

What was Trump's signal to the PKK?

End of an era,
new chapter for Kurds

INTERVIEW

Apparently, the secret negotiations between representatives of the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), finally paid off. These talks led to an earlier statement from Öcalan and now the disarmament and dissolution of the PKK.

Following this announcement — welcomed by the Erdoğan government — the topic of disarmament and dissolution quickly became a major political talking point in Turkey. The official news of the party's dissolution, which had been founded to carve out an independent Kurdish homeland, grabbed headlines worldwide.

The main question is: How does a political-militant party, nearly 47 years old and engaged in armed struggle since 1984, suddenly call it a day? Mohammad Ali Dastmali, a researcher on Turkey, Syria, and Kurdish affairs, speaks about the reasons behind the dissolution.

How do you assess the dissolution and disarmament of the PKK? How significant is what's happened?

DASTMALI: The PKK has long since lost its grip inside Turkey and no longer poses a serious security threat to the country. So, from a security perspective, it's not a game-changer. But symbolically, socially, and historically, we're looking at a scene where words like "dissolution" and "disarmament" are front and center. These are no small matters. Remember, even before World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the first Kurdish armed movements — led by Abdul Salam Barzani and others — kicked off over 115 years ago. Now, with one of the oldest and most significant armed movements pulling down the shutters, it signals that this model has run its course and we're unlikely to see another armed group spring up in its place. This marks a new chapter in the Middle East.

Why did this group, after nearly 50 years, make such a decision?

Öcalan himself addressed part of this in his statement, "The PKK's raison d'être and meaning have ended, and its time is up." He also noted that, "the PKK emerged under two main influences: first, the post-Cold War environment and the spread of socialist ideas from the Soviet Union; second, the harsh policies of the Turkish state, which denied Kurdish existence and identity." These are key points, but, in my view, another crucial factor is the unprecedented and rapid rise of Turkey's military and security forces in countering the PKK's guerrilla tactics. Turkey, as NATO's second-largest army, locked horns with the PKK for years. Yet, guerrilla warfare and Iraq's unique geography and politics allowed the PKK to hold out. However, advances over the past decade in aerial surveillance and drone technology tipped the scales. More than a hundred senior PKK commanders and fighters were taken out by Turkish drones and a robust intelligence network, pinning down the PKK and making it impossible to carry on as before.

How important is the role of external actors, such as the US, in this matter?

Without a doubt, outside players have been instrumental, especially Trump's America. There's no question that the US, in Syria, openly encouraged the Kurds close to Öcalan to sit down with the new Damascus government. Trump's signal to the PKK likely said: "The situation in Syria and the region has turned upside down. If Turkey and the new Syrian government come after



● X
Mohammad Ali Dastmali

you, there's nothing we can do to back you up — we have bigger fish to fry." Of course, the US isn't the only player, and broader Middle Eastern developments have also come into play.

Are you referring solely to events in Syria, or do earlier developments factor in?

Specifically, I mean events after October 7, 2023. If Operation Al-Aqsa Storm hadn't happened, if Assad's government hadn't fallen, and if things hadn't become so tough for Hamas, Jihad, Hezbollah, and the Ansarullah (Houthis), the PKK wouldn't have

moved so quickly toward dissolution and disarmament. All these events played a part.

Why haven't the details of the agreement been made public?

Turkey is a unique case in many respects. Shadowy, violent groups are active, infiltrators of the Turkish Army and National Intelligence Organization have a high capacity for sabotage, and nationalist associations known as the Turkish Idealist Hearths are all armed and dangerous — each could throw a spanner in the works. Even within the PKK, it's not out of the question that some might refuse to go along with the new reality. So, the government has opted to keep the details under wraps to keep spoilers at bay.

So, you believe concessions were made to Öcalan and the PKK, but it's not expedient to announce them yet?

Absolutely. There are conces-

sions, but they don't match the PKK's previous demands. I'd call them "minimal concessions". You might ask: Why did they settle for less? The reality on the ground left them no other choice. Still, Öcalan's move was bold. Now, we'll have to see whether, in his new office on Imrali Island, he lets younger and middle-aged Kurdish political cadres take the reins, or if he insists on calling the shots himself. Time will tell.

Who is the real winner in this process?

Bringing the old cycle of violence and military conflict to a close is undoubtedly in the Kurds' best interest and can be seen as a positive achievement in peace studies. But if we're to be precise about the "winner," it's really a Turkish quartet: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, head of the ruling AK Party; İbrahim Kalın, head of

the National Intelligence Organization; Hakan Fidan, foreign minister; and Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party and Erdoğan's key political partner for the past 11 years.

With the ongoing economic crisis making life tough for many Turks, nothing could have come to Erdoğan's rescue like a media blitz touting his "successful leadership in ending a 50-year threat." Now, he has a new ace up his sleeve to show that his party and government aren't out of their depth. This is nothing short of a victory.

There's also a chance that Kurdish civilian politicians like Selahattin Demirtaş, İdris Baluken, Fırat Anlı, and others will now have more room to make their mark politically and socially. In the past, they had to toe the line set by PKK leaders, but now they'll have more freedom.

What's in store for Erdoğan's opponents?

We're looking at a complicated equation. With Ekrem İmamoğlu, the former mayor of Istanbul and Erdoğan's strongest rival, behind bars, things have gotten tougher for the opposition, especially the Republican People's Party. If Erdoğan's government offers concessions to the Kurds to secure their votes for constitutional reforms and the 2018 elections, the opposition will find it harder to keep up.

Still, it's not all smooth sailing for Erdoğan. The PKK's dissolution is great news fodder and PR for Erdoğan's base, but it's not a lasting achievement. If he can't pull Turkey out of its economic tailspin and if the AKP government's inefficiency isn't resolved, his opponents still stand a good chance of taking power.

The article first appeared in Persian on KhabarOnline news agency.



Members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) begrudgingly raise their hands during the PKK's 12th Party Congress, where the group's dissolution was announced, at an undisclosed location in Northern Iraq on May 12, 2025.

● X

“

It appears that Trump's message to the PKK was clear, "The situation in Syria and the region has turned upside down. If Turkey and the new Syrian government come after you, there's nothing we can do to back you up — we have bigger fish to fry."



Four women members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are seized along with six others (not pictured) during a massive attack by Turkish troops on PKK mountain hideouts in the eastern Tunceli province on April 17, 1995.

● REUTERS

