

From Crackdown to Calculated De-escalation

**Human Rights Abuses Against
Turkey's Kurdish Population between
2020–2025**



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Executive Summary

This consolidated report summarises the findings of the 'Turkey Rights Monitor' Weekly Bulletins by Solidarity with Others¹, covering the period between June 2020 and November 2025. It provides an analytical account of evolving state policies, human rights trends, and political dynamics affecting the **Kurdish population in Turkey** under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule. The six annual chapters reveal a trajectory from systematic repression ('the stick') to calculated de-escalation and rhetorical appeasement ('the carrot').

- **Persistent Repression (2020–2023):** From mid-2020 through 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government carried out a **systematic campaign of repression** against Turkey's Kurdish population – including politicians, journalists, and civilians. Under the guise of counterterrorism, authorities **detained and prosecuted thousands of Kurdish activists and officials**, removed elected representatives, banned protests, censored Kurdish culture and media, and tolerated torture and ill-treatment in custody[1][2]. Virtually all Kurdish political expression was conflated with terrorism, as exemplified by the ongoing imprisonment of Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtaş despite a 2020 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruling ordering his release[3].
- **Criminalization of Kurdish Politics:** The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – the country's second-largest opposition bloc – was relentlessly targeted. **Dozens of elected Kurdish mayors were removed** from office and replaced by state-appointed "trustees," effectively nullifying local election results[4]. By early 2021, trustees had been imposed on **48 out of 65 HDP-run municipalities** won in 2019[4]. Meanwhile, over **5,000 HDP members and officials** were behind bars on terrorism-related charges[5]. In 2021, prosecutors initiated a **closure case to ban the HDP** and over 450 of its politicians[6]. Mass trials – such as the so-called "Kobani trial" of 108 Kurdish activists – were used to punish past protests and **silence Kurdish political opposition**[7].
- **Censorship and Cultural Suppression:** Kurdish journalists and media outlets faced **pervasive censorship, arrests, and violence**. Independent Kurdish news agencies (e.g. Mezopotamya, JinNews) endured waves of website bans and

¹ See Annex to this report on <https://solidaritywithothers.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/web-Annex-Report.pdf>

police raids[8][9]. Reporting on Kurdish issues often led to terrorism charges; by late 2022 at least **69 journalists were in prison** in Turkey, many for covering Kurdish-related stories[10]. Kurdish language and culture were systematically stifled – from bans on Kurdish-language theatre performances and music[11] to the removal of bilingual public signs by appointed trustees[12][13]. Even everyday expressions of Kurdish identity (speaking Kurdish in public, on social media, or in prisons) were punished as “propaganda” or “security” threats.

- **Abuses of Security and Judicial Powers:** Security forces and courts were **deployed as instruments of repression**. Provincial governors maintained blanket bans on Kurdish gatherings (the province of Van, for example, banned public assemblies continuously since 2016)[14]. Peaceful protests – including mothers seeking justice for disappeared relatives and Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations – were met with police violence and mass detentions[15][16]. **Torture and ill-treatment** of Kurdish detainees were routinely reported[17]. Notorious cases like that of Osman Şiban and Servet Turgut – two Kurdish villagers thrown from a military helicopter in 2020, resulting in Turgut’s death – underscored the climate of impunity for security forces[2]. The judiciary, far from providing redress, was **openly complicit**: courts kept Kurdish leaders jailed in defiance of ECtHR rulings[18][3], relied on secret witnesses and politicized indictments, and even prosecuted lawyers who defended Kurdish clients[19]. Turkey’s legal system thus served to **legitimize political persecution**, undermining fair trial rights and the rule of law.
- **International Condemnation:** The Turkish government’s treatment of Kurds drew strong criticism from international bodies. The ECtHR’s Grand Chamber in December 2020 found Demirtaş’s continued detention to be **politically motivated** – a rare Article 18 ECHR violation – and ordered his immediate release[3]. Ankara’s refusal to comply prompted the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers to initiate infringement proceedings for the first time in its history (previously used only in one other case)[20]. United Nations experts and the European Parliament also condemned the **erosion of democratic rights**, noting that dozens of HDP mayors had been arbitrarily replaced and that Kurdish politicians faced systematic harassment[21][22]. However, despite these rebukes and the threat of sanctions, Erdoğan’s administration largely ignored international rulings and appeals, insisting its actions were necessary in the fight against “terrorism.”

- **Emerging Rhetorical Shift (2024–2025):** By late 2023 and into 2024, as Turkey headed into critical elections and economic strains, the regime **softened its tone** toward the Kurdish issue without enacting meaningful reforms. The frequency of overt violations against Kurds modestly declined[23], and nationalist coalition leaders began floating surprising gestures of conciliation. In October 2024, Devlet Bahçeli – leader of the ultranationalist MHP and Erdoğan's governing ally – **called for renewed dialogue** with Kurdish leaders, even suggesting that jailed PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan be allowed to address parliament in exchange for endorsing an end to the insurgency[24][25]. President Erdoğan in early 2025 publicly embraced the goal of a **"Turkey without terror"**, framing it as a historic opportunity to end the 40-year conflict[26]. By June 2025, the weekly human rights bulletins recorded *no* new Kurdish-related violations for the first time in years[27]. However, this **"carrot" – a rhetorical peace initiative – came after years of the "stick."** It did not reverse past injustices: Kurdish leaders like Demirtaş remained imprisoned, and elsewhere the government's authoritarian repression merely shifted onto other targets (for example, opposition CHP mayors were detained and replaced with trustees in late 2024)[28][29]. The overtures toward Kurds thus appeared largely tactical, aimed at shoring up domestic and international legitimacy while **preserving the regime's centralized control.**

1

Introduction

Introduction

Turkey's Kurdish population – estimated at 15–20% of the country (over 15 million people) – has long faced state repression and denial of basic rights. The **Kurdish question** in Turkey centres on the struggle for cultural recognition, political representation, and autonomy, set against the Turkish state's insistence on unitary national identity. Decades of armed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (which launched an insurgency in 1984) have been accompanied by harsh government policies towards Kurdish civilians, including forced village evacuations in the 1990s and widespread human rights abuses[30][31]. Yet there have also been periods of relative reform. In the early 2000s, Turkey's European Union candidacy spurred some cultural openings (e.g. limited Kurdish-language media) and a briefly hopeful **peace process** with the PKK from 2013 to 2015. That peace process was too collapsed by President Erdoğan in mid-2015, ushering in a new chapter of intense violence and repression in the Kurdish-majority southeast. Kurdish cities like Diyarbakır saw heavy fighting; hundreds of civilians were killed, and entire neighbourhoods were devastated during security operations in 2015–2016[32]. President Erdoğan, pivoting from negotiation to a nationalist stance, formed an alliance with the hardline Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and pursued an unabated "**securitization**" of the Kurdish issue[33][34].

Following the failed coup attempt of 2016 (unrelated to the Kurdish movement), Erdoğan ruled under a ruthless state of emergency, mainly targeting the Gülen movement, and decreed sweeping powers that would later be used to suppress Kurdish political expression. In 2016–2017, dozens of democratically elected Kurdish mayors were summarily **removed and arrested**, and the government appointed trustees to run 94 municipalities in their stead[35][36]. In November 2016, the HDP's co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ (members of Parliament) were arrested alongside a dozen other HDP MPs. These moves decapitated the legal Kurdish political leadership. Although the state of emergency was lifted in 2018, most emergency decrees were cemented into law, providing a legal facade for continued crackdowns. In 2019,

despite this hostile climate, the HDP again won 65 municipalities (mostly in the southeast) in local elections – only to see **nearly three-quarters of those mayors swiftly removed** on terrorism allegations[37]. The pattern was clear: when Kurds voted for their chosen representatives, the state nullified the result. By 2020, the stage was set for an intensified campaign to **criminalize Kurdish civic life** entirely, from elected officials and political parties to journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens.

This report documents the **human rights violations committed by the Turkish government against the Kurdish population** from June 2020 through November 2025. It is based on primary data from weekly human rights monitoring bulletins² compiled by *Solidarity With OTHERS*, a Brussels-based NGO, supplemented by reports from international bodies (United Nations, Council of Europe), human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), court documents (including ECtHR judgments), and official Turkish statements and legal rulings. The aim is to provide a fact-based account of how state repression evolved over this five-year period – tracing a trajectory from **blatant, heavy-handed oppression (“the stick”) to a later strategy of calculated appeasement (“the carrot”)**. Each section of the report corresponds to a year (mid-2020 being grouped with the second half of 2020), detailing key patterns of violations and notable developments. Thematic sub-sections address recurring issues – such as the **criminalisation of Kurdish politics**, suppression of free expression, cultural rights violations, prison conditions, and international legal responses – to highlight both continuity and change. An overview of major statistical indicators (e.g. number of arrests, media bans, and trustee appointments) is included in tables and figures for reference.

Throughout, the report finds that **President Erdoğan’s approach toward the Kurds has been cyclical and instrumental**. Repressive measures were ramped up to quash Kurdish political autonomy and intimidate dissent, especially when Erdoğan’s ruling coalition felt secure or challenged by Kurdish electoral success. Conversely, when facing electoral pressure or international scrutiny, the government dialled down visible repression and floated promises of reconciliation – without fundamentally altering the structures of oppression. This dual strategy of *coercion followed by co-optation* was encapsulated in late 2024, when the very architects of the crackdowns began advocating a “Turkey without terror” initiative – essentially inviting Kurdish cooperation on the state’s terms

² See Annex to this report for individual cases and links to each source.

<https://solidaritywithothers.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/web-Annex-Report.pdf>

after years of violent **subjugation**³[24][38]. The concluding section of the report examines this strategic shift, questioning whether it represents a genuine step toward peace or merely a tactical reset in service of Erdoğan's consolidation of power.

1

Introduction

³ Even **Ahmet Türk** – a veteran Kurdish politician and former Mardin mayor who has been ousted and replaced by government-appointed trustees three times since 2016 – has now offered striking public praise for President Erdoğan. Türk, now in his 80s and undergoing treatment for lung cancer, gave a *pro-Erdoğan* interview to the government-aligned *Sabah* daily on 3 November 2025 (available at <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/tuba-kalcik/2025/11/03/ahmet-turk-cozum-sureci-hakkinda-net-konustu-terorsuz-turkiye-icin-guclu-bir-irade-var>). In it, he lauded Erdoğan as “the most effective leader since Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk]” and credited the President's support for the new “peace process” as the reason it is advancing. He even professed “*great respect*” for ultra-nationalist MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, extolling Bahçeli's “state-minded” stance in backing Erdoğan's initiative. Observers have viewed Türk's sudden effusive praise – directed at the very authorities who repeatedly removed or jailed him – as a stark symbol of the Kurdish political leadership's subjugation under Erdoğan's dominance.

2

2020

2

June–December 2020

Consolidating the Crackdown

(Period Covered: 23 June 2020 – 31 December 2020.)

The latter half of 2020 marked a **concerted escalation in state repression** targeting Kurdish political representation, freedom of expression, and civil liberties. Building on the post-2015 crackdown, the Turkish authorities intensified measures to dismantle Kurdish opposition. In these six months, the government **framed virtually all Kurdish activism as terrorism**, leveraging the judiciary, law enforcement, and administrative fiat to cement control over Kurdish-majority regions and silence Kurdish voices nationwide.

Political Repression and “Trustee” Takeovers

By mid-2020, the pattern of **ousting elected Kurdish mayors** and replacing them with government-appointed officials (trustee, *kayyım* in Turkish) had become institutionalized. In July 2020, an Interior Ministry decree was used to remove dozens more mayors on dubious terrorism grounds[39]. Of the 65 municipalities won by the HDP in the March 2019 local elections, **47 had been seized by the state and put under trustee administration as of July 2020**[40]. This effectively disenfranchised millions of Kurdish voters. For example, in June 2020 the trustee appointed to Batman province not only ran the city but even **removed Kurdish-language pedestrian signs**, erasing visible elements of Kurdish culture from public space[12][13]. Mayors who had been democratically elected – such as those of Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Van in 2019 – were jailed or prosecuted.⁴ In one week of June 2020 alone, authorities detained the ousted HDP mayor of Siirt and six others in dawn raids[41], arrested a former Kurdish district mayor in Erzurum[42], and sentenced **68 Kurdish politicians and activists to up to 10**

⁴ See footnote 3 for Ahmet Türk’s dismissal and his recent reaction to the so-called new “peace process”.

years in prison based on alleged PKK links[43]. The clear intent was to **cripple Kurdish political capacity** at the local level and deter any future electoral challenges to the ruling party's authority in the southeast[44][45].

