

In this week's *Türkiye in Focus*:

- Türkiye stands at the beginning of a historic transformation following the PKK's decision to disarm and dissolve itself.
- A significant portion of the opposition parties is struggling to align with the "Terror-Free Türkiye" initiative.
- Türkiye's role in mediation efforts between Ukraine and Russia is gaining increasing prominence.

## A Historic Moment: PKK Announces Disbandment and Disarmament

During the Turkish Parliament's opening session on October 1, 2024, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli's unexpected gesture of turning toward the DEM Party's benches and greeting its members left everyone stunned. The swift sequence of events that followed this surprising move by the leading figure of Turkish nationalism toward a pro-Kurdish party culminated this week with the PKK announcing its decision to lay down arms and dissolve itself. President Erdoğan welcomed the development by stating, "After all the pain we have endured, we believe our nation is on the threshold of a brighter future." In his message, Bahçeli thanked the President, PKK's founding leader Abdullah Öcalan, and senior DEM Party officials for their efforts in facilitating peace. With this step—arguably the most concrete move toward resolving a decades-old conflict—a notably optimistic atmosphere has taken hold of Turkish domestic politics.

It is important to recognise that this peace process should not be seen as just a series of events that unfolded since October 2024. Since the 1990s, Türkiye has made multiple attempts to silence arms and create a conducive environment for political dialogue. The first of these was the ceasefire process in 1993. However, for various reasons, none of these earlier efforts succeeded. The relative success of the current process can be attributed to the development of several factors, which can be broadly classified into domestic and international dynamics.

The most prominent domestic factor can be traced back to the period following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic: unresolved tensions surrounding citizenship and national identity. Over the last two decades, Türkiye has made notable progress in accommodating Kurdish identity and culture. A symbolic example is the establishment of TRT Kurdi, a state-run Kurdish-language television channel. On the other side, the PKK has gradually toned down its separatist demands. These mutual evolutions have, over time, strengthened the foundation for compromise.

A key domestic factor is the significant military success achieved by the Turkish state, marked by a dramatic decline in terrorist activity. Over the past decade, the PKK's armed operations within Türkiye's borders have sharply decreased. While sporadic attacks have occurred, they have been much more limited compared to previous decades. This trend highlights the effectiveness of Türkiye's counter-terrorism approaches.



(Raşit Aydoğan - Anadolu Agency)

Considering that the Kurdish population spans across four countries in the Middle East, it is essential to also take into account the regional and international aspects of this issue. Most experts agree that the collapse of the previous peace process in 2015 was primarily driven by the deeply contrasting views of the two sides regarding Syria. Today, the fall of the Assad regime and the potential for a stable future in Syria that is in alignment with Türkiye are critical factors to consider.

That said, the PKK's decision to disarm and dissolve should be viewed not as the conclusion of the process but rather as its beginning. Presidential Chief Legal Adviser Mehmet Uçum remarked: "The new era is expected to strengthen Türkiye in every respect. It is widely acknowledged that the country will enter a new phase marked by comprehensive reforms in democracy and the rule of law, embodying a national and patriotic democratic legal framework."

The disarmament of the terrorist organisation also implies the removal of constraints over civilian politics. In this context, new legal reforms are being discussed, some of which may affect individuals currently imprisoned on terror-related charges. At the same time, as Uçum has previously noted, this process marks a fundamental paradigm shift—one that is expected to directly influence upcoming debates on drafting a new constitution.

In short, Türkiye still faces numerous challenges that need to be debated and resolved. However, it would not be wrong to predict that a "terror-free Türkiye" will positively impact the quality and tone of political discourse and policymaking going forward.

## The Opposition is facing a critical test in the Terror-Free Türkiye process.

As Türkiye undergoes a historic transformation, opposition parties are struggling to adapt to the new reality. Except for the İYİ Party, the leaders of all parliamentary opposition parties have, despite some reservations, expressed support for the process. However, dissenting voices within the CHP raise questions about how the main opposition will position itself in the future.

Following the PKK's disarmament announcement, nationalist rhetoric has become more prominent in opposition-leaning media. Hardline nationalist factions within the CHP have begun framing the disarmament process in emotionally manipulative ways, turning it into a tool of political propaganda.

Türkiye has lost tens of thousands of lives over the past 40 years due to this conflict, not to mention the severe economic and social costs. The ongoing peace process is being carefully managed to ease these long-standing societal wounds. The fact that Devlet Bahçeli—arguably the most prominent nationalist figure in the country—is now a staunch supporter of the process is a major factor in building social consensus. However, if nationalist reactions from the opposition's base and figures within the CHP begin to influence party leadership, this could lead to an intensification of efforts to derail the process.

In this context, the CHP faces two choices. The first is to appeal to nationalist sentiments, which could risk alienating the Kurdish support it has garnered in recent years. The second option is to actively support the peace process and focus on gaining Kurdish votes. In any case, cracks start to appear between the CHP leadership, its grassroots base, the party's organisation, and its affiliated media. How long these contradictions can be managed—and which path the party ultimately chooses—will become clearer soon.



(Esra Bilgin - Anadolu Agency)

## Türkiye's Role as a Neutral Ground for Russia-Ukraine Talks



(TUR Presidency/Murat Çetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

Last week, Türkiye was at the centre of intense diplomatic negotiations. Delegations from Russia and the United States, as well as Ukrainian President Zelensky and his team, were in Türkiye for Russia-Ukraine talks. We asked researchers Hüseyin Özdemir and Çağdaş Yüksel for their insights on these developments.

