. Rather, it reflects a gradual shift from reactive mobilization toward strategic agency shaped by regional conflict, transnational ideological diffusion, and fluctuating great-power involvement. While Kurdish movements in Türkiye and Syria emerged from structurally similar patterns of exclusion, their trajectories have diverged in response to distinct state strategies, international alignments, and internal organizational dynamics.

The Kurdish political trajectories in Türkiye and Syria reveal structurally parallel dynamics shaped by securitization, contested sovereignty, and evolving forms of political agency. Although embedded within distinct state systems, Kurdish movements in both countries operate within an interconnected geopolitical field in which domestic policy, cross-border insurgency, and international intervention interact. As Barkey and Fuller (1998) argue, the Kurdish question constitutes not merely a minority rights issue but a transnational security and governance challenge affecting regional order.

In Türkiye, the Kurdish question has evolved within this deeply securitized framework, centering on the PKK. The insurgency launched in 1984 gradually shifted from demands for independence to claims for autonomy and cultural rights, producing over 40,000 deaths and extensive socioeconomic disruption (Marcus, 2007; Gunter, 2011). Ankara's response, grounded in counterterrorism, military operations, and administrative centralization, has institutionalized a durable security paradigm (Yeğen, 2009). Although recent reporting has noted cautious signals of dialogue and potential demobilization (Al Jazeera, 2025), these initiatives coexist with continued security operations and centralized oversight in Kurdish-majority municipalities (Reuters, 2025), highlighting the persistent tension between containment and political accommodation.

In Syria, Kurdish mobilization emerged from longstanding repression, including citizenship denial and restrictions on linguistic and cultural expression. The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War created an unprecedented opportunity structure. As central authority receded from the north and northeast, Kurdish forces consolidated territorial control and constructed *de facto* autonomous administrations. Often described as the "Rojava Revolution," the cantons established under the Democratic Union Party (Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira) were structured around Democratic Confederalism, gender inclusion, multi-ethnic representation, and ecological sustainability (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016; Mondoweiss, 2017).

This transformation enabled Syrian Kurds to shift from a historically marginalized minority to a strategic actor shaping the balance of power in the Levant (Dalay, 2021). However, Türkiye framed this governance experiment as an extension of the PKK, defining it as an existential security threat. Consequently, Kurdish-controlled areas have faced sustained military pressure from Ankara and remain unrecognized by Damascus. The durability of these structures continues to depend on fragile military alignments across the Euphrates and broader geopolitical recalibrations (Reuters, 2025).

Importantly, Syrian Kurdish autonomy has been shaped by pragmatic strategic calculation. Kurdish forces largely avoided direct confrontation with the Assad regime, prioritizing territorial consolidation and cooperation with international actors in the fight against ISIS (Middle East Eye, n.d.). This pragmatism strengthened their military and diplomatic leverage but also rendered their project vulnerable to shifting external alliances. Simultaneously, Türkiye's interpretation of the Syrian Democratic Forces as linked to the PKK effectively merged the Syrian and Turkish Kurdish arenas within Ankara's security doctrine (Al Jazeera, 2025). More recent discussions of negotiated reintegration into Syrian state structures illustrate the fragility of de facto autonomy under sustained geopolitical pressure (CounterPunch, 2026; MintPress News, n.d.).

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, Kurdish leadership adopted a pragmatic "Third Way" strategy, prioritizing consolidation in regime-withdrawn territories and the fight against ISIS over direct confrontation with Damascus. This approach strengthened their military capacity and enhanced their international leverage, particularly through U.S. backing (Allsopp, 2014; Tezcür, 2023; Middle East Eye, n.d.). Simultaneously, Israel's regional posture influenced Kurdish calculations, as the state monitored northern Syria and Kurdish forces for strategic purposes, including countering Iranian influence and shaping local alliances (MintPress News, n.d.). By leveraging these external relationships, Syrian Kurdish actors were able to sustain autonomous governance structures while navigating regional hostilities and competing international expectations, though their strategy also drew criticism from segments of the Syrian Arab opposition and rival Kurdish factions, such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC), for perceived proximity to the Assad regime.