Opposition members of Parliament also remained behind bars. **Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ**, former HDP co-chairs and presidential candidates, had been in pre-trial detention since 2016 on trumped-up terrorism charges. In late 2020, Turkish courts *openly defied* an ECtHR Grand Chamber judgment (22 December 2020) that found Demirtaş's imprisonment to be politically motivated and ordered his immediate release[46][3]. An Ankara court on 26 December 2020 simply refused to implement the Strasbourg ruling, indicating Turkey's willingness to breach international law rather than release a prominent Kurdish leader[47].⁵ President Erdoğan dismissed the ECtHR decision, while his nationalist allies accused European institutions of "supporting terrorists." This **intransigence** set the stage for a protracted standoff with the Council of Europe over Turkey's compliance with human rights obligations.

Freedom of Expression and Media under Attack

The latter half of 2020 saw a **relentless crackdown on Kurdish and independent media**, alongside broader censorship. Journalists reporting on Kurdish issues were harassed with detentions and legal charges. In June, a young Kurdish journalist, Beritan Canözer of JinNews, was sentenced to nearly 2 years in prison for "terrorist propaganda" simply due to her social media posts[48]. Over the summer, police raided homes and offices of Kurdish news agencies; reporters from outlets like *Mezopotamya* and *Yeni Yaşam* were among dozens detained[49][50]. Courts routinely **blocked access** to Kurdish news websites – JinNews faced over 25 separate website bans by 2020[51]. Even artistic expression was targeted: Kurdish musicians and actors found their performances banned, and social media users were arrested for posting in Kurdish[52][53].

At the same time, Turkey's media regulator RTÜK and the Information Technologies Authority (BTK) aggressively shut down alternative narratives. In July 2020, for instance,

⁵ At the same time, following the ECtHR Grand Chamber panel's rejection of Turkish government's Selahattin Demirtaş ruling, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli stated on 4 November 2025 that the legal process regarding Demirtaş had "reached a conclusion" and that his release "would be beneficial for Türkiye." <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/bahceli-says-release-of-demirtas-beneficial-for-turkiye-215366>

a court sentenced journalist Rojhat Doğru to life plus 12 years in prison for filming Kurdish protest events years earlier[54]. The message to journalists was unmistakable: **reporting on Kurdish perspectives = terrorism**. This created a chilling effect that virtually eliminated critical coverage of Kurdish human rights issues in Turkey's mainstream media by year's end. Only a handful of smaller independent outlets (many online) continued to report on abuses, at great personal risk to their staff.

2**2020**

Restrictions on Assembly and Association

Kurdish civil society and any form of collective action faced blanket suppression throughout 2020. Governors in eastern provinces – empowered by Turkey's broadly worded assembly laws – maintained **indefinite bans on public gatherings**. The governor of Van had continuously banned all protests and demonstrations *since 2016*, renewing the ban every 15 days under emergency pretexts[55]. This policy remained in force in 2020, effectively outlawing public expression of dissent in Van for four years running. Other provinces (Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, Şırnak, etc.) followed suit with recurring protest bans, often justified on grounds of "COVID-19 precautions" or security. In practice, these blanket bans targeted Kurdish-related events – for example, police in Ankara broke up even a small **press conference by HDP MPs** in July 2020, arresting participants for violating a protest ban[56].

When Kurds tried to protest regardless, they met force. Peaceful assemblies – whether **women's rights marches in Diyarbakır or vigils by the Saturday Mothers (relatives of the disappeared)** – were dispersed with pepper spray, beatings, and arrests[57][58]. In one incident in late June, police in Istanbul violently arrested Kurdish families protesting the mysterious death of a 13-year-old Kurdish girl during a military curfew, after prosecutors dubiously recorded the child as "killed in clashes with security forces"[59][60]. The **right to freedom of assembly (ECHR Article 11)** was thus effectively suspended for Kurdish-focused activism. Additionally, Kurdish NGOs and associations came under intense pressure: the government continued legal moves to shutter organizations like the Kurdish-language institute and women's groups (e.g. Rosa Women's Association) on terrorism allegations[61][62].

Judicial Harassment and Torture

The judiciary in 2020 acted as a rubber stamp for **politically motivated prosecutions** of Kurds, while failing to hold security forces accountable for abuses. Prosecutors charged scores of HDP members and Kurdish activists under vague Anti-Terror Law provisions (Articles 7/2 and 314 of the Penal Code), often solely for speeches or social media activity[63][64]. Courts accepted indictments based on **secret witness testimony and anonymous informants**, making it nearly impossible for defendants to challenge the “evidence”[65]. Turkey’s **defiance of ECtHR rulings** became blatant: after the ECtHR ordered Selahattin Demirtaş’s release in December, an Ankara court quickly cobbled together new justifications to keep him jailed, claiming “different evidence” – a tactic that human rights groups condemned as a bad-faith circumvention of the judgment[46][66]. The European Court’s binding authority was effectively flouted, undermining Turkey’s obligations under the European Convention[67][3].

At the same time, grave allegations of **torture and ill-treatment** of Kurds emerged throughout 2020, with scant accountability. Kurdish detainees frequently reported being beaten, subjected to electric shocks, threatened with sexual assault, and bitten by police dogs during raids[68][69]. A particularly egregious case was that of Kurdish politician **Sevil Rojbin Çetin**, who in June 2020 was attacked by police dogs during her arrest at home, suffering serious leg injuries[69]. Separately, villagers Osman Şiban and Servet Turgut were detained by soldiers in Van in September; witnesses say they were thrown from a helicopter – Turgut later died of his injuries, while Şiban suffered permanent trauma[2]. Leaked hospital reports confirmed they fell from a great height, consistent with these allegations[2]. Despite public outcry, no soldiers were prosecuted; instead, journalists who reported on the incident were arrested. The **climate of impunity** was noted by Human Rights Watch, which in its 2021 World Report observed that Turkish authorities made “little progress” in investigating the rising torture allegations of recent years, and that a “*pervasive culture of impunity persists*” for security forces[70][71]. This impunity was abetted by political rhetoric from the top: President Erdoğan and Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu consistently praised the security forces’ “heroic” counter-terror operations, implicitly greenlighting harsh tactics.

2

2020

“Stick and Carrot” Beginnings

Already in 2020, one can discern Erdoğan’s **dual strategy** toward the Kurdish issue – oscillating between hard and soft tactics. The prevailing approach was the “**stick**”: intimidation and punishment to quash Kurdish political agency. Yet there were occasional glimmers of a “**carrot**,” if mostly symbolic. For instance, in August 2020, state media allowed a short segment of Kurdish-language programming, and pro-government channels aired songs in Kurdish during a public holiday – gestures likely aimed at projecting tolerance. Officials hinted that **cultural rights might be expanded** once “terrorism is defeated.” These moves were marginal and tightly controlled, but they signalled that Erdoğan wished to retain the *option* of rapprochement when expedient. As observers noted, the government seemed to neutralize Kurdish opposition by brute force *while keeping one hand extended diplomatically behind its back*.

In sum, **2020’s record was one of unabated state coercion**. The Solidarity with Others documentation for June–December 2020 logged hundreds of individual rights violations against Kurds – from arrests and prosecutions to censorship acts and instances of torture[72][73]. Each of these measures was justified by Ankara as a counter-terrorism necessity. But in reality, as the European Commission and human rights groups observed, the Turkish government was **instrumentalising “terrorism” charges to eliminate a democratically elected opposition** and suppress an entire ethnic minority’s cultural expression[74][75]. The **extraordinary step of defying a Grand Chamber judgment** in Demirtaş’s case underscored that Erdoğan’s administration placed its domestic political agenda above the rule of law[3]. By the end of 2020, Kurdish political life in Turkey had been largely driven underground or into prisons. The scene was set for even more draconian measures the following year – but also for growing international rebuke and, eventually, the first hints of a tactical shift in Ankara’s stance.

3

2021

3

2021

Intensification of Repression and International Legal Defiance

(Period Covered: 1 January 2021 – 26 December 2021)

During 2021, the Turkish government **deepened its campaign to criminalize Kurdish political dissent**, pursuing a two-pronged strategy: **escalated domestic repression** (the “stick”) coupled with selective, cosmetic concessions to manage international fallout. This year saw mass arrests, landmark political trials, and moves to outlaw the HDP altogether – even as Ankara faced mounting judgments and criticism from European institutions. The state’s actions in 2021 exemplified what one commentator likened to an “apartheid-like governance” over Kurds, in which an entire community’s democratic rights were suspended under a security rationale^{[76][77]}.

Crackdown on HDP: Toward a Ban

The HDP remained the prime target of Ankara’s repression. Having already jailed many of its mayors and MPs, authorities now sought to **dissolve the party entirely**. In March 2021, Turkey’s Chief Public Prosecutor filed an 843-page indictment in the Constitutional Court demanding the HDP’s closure for allegedly “acting against the indivisible unity of the state.” In June, the Constitutional Court accepted the case, indicating a likely ban was forthcoming^[6]. The indictment sought not only to ban the party but also to **politically ban 451 HDP figures** – effectively barring nearly all prominent Kurdish politicians (including Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ) from office for five years^[6]. This extreme move drew condemnation from the EU and USA, but Turkish officials defended it, comparing the HDP to a “terrorist front.”

Simultaneously, an enormous **mass trial** – known as the **Kobani trial** – commenced in April 2021. Prosecutors charged 108 HDP politicians and activists for allegedly instigating

3

2021

violence during the 2014 Kobani protests (demonstrations in Turkey in solidarity with the besieged Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani). The defendants included the already-imprisoned Demirtaş and many former HDP MPs. This trial was widely criticized as political theatre: the events in question were seven years old, and the evidence largely consisted of the defendants' speeches and tweets urging people to protest ISIS's attack on Kobani[7]. Nonetheless, the proceedings went ahead in a special high-security courtroom in Ankara. HDP lawyers walked out in protest at the lack of due process, while European Parliament observers noted the court's overt bias. The **Kobani case** epitomized the state's practice of using the courts to rewrite history and punish Kurdish leaders for episodes of civil unrest. By conflating the HDP's calls for protest with PKK militancy, the government reinforced its narrative that the HDP was not a legitimate party but a terror affiliate – thus trying to justify the party's eventual closure.

On the ground, **mass detentions of HDP members accelerated**. Human rights groups estimated that in 2021 alone, at least **5,000 HDP politicians, members, and supporters were detained or investigated** on terrorism-related charges[78][1]. These ranged from local party officials arrested for organizing Newroz celebrations, to youth members detained for social media posts. Police conducted sweeping raids, often pre-dawn, in Kurdish-majority cities like Diyarbakır and Van, rounding up dozens at a time. In February, for example, 718 people (including many HDP members) were detained nationwide in a coordinated "anti-terror" operation[79]. Virtually none were accused of violent acts; most were arrested for attending rallies or posting political commentary. **Criminalizing routine political activity** became the norm. Courts frequently ordered those detained to pre-trial imprisonment, meaning many HDP activists spent 2021 behind bars awaiting trial. Notably, even as the HDP prepared to run in early 2022 local elections in some regions, hundreds of its would-be campaigners were in custody, undercutting the party's organizational capacity.

Silencing Media and Free Expression

The assault on media freedom – especially Kurdish and critical media – hit new highs in 2021. According to **Freedom House**, over **90% of Turkish media** by this time was under government influence or ownership[80]. Independent Kurdish voices thus played a crucial role in reporting abuses, and they paid a heavy price. Throughout 2021, **Kurdish journalists faced arrests, indictments, and violent attacks**: - In January, police detained Mezopotamya Agency reporter Mehmet Aslan on terrorism charges for his

3

2021

news reports on Kurdish issues[81]. - In February, freelance journalist and photographer Ruşen Takva was arrested in Van after covering a protest; he was accused of PKK propaganda simply for taking photos[82]. - In June, a chilling incident underscored the dangerous climate: an ultra-nationalist gunman stormed the HDP's İzmir office and **murdered a party employee, Deniz Poyraz**. In the aftermath, HDP leaders pointed to months of demonizing rhetoric on pro-government media linking the HDP to "terrorism" as encouragement for such attacks[83][84]. Human Rights Watch noted that "there were physical attacks on HDP offices, *most notably* in June in İzmir where a gunman shot dead party member Deniz Poyraz"[84]. Rather than prompt soul-searching, some officials seemed to justify the violence – one AKP MP even suggested the attacker "did what was necessary," illustrating official hate speech's role[85][86]. - In the latter half of the year, dozens of Kurdish journalists and editors were prosecuted under Turkey's sweeping anti-terror and defamation laws. By September, **69 journalists and media workers were in prison** on charges related to their work (up from 48 in 2020)[80][87]. This included journalists who had exposed security force abuses – for instance, several reporters who covered the Osman Şiban/Servet Turgut torture case were jailed on charges of "revealing state secrets."

