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Öcalan's Call for the Dissolution of the PKK and the Regional Context

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Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who has been imprisoned for over 25 years, issued a statement calling for the immediate laying down of arms and dissolution of his organization. A delegation from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which met Öcalan for the third time on the prison island of İmralı on February 27, 2025, announced this call at a press conference in Istanbul on the same day.¹ In his "Call for Peace and a Democratic Society,"² Öcalan called on the PKK to convene a congress to decide on its dissolution and integration into the Turkish state.

Shortly afterward, the PKK leadership in the Kandil Mountains declared a unilateral ceasefire and expressed its willingness to comply with Öcalan's request for disarmament and self-dissolution. However, it tied this to the condition that a final disarmament and dissolution could only take place under Öcalan's personal leadership, and that the Turkish government would have to create the necessary political and legal framework for this. Furthermore, the PKK leadership insisted that Öcalan himself must participate in the PKK congress and the Turkish government must establish the required political and democratic conditions so the congress could be held successfully with guaranteed security.³

A letter from Öcalan to the Kurdish leadership in Syria and to the autonomous government in Kurdistan-Iraq was sent, and both sides welcomed the appeal. However, Mazloum Abdi, commander of the Kurdish-led and U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the fight against ISIS (Islamic State), emphasized, that this call does not apply to the SDF. The Kurdish militia YPG (People's Defense Units) is the leading force within the SDF.⁴

Bahçeli's push for a 'terror-free Turkey'

The impetus for this surprising development came from Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) and coalition partner of the government - the politician who repeatedly called for Öcalan's execution in the past and sharply criticized the first peace process (2013-June 2015). Now Bahçeli called on Öcalan to address the Turkish parliament and announce the unconditional dissolution of the PKK, even holding out the prospect of easing his prison sentence.⁵ After President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his support for Bahçeli's move, DEM representatives were granted permission to visit Öcalan for the first time in over a decade. Since then, the DEM delegation has been unilaterally pushing this process forward, holding talks with other Turkish political parties, civil society organizations, and the Kurdish leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP, now DEM), who has been in prison since 2016, supported Bahçeli's push and Öcalan's call.⁶ The DEM and Demirtaş see this as an opportunity for a peace process. By contrast, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his main partner the head of the MHP Devlet Bahçeli and other government representatives deliberately refrain from using terms such as 'process' or 'negotiations' and speak instead of a 'terror-free Turkey', which is to be achieved exclusively through the unconditional disarmament and dissolution of the PKK.

Regional embedding

The motives behind Bahçeli's push and Öcalan's call are inextricably linked to developments in Syria and the Middle East. A purely domestic political explanation, such as Erdoğan's ambition for another term in office or support for the DEM, falls short and does not fully capture the regional dynamics.

Since the end of the previous peace process in 2015, Turkey has massively intensified its military attacks on PKK positions in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria, which have weakened the PKK significantly and damaged the infrastructure in Rojava, the Syrian region of Kurdistan. The terrorist attack and massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas on October 7, 2023, led to a chain reaction in the Middle East, which also put pressure on Turkey, the PKK and the Kurds in Syria under the leadership of the PYD (Democratic Union Party) as well as the SDF coalition. Israel's two-front war in Gaza against Hamas and in Lebanon against Hezbollah indirectly helped pave the way for the takeover of the radical Islamist HTS (Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham) in Damascus on December 8, 2024. This in turn strengthened Turkey and enabled it to pursue a Sunni Islamist axis under its leadership. Israel's attacks on military facilities and installations in Syria

following HTS's takeover, aimed at countering another radical Islamist threat, have faced strong criticism from Ankara and are seen as a deliberate attempt to curb Turkey's growing influence.

A potential decision by the new US administration under President Donald Trump to withdraw its troops from Syria would have significant consequences for all parties, particularly the Syrian Kurds. They fear the dismantling of their autonomy in Rojava, Northeast Syria, and are therefore increasingly seeking new regional alliances.

In this geopolitical context, the rivalry between Turkey and Israel has grown, while the Syrian Kurds are gaining strategic importance as a pro-Western and secular-democratic force - a role that is increasingly supported by the US, Israel and some members of the EU. While the US, Israel and France have advocated a stronger political position for the Kurds in Syria and expressed support a federal structure, these developments are problematic from a Turkish perspective. A possible Israeli-Kurdish alliance or a stronger political position for the Kurds in Syria is perceived as a threat by Ankara. Israel is seen as the main opponent because it maintains close relations with the USA, and an alliance with the Kurds could significantly weaken Turkey's influence in Syria. Domestically, Erdoğan is using these developments to spread the narrative that Israel's aggression also targets Turkey, portraying Turkey as the victim of imperialist powers (referring to the West, the USA, and Israel) that are attempting to divide and control the country.⁷

Bahçeli's push should be understood against this background: The aim is to bind the Kurds more closely to Turkey in order to, as Bahçeli and Erdoğan put it, strengthen the 'internal front'⁸ and prevent possible Israeli-Kurdish cooperation. Bahçeli and Erdoğan are focusing on reviving a Turkish-Kurdish alliance based on the Ottoman model and promising the Kurds a common future with mutual benefits.