Over time, regional and international recalibrations narrowed the scope of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Türkiye consistently framed Kurdish-controlled areas as extensions of the PKK, defining them as an existential security threat (Al Jazeera, 2025). Simultaneously, fluctuating U.S. commitments and periodic withdrawal signals reinforced Kurdish vulnerability within broader geopolitical calculations (Middle East Eye, n.d.). Recent reporting indicates negotiations between Kurdish authorities and Damascus that could facilitate conditional reintegration into Syrian state structures, suggesting a shift from revolutionary autonomy toward negotiated incorporation. Nevertheless, the fragile military balance across the Euphrates and competing external interests sustain the risk of renewed fragmentation should these arrangements falter (MintPress News, n.d.; CounterPunch, 2026; Reuters, 2025).

The historically suppressed, fragmented, and politically excluded identity of the Kurds has undergone a profound transformation, particularly in the wake of the regional crises of the 21st century. The militarization of the conflict in Türkiye and the power vacuum created by the Syrian Civil War have enabled Kurdish movements to form new alliances, build autonomous administrations, and emerge as visible actors in the international arena. Consequently, the Kurds have evolved from a marginalized peripheral entity into a strategic actor capable of influencing regional power balances. The Syrian Civil War, in particular, accelerated this shift, elevating the Kurds from an "intermediate" proxy to a "main" geopolitical player (Gunter, 2014; Phillips, 2020).

The 2013–2015 "Resolution Process" (Çözüm Süreci) marked a brief but significant attempt at negotiated settlement. Structured dialogue with Abdullah Öcalan, partial PKK withdrawal, and discussions of constitutional reform signaled movement toward political accommodation. However, its collapse in mid-2015 exposed the fragility of reform within a deeply securitized environment. Renewed clashes and the consolidation of Kurdish-led

administrations in northern Syria intensified Ankara's threat perception, illustrating how regional dynamics directly shaped domestic security calculations (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Following 2015, Türkiye consolidated a policy of containment toward Kurdish political and military actors. Military operations including Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), Peace Spring (2019), and Claw-Lock (2022) were publicly justified as preemptive actions against PKK-affiliated formations along the southern border (W, 2019; Reuters, 2025). Concurrently, domestic measures reinforced a securitized model of governance: trustee appointments to Kurdish-majority municipalities and legal actions against pro-Kurdish political figures, most notably the arrest and detention of Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), exemplified the tension between electoral representation and centralized security control (BBC News, 2021).

Despite these structural constraints, symbolic and rhetorical shifts hint at potential recalibration. In 2024, nationalist leader Devlet Bahçeli publicly referred to PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan as "Mr. Öcalan," a highly unusual form of address that carries symbolic weight in Türkiye. For the Turkish public, this phrasing is significant because Öcalan is widely associated with militancy and national security threats; using a respectful title signals, at least rhetorically, the possibility of reconsidering rigid political taboos surrounding dialogue with Kurdish actors (Al Jazeera, 2025). Nonetheless, any substantive transition toward meaningful reform will remain contingent on stabilizing the broader regional environment, achieving alignment among international stakeholders, and the ability to disentangle domestic security concerns from cross-border Kurdish empowerment.

Taken together, the Kurdish political trajectories in Türkiye and Syria illustrate a nested security dilemma: domestic reform is perceived as potentially weakening state authority, while regional Kurdish empowerment intensifies internal securitization. In both contexts, Kurdish movements have transitioned from marginalized actors to central stakeholders in regional geopolitics, yet their institutional achievements remain provisional. The durability of Kurdish political agency ultimately depends on inclusive constitutional arrangements, negotiated incorporation, and stabilization of regional power dynamics.

Relationship with Developments in the Process

Devlet Bahçeli's public reference to Abdullah Öcalan as "Mr. Öcalan" signals more than a rhetorical anomaly; it reflects a recalibration within the elite consensus regarding the Kurdish issue in Türkiye. In contrast to President Erdoğan's historically cautious and strategically ambiguous positioning, Bahçeli's intervention indicates an assumption of political ownership over the emerging process. Contemporary analyses suggest that this discursive shift reframes dialogue not as a partisan concession but as a state-led initiative situated within nationalist legitimacy frameworks (Al Jazeera, 2025).