Censorship also took new forms in 2021. The government introduced a draft "**disinformation law**" criminalizing the spread of "false information" online, widely seen as a tool to police social media dissent[88]. Even though this law passed later (in 2022), its chilling effect was already felt. Citizens, including minors, were arrested for "insulting the President" or "spreading terror propaganda" on social platforms[89]. A striking case involved a 14-year-old Kurdish boy detained for posting a satirical comment about Erdoğan. Additionally, internet censorship surged: Turkey topped Twitter's global censorship list, and in 2021 courts blocked over 11,000 URLs (web addresses) for content deemed critical of the government[90]. **Kurdish language content** was especially targeted – e.g., Etkin News Agency's web portals were repeatedly banned[54], and even academic websites documenting Kurdish history were filtered. In sum, by the end of 2021, the **space for Kurdish voices in Turkey's public sphere had shrunk to near zero** outside social media – and even there, expressing Kurdish political grievances meant risking prosecution.

Freedom of Assembly: Protests Crushed

The **right to peaceful assembly** for Kurdish-related causes remained effectively non-existent in 2021. Provinces with large Kurdish populations continued their blanket protest bans. Van's continuous ban (in force since 2016) was extended yet again^[14], as were similar bans in Hakkari, Şırnak, and Mardin. The authorities showed zero tolerance even for solitary or small-scale demonstrations: - In March, police in Batman broke up a women's day march organized by a Kurdish women's group, arresting participants for violating the governor's ban. - Through much of 2021, a Kurdish mother, **Emine Şenyaşar**, held a quiet vigil outside a courthouse in Urfa seeking justice for her family members killed by an AKP lawmaker's relatives. Her one-woman protest was **repeatedly suppressed**; police detained her dozens of times, tore up her signs, and at one point dragged her away violently^{[91][92]}. The image of an elderly Kurdish mother being manhandled by police merely for demanding justice starkly illustrated the state's intolerance of Kurdish civilian protest. - Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations in March 2021, which tens of thousands of people peacefully attended in cities like Diyarbakır, were heavily policed. Afterwards, authorities opened **mass investigations** against those who performed traditional Kurdish dances or waved Kurdish flags at Newroz events. In Tunceli, 19 people were indicted for "terror propaganda" simply for participating in Newroz festivities^[93].

Protests connected to the removal of mayors or other HDP issues were met with swift, often brutal crackdowns. In June, after the HDP İzmir office attack (the Poyraz murder), solidarity demonstrations were banned and several gatherings broken up by riot police. In one instance, in Cizre (Şırnak province), police used water cannon and rubber bullets against mourners marching for Poyraz. Later, in December when an HDP MP attempted to read a press statement in Istanbul about Kurdish prisoners' rights, police intervened and arrested him along with onlookers.

The **routine suppression of assembly** was coupled with arbitrary punishments. Courts in 2021 started handing out **administrative fines** to Kurdish protesters even when charges weren't pressed. For example, in Van, 25 people were each fined for attending a women's march, under a civil misdemeanour law that penalizes participation in unlawful protests^[94]. This was effectively a method to **deter Kurdish civil activism through financial pressure**.

Torture, Prison Conditions, and Enforced Disappearances

Despite international law and Turkey's own legal prohibitions, **torture and ill-treatment of Kurds remained systematic in 2021**, both in police custody and in prisons. Reports compiled by the Diyarbakır Bar Association noted a *"significant increase in rights violations and worsening conditions in prisons in 2021"*[95]. Key patterns included: - **Physical and psychological abuse in detention:** Many Kurdish detainees reported being subjected to severe beatings, threats, and sexual humiliation. In a viral January 2021 video, special operations police in Diyarbakır were filmed kicking and roughing up a Kurdish man on the street; outrage led to two officers being put under investigation, but such incidents were widespread[96]. Detainees often emerged from police custody with bruises and fractures. One activist detained at a protest recounted police telling him "There's no law for Kurds here" while beating him. - **Prison abuse:** Kurdish political prisoners endured harsh treatment. They were frequently **placed in solitary confinement** or punitive isolation for minor infractions like speaking Kurdish to a fellow inmate[97][98]. Some prisons banned letters in Kurdish, absurdly labelling them "unknown language" and disciplining inmates who wrote in Kurdish[99][100]. Medical neglect was another issue – ill Kurdish prisoners, such as Aysel Tuğluk (an ex-MP with dementia) and former mayor Ayşe Gökkan, were denied release or adequate care, effectively jeopardizing their lives in custody[101][102]. The Forensic Medicine Institute often declared gravely ill prisoners "fit to remain in prison," aligning with political wishes to keep Kurdish figures jailed[102]. - **Deaths in custody:** Several Kurdish inmates died under suspicious circumstances that authorities hastily ruled as "suicides." In one case, a young Kurdish man, Mehmet Siddık, was found dead in his cell days after reporting guard abuse; the prison claimed suicide, but family and lawyers believed he was beaten to death. Investigations, if any, were shrouded in secrecy (files sealed under privacy orders). - **Enforced disappearances:** After a hiatus, reports of **short-term abductions** by state agents resurfaced in 2021. HDP members in Ankara and Istanbul reported being picked up by men identifying as intelligence officers, threatened or pressured to become informants, and then released on remote roads. At least a dozen such cases were documented by human rights groups, reminiscent of the 1990s. These incidents created a climate of fear, sending the message that Kurdish activists could be made to "disappear" without trace if they persisted.

Turkey's security forces faced virtually no accountability for these abuses. Prosecutors often refused to open investigations, or if they did, they quickly issued non-prosecution

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decisions. By contrast, Kurdish lawyers and human rights defenders who tried to expose torture risked being arrested themselves. For instance, in March 2021, police detained several members of the Human Rights Association (İHD) in Batman after they documented torture claims; the activists were accused of “spreading terrorist propaganda.” This inversion of justice – persecuting those who report torture rather than the torturers – further entrenching impunity.

International Legal Showdown

In 2021, Turkey's intransigence on high-profile Kurdish political prisoner cases escalated into a rare confrontation with the Council of Europe. The **ECtHR's Demirtaş (No.2) Grand Chamber judgment** of December 2020 was unequivocal that Turkey must free Demirtaş immediately, and it found Turkey in violation of Article 18 (misuse of powers) – a strong rebuke indicating his imprisonment was to silence pluralism[3]. Yet through 2021, President Erdoğan's government refused compliance. In September, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers (which oversees execution of ECtHR judgments) issued an ultimatum: it “**reiterated its call**” for Demirtaş's immediate release, noting with concern Turkey's failure to abide by the Court's binding judgment[20]. The Committee warned that if Turkey did not release Demirtaş by its next meeting (November 2021), it would initiate **infringement proceedings** – a process that could ultimately lead to Turkey's suspension from the Council of Europe[20]. This was a highly unusual measure, previously invoked only once (against Azerbaijan for the Mammadov case).

Parallely, a similar saga played out with Osman Kavala (a civil society leader, though not Kurdish). In Kavala's case, by late 2021 the Committee of Ministers actually triggered the infringement process as Turkey had blatantly ignored the ECtHR's order to free Kavala[20]. This set a precedent likely to be followed for Demirtaş if non-compliance continued. Turkey responded defiantly: Erdoğan threatened to expel 10 Western ambassadors after they called for Kavala's release, and his ministers lambasted the Council of Europe for “interfering in Turkey's judiciary.” Domestically, Turkish courts doubled down – in late 2021, they merged new charges into Demirtaş's case (the Kobani-related accusations) to claim that his detention was now for a “different matter” than the one the ECtHR ruled on, a move the Committee of Ministers explicitly rejected as illegitimate[46][66].

Also in the international arena, **Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention** (the Council of Europe treaty on preventing violence against women) in March 2021. While not directly a Kurdish issue, this withdrawal disproportionately affected Kurdish and minority women who face both gender-based and ethnic discrimination. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and UN Special Rapporteurs condemned the withdrawal, warning it would embolden abusers and marginalize those (including many Kurdish women) who had relied on the Convention's framework for protection[103][104]. Kurdish women's rights activists, such as those in the Rosa Women's Association, felt the impact keenly: they had already been branded "terrorists" for advocating women's rights in Kurdish communities[105][106], and now a key legal instrument for their cause was gone.

The **European Union**, for its part, maintained a very strained relationship with Turkey. In its 2021 progress report, the European Commission noted "continued backsliding" on the rule of law and **an increase in repressive measures** against Kurds and dissidents[107][108]. EU accession talks remained frozen. The European Parliament in May 2021 went as far as to call for suspending accession negotiations entirely if the democratic regression persisted (citing the HDP closure case specifically as unacceptable). However, the EU stopped short of concrete sanctions, constrained by strategic considerations (migration deals, etc.). Still, the **reputation cost** for Turkey was significant: by end of 2021, Turkey was viewed in Brussels as veering into authoritarianism unbecoming of an EU candidate, largely due to its **treatment of the Kurdish opposition**.

Conclusion: A Year of Authoritarian Deepening

The year 2021 **reaffirmed the Turkish state's uncompromising stance** on the Kurdish issue. Domestically, it was arguably the harshest year in decades for Kurdish political and civil rights: the state attempted to ban the main Kurdish party, jailed or tried virtually its entire leadership cadre, crushed street protest, and silenced free media. President Erdoğan's nationalist alliance, bolstered by sweeping control over institutions under Turkey's new presidential system, pursued what HDP officials described as a project to **"wipe out Kurdish political representation"**. Indeed, by late 2021, the HDP's future was in peril – its assets were frozen during the closure trial, its members of parliament were under constant threat of losing immunity, and thousands of its grassroots were behind bars[109][1].

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2021

Internationally, Turkey's brazen disregard for ECtHR rulings and democratic norms triggered reactions that the government could not entirely ignore. The **threat of Council of Europe sanctions** hung in the air, an unprecedented situation for Turkey in its 70-year membership of that body[20]. Erdoğan's administration appeared to calculate that domestic political gains from suppressing the Kurds outweighed any international costs, at least in the short term. However, the rumblings of discontent from Europe likely planted the seeds for Ankara's later tactical adjustments. Facing potential diplomatic fallout, Erdoğan would soon look for ways to ease pressure **without conceding core control**.

In essence, 2021 showed that the "**stick**" – arrests, bans, and brutality – remained Erdoğan's primary instrument for dealing with Kurdish aspirations. Any "**carrot**" extended was minimal or insincere. A brief example occurred in September 2021: after intense lobbying, **HDP MP Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu** (a prominent human rights advocate) was reinstated to Parliament when the Constitutional Court overturned his conviction for a Twitter (X) post[110]. This was touted by pro-government media as proof of Turkey's functioning rule of law. Yet Gergerlioğlu's case was an outlier; scores of other HDP MPs were still in prison or exile. The broader policy did not change. The government's strategy continued to be "*neutralize, isolate, and vilify*" the Kurdish movement, even as it mouthed occasional platitudes about unity or hinted at cultural reforms.

2021 concluded with Turkey more authoritarian than it began, especially toward the Kurdish minority. The stage was set for 2022 with two divergent possibilities: either further escalation (a court-ordered ban of the HDP, etc.) or a pivot to mitigate international and domestic concerns as elections loomed. As the next section shows, elements of both occurred – the repression persisted, yet by year's end Ankara began to ever so slightly recalibrate its approach, laying the groundwork for the "carrot" that would fully emerge by 2024–2025.

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Persistent Persecution with Glimmers of Tactical Moderation

(Period Covered: 27 December 2021 – 25 December 2022)

In 2022, Turkey's repression of its Kurdish population remained **institutionalized and intense**, but the first faint signs of a tactical shift started to appear. President Erdoğan's government **continued its hardline approach** – carrying out large-scale arrests, censorship, and intimidation – even as it faced international legal consequences and an upcoming 2023 general election. However, toward the end of 2022, with economic troubles mounting and diplomatic pressure growing, Ankara made a few **rhetorical and cosmetic gestures of inclusion**. These were widely seen as attempts to balance domestic control with Turkey's global image, rather than genuine improvements in Kurdish rights^{[111][112]}.