The Common denominator of Öcalan's call: A 'Turkish-Kurdish alliance'

Öcalan's call emphasizes two central points that coincide with the ideas of Bahçeli and Erdoğan: First, he rejects previous models such as an independent nation state, federalism, autonomy or culturalist approaches and considers them unsuitable for creating sustainable solutions to societal challenges. Instead, he sees a basis for lasting peace in the creation of a democratic society based on participation and equality. Secondly, Öcalan calls for the revival of a Turkish-Kurdish alliance - a historical alliance that has been formed over a millennium against 'hegemonic powers' but has eroded with time. This alliance must be renewed in the face of the threat posed by 'capitalist modernity'. The reference to the 'Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood' and the 'anti-imperialist community of destiny' is nothing new. Even during the failed peace process

(2013-June 2015), Öcalan emphasized the historical significance of this alliance, which he placed under the banner of Islam, in his Newroz appeal in March 2013.

The perspective expressed by Öcalan from prison and the leadership cadres of the PKK in the Kandil Mountains aligns with that of Bahçeli and Erdoğan, both of whom advocate a return to the Ottoman-Muslim past and promote a Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood. This narrative is aimed at 'strengthening the internal front' and is directed against imperialist powers, highlighting the need for a united alliance. Historically, there is a current within the Kurdish movements that favors a Turkish-Kurdish alliance, including statements by Öcalan and the PKK.⁹ They continue this tradition and are ready to renew this alliance to secure the achievements of Syrian Kurds in Rojava.

Regional effects

The renunciation of violence is perceived by most actors in the region as a positive development. Many Kurds believe it is a liberation from the stranglehold of the stigma of being called 'terrorists', which burdens every political and civil activity. At the same time, it opens the possibility of expanding their scope for political action in Turkey and the region, by strengthening democratic participation and promoting political pluralism within the Kurdish movements. These political processes would experience an upswing and develop new dynamics in all parts of Kurdistan where Kurds live.

Disbanding the PKK would have far-reaching consequences for the region. It would contribute to the stabilization of the autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq, as the Turkish military interventions that destabilized it in the past would become superfluous. These operations led to civilian casualties and the destruction of villages, which put the Kurdish Regional Government under considerable pressure. On the one hand, it was under pressure from Turkey to act against the PKK; on the other hand, such cooperation was domestically sensitive.

In addition, a defusing of the political rivalry between the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) under Masoud Barzani and the PKK would strengthen the position of the Kurds in the region as a whole. The Kurds in Syria would also benefit. A dissolution of the PKK could reduce Turkish military operations and increase the maneuverability of the Syrian Kurds.

Overall, the dissolution of the PKK would significantly reduce intra-Kurdish lines of conflict and contribute to the stabilization of intra-Kurdish relations. Such consolidation would strengthen the strategic importance of the Kurds in the region, make their instrumentalization by anti-Kurdish neighboring states more difficult and at the same time consolidate their position

as an indispensable political factor and game changer in the respective states and in regional politics.

Rojava as a red line

Rojava remains the central point of contention between Turkey, the PKK and the PYD - a red line for both sides. As early as 2015, the peace talks failed largely due to Erdoğan's categorical refusal to recognize the Syrian Kurds politically. While Ankara regards the PYD, YPG and SDF as offshoots of the PKK, the PKK sees Rojava as its ideological and military project. The positions on a future state structure for Syria and the role of the Kurds within it differ widely.

Turkey is pursuing a dual strategy: on the one hand, it is trying to win over the Kurds with the narrative of Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood; on the other, it is pushing for Rojava to be integrated into a centrally organized Syrian state order - without autonomy rights. The Turkish government is using its influence to persuade the Syrian leadership to adopt this stance. At the same time, it is intensifying its airstrikes on PKK positions in Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava, while domestic repression against Kurdish civil society and political actors in Turkey continues. Ankara is thus pursuing a consistent line: the unconditional dissolution of the PKK without political concessions.

On March 10, 2025, shortly after the massacres of the Alawi population by members of the HTS, the US reached a long-negotiated framework agreement between the interim government and the SDF. This provides for eight commissions under US supervision to work out the details of the eight framework points by the end of 2025,¹⁰ including the integration of the SDF into a new Syrian army, the form of Kurdish self-government and Syria's future state model. The Kurds see this as an opportunity to strengthen their strategic position as a counterweight to the Islamists and to protect themselves from possible Turkish attacks, especially in the event of a US withdrawal from Syria.