This leadership dynamic carries significance in multiple dimensions. First, it reduces uncertainty surrounding political authorization. In protracted conflicts, elite fragmentation often undermines negotiation credibility; Bahçeli's endorsement signals intra-state consolidation behind potential engagement. Second, it reconceptualizes Öcalan, not solely as a criminalized insurgent, but as a functional interlocutor within a structured negotiation process. Recognizing an interlocutor is a foundational element of conflict transformation, particularly when insurgent movements maintain hierarchical command structures (Romano,

2006). Third, Bahçeli's language appears calibrated to manage nationalist constituencies, mitigating potential backlash and social resistance to renewed talks.

However, a critical asymmetry persists between discourse and institutional reform. While rhetorical normalization expands the negotiation space, structural measures remain limited. The current trajectory prioritizes disarmament, whereas constitutional guarantees and mechanisms for decentralization continue to occupy a secondary role. This sequencing reflects continuity with the state's longstanding emphasis on security-first frameworks. Nonetheless, formally recognizing Öcalan as an interlocutor implicitly acknowledges that disarmament cannot proceed independently of political concessions (Romano, 2006).

Recent developments further reinforce the perception of strategic recalibration. Reports from late 2024 and early 2025 indicate that segments of the PKK have undertaken limited de-escalation measures, including partial withdrawals from southeastern Türkiye and northern Iraq (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2025). While these actions do not amount to full demobilization, they constitute the most substantial shift since the collapse of the 2013–2015 Resolution Process. Simultaneously, evolving regional alignments and renewed backchannel communications have reduced immediate confrontations, although the security environment remains fragile (Reuters, 2025; CounterPunch, 2026).

Internal divisions within the PKK persist, with hardline elements skeptical of negotiation and factions willing to engage conditionally (ICG, 2025). Nevertheless, the current moment represents a potential strategic window: a convergence of rhetorical normalization, limited de-escalation, and recalibrated regional positioning. The sustainability of this window hinges on Türkiye's willingness to move beyond a narrowly securitized framework, integrating political concessions, institutional assurances, and regional diplomatic coordination (Mondoweiss, 2025; Countercurrents, 2025).

Recent developments further complicate the calculus of Kurdish strategic positioning. The United States' announced withdrawal of approximately 1,000 troops from Syria significantly alters security guarantees for Syrian Kurdish actors and indirectly affects PKK calculations in Türkiye (Al Jazeera, 2026). Concurrently, evolving relations between Kurdish authorities in northern Syria and Damascus suggest a tentative reintegration framework, potentially recalibrating cross-border Kurdish leverage while exposing vulnerabilities to renewed fragmentation (MintPress News, n.d.; Middle East Eye, n.d.).

In this context, the Kurdish political agency operates within a nested security dilemma. Symbolic shifts, such as Bahçeli's reference to Öcalan, intersect with tangible operational developments, including partial PKK de-escalation and regional realignments, producing conditional opportunities for dialogue. However, the durability of these openings depends on continued elite consolidation, credible institutional guarantees, and the stabilization of regional and international commitments, illustrating the complex interplay between domestic political recalibration and broader geopolitical dynamics (Mondoweiss, 2025; CounterPunch, 2026; Countercurrents, 2025; Middle East Eye, n.d.; MintPress News, n.d.).

Regional Interdependence and Strategic Constraint

The domestic Kurdish process in Türkiye remains deeply intertwined with regional dynamics, particularly developments in northern Syria. Ankara's security doctrine continues to frame Kurdish-led governance structures across the Euphrates as extensions of the Kurdistan

Workers' Party (PKK), positioning them as existential threats to national security (Al Jazeera, 2025; Dalay, 2021). As a result, political and military developments in Syria directly influence the perceived feasibility of domestic reform, constraining Ankara's policy flexibility (Güneş & Lowe, 2015).