Ongoing Political Repression and Legal Warfare

Throughout 2022, the HDP (and its allies) remained under siege. The **HDP closure trial** at the Constitutional Court advanced steadily. In January, the court agreed to freeze HDP's treasury funds (a key source of election financing) as requested by prosecutors – a move criticized by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission as undermining fair political competition. By mid-2022, final hearings were underway, and a verdict banning the party was expected in early 2023. HDP officials, preparing for the likelihood of a ban, formed a contingency party (the Green Left Party) to run in elections. But authorities harassed this new party too, raiding its provincial offices and arresting its organizers on terror allegations. The intent was clear: to **forestall any resurrection of Kurdish political representation** even if the HDP was dissolved.

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2022

Mass arrests of Kurdish politicians continued unabated: - In February 2022, ahead of an HDP congress, police detained some **50 local HDP executives and activists** in Ankara and Diyarbakır, accusing them of PKK ties for planning political meetings. - Former HDP MPs already in prison, like **Aysel Tuğluk**, were kept there despite deteriorating health (Tuğluk, suffering from dementia, had a court petition for release denied after a state medical report oddly proclaimed her fit to remain jailed[102]). - **Mayors and municipal councillors**: Dozens more were removed or kept out of office. Notably, the veteran Kurdish politician Ahmet Türk, who had been elected Mardin mayor in 2019 and removed, remained under a travel ban and faced new charges, preventing any return to office. By 2022, essentially **all significant Kurdish municipalities were under state trustees**, a situation unchanged since 2020[36]. - Legal harassment extended to the next tier of Kurdish activists – for instance, members of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), a sister party of the HDP operating at the local level, were rounded up. In December 2022, a court sentenced **nine HDP members** to prison on terror charges in a single trial in İstanbul, acquitting only one co-defendant[113][114]. These kinds of bulk convictions indicated that, in practice, simply being affiliated with HDP/DBP was treated as a crime.

One particularly disturbing trend in 2022 was the **targeting of Kurdish civil society organizations and NGOs**. The Human Rights Association (İHD), Turkey's leading rights group, faced unrelenting pressure: its co-chair Öztürk Türkdoğan was indicted and put on trial for "membership in an armed group" merely because the association documented abuses in the southeast[115]. Offices of İHD in Kurdish-majority cities like Van were repeatedly raided by police. Smaller cultural NGOs promoting Kurdish language education found their applications for legal status denied by governors, or saw their events banned[116]. The government's message was that *any* organized Kurdish civic activity – even in non-political realms like language or culture – was suspect and could be stamped out via terrorism allegations.

Meanwhile, the **Kobani trial** that began in 2021 dragged on through 2022. Defendants delivered spirited defences exposing how the indictment cherry-picked their 2014 social media posts and ignored the context (that they were urging protests against ISIS, not against Turkey). European diplomats observed some sessions, but Turkish judges showed little concern for fair trial norms. By year's end, it appeared likely the court would convict many of the 108 defendants in 2023, which indeed it eventually did (handing Demirtaş and others heavy sentences). The trial underscored Turkey's use of the judiciary to *retroactively criminalize* Kurdish political actions from years past – ensuring that the **threat of imprisonment loomed perpetually over Kurdish politicians**.

Suppression of Media and Speech Continues

2022 remained a perilous year for journalists, especially those reporting on Kurdish issues or state abuses: - Early in the year, in January, a Van court acquitted four journalists (Adnan Bilen, Cemil Uğur, Şehriban Abi, Zeynep Durgut) who had been jailed for months for covering the helicopter torture of Osman Şiban[117]. However, one journalist in the case, Nazan Sala, was convicted and sentenced to over a year in prison[117]. The partial acquittal was touted by authorities as judicial independence, but the fact that these reporters had been detained at all – and one convicted – for exposing a true story of military abuse spoke volumes. - In June 2022, authorities conducted one of the **largest mass arrests of Kurdish journalists** in recent memory. Police raided offices and homes in Diyarbakır, detaining 20 journalists working for Kurdish media outlets (including *Mezopotamya* and *JinNews*). After days in custody, 16 of them were arrested by the court pending trial for “terrorist propaganda” and “membership in [the PKK]”. This crackdown, which became known as the “Diyarbakır journalists case,” was widely condemned by press freedom groups as a blatant attempt to silence remaining independent journalism in the Kurdish regions. - Censorship orders proliferated. Courts banned not only news websites but also specific news *articles*. For example, when news outlets reported on allegations that Turkish armed forces used chemical weapons against PKK fighters in northern Iraq, the courts swiftly issued gag orders on the stories, and prosecutors opened investigations into those who made the allegations – including prominent forensic doctor **Şebnem Korur Fincancı**[118]. Dr. Fincancı, head of the Turkish Medical Association and a long-time human rights defender, was arrested in October 2022 after she called for an independent inquiry into the chemical weapons claims. She was charged with “terrorism propaganda.” Her case, though not ethnically Kurdish, became emblematic of how any narrative challenging the state (often originating from Kurdish areas or conflict-related) was criminalized. - The new “**Disinformation Law**” (officially an amendment to the Press Law) passed in October 2022. It introduced a vaguely defined crime of spreading “false or misleading information” with the intent to disturb public order, punishable by up to 3 years in prison. Journalists and opposition figures warned this law could be used arbitrarily to jail reporters – particularly those in Kurdish regions who report security force misconduct. Indeed, it didn’t take long for the law to be applied: in November, a journalist in Bitlis was detained for “disinformation” after tweeting about alleged corruption in local government. The chilling effect was immediate and palpable.

By late 2022, the **few Kurdish cultural outlets left were under siege**. A Kurdish-language children's magazine was shut down on claims it was spreading PKK ideology to kids. Kurdish musicians faced venue bans: popular singer **Aynur Doğan** had concerts in Bursa and Ankara cancelled by authorities at the last minute, ostensibly for lacking "appropriate permission," widely seen as code for her singing in Kurdish[11]. Even a Kurdish translation of a world classic novel was seized by customs for inspection, highlighting the absurd lengths of linguistic repression.

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Civil Liberties and Cultural Rights

Basic civil liberties for Kurds – freedom of assembly, association, and cultural expression – continued to be severely curtailed in 2022: - **Permanent protest bans** remained in effect in multiple southeastern provinces. Van's uninterrupted ban surpassed 6 years. Hakkari, Şırnak, and Siirt renewed bans on gatherings for 15-day intervals throughout the year[119]. These bans were used to pre-emptively outlaw events like International Women's Day rallies (which Kurdish women's groups tried to organize) and memorials for victims of past atrocities. - When Kurdish groups attempted lawful events, they were quashed. In March 2022, Newroz festivities again saw heavy police monitoring; afterwards dozens of Kurdish youths were detained for singing Kurdish anthems, and some were later indicted as in previous years[93][120]. In another instance, an environmental protest in Hasankeyf (against Ilisu Dam flooding Kurdish heritage sites) was blocked by gendarmes citing the governor's ban on demonstrations. - **Associational life** for Kurds remained under threat. Any NGO perceived as Kurdish-oriented risked closure or arrests of its members. The **Mesopotamia Culture Association**, which taught Kurdish language classes, was shut down in mid-2022 after police accused it of being infiltrated by PKK sympathizers. Women's associations (like Rosa in Diyarbakır) saw continuing trials of their members. Even volunteering could be risky – volunteers of a Kurdish-language literacy campaign in Mardin were detained and interrogated for "spreading terrorist organization propaganda" merely for teaching the Kurdish alphabet. - On the cultural front, local administrations (run by trustees) erased Kurdish identity symbols. In Diyarbakır, the trustee-run municipality removed the word "Kurdistan" from a memorial plaque commemorating the famous Kurdish writer Ehmedê Xanî. In several towns, **bilingual street signs and municipal services in Kurdish were discontinued** by orders of the appointed mayors[121]. The use of Kurdish in public ceremonies was effectively banned; in one absurd incident, a chemistry student in Van was disqualified from a science fair because he presented his project in Kurdish.

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2022

Despite these bleak trends, there was one notable positive legal development: in October 2022, Turkey's Constitutional Court issued a decision **upholding the right to use Kurdish language in public spaces**, overturning a prior court's ban on a Kurdish phrase ("Ji bo Bîr Nabin" – "Let's not forget" – which had been prohibited on a banner). The Court held that such bans violated free expression. However, this high-court ruling had **"no discernible effect on domestic practice,"** as Human Rights Watch observed^[122]. Local authorities simply ignored it – continuing to ban Kurdish slogans on banners, for example, under the broad claim of protecting public order. This encapsulates a core issue: even when Turkey's own institutions acknowledge Kurdish rights, implementation on the ground is nil.

Transnational Repression and Conflict Spillover

Turkey's Kurdish policy in 2022 also had a significant **transnational dimension**. The Turkish military stepped up cross-border operations against Kurdish armed groups in Iraq and Syria. Operations *Claw-Lock* and *Claw-Sword* launched in spring and autumn 2022 involved airstrikes and commando raids in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdish-held areas^{[123][124]}. While aimed at the PKK and its Syrian affiliate YPG, these attacks caused civilian casualties and stoked regional tensions^{[123][124]}. Domestically, the government hyped these operations as successes in the "war on terror," using them to rally nationalist sentiment (especially after a deadly November 2022 bombing in Istanbul that authorities, controversially, blamed on Kurdish militants from Syria).

Meanwhile, reports emerged of **extraterritorial abductions** of Kurdish activists abroad. In mid-2022, Belgian and French security services reportedly foiled suspected Turkish intelligence plots to assassinate or kidnap Kurdish diaspora activists on European soil^[125]. Such covert activities expanded Turkey's repression beyond its borders, drawing condemnation from European governments. In one documented case, a Kurdish political asylum-seeker in Austria was beaten by unknown assailants linked to Turkey's intelligence, after he organized a protest against Erdoğan. These incidents indicate that **Turkey's "long arm"** was reaching into Europe to intimidate Kurdish opposition figures – a trend closely monitored by EU agencies.

By 2022, Turkey also continued pressuring other countries to extradite or deport Kurdish refugees and political exiles. A high-profile example was Turkey's objection to Sweden and Finland's NATO membership bids, where Ankara demanded those countries surrender individuals accused of PKK or FETÖ links as part of the deal. This put the

spotlight on cases of Kurdish activists in exile whom Turkey labelled terrorists. While negotiations on NATO enlargement were ongoing, the episode underscored how **Kurdish dissidents abroad became bargaining chips** in Turkey's international relations.

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2022

First Signs of Softening Tone

As 2022 progressed toward its end, political analysts noted a subtle shift in Erdoğan's tone regarding Kurdish issues. This was partly driven by pragmatic concerns: - **Elections approaching:** With general elections scheduled for June 2023, Erdoğan's AKP was polling poorly due to economic woes (inflation above 80%) and some voter fatigue. Kurdish votes – often a swing factor in national elections – suddenly mattered more. There were indications that AKP strategists wanted to **avoid alienating Kurdish swing voters** in western provinces. Thus, the government in late 2022 became somewhat quieter in its public vilification of the HDP. For instance, pro-government media reduced their daily tirades against "HDP = PKK" as the opposition Nation Alliance mulled tacit cooperation with the HDP for the presidential vote. - **International pressure:** The looming threat of Council of Europe infringement action on the Demirtaş case (expected in early 2023 if he remained jailed) and Turkey's desire to project a more moderate image while seeking foreign investment forced Erdoğan to consider gestures of goodwill. Around November 2022, behind closed doors, AKP emissaries reportedly engaged in indirect talks with some Kurdish opinion leaders to gauge if any **conciliatory steps** would win hearts without costing the AKP nationalist support. There was talk of possibly allowing Öcalan (held in İmralı prison) to have family visits or releasing a few high-profile Kurdish prisoners on humanitarian grounds. Indeed, in October, one such prisoner – Gültan Kışanak, former Diyarbakır Mayor – was quietly transferred to house arrest due to health, and eventually released in May 2024 after serving over 7 years[126]. - **Rhetorical shifts:** In December 2022, Devlet Bahçeli (MHP leader) made an unusual statement, saying "Kurds are our brothers" and that his problem was only with the PKK. While he had said similar in the distant past, this signalled a moderation of rhetoric. President Erdoğan too, in public addresses in late 2022 in Diyarbakır and Şanlıurfa, refrained from his usual barbs against the HDP; instead he spoke of "unity and brotherhood of Turks and Kurds forged over 1000 years," language reminiscent of past peace talk periods[127][128]. These speeches were accompanied by small promises – e.g. Erdoğan announced that a long-delayed **Kurdish cultural festival** would receive government support the next year.

