Can Reconciliation Happen without (Positive) Peace? Justice, Politics and the Kurdish Conflict

by Güneş Daşlı

Since October 2024, Turkey has witnessed the unexpected revival of peace talks with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The initiative, led by Devlet Bahçeli of the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – long known for his opposition to any dialogue with the Kurdish movement – has sparked both hope and deep scepticism.

At first glance, the move suggests a shift in tone. Yet, with the government tightly controlling information and offering little transparency about Öcalan's engagement, many remain unconvinced. For many Kurds and civil society actors, this revival of talks recalls the short-lived 2013–2015 peace process, which collapsed without ever addressing historical injustices or state violence – particularly from the 1990s.

Just like a decade ago, President Erdoğan's motivations appear politically driven. In 2015, the government abandoned peace efforts after the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) victory in the election which prevented the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) from gaining a majority in the parliament. What followed was a harsh military campaign in Kurdish regions, a crackdown on civil society, and mass

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arrests of opposition politicians and journalists. Today, Erdoğan is again facing political uncertainty – and again resorting to peace overtures as a tool to regain electoral ground ahead of the next presidential elections.

This raises critical questions: Can reconciliation truly happen without a formal transition? What role does justice play in sustaining peace – and can civil society advance reconciliation in the absence of state commitment?

Peace in complex conflict realities

Dominant models of reconciliation assume a clear, linear sequence: violence ends, a peace agreement is signed, justice mechanisms follow, and only then can reconciliation begin. But this idealised path rarely reflects the complex realities of protracted conflicts, particularly in the Middle East.

In Turkey and Syria, where national and geopolitical factors deeply entrench conflict dynamics, expecting reconciliation to follow a set script may be counterproductive. Should victims and civil society actors simply wait for a peace agreement that may never arrive? For many Kurdish activists, the answer is no.

Based on interviews with Kurdish civil society actors working on justice, memory and truth, a clear picture emerges: reconciliation, for them, is not something to be delayed. Many reject the idea that reconciliation must wait for conflicts to formally end. Instead, they pursue grassroots peacebuilding efforts within ongoing cycles of violence – challenging both political orthodoxy and international peacebuilding norms.

This aligns with the so-called "Hölderlin perspective" to reconciliation that calls for reconciliation in the midst of strife rather than in a post-conflict setting.[1] This alternative perspective recognises that even temporary reductions in violence can create moments for meaningful reconciliation. In this framing, reconciliation is not an outcome, but an ongoing process that can unfold even during conflict.[2]

Recognition without assimilation

One alternative framework gaining traction is "agonistic reconciliation". Unlike traditional models that rely on consensus or shared narratives, agonistic approaches accept ongoing political disagreement as a feature of democratic life. Rather than aiming for unity, this model makes space for pluralism, enabling diverse groups to contest, negotiate and engage without violence.[3]

This is highly relevant to Turkey's Kurdish conflict. The Kurdish legal parties represented in the parliament

[1] Jena Center for Reconciliation Studies website: *What Is Reconciliation About?*, https://www.jcrs.uni-jena.de/154.

[2] Martin Leiner, "Conclusion: From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation", in Martin Leiner and Christine Schliesser (eds), *Alternative Approaches in Conflict Resolution*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 175-185.

[3] Sarah Maddison, "Agonistic Reconciliation: Inclusion, Decolonisation and the Need for Radical Innovation", in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (2022), p. 1307-1323, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2006054.

have not demanded secession but rather advocated for democratic autonomy -self-governance within Turkey's borders. The Kurdish political project, shared by the PKK, HDP and actors in Rojava, has emphasised coexistence without assimilation. But the Turkish political system has long shut down these efforts, treating Kurdish demands as threats to national unity rather than opportunities for democratic dialogue. The collapse of the 2013–2015 process showed how fragile even partial political openings can be when the state reverts to authoritarian reflexes.

Today, the idea of agonistic reconciliation offers a way forward. It does not ask Kurds to assimilate or renounce political claims but instead invites the Turkish state to recognise difference – and build peace around it.

At its core, political reconciliation in this context is about reclaiming agency. Kurds in Turkey and similarly in Syria have long been denied meaningful political representation. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict, which began in 1984 and escalated through the 1990s, is not only a military confrontation, but an expression of structural inequality embedded in the foundation of the Turkish Republic. This is an asymmetric conflict between a powerful state and a marginalised population.[4] For civil society actors, the conflict itself is a symptom of long-standing historical injustice – decades of cultural repression, forced displacement and systematic denial of political rights.