Recent reporting underscores the fluidity of the Syrian Kurdish position. Armed actors across the Euphrates remain in strategic competition, while negotiations between Kurdish authorities and Damascus suggest possible reintegration into centralized state structures (Reuters, 2025). CounterPunch (2026) characterizes this phase as a potential "sunset" of the Syrian Kurdish rebellion, whereas MintPress News (n.d.) highlights the geopolitical implications of rapprochement between Kurdish actors and the Assad regime, particularly regarding U.S. military presence. Meanwhile, Middle East Eye (n.d.) emphasizes the volatility of U.S. commitments and their implications for Kurdish security guarantees. These dynamics are further complicated by Israel's strategic interests in northern Syria and Iraq, which have historically shaped Kurdish military and political choices, reinforcing the perception among Syrian Kurds that external actors are critical for maintaining autonomy (CounterCurrents, n.d.). Turkish policymakers perceive Syrian Kurdish autonomy as a multiplier of domestic insurgent capacity, while Syrian Kurdish actors view regional volatility as justification for strategic pragmatism. In this context, the interdependence of these arenas constrains unilateral domestic reform and reinforces the linkage between internal democratization and external security calculations.

These dynamics exemplify a nested security dilemma. From Ankara's perspective, Syrian Kurdish autonomy functions as a multiplier of domestic insurgent capacity, reinforcing the securitized framing of the Kurdish question. Conversely, Syrian Kurdish actors interpret regional volatility including shifting alliances, U.S. withdrawals, and intermittent international support as justification for pragmatic, flexible strategies that prioritize survival, territorial consolidation, and diplomatic leverage. The interdependence of these arenas constrains unilateral reform in Türkiye while simultaneously linking domestic democratization prospects to external security considerations, underscoring the complex interplay between national policy, cross-border insurgency, and international geopolitics.

Prospects for Kurdish Agency in Türkiye and Syria

Looking forward, Kurdish actors in both Türkiye and Syria are likely to remain central to regional political restructuring. Their future influence will hinge on four interrelated variables: (1) the orientation of state policies toward inclusion or continued securitization; (2) shifts in regional power dynamics; (3) internal cohesion and strategic alignment within Kurdish movements; and (4) the posture and consistency of international actors (Al Jazeera, 2025; CounterPunch, 2026; MintPress News, n.d.).

In Türkiye, the Kurdish question remains inseparable from broader processes of democratization. Expansion of political participation, institutional safeguards for local governance, and protection of linguistic and cultural rights will determine whether Kurdish mobilization can transition into meaningful constitutional integration. Should rhetorical normalization, such as elite-level references to Abdullah Öcalan, evolve into structured negotiation channels, Kurdish actors could assume a more constructive and stable role within national politics. Conversely, if reform is subordinated to security and disarmament

imperatives, cycles of mistrust and marginalization are likely to persist, constraining both domestic and regional stability (Al Jazeera, 2025; International Crisis Group [ICG], 2025).

In Syria, Kurdish political capacity in Syria has been significantly shaped by their experience of autonomous governance in northern territories. This administrative experience has increased organizational capacity and altered regional power balances. However, long-term institutionalization of Kurdish gains will depend on the post-war constitutional settlement and the extent to which Damascus accommodates decentralized governance arrangements (Reuters, 2025). Moreover, the willingness of the United States, Israel, and other international actors to engage with Kurdish authorities will likely influence the sustainability of self-governance, as these powers can provide security guarantees, economic support, and diplomatic leverage critical for negotiating post-conflict settlements (Mondoweiss, 2017; MintPress News, n.d.). Simultaneously, continued Turkish military pressure and fluctuating U.S. engagement introduce uncertainty into the sustainability of autonomous structures (Middle East Eye, n.d.). Beyond security considerations, Kurdish participation in post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian coordination is likely to be significant, particularly in migration management and social reconciliation, but their effectiveness will hinge upon regional stabilization, legal recognition, and the willingness of central authorities to incorporate decentralized actors into formal governance frameworks.

Beyond immediate security considerations, Kurdish actors are likely to play a significant role in post-conflict reconstruction, humanitarian coordination, and social reconciliation. Administrative experience in northern Syria positions Kurdish institutions as potential partners for reconstruction, refugee and migration management, and local governance. Yet, the effectiveness of such participation will depend on broader regional stabilization, recognition of Kurdish administrative authority, and the willingness of central governments to integrate decentralized actors into formal governance frameworks (MintPress News, n.d.; CounterCurrents, 2026).

