

End of PKK's armed activities carries significant regional implications

INTERVIEW Abdullah Ocalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), recently called on the group's members not only to lay down their arms but to dissolve the organization entirely. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan described this message as a "historic opportunity." However, it did not halt Turkey's ongoing airstrikes against PKK positions. Many figures close to the Turkish government argue that now that the PKK's leader has demanded its dissolution, the group must disarm and end its conflict with Turkey. Turkey on Thursday insisted the PKK and all groups allied with it must disarm and disband "immediately", a week after the historic call by the Kurdish group's jailed founder. Ismail Bagheri, spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry, welcomed Ocalan's message, calling the disarmament a "significant step toward renouncing violence" and expressing hope for its positive regional effects.

IRNA interviewed Siamak Kakaie, a Turkey researcher and international relations scholar, on the motivations and implications of Ocalan's decision. Below is a segment of the discussion:

What recent developments led to Ocalan's statement?

Ocalan's message urging members to lay down arms and dissolve the PKK has resonated widely in political and media circles globally. While the core theme of abandoning armed struggle is not entirely new—Ocalan has previously emphasized democratic solutions for Kurdish issues in Turkey—the current focus stems from several factors.

Three months ago, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), a far-right ally of Erdogan's ruling party, proposed in Parliament that Ocalan should personally announce the PKK's dissolution there. This proposal, framed as a potential amnesty, aimed to foster dialogue among Turkey's political and social factions.

Erdogan endorsed this idea, marking the first official efforts to explore avenues for Ocalan to issue a statement ending armed conflict. Concurrently, Turkey's government facilitated meetings between Ocalan (imprisoned on İmralı Island) and representatives of the pro-Kurdish Equality and Democracy Party (a legal parliamentary group). These discussions culminated in Ocalan's explicit call for disarmament. He further urged current PKK leaders—based in northern Iraq—to convene a congress to formalize the group's dissolution.

Why did Ocalan demand disarmament now, after decades of armed struggle?

Similar appeals have emerged before. For instance, during Turkey's 2011–2012 Kurdish Opening initiative, taboos around direct talks between Ankara and the PKK were broken. At the time, Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) spearheaded negotiations, leading to a cease-fire from 2013 to 2015. However, tensions reignited in 2015 after pro-Kurdish parties gained unprecedented electoral influence, depriving Erdogan's party of a parliamentary majority and triggering snap elections. A security crackdown in southeastern Turkey followed, alongside renewed clashes with the PKK.

Meanwhile, Kurdish groups in Syria capitalized on the Syrian conflict, establishing semi-autonomous zones after Syrian forces withdrew. This development alarmed Ankara, which viewed it as a threat to its territorial integrity. Between 2016 and 2020, Turkey launched cross-border operations (Olive Branch, Peace Spring) to create buffer zones in northern Syria, explicitly opposing Kurdish self-rule. Ankara fears such autonomy could embolden Kurdish aspirations within Turkey.

The Turkish government has welcomed Ocalan's message on disarmament, but the critical question is: Does Erdogan's government now believe the situation is different this time?



A Syrian Kurdish woman waves a flag bearing a picture of the founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party Abdullah Ocalan, as people gather in the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli in northeastern Syria to listen to a message from the jailed leader, Feb. 27, 2025. ● DELI SOULEIMAN / AFP

Yes, the Turkish government has welcomed Ocalan's message and declared that it awaits its results. However, Turkey harbors serious doubts about the likelihood of the PKK's disarmament and has explicitly stated that it expects concrete outcomes from this process. In other words, they believe the PKK must surrender completely and in an organized manner. The Turkish government has framed this situation in a way that underscores the difficulty of implementing such a plan.

Turkey's support for Ocalan's decision, and the prior efforts to disseminate such a statement from him, stem from its perspective on Kurdish issues. Particularly when considering the PKK's nearly 50-year history, Turkey's sustained military campaigns against the group since the 1980s—especially in northern Iraq and parts of Syria—have failed to eliminate it. Consequently, this has become a major predicament for Turkey, as the government designates the PKK as a terrorist group.

In many media circles, the situation of Kurds in Turkey has been analyzed or even addressed through the lens of PKK activities. But what is the overall status of Kurds in Turkey, and what is the perspective of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government toward them?

Over its 22-year rule under Erdogan, Turkey has achieved notable progress for Kurds, including expanded cultural and civil rights and a more inclusive approach toward legal Kurdish political parties. However, these gains coexist with restrictions: Kurdish mayors have faced dismissal, dozens of prominent Kurdish figures have been detained or imprisoned by judicial

authorities, and government pressure persists. Despite these challenges, significant openings for Kurds in Turkey have emerged.

Turkey's ruling coalition leaders—Erdogan and Devlet

To what extent could the issue of US support for Syrian Kurds influence Turkey's envisioned outlook toward Syrian Kurds? The ambiguity surrounding the future of the Kurdish situation in Syria is also tied to US policies,



as some American forces remain stationed in northern Syria, specifically in Kurdish-majority areas. The US implicitly supports Kurdish factions in Syria, which has caused serious concern for Turkey. Ankara's sharp criticism of Washington revolves around why it backs groups that Turkey deems terrorist.