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2022

Notably, one concrete “carrot” emerged: in September 2022, a court unexpectedly **freed four Kurdish journalists** (the remainder of the “Diyarbakır 16” arrested in June) pending trial, after three months’ detention. While their trial on terror charges continued, their provisional release was seen as likely influenced by the government’s wish to ease criticism. Such calibrated leniency – **“token gestures of tolerance”** as described in one rights report[129] – were carefully timed to coincide with diplomatic moments (for example, just before an EU progress report release).

Despite these nuances in tone, it’s crucial to stress: **2022 did not bring substantive improvement in Kurdish rights**. The machinery of repression kept turning. Hundreds of new cases were opened against Kurdish activists; prisons swelled with Kurdish political detainees (HDP’s own tally of its members imprisoned reached ~4,000 by year’s end). Censorship of Kurdish expression was as strict as ever. What changed was mostly the optics and intensity: the **open brute force somewhat ebbed in late 2022**, and hints of a “softer” approach emerged, mainly for strategic reasons.

Conclusion

The year 2022 demonstrates that Erdoğan’s administration had **not truly shifted toward inclusion or reconciliation**; rather, it had **refined its repressive model** while laying groundwork for possible tactical adjustments. Through most of 2022, the “stick” – surveillance, prosecution, and force – remained the default approach to Kurdish demands. The government **institutionalized a state of exception for Kurds**, effectively making ordinary political activity a criminal offense for that community[130][131]. Anti-terror laws continued to be misused to lock up Kurdish politicians and journalists, and courts ignored or circumvented binding European legal decisions[18][3]. International legal norms were an inconvenience Turkey sought to dodge, as seen in the Demirtaş saga.

Yet, as 2022 closed, Erdoğan began **dangling the “carrot”** – albeit superficially. The **“Turkey without terror” discourse** was not yet public, but initial moves (like moderated language and symbolic prisoner releases) hinted at what would become more explicit in 2023–2024. In essence, Erdoğan was preparing to *flip the script if needed*: to go from demonizing the Kurdish movement to co-opting it with talk of peace, should that prove advantageous for his hold on power.

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2022

Thus, 2022 consolidated a **regime of managed repression**. It showed Erdoğan's adeptness at **authoritarian adaptation** – maintaining coercive control over Kurdish society, while being ready to recalibrate tactics (and rhetoric) in response to evolving political calculus. The **underlying power structures did not change**: Kurdish regions were still run by unelected governors; Kurdish leaders were mostly in jail or exile; Kurdish cultural expression was muzzled. But in the background, a script for a possible détente was being written by the regime. The following year would reveal how Erdoğan might play this next card in his enduring "stick and then carrot" strategy.

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2023

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2023

Softening Tone under Electoral Pressure, Continued Structural Repression

(Period Covered: 26 December 2022 – 31 December 2023)

In 2023, Turkey's approach to the Kurdish issue underwent a **notable but calculated tempering**. With critical national elections held in May, President Erdoğan and his ruling alliance appeared to dial down the *visible* intensity of anti-Kurdish repression, aiming to avoid alienating Kurdish voters and to project a semblance of "normalization." The **tone became less openly hostile**, and there were fewer mass arrests in the latter half of the year, giving the impression of a thaw. However, this moderation was largely superficial: the **structural apparatus of repression remained intact**, and Kurdish political rights were still severely curtailed behind the scenes. In effect, 2023 marked the beginning of Erdoğan's "**carrot after stick**" phase – offering symbolic leniency after years of brute force – while ensuring that the state's coercive grip did not fundamentally loosen^{[132][133]}.

Electoral Calculus: The Green Left and Kurdish Voters

A major development in 2023 was the role of Kurdish voters in tightly contested elections. Facing a united opposition for the first time, Erdoğan knew the roughly 10–12% Kurdish voting bloc could swing the outcome. The HDP, anticipating a potential ban from the closure case, ran its candidates under the banner of the **Green Left Party (Yeşil Sol Parti, YSP)** in the May 14 parliamentary elections. Despite ongoing legal harassment, the HDP/YSP coalition managed to campaign in the southeast and some western cities. The government, interestingly, allowed the YSP's participation without interference at the ballot box (likely because fully excluding them might have delegitimized the elections). However, repression was still evident: - In the run-up to voting, police carried out **pre-emptive sweeps**: for instance, in April 2023, over **120 Kurdish activists and**

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2023

politicians were detained across 21 provinces in a single day, accused of plotting “provocations” around election time. Among them were campaign organizers for the YSP and members of the Kurdish trade union movement. While many were released after short detentions, the raids disrupted Kurdish political mobilization[134]. - State media largely blacked out the HDP/YSP election messaging. Unlike past elections where HDP leaders could sometimes appear on television, in 2023 none of the pro-Kurdish candidates got significant airtime. This information blackout was part of the subtle suppression – less overt than arrests, but impactful in limiting their reach. - Erdoğan adopted a different rhetoric on the campaign trail in Kurdish areas compared to previous years. Rather than excoriating the HDP as terrorists at every rally, he spoke more about **economic development and infrastructure** in the southeast. He also hinted at possible **reforms**, saying in Diyarbakır: “After elections, we will solve all issues through unity and democracy” – a vague but softer tone than his 2019 line that “there is no Kurdish issue anymore.” This seemed designed to peel off Kurdish votes from the opposition’s presidential candidate by implying Erdoğan might revive a form of the peace process if re-elected.

The results bore out some success for Erdoğan’s tactics. While the YSP (HDP) still won about 8.8% of the national vote and 61 parliamentary seats, their vote share dipped compared to previous HDP performance, and **Erdoğan narrowly won the Kurdish-majority provinces of Şanlıurfa and Bingöl**, for instance – indicating that conservative Kurdish voters stuck with him, swayed perhaps by his tempered approach and the lack of a compelling alternative. Notably, the imprisoned Demirtaş – from his cell – endorsed the opposition’s Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential race. But Kılıçdaroğlu, under nationalist pressure, ran on a somewhat anti-migrant, law-and-order platform that did not strongly court Kurds. In the end, Erdoğan secured a presidential runoff victory. The elections thus reinforced his power, but also showed that **millions of Kurds still backed the opposition** (Erdoğan lost in many Kurdish-majority areas to Kılıçdaroğlu).

Controlled Tolerance and Symbolic Gestures

After the elections, having secured another term, Erdoğan’s government made a few **symbolic gestures of reconciliation** toward the Kurdish community: - In June 2023, authorities allowed the family of **Abdullah Öcalan** to make a long-denied visit to him in İmralı Island prison. This was the first family visit in over 2 years (Öcalan had been kept in near-total isolation). The government did not publicize it widely, but Kurdish media

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reported the visit occurred. Many interpreted it as a gesture to the Kurdish public that *something* was moving – possibly a harbinger of renewed dialogue. Indeed, Devlet Bahçeli (normally vehemently opposed to Öcalan having any platform) gave tacit approval, saying “if our state sees fit to allow a visit, so be it.” - The broadcasting regulator RTÜK quietly eased some restrictions on Kurdish music on radio/TV. In August, a state TV channel aired a program with **Kurdish folk songs**, which was unusual. Pro-government press hailed this as cultural opening, though cynics noted it coincided with Erdoğan’s attempts to win Kurdish goodwill ahead of local elections. - Some Kurdish **political prisoners were released or had sentences reduced** on appeal. For example, in October 2023 an appeals court overturned part of the conviction of former HDP MP *Çağlar Demirel*, leading to her release after 7 years in prison. Similarly, a couple of long-term detained Kurdish journalists were released pending appeal. These were isolated cases, often due to legal technicalities, but the timing suggested an effort to generate a narrative that the judicial climate was improving.

Despite these gestures, **underlying policies remained repressive**: - **Trustee rule** persisted. Even after the elections, in late 2023 most Kurdish-majority municipalities were still governed by state appointees; elected councils were sidelined. The Interior Minister (Süleyman Soylu until June, then Ali Yerlikaya) publicly defended the trustee system, with Soylu boasting that “we removed 45 HDP mayors under Erdoğan’s instructions” and would do it again if needed[135]. This admission[136] showed that nothing had changed structurally: if anything, the government had normalized the idea that Kurds are not entitled to self-government. - The **HDP closure case** remained formally pending. In a somewhat farcical twist, the Constitutional Court postponed its verdict on banning the HDP until after the elections – likely under government influence to avoid a backlash before voting. Then, as 2023 ended, the case was still unresolved (the Court eventually delayed it into 2024). In practice, the HDP had already run via YSP, so the threat of a ban hung like a sword but was not executed yet – another example of strategic delay rather than change of heart. - Perhaps the starkest evidence that the “carrot” was limited to rhetoric was the **continued imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş and other HDP leaders**. Throughout 2023, Demirtaş remained behind bars in Edirne Prison. In fact, in May – just days before the election – a Turkish court piled on a new **sentence of 2 years 6 months** on Demirtaş for allegedly insulting the judiciary, demonstrating that hardliners were still keen to ensure he wouldn’t be freed anytime soon[137]. Similarly, former co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ was still incarcerated, and in September 2023 a court convicted her on another charge, extending her sentence. These moves flew in the face of the

ECtHR rulings and belied any notion of true liberalization. - On the ground, **fewer street protests occurred** mainly because Kurds had been demobilized by fear or discouraged by calls for calm during the election period. But when protests did occur, the response was familiar. For example, in July 2023 when villagers in Siirt protested a new military outpost's land seizure, soldiers broke it up violently and detained 15 people. There was no lasting media coverage or outrage, partly because the public was fatigued and focused on post-election politics.

International Engagement and Image Management

In 2023, Erdoğan was keen to mend fences internationally after years of tension. Turkey's more moderate posture on Kurdish rights was partly a talking point in this diplomatic push: - In talks with the EU over reviving aspects of Turkey's accession process or updating the customs union, Turkish diplomats subtly hinted that "the Kurdish issue is calming down" and that Turkey might undertake democratic reforms after elections. This was aimed at persuading European counterparts that Turkey under Erdoğan's new term would be more stable and possibly more rights-respecting. The actual steps were minimal, but the rhetoric played its role. The European Commission's 2023 country report did note "some decrease in tensions in the southeast," yet maintained harsh criticism of the ongoing trustee system and legal oppression of Kurds. - The Council of Europe's infringement process for Demirtaş was put on temporary hold as the Committee of Ministers awaited the outcome of the Turkish elections and gave Ankara a bit more time. By late 2023, with no release in sight, the Committee signalled it would resume steps in 2024. Turkey's representatives in Strasbourg argued that a new "domestic legal process" (the Kobani trial) was underway and asked for patience – essentially **buying time** while Turkey adjusted its stance domestically. This delay can be seen as Turkey stalling until it could unveil its own initiative (which turned out to be the "Turkey without terror" plan in 2024). - Notably, Sweden and Finland's NATO accession saga continued into 2023. Turkey finally agreed to Finland joining in March, and to Sweden by July, but only after extracting certain commitments, including Sweden's promise to **tighten anti-terror laws targeting the PKK**. This resulted in Sweden criminalizing more PKK-related activities and extraditing a few individuals Turkey wanted (though none high-profile HDP figures). While separate from Turkey's internal Kurdish policy, it underscored Erdoğan's stance that the **"fight against Kurdish terrorism" was non-negotiable** – he was even exporting that fight to Europe diplomatically. However, once NATO deals were done, Erdoğan softened his language towards Western partners

and emphasized Turkey's constructive role – trying to turn the page on being seen as an obstructive authoritarian.

Structural Discrimination and Social Dynamics

Even with less overt violence, the **day-to-day discrimination against Kurds** in Turkey remained deeply entrenched in 2023. Anecdotal reports and surveys indicated that Kurdish citizens still faced significant barriers: - A study by a Turkish university in late 2023 found that over 60% of Kurdish respondents reported experiencing discrimination in job applications or public services because of their ethnicity or accent. This rate had not improved appreciably from previous years[138]. - The education system continued to marginalize Kurdish identity. School curriculums did not include Kurdish language, and indeed some schoolbooks contained revisionist claims like describing the Kurdish language as a dialect of Turkish (an example being a Ministry of Education booklet calling Kurdish "mountain Turkish" which sparked controversy)[139][140]. The year saw no reform toward elective Kurdish language courses in public schools either, despite long-standing requests. - Hate speech incidents persisted though somewhat less frequently reported. Early in 2023, an AKP-linked imam in Ankara gave a sermon implying that voting for the "supporters of the terrorists" (widely understood as HDP) was religiously forbidden. Such rhetoric, while still present, was toned down by the party leadership post-election, but its residue in society remained. - Isolated **racist attacks** against Kurds occurred, though none as deadly as in prior years. In one case in September, a Kurdish family traveling in western Turkey was harassed and assaulted by a mob after they were heard speaking Kurdish at a gas station. Police intervened to stop the violence, but no one was prosecuted, with local officials calling it a "misunderstanding." These incidents, replayed on Kurdish social media, kept mistrust high, even as the state publicly spoke of "brotherhood."