Overall, the trajectory of Kurdish agency in both Türkiye and Syria underscores the interdependence of domestic political reform, regional power dynamics, and international engagement. The degree to which Kurdish actors can consolidate and institutionalize their gains will hinge on navigating this complex, multiscalar landscape, balancing internal cohesion with external pressures, and translating de facto governance experience into recognized political influence.

Conclusion: A Conditional Opportunity in a Fluid Landscape

The role of the Kurds in the social and political dynamics of Türkiye and Syria constitutes a central axis for understanding both conflict persistence and peace-making efforts in the contemporary Middle East. Kurdish demands for political participation, cultural recognition, decentralization, and economic inclusion have evolved from marginal claims into structurally significant variables shaping state policy and regional security configurations. As this analysis demonstrates, Kurdish movements are no longer peripheral actors but key stakeholders whose strategies, alliances, and governance practices directly affect regional stability.

The current conjuncture represents neither definitive resolution nor irreversible escalation. Rather, it reflects a conditional opportunity shaped by elite recalibration, limited de-escalation, and regional realignment. In Türkiye, developments such as Bahçeli's discursive shift

signal elite-level willingness to reconsider structured dialogue, while partial PKK de-escalation indicates reciprocal strategic adjustment (Al Jazeera, 2025; ICG, 2025). In both Türkiye and Syria, the Kurdish question intersects with broader processes of state transformation, securitization, and geopolitical recalibration. Specifically, in Türkiye, the trajectory of democratization remains closely tied to how the state manages Kurdish political participation and institutional reform. In Syria, the sustainability of Kurdish self-administration and its potential reintegration into centralized structures will significantly influence post-conflict reconstruction and regional balance-of-power dynamics. Across both contexts, Kurdish agency operates within a complex matrix of domestic political constraints, regional rivalries, and fluctuating international engagement.

However, sustainable peace in Türkiye and stabilization in Syria requires movement beyond symbolic gestures. Militarized containment alone cannot achieve durable stability; multidimensional approaches are necessary, combining security arrangements with constitutional reform, recognition of cultural rights, and inclusive governance mechanisms. Institutional reform, credible guarantees of political participation, and normalized Kurdish representation remain essential. Where these conditions are met, prospects for coexistence and democratic consolidation increase. Conversely, when securitized frameworks dominate, cycles of mistrust and instability tend to persist. The Kurdish question, therefore, must be understood not solely as an ethnic dispute but as a test case for democratic pluralism, regional cooperation, and post-conflict governance in the contemporary Middle East.

Importantly, the developments discussed in this analysis reflect an ongoing and fluid process. As of February 2026, negotiations, regional alignments, and internal political recalibrations remain in motion. Rhetorical shifts, partial de-escalation measures, and evolving state strategies may generate new opportunities or renewed tensions in the months ahead. Consequently, these conclusions should be understood as an assessment of a dynamic landscape rather than a definitive endpoint. The Kurdish issue in Türkiye and Syria continues to evolve, and future political decisions, regional realignments, and international interventions may substantially reshape current trajectories.

Ultimately, the future role of the Kurds in Türkiye and Syria will depend not only on their internal social and political dynamics but also on the willingness of states and international actors to adopt inclusive, rights-based, and cooperative approaches. Whether the region moves toward stabilization or renewed fragmentation will hinge on how these intertwined processes unfold.

Abbreviations used in text:

PYD: Democratic Union Party, the dominant Syrian Kurdish political party, which administers the Rojava cantons. The party is ideologically linked to the PKK, even though it denies being a branch of the PKK.

YPG: People's Protection Units, the militia associated with the PYD.

KNC: Kurdish National Council, an umbrella body, based in Erbil, made up of smaller Syrian Kurdish political parties that are ideologically linked to the KDP and the PUK in Iraq. It does not include the PYD.

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government, the administration, formed in 1992 and officially recognized in 2005, that governs the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party, the militant organization, formed in 1978, which is the dominant Turkish Kurdish group.

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Iraqi Kurdish political party which controls the most important positions in the KRG and has a long-standing rivalry with the PKK.

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