It appears that Syrian Kurds do not consider themselves bound to follow Ocalan's directives, as evidenced by their stance toward his message. Under these circumstances, how do you predict Turkey's approach will evolve?

There is no doubt that the situation of Kurds in Syria and Turkey is shaped by the PKK issue, but the response of Syrian Kurdish factions to Ocalan's message is noteworthy.



Politicians and lawmakers from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), with a picture taken in Imralı Island prison of the jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan in the background, attend a press conference in Istanbul, Turkey, on February 27, 2025. ● UMIT BEKTAS/REUTERS

Mazlum Abdi, known as Mazlum Kobani and a commander of Kurdish groups in Syria, has stated that they welcome Ocalan's decision and regard it as historic. However, he emphasized that this message pertains solely to Turkish Kurds and the PKK, with no relevance to Syrian Kurds. This stance will sustain Turkey's anxieties, and it can be inferred that the Kurdish issue in Syria remains contingent on US policies and the Syrian government's current approach to

engaging with Kurdish matters in the country.

What priorities drive the Syrian government's engagement with Kurdish factions today?

The current Syrian government seeks the disarmament of weapons held by Kurdish groups and strongly emphasizes Syria's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Ahmad al-Shara has referenced upcoming negotiations with Syrian Kurds. While meetings have occurred between Kurdish leaders and representatives of the current Syrian government, including al-Shara, the prospects of Damascus and the Kurds reaching an agreement that would also satisfy Turkey remain unclear.

It is critically evident that Turkey categorically opposes any federalization or creation of an autonomous region for Syrian Kurds. Turkey desires Kurdish participation in Syria's political process; however, this stance explicitly excludes groups like the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the People's Defense Units (YPG). Turkey adamantly rejects these groups' involvement in Syria's political processes and simultaneously demands an end to Kurdish armed activities in Syria. Nevertheless, doubts persist over whether Ocalan's message can meaningfully impact the broader Kurdish situation in Syria. After all, Syrian Kurds have maintained a semi-autonomous status for roughly 12 years, compounded by relative US support for these factions—a reality deeply concerning to both Damascus and Ankara, further complicating the issue.

While Ocalan's move has received significant regional attention, do you believe the skepticism or doubt within Turkey regarding the implementation of this order is also notable at the regional level?

An examination of Turkey's domestic stance, as well as regional and global positions toward Ocalan's message, reveals that all parties have welcomed it. There is support for the PKK ending its armed activities, laying down its weapons, and even dissolving the party. However, when scrutinizing the operational realities, it becomes clear that the conditions for ending the armed struggle of a group that has been engaged in militant activities for over four decades will not be straightforward. As noted earlier, PKK forces and



Siamak Kakaie

their military leaders in northern Iraq are uncertain about the logistics of disarmament. Will the Turkish government welcome them? Has the social and political climate in Turkey opened up for this group's political participation? These are pressing questions tied to this issue.

If we dissect the essence of Ocalan's directive, the critical question is whether this approach signifies a metamorphosis in his ideological framework or is merely a tactical maneuver.

Conceptually, Abdullah Ocalan's message is being analyzed as a historic move, emphasizing the end of a political movement and group that he, as the founder of the PKK, now believes has outlived its original purpose and existential nature. From this perspective, yes, this represents a transformation in the PKK's operational concept. However, the Turkish government's final decision to terminate the PKK's activities and implement Ocalan's call for dissolution and disarmament depends on a set of conditions and factors that must lead to the operationalization of this process. This means both sides must reach a shared perspective and a degree of mutual trust: the PKK must lay down its arms, and Turkey's political and social environment must open to accepting their integration into civil and political processes. Ending violence in any form would be an effective step. The fact that both Erdogan and the Nationalist Movement Party's leader have taken the first steps to advance this issue suggests that subsequent actions have been somewhat anticipated.

This implies a shift in attitudes toward accepting PKK members, elements, and affiliates within Turkey. Otherwise, if the call for the PKK's dissolution and disarmament remains purely a political statement, the process will stall at the declaratory stage.

Previous actions demonstrate that Turkey's approach to this issue has not broadened significantly, and securing full disarmament by the PKK will face steep challenges. This does not render the process impossible—the order to execute it has been issued, and its steps are technically feasible. However, implementing this directive, coupled with Turkey's shifting perception of the PKK's nature and its move toward domestic peace and ending terrorist activities, requires broader measures. These include Turkey's sustained commitment to this path and the PKK's compliance with Ocalan's messages.

A dialogue-driven process could forge consensus on ending the PKK's armed activities, paving the way for their acceptance within Turkish society and civil institutions. Thus, entering a new political cycle in Turkey demands a fresh, reciprocal vision—one embraced by both the Turkish government and domestic actors—to achieve a sustainable peace.