Ankara reacted with cautious approval, fearing the regional repercussions of the massacres and possible repercussions on the domestic political situation. A day later, a high-ranking Turkish delegation - consisting of the foreign minister, defense minister, and intelligence chief - travelled to Damascus to underline its 'cautious optimism'¹¹ and signal that it would closely monitor the implementation of the framework agreement and react accordingly if necessary.

Outlook

Although Bahçeli has now refrained from using the term ‘terrorist leader’ and instead refers to Öcalan as the ‘founding leader’ (kurucu önder, kurucu lider) and recognizes his call as valuable, this does not mean that the Turkish government will soften its hard stance on the Kurdish issue domestically or in Rojava. However, the DEM and the PKK expect the government to take concrete steps towards political opening in the event of an actual dissolution of the PKK, such as ending the long-standing practice of removing democratically elected DEM mayors from office and replacing them with state-appointed trustees, releasing political prisoners, and implementing legal measures to support an orderly disarmament and dissolution process.

The PKK issue has long transcended national borders and become a regional issue - just as the conflict in Turkey is part of a wider, transnational Kurdish conflict in the Middle East. Its resolution is closely linked to the future of Rojava. A sustainable solution requires Turkey to recognize some type of Kurdish autonomy in Rojava, similar to what it did with the Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraq. The Kurds in Syria and the PKK are open to such a solution, but Turkey is still hesitant.

Bahçeli's push and Öcalan's call reflect a strategic realignment driven by regional upheavals and shifting power dynamics. This is primarily a matter of strategic positioning and security interests, which is why it cannot yet be regarded as a genuine peace initiative.

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Notes

¹ The first and second visits of the DEM delegation to Öcalan took place on December 28, 2024, and January 22, 2025. For the announcement of Öcalan's call by the DEM delegation on February 27, 2025, in Istanbul, see *Habertürk TV*, “[SON DAKİKA! DEM Heyeti İmralı Çağrısını Açıkladı! Abdullah Öcalan'dan PKK'ya Fesih Çağrısı](#),” YouTube, February 27, 2025 [Accessed: March 14, 2025].

² DW, “[Abdullah Öcalan: PKK kendini feshetmelidir](#),” February 27, 2025 [Accessed: March 14, 2025].

³ See [Interview with Bese Hozat](#) (PKK Executive Committee Member) in the PKK-affiliated *ANF News*, March 25, 2025.

⁴ *Medya News*, “[SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi and AANES’s Salih Muslim back Öcalan’s call for PKK disarmament](#),” February 28, 2025.

⁵ *Now Haber*, “[Bahçeli’den Öcalan’a Meclis daveti... 22 Ekim 2024 Selçuk Tepeli ile NOW Ana Haber](#),” YouTube, October 22, 2024 [Accessed: March 13, 2025].

⁶ *QAD Barış Meydanı*, “[Korkma Barış](#),” March 13, 2025 [Accessed: March 14, 2025].

⁷ “[Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ‘Gazze soykırımının hesabının sorulmadığı bir dünya temiz kalamaz’](#),” Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, May 15, 2024 [Accessed: March 15, 2025]; “[Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan İsrail’e karşı İslam İttifakı çağrısı yaptı](#),” Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications, September 8, 2024 [Accessed: March 16, 2025]; and *VOA Türkçe*, “[TBMM’de İsrail oturumuyla ‘Türkiye’ye tehdit’ iddiası tartışıldı, CHP Genel Başkanı ‘iddia manipülasyon’ dedi](#),” October 8, 2024 [Accessed: March 18, 2025].

⁸ “[Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ‘Büyük Zafer, yok edilmek istenen milletin küllerinden yeniden doğuşunun adıdır’](#),” Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Directorate of Communications [Accessed: March 17, 2025]; *Haber 7*, “[Başkan Erdoğan’dan son dakika ‘iç cephe’ açıklaması: Mecburuz, başka çare yok](#),” November 13, 2024, [Accessed: March 18, 2025]; and, *Gazete Duvar*, “[‘İç cephe’nin şifreleri: Bahçeli ve Erdoğan ne yapmak istiyor?’](#),” October 4, 2024 [Accessed: March 18, 2025].

⁹ See *ANF News*, [Interview with Murat Karayılan, PKK Executive Committee Member](#), February 7, 2025 [Accessed: March 31, 2025].

¹⁰ Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “[The SDF-Syrian Agreement: Translation and Overview](#),” *Middle East Forum*, March 10, 2025 [Accessed: March 31, 2025]; also, France Diplomacy: Syria – [Agreement between Syria’s interim government and the Syrian Democratic Forces](#), March 11, 2025 [Accessed: March 31, 2025].

¹¹ *TV100*, “[ABD’nin Koruma Çemberi Kalkarsa Her Şey Bozulur | Hakan Fidan İle Özel Yayın](#),” YouTube, March 14, 2025 [Accessed: March 15, 2025].