In short, the **lived reality for Kurdish people in Turkey in 2023 was still that of second-class citizenship**, even if fewer were being shot or arrested than in the peak crackdown years. Freedom to speak Kurdish, to celebrate Kurdish culture, to elect Kurdish leaders – all were still severely limited, just with a friendlier face in Ankara promising that peace was on the horizon.

Conclusion

The year 2023 illustrates a **subtle yet deliberate transition** in Ankara's Kurdish policy: from open, hard repression to a more **strategic moderation** in the service of political expediency[133]. President Erdoğan sought to maintain his ultranationalist alliance (and thereby the status quo of state dominance in Kurdish regions) while **selectively appealing to Kurdish voters** and mollifying international critics[141][142]. This balancing act gave rise to what can be called a "controlled tolerance." The government offered *selective acquittals*, allowed a bit more cultural visibility, and reduced the frequency of headline-grabbing crackdowns[143][132] – all without dismantling any apparatus of suppression.

Crucially, the **structural framework of discrimination and securitization stayed fully intact**[144]. Kurds remained under the thumb of a politicized judiciary and militarized local governance. By year's end, **Turkey's treatment of its Kurdish population still amounted to a dual system**: one in which normal democratic rights were suspended if one was Kurdish or spoke up for Kurdish issues, but where on the surface Ankara could claim things were "normalizing."

This dichotomy embodied Erdoğan's "**first the stick, now the carrot**" methodology[142]. After battering the Kurdish movement into a weakened state over several years, the regime in 2023 moved to dangle the prospect of reconciliation – not necessarily to genuinely solve the Kurdish issue, but to **sustain Erdoğan's power** under a veneer of reformism[142]. As elections were won and international pressure tentatively eased, Turkey was poised to unveil a new initiative in 2024 that would put this approach into full play. The following section details how this "carrot" was formally introduced and what it entailed, set against the backdrop of an ever-watchful authoritarian state.

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2024

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2024

“Turkey without Terror” Political Reorientation amid Ongoing Control

(Period Covered: 1 January 2024 – 29 December 2024)

In 2024, the Turkish government launched a dramatic **rhetorical pivot** regarding its Kurdish policy – encapsulated in the phrase “**Turkey without Terror**,” a slogan heralding a supposed new peace initiative. This year can be characterized by a dual dynamic: on one hand, the regime **further softened its public stance** toward Kurdish issues, making overtures about reconciliation and even involving the previously demonized PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in political discourse [24][25]. On the other hand, systemic repression of Kurdish political and cultural rights **continued in practice**, albeit at a somewhat reduced intensity, and the state **redirected some of its repressive focus onto other opponents** (namely the secular opposition CHP). In effect, President Erdoğan’s “stick then carrot” strategy entered its “carrot” phase – but it was a **tactical carrot**, aimed at rebalancing Turkey’s internal politics and international standing, rather than a genuine transformation in attitudes toward Kurdish rights[145][146].

Announcing the “Turkey without Terror” Initiative

The turning point came in October 2024. Devlet Bahçeli, the fiercely nationalist MHP leader and Erdoğan’s coalition partner, stunned observers during an MHP parliamentary group meeting by extending a **public invitation to Abdullah Öcalan** – the imprisoned PKK founder – to “address Parliament” on the condition that he call for the PKK to lay down arms and disband[24][25]. Bahçeli declared that if Öcalan would renounce terrorism, he should be granted the “right to hope” (a hint at some form of clemency)[25][147]. Coming from Bahçeli, who for decades had vilified Öcalan as “terroristbaşı” (chief terrorist), this was an **extraordinary rhetorical U-turn**.

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Within days on 28 February 2025, President Erdoğan endorsed Bahçeli's remarks in careful terms. Erdoğan said Turkey had "entered a new phase through the 'Turkey without terror' efforts" launched by Bahçeli, framing it as a chance to **"tear down the wall of terror"** separating Turks and Kurds[148][26]. Government media began referring to a nascent process aimed at finally ending the 40-year conflict. Notably, the messaging emphasized that this was *not a return to the 2013–2015 peace process*, which had involved negotiations with the HDP and PKK in a context of mutual ceasefire. Rather, officials insisted "there will be no new peace process – we seek unconditional surrender of the terrorists"[149]. The **tone was one of magnanimous victor**: the state would offer an olive branch, but only if the PKK capitulated entirely. Still, the mere talk of **dialogue with Öcalan** and the use of words like "peace" represented a sea change in public narrative.

A likely catalyst for this shift was the fact that by mid-2024, the **PKK insurgency had been largely contained** to outside Turkey's borders (Northern Iraq and parts of Syria) and was at a low ebb inside Turkey. The government possibly calculated that it could afford to act conciliatory without appearing weak. Additionally, with local elections due in March 2024 (including in big cities like Istanbul and Ankara), Erdoğan had a political incentive to court Kurdish voters again. Indeed, some analysts speculated that Erdoğan sought a grand bargain: Kurdish support in cities in exchange for some concessions on cultural or political rights.

In practical terms, after Bahçeli's statement, the government **took steps to operationalize the "Turkey without Terror" roadmap**: - A special intra-government committee was reportedly formed in late 2024 to liaise with "relevant parties" (widely assumed to include intelligence contacts to Öcalan). The National Intelligence Organization (MİT) was said to be pivotal, just as it had been during the 2013 talks. - The Justice Ministry in November 2024 quietly eased Öcalan's prison isolation slightly by allowing a delegation from a newly formed parliamentary commission (with AKP and MHP MPs) to visit İmralı. This visit (never officially confirmed at the time) was essentially to get a message from Öcalan. And indeed, soon after, pro-government outlets carried an indirect report: Öcalan was "ready to support a solution if the PKK heeds the state's call"[150]. - At the same time, the MHP's tone continued to soften: by November, an MHP deputy chairman openly called for **Demirtaş's release**, citing the ECtHR ruling as binding and saying "the court will order release" – a stark departure from the party's prior stance[151][152]. Bahçeli himself commented that freeing Demirtaş "will be

auspicious for Turkey”[153].⁶ This appeared coordinated to show good faith in the new initiative – essentially admitting that to credibly engage Kurds, the government might eventually need to free prominent Kurdish political prisoners.

Internationally, these developments drew cautious optimism. The EU and US welcomed “steps toward a peaceful resolution” of Turkey’s Kurdish conflict, though human rights groups warned that excluding the legal Kurdish political movement (HDP/YSP) from the process and demanding unconditional PKK surrender was a one-sided formula.

A Moderating Climate for Kurds?

In tandem with the “Turkey without Terror” narrative, the **frequency of reported violations against Kurds continued to decline modestly in 2024**[154]. Solidarity with Others’ data showed fewer weekly incidents on average than in prior years. For example, the weekly bulletins recorded *zero* incidents in some weeks of mid-2025 – something unheard of during 2016–2022[27]. Of course, part of this was because so much of Kurdish political life had already been crushed; there were simply fewer HDP offices left to raid or Kurdish journalists left free to arrest. But it also seemed that orders had come from Ankara to **avoid major crackdowns** unless absolutely necessary, so as not to derail the nascent political détente: - No new HDP or YSP mayoral removals occurred in 2024 until the very end of October, when – notably *after* Bahçeli’s Öcalan invitation – the Interior Ministry did remove three newly elected DEM (HDP successor) mayors (in Mardin, Batman, and Şanlıurfa’s Halfeti district) for alleged terror links[29]. This triggered protests and was criticized by HRW as violating voters’ rights[28][29]. Why did this happen during a peace overture? It highlighted that while rhetoric changed, the regime still reflexively resorted to repression when convenient (and indeed those mayors were removed ostensibly because of pending convictions on appeal). However, beyond those, most other Kurdish mayors had already been replaced long before, so the practice was not as visible simply for lack of remaining targets. - **Fewer terrorism trials were launched** against Kurdish activists in 2024. Many ongoing cases continued (Kobani trial ended in May with heavy sentences, as expected), but new indictments dropped. There was, for instance, a noticeable decrease in social media-related arrests of Kurds. Prosecutors were likely instructed to hold off on initiating big new cases against HDP figures, given the political climate. - Cultural events proceeded with less hindrance. The **Newroz 2024**

⁶ At the time of writing as of 11 November 2025, Demirtaş is still not released from Edirne prison.

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celebrations were among the most peaceful in years – large crowds gathered in Diyarbakır and other cities, and police largely stood back. For the first time since 2015, state television covered parts of a Newroz event (showing Erdoğan's congratulatory message). Similarly, a prominent Kurdish film festival in Istanbul was allowed to open in September with minimal interference, featuring Kurdish-language films that previously might have been banned.

However, it would be a mistake to interpret these signs as true liberalization. **Kurdish rights remained precarious and dependent on the political winds.** The core legal architecture – anti-terror laws, broad police powers, the trustee decree – all stayed in place. And tellingly, **repression was not reduced but rather refocused** onto other perceived threats: - In 2024, the government intensified its crackdown on the main **opposition CHP**. For the first time, CHP mayors faced the same fate long suffered by HDP mayors. The most significant case was Istanbul's district of Esenyurt: its CHP mayor, *Ahmet Özer*, was detained on October 30 on charges of PKK membership (based on years-old phone calls as "evidence") and promptly removed from office, replaced by a government trustee (the Istanbul Deputy Governor)[155][156]. Days later, the Interior Ministry dissolved the entire elected council of Esenyurt, essentially replicating the trustee model in Turkey's largest city[156][157]. HRW decried this as a "significant blow to democratic governance" and noted it was **the first time a CHP mayor was ousted in this manner**[28][158]. Concurrently, the CHP mayors of Mersin and Yalova were arrested on unrelated charges. The pattern indicated that Erdoğan's regime was willing to use the tools perfected against the Kurds now also against non-Kurdish opposition. - For Kurdish activists, this broadening of targets was double-edged: on one hand, it meant slightly less spotlight on them; on the other, it signalled that the **authoritarian playbook had simply expanded**. Kurdish politicians saw the writing on the wall – today trustees in Diyarbakır, tomorrow in Istanbul. Some HDP figures cynically remarked that the government's newfound "peace" with Kurds was *because it had found new enemies to go after*. Indeed, in November, a third removal of a CHP-related mayor occurred (Bolu's mayor, a dissident CHP figure, was also suspended). So, while Kurdish regions were somewhat quieter, the **coercive structures had not slackened but proliferated**.

International and Legal Developments

2024's shifts did yield some noteworthy legal outcomes: - The **ECtHR Demirtaş (No.2) judgment** continued to loom. Faced with Turkey's overt non-compliance, the Council of

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Europe's Committee of Ministers prepared a draft decision in late 2024 to refer the case back to the ECtHR for infringement proceedings (as it had done for Kavala). However, Turkey pleaded that it was working on a "solution" domestically – likely alluding to the Turkey without Terror initiative. In a December session, the Committee gave a final warning, urging Demirtaş's release by its next meeting in 2025, lest infringement move forward. The Turkish government took this seriously; it did not want the embarrassment of suspension from the Council of Europe while rolling out a peace narrative. Hence the signs by year's end that Demirtaş might be transferred from prison to house arrest as a "goodwill gesture" – something advocated by some AKP insiders and MHP's sudden change of tune in November[159][160]. - The **Constitutional Court's role** was also interesting. It had delayed the HDP closure case, possibly indefinitely, reading the political tea leaves that an outright ban might undermine the new initiative. Indeed, many expected the case to be quietly shelved if the "peace process 2.0" progressed. And in a surprising liberal move, the Court in October ruled in favour of a Kurdish musician (Hozan Canê) who had been convicted of insulting the President; the Court found her conviction violated free expression[161]. This was a small victory that had no immediate effect on practice (courts kept jailing people for insult), but it showed how high courts were calibrating decisions to appear more rights-friendly in a changing political context. - The European Union signalled possible positive engagement if Turkey's initiative bore fruit. EU officials noted that **progress on Kurdish rights** would greatly help thaw relations. There was talk (optimistic perhaps) that by addressing the Kurdish issue, Turkey could unlock chapters in the accession process that had been frozen over human rights concerns.

