

# Free Selahattin Demirtaş and all Turkey's political prisoners!

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8 October 2025

On the final day it was eligible to contest the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling on human rights violations and the political imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Turkey's Ministry of Justice filed an appeal. The ECHR had ordered that Demirtaş, who remains imprisoned, be released immediately.

The objection and the political imprisonment of Selahattin Demirtaş once again expose the falseness of the claims that the ongoing negotiations between the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as well as the commission established in parliament as part of these negotiations, will bring peace and democracy.

The Socialist Equality Party—Fourth International has well-documented and irreconcilable political differences with the Kurdish nationalist movement. But we fundamentally oppose the ongoing repression of the Kurdish people and politicians by the Erdoğan government and uncompromisingly defends the recognition of their fundamental democratic rights. Demirtaş; the other imprisoned HDP leader, Figen Yüksekdağ; the Republican People's Party (CHP) Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor and presidential candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu; and all other political prisoners, including numerous figures from Kurdish politics and left organisations must be released immediately.

In 2016, the arrest of Demirtaş and other MPs was made possible by the removal of parliamentary immunity through a constitutional amendment passed that year with the support of the CHP. This regressive step was primarily aimed at the Kurdish political movement. Since 2016, numerous cases have been brought against Demirtaş. He was first sentenced to four years and eight months in prison for “making propaganda for a terrorist organization.”

Last year, in the “Kobane trial” where a total of 108 Kurdish politicians were prosecuted over protests in October 2014 that left at least 37 people dead, Demirtaş was sentenced to 42 years in prison. Although Erdoğan, like a prosecutor, claimed for years that Demirtaş was responsible for the deaths, the court ruled that the Kurdish politicians were not guilty of the deaths that occurred during the protests. Despite this, Demirtaş received such a sentence on charges related to “terrorism.” The HDP, led by Demirtaş, received between 5 and 6 million votes

in the elections it participated in.

In October 2014, mass protests broke out across Turkey, particularly in Kurdish regions. These were linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) attacks on Kobane in September 2014. Kobane was under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defence Units (YPG), Syrian sister organisations of the PKK. While the Erdoğan government was in negotiations with the PKK at the time, it was uncomfortable with the prospect of the PYD-YPG gaining strength in Syria with US support.

There were calls for Turkey to open a corridor through its territory to allow military aid coming from other areas in northern Syria and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (IKRG) to reach Kobane. As the WSWs explained: “Backing the jihadist forces in the Free Syrian Army, Ankara has opposed any policies that would strengthen the Kurdish nationalists and pushed for a NATO intervention in which the Turkish army would participate to secure the interests of the Turkish ruling class in Syria.”

These developments and the bloodshed during the protests signalled the end of negotiations with the PKK in 2015 and the government's shift to a violent military offensive domestically and in Syria.

The ECHR has issued three rulings to date, on November 20, 2018, December 22, 2020, and July 8, 2025, stating that Demirtaş's detention constitutes a violation of his rights. In its latest ruling, the court stated that the 2019 detention order against Demirtaş was “not based on legal grounds” and “essentially pursued a political motive.”

The deadline for appealing the final decision was October 8. Turkey's lack of appeal and ongoing negotiations in parliament with both imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the Peoples' Democracy and Equality Party (DEM Party), the successor to the HDP, had raised expectations that Demirtaş could be released.

In a statement issued on 6 October, the Diyarbakır Bar Association demanded the “immediate and unconditional release” of Demirtaş on the grounds of the supremacy of international law and as a “necessary step in the social process we are currently undergoing”. However, just a day before the appeal period expired, the Ministry of Justice continued its

vendetta by requesting that the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights reconsider the decision regarding Demirtaş.

DEM Party lawmaker and co-chair Tuncer Bakırhan, who was criticized for appearing friendly with Erdoğan at parliament's opening on October 1, reacted in a post on X saying, "Insisting on not recognizing international legal decisions means nothing other than admitting lawlessness."

The ongoing persecution of Kurdish politicians, exemplified by Demirtaş, is not merely a matter of a personal vendetta. It is primarily an expression of the ruling elite's inability to recognize and defend fundamental democratic rights and their need for an authoritarian regime to advance their interests. Even if Demirtaş or Öcalan were released from prison, this would not be linked to efforts to establish a democratic regime but rather to ongoing negotiations between Turkish and Kurdish elites as part of the imperialist war in the Middle East.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has emphasized from the outset that the new negotiations have no connection whatsoever with a democratic solution to the Kurdish question, and that such a solution can only be achieved through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class to seize power against imperialism and its regional proxies. What is at stake is an attempt at a reactionary agreement between the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeoisie, in line with US imperialism. It must be rejected by the Turkish, Kurdish, and other workers and oppressed masses in the Middle East from an internationalist perspective.

The intensification of the imperialist war of redivision in the Middle East, which includes the genocide in Gaza and the war for regime change in Syria, and the growing competition between Turkey and Israel, led Ankara to seek a renewed agreement with the PKK in 2024. The Erdoğan government, with the support of Öcalan, whose meeting minutes indicating his stance in favour of the Turkish state against the Israeli state were leaked, put forward a perspective of a reactionary "Turkish-Kurdish-Arab" alliance to counter Israel's expansionist ambitions in the region.

Erdoğan reiterated this perspective on Wednesday, referring to the armed clashes in Syria between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose backbone is the YPG, and the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) regime: "The Syrian Democratic Forces must keep their promise. They must complete their integration with Syria... Those who turn their direction towards Ankara and Damascus will prevail. The Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab alliance is the key to eternal peace and tranquillity in the region."

Erdoğan is calling on the SDF to cooperate with the regimes in Ankara and Damascus, not Tel Aviv, claiming that this will bring peace to the region. The fallacy of this claim is evident in the fact that not only Tel Aviv and the SDF, but also Ankara and Damascus have turned toward the US. All these powers and the Arab regimes in the region are complicit in the aggressive actions of the imperialist powers led by Washington

that are destroying the Middle East. This includes the genocide in Gaza.

The agreement Erdoğan called on the SDF to fulfil is the "integration agreement" which it signed with HTS on March 10. Ankara-backed HTS wants the SDF to lay down its arms, end its de facto autonomous administration, and submit to the Damascus regime, while the SDF demands that it preserve its current autonomy and takes its place as an autonomous force within the Syrian army.

In recent days, clashes between HTS and SDF forces have escalated in northern and eastern Syria, which is under SDF control, and in the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Aleppo. The escalation between forces that played a role as US allies in the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, in December 2024 after a 13-year regime change war, is seen as a threat to Washington's "new Middle East" plans. A war in Syria between pro-Ankara and pro-Damascus forces and Kurdish militias, which could draw Israel in, could shatter the axis the US is trying to build, particularly against Iran.

For this reason, the US intervened. Washington's Ambassador to Ankara and Special Envoy to Syria, Thomas Barrack, said in a statement on X on Monday: "I visited northeast Syria today with CENTCOM Commander Admiral Cooper for substantive conversations with Mazloum Abdi and the SDF. Forward momentum for POTUS's vision of 'give Syria a chance' by allowing Syrians to unite with all Syrians in a renewed effort for cooperative peace and prosperity."

Barrack and Cooper also met with HTS leader Ahmed al-Shara in Damascus on Tuesday. It was reported that the March 10 agreement was discussed during the meeting. On the same day, an SDF delegation led by Abdi travelled to Damascus by US helicopter and met with al-Shara. The delegation stated that they discussed declaring an "immediate and comprehensive ceasefire" in northern and eastern Syria and Aleppo and merging the SDF and government military forces, but no official agreement was signed.



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