Despite this, Kurdish actors continue to engage in nonviolent political projects. They advocate not for revenge or separation, but for a reimagined Turkey – one where democracy accommodates pluralism, and reconciliation does not require silence. As many activists highlight, this includes building cross-community solidarity with other oppressed groups, such as Alevis, Yezidis and Armenians, while resisting the ethnicisation of blame: Kurdish victims and activists identify the state as the main perpetrator of war crimes, but do not perceive 'the Turks' – as a collective identity – as responsible. This distinction reflects an openness to societal-level reconciliation, in contrast to the ongoing political deadlock.[5]

Justice as an enabler of reconciliation

One of the most pressing questions is whether reconciliation is possible without justice. In the current peace talks, unlike the 2013–2015 process,[6]

[4] Bahar Baser and Alparslan Ozerdem, "Conflict Transformation and Asymmetric Conflicts: A Critique of the Failed Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process", in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 8 (2021), p. 1775-1796, DOI 10.1080/09546553.2019.1657844.

[5] Ayşe Betül Çelik, "Inclusive Citizenship and Societal Reconciliation within Turkey's Kurdish Issue", in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2021), p. 313-132, DOI 10.1080/14683857.2021.1909284.

[6] Öcalan repeatedly said that a truth commission modelled on the South African example should be established. See Bahar Baser, "Intricacies of Engaging Diasporas in Conflict Resolution and Transitional Justice: The Kurdish Diaspora and the Peace Process in Turkey", in *Civil Wars*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2017), p. 470-494, DOI 10.1080/13698249.2017.1396528. HDP, the pro-Kurdish party, proposed a bill on establishing a truth commission in the Parliament, See "HDP Proposes Truth and Facing Commission", in *Bianet*, 14 January 2015, https://bianet.org/haber/hdp-proposes-truth-and-facing-commission-161545.

there has been no discussion of legal accountability, truth-telling or reparations. Yet civil society actors working closely with victims stress that justice is not a separate track from reconciliation – it is the foundation.

Justice restores trust. When victims see acknowledgment of their suffering and accountability for crimes, it creates the emotional and political space needed for coexistence. But in Turkey, the long-standing culture of impunity has only deepened mistrust between the Kurdish population and the state.

Justice also prevents future violence. Without guarantees of non-repetition, cycles of repression and retaliation are likely to continue. Trials, truth commissions or even symbolic acknowledgments can function as powerful signals of change. In their absence, reconciliation remains fragile.

Civil society organisations continue to push for these mechanisms despite the hostile climate. Legal struggles against impunity, demands for truth about enforced disappearances and efforts to document past abuses are all acts of peacebuilding – even if they are rarely recognised as such.

Importantly, research in post-conflict contexts has shown that victims are often willing to engage in reconciliation when justice is pursued seriously. One Kurdish activist summed it up clearly: "If justice is done properly, people will forgive."[7]

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[7] Personal interview with a Kurdish activist working on enforced displacement, 20 August 2021.

Rethinking reconciliation in Turkey

While the current talks may suggest progress, they are unlikely to deliver a lasting settlement unless grounded in justice, inclusivity, and political recognition. Policymakers – both in Turkey and internationally – must adopt a broader view of what reconciliation entails.

First, Turkish authorities must move beyond using peace talks as short-term political tools. Reconciliation cannot be micromanaged or postponed indefinitely. It demands transparent dialogue, acknowledgment of past harms and an honest reckoning with the state's role in the conflict.

Second, international actors engaging with Turkey should support grassroots reconciliation initiatives. Groups like the Peace Mothers and the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network Turkey are already engaged in the difficult work of building peace from below, often without institutional backing.

Third, justice should be understood not as an obstacle but as an enabler of peace. Legal accountability and truth-seeking are essential to any credible and lasting settlement.

Finally, reconciliation must allow space for continued political disagreement. Rather than aiming for consensus or a unified national identity, democratic structures – including a new constitution – should embrace contestation, plural ethnic identities and decentralised power-sharing.

The renewed Öcalan talks may open a window of opportunity, but only if approached with seriousness and inclusivity. Reconciliation doesn't wait for the perfect agreement – it happens in the messy, painful and uncertain space between violence and peace. Notably, this peace initiative is unfolding in a much more challenging political climate than the failed 2013–2015 process. Since then, the AKP-MHP government has intensified its authoritarian policies, which have extended to include all opposition groups, specifically the secular-Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP). This shift prompted an unprecedented coalition between opposition forces during the 2019 local elections, most notably between the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the CHP, culminating in a landmark victory in the Istanbul mayoral race.

This time, the CHP and its leadership have openly declared their support for the peace process, despite maintaining strong criticism of the government's authoritarianism. Similarly, the DEM Party (successor to the HDP) continues to engage in peace negotiations while simultaneously resisting the AKP's repressive policies. These multi-directional political dynamics offer hope for overcoming *both* authoritarian rule and the protracted Kurdish conflict, potentially paving the way for a more democratic future.

6 May 2025

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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