By the end of 2024, the **overall picture** was that Turkey was entering a new phase: one of official reconciliation discourse after years of open hostilities. **Bahçeli's overtures**, Erdoğan's endorsement, and some concrete steps (Öcalan's communication, talk of Demirtaş's release) all pointed to a concerted plan[162][38]. Yet Kurdish sceptics warned that the **"carrot" was largely performative** – an attempt to secure regime stability rather than to truly recognize Kurdish aspirations. After all, **none of the Kurdish movement's core demands** (education in mother tongue, local autonomy, release of political prisoners, etc.) had been substantively addressed. The "peace" being offered was one where Kurds surrender arms and resistance in exchange for promises of being treated better under the same system.

Conclusion

The year 2024 records a **controlled de-escalation rather than a genuine improvement** in Kurdish rights[163]. The Turkish government maintained the instruments of systematic repression but **tempered its visibility**, shifting its coercive apparatus partly toward other opponents (the CHP)[164][165]. Erdoğan's enduring strategy of authoritarian adaptation was on full display: after years of punitive force, he pivoted to *tactical conciliation* – “first the stick, now the carrot” – not as an admission of wrongdoing, but as a means to **preserve power amid shifting dynamics**[166][145].

Bahçeli's surprising peace process rhetoric and the engagement of Öcalan were best understood as **political theatre** – instruments in a broader calculus to rebalance domestic alliances and sustain the regime's hegemony[145][146]. Indeed, many Kurdish observers felt the government was effectively saying: “*We have suppressed you; now we'll talk – but on our terms, from a position of strength.*”

By the close of 2024, Kurdish society in Turkey was in a peculiar state of limbo. There was cautious hope among some that perhaps this time Erdoğan might follow through with reforms (having neutralized the ultranationalists by bringing them on board). Others were deeply cynical, noting Erdoğan's track record of using and discarding peace overtures. **What was undeniable is that the cycle had turned** – open stick had given way to dangling carrot. The next year, 2025, would test whether this carrot would lead to any lasting change or whether it was merely a pause before another turn of the cycle.

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2025

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2025

Rhetorical Reconciliation Amid Entrenched Authoritarianism

(Period Covered: 1 January 2025 – 30 November 2025)

The first eleven months of 2025 saw the Turkish government **further its narrative of reconciliation** with the Kurdish population, even as the substance of its policies remained authoritarian. This period effectively marked the culmination of Erdoğan's "stick then carrot" strategy: after a decade of crackdowns, the regime actively promoted a message of national unity and an end to conflict – symbolized by the **"Turkey without Terror"** campaign unveiled by MHP leader Bahçeli and embraced by President Erdoğan[26][38]. The tangible result was a **dramatic fall in reported Kurdish-rights violations** – by mid-2025, for the first time in many years, a week passed with *no* new incidents of repression recorded[27]. However, this was not due to fully restored freedoms or structural reforms, but largely because the Kurdish movement had been effectively demobilized (there were fewer targets left) and because the state was holding its fire as a political tactic. Meanwhile, Turkey's broader authoritarian trajectory continued, exemplified by the imprisonment of high-profile opposition figures like Istanbul's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on politically motivated charges[167]. Thus, 2025 was a year of **rhetorical peace and selective restraint** in the Kurdish context, coexisting with ongoing intolerance of dissent in general.

A "Peace Discourse" Takes Centre Stage

By early 2025, Ankara's official discourse was dominated by talk of ending the Kurdish conflict: - In January, as parliament resumed, President Erdoğan gave a speech celebrating how Turkey had **"greatly reduced terrorism"** and suggesting the country was on the verge of a new era of unity. He referenced the absence of major PKK attacks on Turkish soil in the past year and said families in the southeast could now "sleep in peace." - The **"Turkey without Terror" process** was formalized in February 2025 when

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Erdoğan announced that a “*new phase*” had begun and that “we have the opportunity to take a historic step on the path to tearing down the wall of terror between our thousand-year-old brotherhood”[127][148]. This remark, made at a high-profile event in Istanbul, was broadcast widely. It underscored that Erdoğan was fully aligning himself with the initiative Bahçeli had kicked off. Importantly, Erdoğan credited Bahçeli for the “bold initiative” and said it was advancing with their joint determination[26] – signalling to any sceptics (especially nationalist constituencies) that this was a unified establishment project, not a concession forced by Kurdish resistance. - Crucially, on February 15, 2025 (the anniversary of Öcalan’s 1999 capture), a **message attributed to Abdullah Öcalan** was reported by state media: Öcalan called on all PKK-affiliated groups to **dissolve themselves and end the armed struggle**[148][168]. The message, apparently obtained via the parliamentary delegation that visited him, urged an end to the “40-year terror campaign” and said further armed resistance was futile. Coming from Öcalan himself, this was groundbreaking. It was exactly what the government sought – an effective *declaration of defeat* from the insurgency’s founder, delivered from his prison cell under obviously orchestrated circumstances. Nonetheless, it carried weight among PKK fighters; indeed, by spring 2025, Turkish intelligence reported an uptick in PKK militants laying down arms or deserting. (Sceptics noted we only had Ankara’s word on Öcalan’s message, as independent observers weren’t present.) - Following Öcalan’s message, President Erdoğan in late February triumphantly declared that “**a new phase has been entered**” in eliminating terrorism with Bahçeli’s initiative and “our determined stance”[26]. He portrayed it as Turkey finally defeating the plots that had sown division (referring to the Kurdish insurgency as an imperialist plot) and said the winners of a terror-free Turkey would be “*all 85 million citizens, whether Turk, Kurd, Alevi, Sunni*”[169][170]. This inclusive rhetoric – explicitly naming Kurds as equal beneficiaries – was virtually unprecedented for Erdoğan, who in earlier years rarely acknowledged Kurds except in negative contexts.

These developments culminated in what many dubbed the “**Newroz Deal**” of 2025: at Newroz (March 21), massive celebrations took place in Diyarbakır with an atmosphere of cautious optimism. The government permitted a large festival. An envoy from Ankara even attended and read a statement conveying Erdoğan’s greetings and commitment to a peaceful future. In turn, HDP (YSP) politicians, while sceptical, refrained from harsh criticism during their Newroz speeches, instead focusing on hopes for democracy and mentioning Öcalan’s call as a positive step. It was as close to a celebratory peace moment as Turkey had seen since the 2013 Newroz when Öcalan’s ceasefire letter was read out.

However, it must be underscored: this was a **top-down, tightly controlled peace narrative**. Unlike in 2013–2015, when HDP politicians were active mediators and the process was somewhat public, the 2025 version involved **no direct negotiations with the HDP or PKK cadres**. It was essentially an offer of surrender: the state held all the cards and was dictating terms, with Öcalan co-opted as a mouthpiece. Kurdish civil society had no formal role. Many Kurdish activists and the diaspora criticized this as a stage-managed “peace” that left Kurds voiceless regarding their own demands.

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2025

Collapse of Violations: First Week with None

One undeniable positive outcome was the **sharp drop in overt repressive incidents** affecting the Kurdish population. According to the Solidarity with Others weekly monitor, **Week 260 (9–15 June 2025) marked the first week with zero recorded Kurdish-related human rights violations** since the monitoring began in 2020[27]. This milestone was emblematic of the trend throughout much of 2025: - Political arrests of Kurds had virtually ceased by the spring. There were no large-scale anti-HDP raids or new prosecutions of journalists for Kurdish-related coverage. A handful of local incidents still occurred (e.g., a skirmish at a protest in Van in April led to a few brief detentions), but these were isolated and resolved quickly. - Incidents of **torture or mistreatment** of Kurdish detainees also diminished in reporting. Partly because there were far fewer new detainees, and also possibly because security forces had been cautioned to avoid scandals that could sabotage the political process. Family visits, such as to Kurdish prisoners, were more regularly allowed; even Öcalan’s brother was permitted a short visit in July, which had been unheard-of during his prior isolation. - The overall **security presence in the southeast was somewhat relaxed**. Military operations against the PKK in Turkey had already wound down as the PKK presence in Turkey was minimal. The focus shifted entirely to cross-border operations (which continued in Northern Iraq against remaining PKK bases, albeit with less fanfare). Checkpoints in some Kurdish towns were scaled back; long-standing curfews in rural areas were lifted. For example, villagers in parts of Diyarbakır reported that, for the first time in a decade, they didn’t have to undergo daily ID checks by gendarmes. This created a sense of normal life returning.

It’s important to note that **this drop in violations did not stem from institutional reforms or improved human rights protections** – it was largely a result of political directive. The laws enabling repression were unchanged, but the political order of the

day was restraint. As one Kurdish lawyer put it, “The gun is still loaded, but they’ve taken the finger off the trigger for now.”

In another symbolic milestone, the **Interior Ministry did not renew a number of protest bans** in Kurdish provinces after June 2025. Van’s infamous continuous ban was finally allowed to expire that month (likely under pressure to show goodwill). While authorities reserved the right to issue new bans if needed, for a time it meant that theoretically Kurds could assemble without automatic prohibition – a first since 2016. Indeed, in Van, a group of women’s rights activists held a permitted march in July calling for justice for victims of ISIS (including Yazidi women), an event that previously might have been banned but now passed peacefully.

Deepened Authoritarianism Elsewhere

While Kurdish-focused violations abated, the broader **authoritarian context in Turkey did not ameliorate – it arguably worsened**. One stark illustration was the **Imprisonment of Ekrem İmamoğlu**, the popular CHP mayor of Istanbul and potential presidential contender. In December 2022 he had been sentenced to 2 years 7 months and political ban for allegedly insulting election officials. In 2023 he remained free pending appeal. However, in October 2025, the Court of Appeals *upheld his sentence*, immediately triggering his removal from office and arrest to serve the prison term^[167]. This event, mentioned in the Solidarity with Others summary for 2025^[171], underscored that Erdoğan’s regime *continued to eliminate major opposition figures through the judiciary*, even while making peace gestures to Kurds. In fact, some interpreted the timing – İmamoğlu’s imprisonment just a week after Bahçeli launched the “Turkey without Terror” – as evidence that Erdoğan was trading one form of repression for another: easing up on Kurds but cracking down on the secular opposition.

Additionally, throughout 2025, **civil society and media nationwide remained under heavy pressure**. Turkey’s ranking in press freedom indices did not improve. The new disinformation law was actively enforced, resulting in dozens of journalists (mostly not Kurdish) being prosecuted for online posts about corruption or the government’s handling of economic crisis. None of these systemic issues changed as a result of the Kurdish initiative – indicating it was a circumscribed endeavour, not a democratization.

For Kurds, this raised the question: what good is a “peace process” that doesn’t expand democracy? If the outcome was simply that Kurds wouldn’t be killed or jailed as long as

they acquiesced, but they still couldn't freely criticize the government, then it wasn't a just peace – it was an enforced silence. Many Kurdish intellectuals and the HDP (YSP) leadership stressed in statements that any genuine resolution must involve democratization for all of Turkey, not just a ceasefire. They called for the **release of all political prisoners (Kurdish and otherwise)**, restoration of free elections in the southeast (i.e., end the trustee regime), and constitutional changes to guarantee minority rights. By November 2025, however, the government had not concretely addressed these demands.

One minor positive was that in May 2025, as part of the attempt to show progress, a few **Kurdish political prisoners were released** on probation after serving lengthy sentences (for example, a former mayor was let out 2 months early "for good behaviour"). And there were rumours that Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ might be moved to house arrest or released by late 2025.⁷ Indeed, as reported on November 4, 2025, an MHP official publicly urged compliance with the ECtHR and said "*the court will order Demirtaş's release*"[151][152], essentially preparing the ground for his freedom. This was a remarkable turnaround, and by the end of November, Turkish media were speculating that Demirtaş could be freed in early 2026 as part of a broader amnesty or legal reform package. (Demirtaş himself, still writing from prison, remained sceptical and insisted via his lawyers that any reconciliation would be empty without true democratic reforms.)

Conclusion

The decline in overt repression in 2025 **signalled the end of a decade-long cycle of persecution** and the beginning of a *politically choreographed de-escalation*[172]. President Erdoğan's government, having achieved its aims of crushing organized Kurdish political resistance, now applied strategic restraint and symbolic inclusion to turn the page. Bahçeli's rhetoric of reconciliation – calling it a "historic opportunity" not to be missed – and Erdoğan's championing of a terror-free future formed part of a **cyclical governance model**: extreme coercion followed by controlled conciliation[26][173]. This model is fundamentally about **sustaining power**, not necessarily resolving deep-rooted issues[172].

⁷ It is worth to note that at the time of writing as of 11 November 2025, Demirtaş is still not released from Edirne prison.

