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# Betting on Öcalan: The Inside Story of PKK's Speculative Disarmament Talks

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## Authors

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**Summary :** These days, many parties are placing their bets on a potential message from Abdullah Öcalan regarding the PKK's disarmament—an announcement that is reportedly imminent and could be released in the coming days. If confirmed, this could mark a turning point in the 40-year conflict between the PKK and Turkey. However, achieving immediate disarmament remains a significant challenge. In its latest statement, the PKK has signaled a willingness to support Öcalan's decision, declaring, "We will change ourselves." At the same time, it cautioned that the process will not happen overnight. While this development could serve as a starting point for disarmament, Turkey's complex internal and external dynamics make the path forward both possible and highly challenging. The question of disarmament—or the PKK's continued existence—has the potential to reshape political and military balances far beyond Turkey, influencing the broader West Asian region. In the wake of the October 7 events and Bashar al-Assad's declining grip on power, the region is undergoing a fundamental transformation. As a result, this issue cannot be viewed solely as Turkey's internal affair.

These days, many parties are placing their bets on a potential message from Abdullah Öcalan regarding the PKK's disarmament—an announcement that is reportedly imminent and could be released in the coming days. If confirmed, this could mark a turning point in the 40-year conflict between the PKK and Turkey. However, achieving immediate disarmament remains a significant challenge. [In its latest statement](#), the PKK has signaled a willingness to support Öcalan's decision, declaring, "We will change ourselves." At the same time, it cautioned that the process will not happen overnight. While this development could serve as a starting point for disarmament, Turkey's complex internal and external dynamics make the path forward both possible and highly challenging. The question of disarmament—or the the PKK's continued armed presence—has the potential to reshape political and military balances far beyond Turkey, influencing the broader West Asian region. In the wake of the October 7 events and Bashar al-Assad's declining grip on power, the region is undergoing a fundamental transformation. As a result, this issue cannot be viewed solely as Turkey's internal affair.

## Öcalan's Hypothetical Call and Its Potential Consequences

There is still no official date for Öcalan's anticipated message, which is expected to be delivered sometime in February. Despite lingering issues related to Rojava, Öcalan's status, and broader concerns such as a potential general amnesty or the PKK's future after hypothetical disarmament, most parties seem to agree that the call will happen. If confirmed, this would mark the third time since his capture in Kenya in 1999 that Öcalan has sought to resolve the conflict or push for the PKK's disarmament. His previous attempts were unsuccessful, but the pressing question now remains: Will this time be any different?

After his capture in 1999, Öcalan asked PKK to withdraw from Turkey's borders. At that time, some PKK members, especially in Dersim (Tunceli), rejected the request. Despite the objections of some PKK leaders, they eventually agreed and, according to a high-level Iraqi diplomatic source, most members of the organization withdrew to Qandil through an agreement between Turkey, Mam Jalal, and PKK.

Öcalan's decision at that time significantly reduced armed clashes and political violence between the PKK and Turkey, though it did not bring them to a complete halt. According to the Uniform Collateral Data Portal, [UCDP's](#) organized violence data, in the four years preceding Öcalan's capture (1994-1998), there were approximately 2,881 recorded violent incidents between the PKK and the Turkish state. However, following his decision in 1999, this number dropped sharply to 263 incidents between 1999 and 2003.

Casualty figures followed a similar trend. Between 1994 and 1998, the conflict claimed 18,538 lives, whereas during the 1999-2003 period, the number of war-related deaths fell to 1,844. Öcalan's proposal to temporarily and nominally change the PKK's name had some impact, but the organization was neither effectively dissolved nor fully disbanded. Despite his imprisonment, Öcalan demonstrated that he remained the PKK's undisputed leader. His influence persisted in later periods, including 2004-2008 and 2009-2013, even as the number of clashes and casualties began to rise again.