Researcher Hüseyin Özdemir shared the following views on Türkiye's role in the Russia-Ukraine negotiations:

"Türkiye has emerged as a pivotal player in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, particularly with the proposed talks in Istanbul on 15 May 2025. Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed direct negotiations in Türkiye without preconditions—a notable shift from previous indirect talks facilitated by the US and other nations. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has expressed readiness to participate, underscoring Türkiye's position as a neutral and trusted venue. US President Donald Trump described Türkiye as a "great host" and expressed optimism about the talks, further affirming its diplomatic credibility.

Türkiye's selection as a mediator by both Russia and Ukraine is grounded in its balanced relations, pragmatic neutrality, and proven track record. Ankara maintains rare open communication channels with both Moscow and Kyiv. Past successes, such as brokering the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 and facilitating prisoner exchanges, have reinforced Türkiye's reputation as a reliable intermediary.

Its geopolitical proximity, NATO membership, EU candidacy, and Türkiye's active diplomacy further elevate its role. Türkiye's policy of prioritising dialogue over sanctions has allowed it to maintain constructive relations with both sides. President Erdoğan's rapport with both leaders and the trust underpinning Türkiye's mediation.

The Istanbul talks represent a critical moment, marking the first direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine since March 2022. Coming after more than three years of conflict and stalled diplomacy, this meeting may signal a turning point towards de-escalation.

International actors, including the US and EU, are closely monitoring developments, hopeful that Türkiye's mediation might yield a ceasefire or lay the groundwork for a broader peace process. Although the 2022 talks in Istanbul did not result in a resolution, the city's role in hosting them reinforces its symbolic and practical significance as a trusted venue for dialogue. Türkiye's consistent pursuit of a fair and lasting peace, supported by its diplomatic standing, positions it as a uniquely capable facilitator. While outcomes remain uncertain, the talks themselves mark a vital opportunity for advancing peace-building efforts."

Researcher Çağdaş Yüksel, on the other hand, analysed these developments within the context of Türkiye-US relations:

"The Ukraine-Russia peace talks held in Istanbul are noteworthy not only in terms of the future of the war but also in terms of Türkiye's position on the international diplomatic stage and the relations between Ankara and Washington.

The fact that the Washington administration stated Donald Trump would personally attend the talks if Russian President Vladimir Putin participated and then assigned Secretary of State Marco Rubio to represent the US is striking in terms of reminding both the US and the international public of Türkiye's role as a mediator. Indeed, the meetings previously held in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, and attended only by the Ukrainian and US delegations, had progressed in a limited context and did not yield any concrete outcomes.

The talks in Istanbul reflect not only Türkiye's but also the US's process of redefining its position in this equation. Following Donald Trump's re-election as president, there has been a visible shift in US foreign policy. The Trump administration has adopted a more economically driven approach compared to previous terms regarding the Ukraine issue; while seeking strategic gains through the Rare Earth Elements Agreement with Ukraine, it has also looked for ways to re-establish diplomatic contacts with Russia. This dual strategy indicates that US foreign policy has shifted from a classical security-focused approach toward areas of economic influence.

At precisely this point, Türkiye's strategic value for Washington is coming back onto the agenda. In recent years, disagreements over issues such as Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Gaza, Türkiye's removal from the F-35 program due to the S-400 purchase, and the imposed sanctions had caused tensions in the relationship. However, with Trump's return to the presidency, a normalisation process has begun thanks to the positive impact of personal relations at the leadership level. Trump's positive remarks about President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan underscore this process, while Erdoğan's diplomatic efforts to ease sanctions on Syria have made this rapprochement concrete.

Indeed, the recent announcement by the DSCA, which is affiliated with the Pentagon, regarding the sale of AIM-120C-8 AMRAAM missiles worth \$225 million and AIM-9X Sidewinder missiles worth \$79 million to Türkiye shows that the US has missed a serious opportunity in its security and defence policy toward Türkiye. This development is one of the most significant positive steps since Türkiye's removal from the F-35 program in 2019. At the same time, these decisions indicate that Türkiye is once again intended to be placed at the centre of the regional security architecture.

In conclusion, the peace talks held in Istanbul are not merely a technical negotiation process aimed at ending a war; they are also a strategic diplomatic platform in which Türkiye's global mediator identity has once again been confirmed, and the US have clearly recognised this role. Türkiye is one of the rare actors that can establish direct dialogue with Russia, maintain ties with the West within NATO, and bring both sides to the table simultaneously. This unique balancing capacity turns Türkiye into an indispensable actor not only for the region but also for global crises. In this context, the US must further develop its alliance with Türkiye in order to strengthen its diplomatic influence in the region."

### Highlights

- The informal NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Antalya.
- Following his talk with President Erdoğan and other leaders, the US President announced his decision to lift sanctions on Syria.
- Indian tourists have started canceling trips to Türkiye and Azerbaijan following the countries' support for Pakistan amid tensions with India. Although cancellations have surged by 250% and bookings have dropped by 60%, experts suggest the boycott will have little impact, as Indian tourist numbers are relatively low compared to other nationalities.

### Recent Publications by TRT World Research Centre

- [From Battlefield to Boardroom: The Real Power Broker in Ukraine's Peace Talks](#) by Çağdaş Yüksel
- [From Pressure to Diplomacy: Prospects for a U.S.-Iran Nuclear Deal](#) by Mehmet Kılıç



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