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2025

In summary, from 2020 through 2025, the Turkish state's treatment of its Kurdish population went from one of **unrelenting stick** to a carefully meted **carrot**. Thousands of lives were upended by imprisonment, and dozens killed or tortured, in the first phase; in the second phase, Kurds were courted with promises of peace and a few high-profile overtures. The underlying drivers – the state's insistence on unitary national identity, its refusal to entertain true decentralization or bilingualism, and the instrumental use of Kurdish issues in domestic politics – remain intact. As of November 2025, while open conflict has abated and the Kurdish issue is entering a quieter chapter, the **future is uncertain**. Whether Erdoğan's "carrot" will lead to a durable reconciliation or whether it is merely a lull before another cycle of repression will depend on how genuinely Turkey's rulers address Kurdish grievances going forward.

What is clear is that **Erdoğan's strategic transition from harsh repression to rhetorical reconciliation has been executed on his terms** – having first debilitated the Kurdish movement, he now extends a hand, expecting acquiescence rather than negotiating as equals. International actors may welcome the reduction in violence, but they and Turkey's democratic forces must remain vigilant that this process yields real improvements in human rights and not just a more palatable facade on continued authoritarian rule.

8

International Legal and Human Rights Responses

8

International Legal and Human Rights Responses (2020–2025)

Throughout the 2020–2025 period, the international community – including legal bodies, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs – closely monitored and responded to Turkey's human rights violations against the Kurdish population. Reactions ranged from **court judgments and diplomatic pressures to fact-finding reports and public advocacy**, all of which exerted some influence (albeit limited) on Turkey's calculations.

European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and Council of Europe

The **European Court of Human Rights** played a pivotal role by issuing landmark judgments on cases stemming from Turkey's crackdown: - **Selahattin Demirtaş v. Turkey (No. 2)**: In a Grand Chamber judgment on 22 December 2020, the ECtHR ruled that Turkey had violated Demirtaş's rights on multiple counts – including freedom of expression, liberty, and **Article 18** (misuse of power for political purposes) – by detaining him to sideline him from politics[3]. Crucially, the Court ordered Demirtaş's **immediate release**[46][3]. This was one of the strongest ECtHR rulings against Turkey in years. Turkey's refusal to execute this judgment triggered an escalation: the **Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers** (which supervises ECtHR judgment compliance) repeatedly demanded Demirtaş's release[20]. In late 2021, seeing no progress, the Committee initiated **infringement proceedings** under Article 46(4) of the ECHR – a process only used once before (against Azerbaijan)[20]. By 2022, the Committee formally referred Turkey's non-compliance in the *Osman Kavala* case back to the ECtHR for a finding, and it warned a Demirtaş referral was imminent[20]. Facing this, Turkey stalled

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and eventually, as noted, co-opted Demirtaş's potential release into its 2024 "carrot" strategy. As of November 2025, Turkey still had not released him, keeping the infringement threat alive, but the Demirtaş case stands as a **test of the Council of Europe's resolve**. The Committee of Ministers has maintained intense pressure, with repeated resolutions "deeply deploring" Turkey's non-compliance and calling it a breach of Article 46 obligations. - **Other ECtHR cases:** The ECtHR issued multiple judgments on related Kurdish issues – for example, in 2021 it ruled on the case of politician **Figen Yüksekdağ**, similarly finding her prolonged pre-trial detention unlawful (echoing Demirtaş). In 2022, the Court found Turkey violated the right to freedom of assembly of academics who had signed a peace petition about Kurdish regions, ordering compensation. Additionally, long-running cases about the 1990s village burnings and disappearances continued to yield judgments (e.g., *Chop v. Turkey*, 2022), underlining **systemic issues of impunity**.

Turkey's reaction to these judgments was largely defiant. Government officials accused the ECtHR of bias and insisted Turkish courts were not bound by "foreign" rulings in terrorism cases – a stance clearly at odds with Turkey's legal commitments. This stance led the **Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)** to adopt resolutions condemning Turkey's non-execution of judgments (in particular, a September 2021 PACE resolution explicitly called out Turkey for not freeing Demirtaş and Kavala, warning of consequences[20]).

European Union and European States

The **European Union** repeatedly criticized Turkey's treatment of Kurds in its annual reports and statements: - The **European Commission's Turkey Progress Reports** (2020, 2021, 2022) highlighted the backsliding on rule of law and minority rights. The 2020 report noted "serious deficiencies" in democracy and that "the government's broad definition of terrorism continues to negatively affect the Kurdish community"[174][175]. The 2021 report condemned the closure case against HDP and removal of elected mayors as undermining pluralism. And the 2022 report, as mentioned, cited increased repressive measures and the continued detention of Demirtaş as evidence that Turkey was distancing itself from EU norms[107][176]. - In the **European Parliament**, members were vocal. In May 2021, the Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights in Turkey that explicitly "*calls on Turkish authorities to release all those arbitrarily detained, notably Selahattin Demirtaş, in compliance with court decisions*"[177][160] and "*condemns the*

replacement of dozens of HDP mayors by unelected trustees.” A later EP resolution in 2022 on the repression of the opposition also expressed deep concern over the closure case and the continued imprisonment of Kurdish politicians[178][179]. - Individual EU member states raised the Kurdish issue in bilateral forums. For instance, Germany and France’s foreign ministries in 2020–2021 issued statements criticizing the HDP crackdown, and diplomats from several embassies observed politically charged trials (like the Kobani trial) as a form of oversight.

These EU criticisms, while sharp in language, were not backed by concrete conditionality beyond the frozen accession talks. Still, they annoyed Ankara and possibly contributed to Erdoğan’s calculation to soften approach by 2024 to avoid jeopardizing trade or other cooperation with Europe.

United Nations and International Human Rights Organizations

Various **UN bodies and officials** weighed in: - The **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights** in annual updates cited Turkey’s actions against Kurdish officials as part of a worrying trend of civic space closure. In 2021, Michelle Bachelet’s office noted with concern Turkey’s attempts to shut down the HDP and the harassment of Kurdish mayors. - **UN Special Procedures:** Notably, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on torture both sent communications to Turkey during this period. For example, after the 2020 reports of Kurdish villagers tortured (Şiban and Turgut), the Special Rapporteur on torture sought information from Turkey, reminding it of obligations under CAT (Convention Against Torture). Turkey’s replies were generally dismissive or denied allegations. - The **UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)** in 2023 requested information from Turkey about measures to protect Kurds from racially motivated attacks, referencing incidents such as the Deniz Poyraz murder. Turkey responded that its laws prohibited discrimination and that Poyraz’s killer was being prosecuted (which was true; he was tried and eventually sentenced to life in late 2022).

Global **human rights NGOs** were a crucial voice: - **Human Rights Watch (HRW)** and **Amnesty International** issued numerous reports and briefings. HRW’s World Reports each year from 2020–2025 included sections on the Kurdish conflict and crackdown, documenting arrests, the suppression of Kurdish political representation, and Turkey’s disregard for ECtHR judgments[84][180]. Amnesty International in 2020 declared “the

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prosecution and jailing of opposition politicians, including from the HDP, is politically motivated and must stop.” Amnesty’s 2021/22 annual report criticized Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and its impact on Kurdish women, and condemned the continued imprisonment of Demirtaş and others[181]. Both HRW and Amnesty lobbied foreign governments to maintain pressure on Turkey. - The **International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)**, along with Article 19 and other NGOs, made a joint submission to the Council of Europe in June 2022 regarding Demirtaş’s case[182][46], urging infringement proceedings and highlighting how Turkey was weaponizing law to silence opposition. The submission stated that Demirtaş’s detention “represents a deepening of the rule of law crisis in Turkey” and refuted the government’s purported “new evidence” excuse[46][183]. - **Kurdish rights groups in exile**, like the Kurdish Human Rights Project and various Kurdish diaspora organizations, also generated extensive documentation and advocacy. They frequently briefed European parliamentarians, contributing to the robust discourse in bodies like PACE and the EP.

One can observe that these international responses at least kept Turkey’s abuses in the spotlight and imposed a reputational cost. They also gave moral support to Kurdish activists and a legal basis (like ECtHR rulings) for their cause. In some instances, they influenced incremental change: for example, the Council of Europe pressure likely factored into Turkey finally allowing some of Öcalan’s rights (family visits, etc.) by 2024 and seeking a “process” to avoid further sanction.

However, the impact was limited in altering Turkey’s behaviour until Turkey itself chose to pivot for its own reasons. During the height of repression (2020–2022), Erdoğan’s government largely shrugged off international criticism, shielded by geostrategic leverage (refugee deal with EU, NATO importance, etc.). It often accused Western critics of hypocrisy or interference, insisting its counter-terror measures were necessary. Only when domestic and international incentives aligned in 2023–2024 did Turkey alter course.

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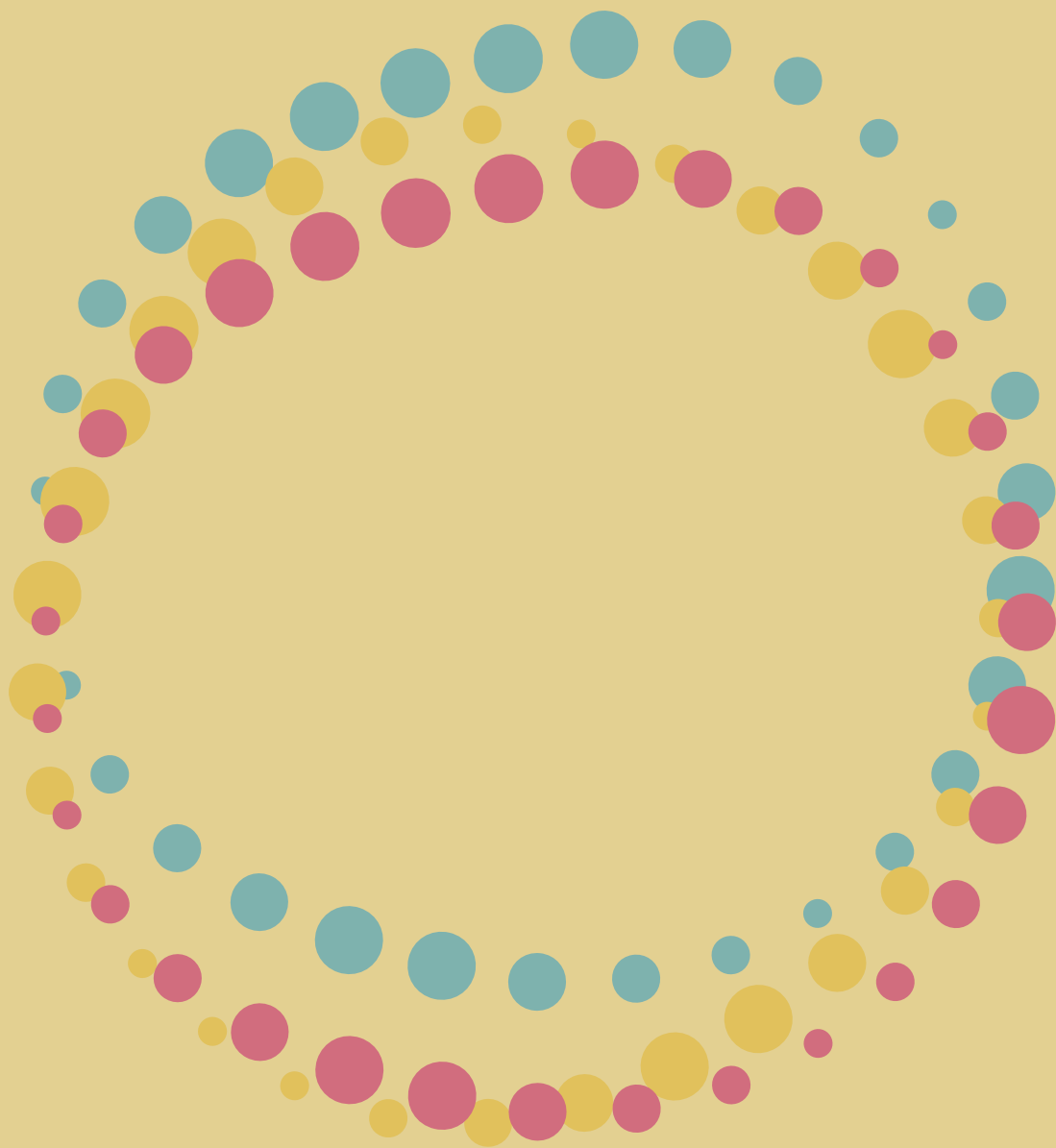
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