Öcalan's efforts during the Oslo negotiations (2009-2011) and the peace process (2013-2014) also ended in failure. As a result, the conflict between the PKK and Turkey escalated from a limited, low-intensity confrontation into a full-scale war with significantly higher casualties. Between 1989 and 2015, 97% of all violent incidents between Turkey and the PKK took place within Turkey's borders. However, between 2015 and 2023, the share of violence occurring outside Turkey increased dramatically—from 3% to 46%. The overall intensity of the conflict also surged, with the number of violent incidents rising from 369 between 2009 and 2013 to 1,908 between 2015 and 2023. Meanwhile, casualties increased more than threefold, from 1,950 to 6,172. Despite Öcalan's continued influence as the PKK's symbolic leader, the shifting political landscape—both within Turkey and beyond—has made it clear that he alone can no longer dictate the course of events or single-handedly resolve the conflict.

Turkish officials now hope that Öcalan's anticipated message will not only address the PKK issue but also untangle the complexities surrounding the SDF. However, it remains unclear what kind of negotiations—if any—have taken place or will take place between Öcalan and the state. Despite the government's official stance denying any talks, a pragmatic assessment suggests that resolving this issue without some form of agreement and preparation is highly unlikely. Moreover, the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Middle East could pose significant challenges to Turkey's ambitions, adding further complexity to the situation.

## Internal Dynamics and the PKK's Disarmament Issue.

Based on statements from both Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist MHP party, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it is evident that the current geopolitical landscape plays a significant role in Ankara's renewed consideration of Öcalan as a potential avenue for resolving the PKK issue. Given his age, Öcalan may represent Turkey's last opportunity to address the conflict with minimal political and military costs. If successful, it would be a major strategic victory for Turkey; if unsuccessful, it could create divisions among Öcalan's supporters and other factions—a scenario that Ankara may still view as advantageous.

Murat Karayılan, a senior PKK leader, has stated that they have developed new strategies to counter Turkey's aerial superiority, particularly against drone warfare. According to him, with the exception of one specific type of drone, they now have the capability to counter all other Turkish drones and have made significant technical and tactical [advancements](#). Additionally, similar to Hamas, they have reportedly placed considerable emphasis on tunnel and underground warfare. However, there is currently insufficient data to determine whether, despite Öcalan's call, and in the hypothetical scenario of continued conflict, these advancements could significantly alter the course of the war.

In reality, compared to the years before Öcalan's capture, PKK is no longer a major security problem for Turkey's interior. Except for a few operations in Ankara, during 2021-2023, 75% of PKK-Turkey violence and clashes occurred outside Turkey's borders, and effectively, the war there has decreased and the geography of conflict has changed, this is besides several Turkish military operations in Kurdistan Region and Rojava which Turkey has conducted under the pretext of PKK and has had a significant impact on the Kurdish issue. Of course, Turkey realizes that despite this current situation, the region's conditions might pave the way for a stronger wave of war and clashes if it doesn't find a solution to this issue. As mentioned in a previous assessment, the Israeli model for weakening Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as Iran's model for marginalizing the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) or People's Mujahedin Organization and eastern Kurdish parties, has [increased](#) Turkey's hope for resolving the PKK issue. Turkey's repeated emphasis that PKK will either disarm voluntarily or by force is reminiscent of the same model that Trump is now following regarding "peace through strength" in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Turkey has a great need for the post-Assad Syria market, particularly in the country's reconstruction projects estimated to [cost](#) between 250-400 billion: this is good news for Turkey's construction sector, which directly contributes 6.06% to the country's GDP but indirectly [goes up](#) to 35%. A sector whose strengthening has paralleled AKP's strengthening in Turkish politics and can serve the Justice and Development Party's domestic politics, which lost many votes in the last election. But before all hypothetical projects in Syria, it needs to resolve its issue with the SDF.

On a personal level, after Devlet Bahçeli's speeches, Turkey's president may have gained a great opportunity to resolve a 40-year war in his country. This is besides the fact that it can impact issues such as constitutional change and AKP's

position in future elections, and can be the removal of an internal barrier to what is envisioned in Ankara's new geopolitical idea as the "Turkish Dream," in which this century's vision of Turkey is drawn through expanding regional influence, economic development, and ending internal armed conflict.

