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# Decoding Öcalan's Message and the Question of PKK Disarmament

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## Authors

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**Summary :** Öcalan has led the PKK for more than 46 years, beginning at the age of 30, and this may be one of the key factors behind his political transformation. His experience lends weight to the age theory in civil war outcomes, which posits that as the leaders of armed groups grow older, they become more inclined toward peace and more focused on the legacy they leave behind, rather than on prolonging the conflict. This mirrors the shift made by Yasser Arafat in Palestine toward the end of his life. In practice, Öcalan's transformation could mark an important step toward ending a prolonged conflict and opening a new chapter in Kurdish politics in Turkey.

However, it remains unclear whether this effort will ultimately succeed.

After 26 years, a video message of Abdullah Öcalan has finally been released, in which he refers to the PKK as a "communalist movement"—the same organization he had previously called to be disbanded. Media outlets affiliated with the group, following its 12th Congress, have increasingly used the term "Kurdish Freedom Movement." However, it is likely that we will hear more references to the communalist concept in the future, which appears to be inspired by Murray Bookchin's ideas on [ecology of freedom](#), democracy, and related subjects. Öcalan's use of that term at the outset may be an effort to signal his departure from Marxist-Leninist and national liberation movements, both of which have played a significant role in Kurdish political struggles for more than four decades.

Time and age possess tremendous power to transform people. In the video, Öcalan speaks with great fervor and energy about advancing the process of *democratic politics*, yet visible signs of aging are evident in him. He speaks more calmly than he once did. A central part of Öcalan's speech is dedicated to justifying his decision to disband the PKK and halt the war in order to give that decision legitimacy. To underscore this sense of legitimacy, six other PKK prisoners are shown either sitting or standing behind him—an implicit message that this is not merely his personal statement.

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Öcalan's transformation becomes clearer when we consider that, during his early political life, he emerged as a leftist leader who formed an organization that sought to implement the ideas of Marx, Lenin, and Mao within the Kurdish context. He strongly believed in the role of "multi-force" in driving political change. To this end, he established the PKK and the National Liberation Army, and for the first time introduced compulsory military service for Kurdish youth. During the third congress of his party, he created the tradition of "Kurdishness by force," which meant that every Kurdish individual was obligated either to participate in the armed struggle or to provide support to the movement.

The outcome of this policy was twofold: on one hand, direct confrontation with the state; on the other, tensions with other rival Kurdish organizations. Unlike many traditional parties in Kurdish society, it began a long war with an idealistic-maximalist demand such as the unification and independence of all four parts of Kurdistan, which for nearly five decades directed some of the changes in the political field of Kurdistan. Once Mam Jalal described the PKK in the Kurdistan Parliament as "a strange body" within the broader Kurdish political movement. Öcalan himself previously referred to the PKK as a "presidential movement," and now calls it "a movement close to communism." Regardless of the evolving terminology, one thing remains clear: the key to understanding the PKK lies in understanding Öcalan himself.

## Decoding Öcalan's Message

The message lasts 7 minutes and 8 seconds, during which Öcalan speaks slowly, expressing only 617 words. He references the importance of time in various ways more than 17 times, using it largely to legitimize his calls and decisions. For instance, he refers to them as "historical decisions" or "historical steps" on nine occasions. To reinforce his argument, he emphasizes that the PKK has achieved its objective in resisting the politics of denial, and as a result, it is now changing both its goals and its operational approach.

At the very beginning of his speech, he states: *"Even though it may seem repetitive, I consider it a moral duty to provide a clear and thoughtful response to the issue, along with possible solutions."* This indicates that he has previously addressed

some of these questions but now finds it necessary to revisit them. He sees this as a personal responsibility, implying that uncertainties still remain in the minds of some regarding this issue. From Öcalan's words, it appears that the hesitations and doubts within the PKK may revolve around two key points: first, the fundamental justifications for the proposed transformation, and second, the guarantees that should be secured from the state.

Öcalan clarifies on at least two occasions that this is not a defeat, emphasizing that the PKK has accomplished its goal in confronting the politics of denial. He argues that continuing further would result in a repetitive and unproductive cycle. To address concerns about the future of PKK members, he refers to two key points: first, the legal process; and second, the establishment of a new political movement. He uses terms related to political change at least 23 times, making a concerted effort to justify the proposed transformation through concepts such as communalism, society, democratic politics, peace, and democracy.

Öcalan states that he has written a manifesto intended to replace the *Path of the Kurdistan Revolution*—which, in practical terms, could signal the creation of a new party in place of the PKK. Most likely, this would involve restructuring PKK-affiliated organizations. Within that framework, the DEM Party could potentially be reformed this fall to accommodate some PKK members. Additionally, those members who cannot return may continue their work in affiliated institutions, either in Europe or elsewhere.

Öcalan has given importance to the impact of the psychological aspect on this process. He has mentioned twice that this is a voluntary disarmament and calls it a transformation rather than a defeat. He has also sent friendly messages to his comrades twice. From the beginning, he has called his movement a friend to communist movement, and at the end, he spoke of eternal friendship. It seems Öcalan is aware that the different stance of each PKK leadership individual can be influential, so he has also considered those psychological aspects. He has said this not only for the PKK, but also for public opinion, and has mentioned that their concerns need to be dispelled. Most likely, he has also linked this to practical steps for disarmament, in order for public opinion to have confidence in it.

Regarding state guarantees, he talks about establishing a parliamentary commission and emphasizes that he has confidence in the Turkish state. Therefore, he asks the PKK several times to fulfill the requirements of this phase and has mentioned the new phase at least 6 times. He talks about taking necessary steps away from the thinking of "you first, then me," and most likely in this he is referring to the PKK, because in his words after that he says "I feel those steps will not go to waste, I know there is good intention and I have confidence in it." He has also tried to make the disarmament process faster and said that the issue of my release should not be mentioned as a condition, and he links his own freedom to the freedom of society.

Öcalan states that he is acting entirely of his own free will and that his statements are the result of his meetings in İmralı. This indicates that, although the issue of PKK disarmament has not yet been formalized in a written agreement, he officially acknowledges that there is dialogue with state officials. Since the end of World War II, a total of 309 peace agreements have been concluded between states and armed rebel groups. The PKK's case is not among these, as it remains an informal rather than a formal agreement. Experience has shown that the success of such processes—whether formal or informal—is a highly sensitive matter. Of the [309](#) peace agreements, 110 failed within an average of 471 days, while more than 64% were successful.

It remains unclear whether the process between Öcalan, the PKK, and the state will ultimately succeed. However, what is certain is that, alongside numerous obstacles, there are also significant opportunities for success. Although there may not be space here to discuss all of these factors, time will reveal the outcome.