For someone like Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist MHP party, who took the initiative to open the door for Öcalan's role, the end of the war means victory and he can portray himself as a "hero" in Turkish nationalist opinion, despite the risks of reducing his party's votes, was willing to take such an initiative for what he calls "Turkish national interest." Of course, it's still unclear how Devlet Bahçeli's recent illness, for which he underwent heart surgery in recent days, will affect this issue.

Abdullah Öcalan, PKK's imprisoned leader, has entered his 76th year and this might be one of his rarest chances to both get out of prison and effectively return to politics. At least for 5 influential PKK leaders whose average age is over 70 and who have been in the mountains for relatively about 40 years, this could be an opportunity to return, but it could also be an obstacle; especially from the perspective of what they would lay down their weapons for! Here, another obstacle is that it's still unclear whether Turkey will make any other openings regarding the Kurdish issue in exchange for PKK's disarmament or, as it's being discussed, will insist that "there is no longer an issue called the Kurdish issue."

## External Dynamics and the Regional Geopolitical Impact on PKK's Disarmament Prospects

It seems that the idea of the pivot to Asia-Pacific in American policy hasn't materialized as predicted after October 7 and has undergone changes. Until before October 7, there was talk of American withdrawal, but now Trump not only doesn't talk about leaving but speaks of owning a piece of land in this region that has been in war and chaos for 80 years! In the events following October 7, 2023, America strongly stood behind Israel and once again played its role as the main actor in the region's security architecture. Israel's military success in the war against Hamas and Hezbollah, along with Turkey's strengthening regional role after Assad's fall, and the possibility of expanding the Abraham Accords, could on a broader level prevent Chinese and Russian dominance in the Middle East and reinforce America's position.

After a long period, once again the geopolitical interests of America and Turkey in the Middle East have converged, and Turkey's importance for America has increased in Central Asia, South Caucasus, and Africa. This can also influence the American perspective on the issue of PKK's disarmament and the SDF issue. However, the problems between Turkey and Israel could create obstacles to this convergence. Perhaps Turkey's dominance alongside Saudi Arabia and Qatar in post-Assad Syria wouldn't be a bad thing for Washington, and with this, it could kill two birds with one stone: First, it would prevent the strengthening of Iran's regional influence which would ultimately serve Russia and China. Second, it would secure the interests of its allies.

The possibility of establishing two new Turkish military [bases](#) in the desert areas of central Syria (Badiya) alongside HTS operations on the Lebanese border provides a guarantee to prevent the reconstruction of Iran's land corridor from Iraq to Syria for reviving the Resistance Axis, without allowing Damascus's authority to become too strong. It can also prevent ISIS from regaining strength, which has had an unprecedented opportunity after Iran and its proxy groups' withdrawal, the absence of monitoring, and Russian air strikes. Turkey has repeatedly announced that it's ready to agree with U.S on the issue of fighting ISIS and the matter of detained ISIS members, which is a main aspect of U.S-SDF cooperation. Back in 2019, Trump had decided to withdraw from Syria on this basis but later backtracked under the influence of protests. From this point, if Öcalan's message proves effective and is heeded, America might be able to prepare the ground for open

dialogue between Turkey and SDF officials, similar to the role it played in the Kobani-Jolani dialogue.

It appears that Israel is using the Kurdish issue more as a pressure card, primarily at the discourse level, against Turkey. However, the continuation of PKK and SDF is in its interest because excessive strengthening of Turkey is likely not a good option for it. During the Turkey-PKK war between 1984-2022, Israel supported Turkey for more than 22 years, and if different agreement opportunities arose, it would prefer to reach an agreement with Ankara. However, it might keep an eye on Öcalan's statements to see what impact they will have on the situation in Syria and the power balance between Israel and Turkey.

It's very likely that Jolani is also one who eagerly watches to see what impact Öcalan's message will have on Syria, especially when resolving the SDF issue through war could create problems for him while Turkey's pressures are also causing him trouble. He currently faces an undeclared Israeli veto from the south regarding resolving the Druze issue and the southern front. From the east, he faces an American veto on the SDF issue, and from the north, Turkey-aligned armed groups are problematic for him, having fought each other at least three times in recent years. In the center, there are other Islamic groups that won't easily submit to him. In reality, he still doesn't have control over all of Syria. Despite claims that all armed groups will be integrated into the new Syrian army, none have actually laid down their weapons yet, and on the ground, each is trying to strengthen their position and areas of influence. This naturally means more gains for them. For example, in a place like Eastern Ghouta, Jabhat al-Islam, which is close to Saudi Arabia, has the most authority. There are still many security issues in the coastal areas of Homs and Hama, and in the coastal regions (especially Alawite areas), there is potential for new armed groups to emerge. This is while Jolani relatively only has 25,000 fighters he can rely on. This is Jolani's dilemma: large geography and few trusted people to manage it! That's why Jolani might also be watching Imrali, hoping that Öcalan's message might have an impact on the SDF situation and the issue of PKK's presence in Syria, making it easier to solve one of his problems.

Iran is also watching to see what Öcalan says and how he has agreed with the state. The first issue for the Iranians is that the potential end of PKK's 40-year war means the strengthening of their rival Turkey. Tehran is concerned about Turkey's role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia and believes that if the Zangezur Corridor project connecting Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan succeeds, then a Turkish-Turanian corridor will be created aimed at closing Iran's gateways to Armenia and from there to Europe. Turkey's relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan also add another layer to Iran's fears about Turkey's increasing regional influence, but Tehran's greatest fear is in Syria and Iraq. Iran spent over 50 billion dollars in Syria in recent years, but Jolani's arrival wasted it all and made the field more favorable for Turkey's regional influence. This is besides the fact that Turkey is beginning to displace Iran in the Palestinian issue, which Iran has been working on for more than forty years.

But more important than all of these is Iran's potential concern about Turkey's increasing role in Iraq, which has become more important to Tehran as the last bastion of regional influence, and it wants to maintain its grip on it by any means. The Iran-Baghdad fear that Kurdish and Sunni demands might increase, or another wave of Sunni resistance might emerge with a new version of ISIS or Al-Qaeda, has created a new security-political puzzle for Tehran. The Sunnis' position regarding the suspension of the general amnesty law and later the federal court's retreat from its decision is a clear sign of this new phase in Iraq.

For Iran, the PKK issue is not just a factor useful in its power balance with Turkey but also a border security issue. Throughout the past years, PKK's presence in Qandil and border areas has served as a barrier to the establishment of Tehran's armed opposition groups in that difficult mountainous area that is hard to control with state forces. This is besides the fact that if Turkey makes Kurdish concessions after PKK's disarmament, then Tehran will also be forced to take a step regarding the Kurdish issue that it has avoided until now.

On the other hand, the Kurdish card for countering the Turkish project is being discussed as an issue within Iran, but as intriguing as this may be, it's equally dangerous for them. Iran effectively supported PKK against Turkey during 1986-1991, as well as in 1995, 1997, and lastly in 1999, but now this isn't as easy as before. Recently, Hakan Fidan explicitly asked Tehran not to support PKK-SDF, saying "we don't support Iran's opponents!" This might be interpreted in Tehran as "we will support your opponents if you continue your policy." However, at the same time, Turkey knows that if Iran insists on supporting PKK-SDF, it can create major headaches for them, so alongside this, Fidan visited Baghdad to assure Iraqi Shiites that it won't support Kurds and Sunnis if their demands are met. Ibrahim Kalin, Turkey's intelligence advisor, also went to Tehran to agree on "security issues"!

Iran likely doesn't want PKK to disarm and will indirectly try to prevent this from succeeding, but in this situation, they won't directly confront Turkey. This is because their position in Iraq is precarious, and it coincides with Trump reinstating sanctions on Iran and trying, with the help of the three European countries in nuclear negotiations, to restore UN Security Council sanctions against Iran, so they need a neighbor like Turkey more than ever before. Of course, if the situation moves toward war or if powers like China and Russia help them, Iran will likely not hesitate to support PKK against Turkey.