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THE END OF THE PKK – NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE KURDISH QUESTION

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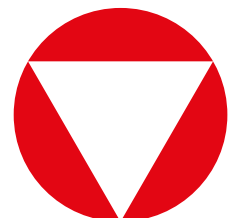
On 25 February 2025, the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan announced the disbandment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This call was in response to a demand – or an offer – made by Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in October 2024, according to which Bahçeli would extend his hand to the imprisoned Öcalan and the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) for a common future if the PKK unconditionally gave up its armed struggle. It is fair to assume that this move was done with the knowledge of President Erdoğan, who immediately expressed his satisfaction and spoke of the beginning of a new era without the threat of terrorism for Turkey.

The official statement

As was the case during the failed peace process of 2013-16, intensive talks between Abdullah Öcalan and government representatives preceded the publication of his statement. Öcalan's official statement, was read out in Turkish and Kurdish on the same day, after a meeting between him and representatives of the DEM party on the prison island of İmralı. The reading was broadcast live – in some Kurdish-dominated cities such as Van and Diyarbakır as open-air screenings. The text is entitled Call for a Peaceful and Democratic Society and is reminiscent of the preface to the Social Contract for Kurdistan (KCK-sözleşmesi) from 2005, which Öcalan penned in prison. He begins by referring to the role of the PKK as a product of the Cold War and as a reaction to the denial of Kurdish identity. He twice

mentions the failure of "real socialism," i.e. the communist Eastern Bloc. This is significant because this historical event is of little importance to the younger generation of Kurds.

Öcalan conjures up a supposed anti-imperialist alliance based on a shared destiny between Turks and Kurds, which they had shaped over the course of a millennium against "hegemonic powers" in order to preserve their identities. Forces of "capitalist modernity" – a term coined by Öcalan – wanted to break up this alliance, which was facilitated by the Turkish Republic's misinterpretation of reality. This fragile alliance must now be revived. The PKK evolved precisely because democratic channels were shut down. He then rejects everything that the Turkish Kurds have fought for: "separate nation states,



federations, administrative autonomy, and culturalist solutions," says Öcalan, "cannot be the answer to historical sociology of society" but are the consequences of "extreme nationalism" – of the Kurds!

Then comes the general statement – not demand – that respect for identities, freedom of expression, and democratic organisation is only possible through "the existence of a democratic society and a [democratic] political space." Hence, there is no alternative to democracy; the path to it runs through "democratic compromise." According to Öcalan, the conditions for this were created by Devlet Bahçeli, in accordance with the will of President Erdoğan and the reactions of the other parties. He therefore orders the organisation to convene a congress to rubber stamp his decision that "all groups must lay down their arms" and the "PKK must disband."

Background and reactions

At present, there can only be speculation concerning the reasons for Öcalan's radical decision to disband the PKK. The fall of the Assad regime and the successes of the Turkish security forces against the PKK groups active in the Iraqi-Turkish border region may have influenced his reasoning. Some observers assume that Öcalan was also reacting to the organisation being overstretched. Other observers suspect a trade-off between better prison conditions or even potential freedom for Öcalan and possible parliamentary support for the president's desire for amending the constitution, in order to overcome the limit of two terms, allowing Erdoğan to run a further term in office.

Nevertheless, for the most part Öcalan's statement was received positively. In Turkey and above all in the Kurdish regions of the country, it gave hope for a peaceful future. Europe, the USA, and the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil share the same sentiment. Many Kurds are hoping for the release of former presidential can-

didate and democratic Kurdish politician Salahettin Demirtaş, who has now been in prison for a decade. Most Kurds regard him as a beacon for hope representing the aspirations of the younger generation. Turkish observers and commentators are generally positive about the renunciation of violence but warn against exaggerated expectations and recall the failure of the peace process between the state and the PKK ten years ago. Sensitive issues such as amnesty for, and reintegration of, the fighters or exile for the leading cadres are not addressed in Öcalan's statement. Nor does he mention the cultural or constitutional demands of the Kurds, or aspirations of the vibrant Kurdish civil society.

The PKK's reactions were muted: The guerrilla leadership in the Kandil Mountains expressed a wait-and-see attitude, declaring a ceasefire for all units. The European arm of the organisation reacted just as cautiously, while Remzi Kartal, the chairman of the People's Congress (Kongra-Gel), criticised the lack of any political process. Mazlum Abdi, from the Syrian YPG, supported the declaration but pointed out that it had nothing to do with the Syrian Kurds, because they are organised independently of the PKK. This addresses an important problem: The numerous branches, wings, congresses, and militias of the PKK keep changing their names and yet make up a single organisation.

Which elements are part of the PKK?

The PKK already disbanded itself as an organisation numerous times and reestablished itself with new statutes, symbols and flags, but the image of Öcalan as leader (*önder*, *rêber*) has remained. Öcalan, who has been imprisoned for 26 years, may only be a symbolic figure, but he remains the determining factor in consequence of the PKK's cult of personality and the pyramidal organisational structure oriented towards the leader. Its latest incarnation is officially called the "Kurdistan Social Union" (KCK) and is based on the "societal

contract,” which is a mixture of party programme and state constitution. KCK is organised as a federation of councils, whose People’s Congress (Kongra-Gel) claims to be the representative body of all Kurds worldwide. In the spirit and tradition of the PKK, this denies the legitimacy of all other Kurdish organisations, which goes back to the decades of enmity between the PKK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan, which in turn claims global representation of the Kurds.

KCK includes several militias (e.g. HPG, YJA-Star), which the guerrilla leadership deploys directly against Turkey. Similar organisations and constitutions are envisaged and have, in some cases, been implemented for the Kurdish minorities in all states of the region, i.e. one party (PJAK in Iran, PYD in Syria) and usually two militias (YPG and YPJ, in Iran YRK etc.) organise themselves autonomously of the overall leadership, with which they are nevertheless in close contact. In Syria, the Kurds have succeeded in establishing an autonomous self-governing region (AANES, Rojava), which Ankara regarded as a direct threat – in contrast to the Kurdish self-government in Erbil, with which the Turks maintain good relations. Finally, there is the powerful European organisation (KCDK-E) based in Brussels, which is responsible for the financing (fundraising campaigns or revolution tax) of the entire organisation, for media appearances, co-ordination of activities, contacts with politicians and authorities and ensures that Öcalan’s organisation is perceived by the European public as the Kurds’ sole representative.

Syria

From a Turkish perspective, the disbandment of the PKK also affects the elements loyal to Öcalan in Syria that are active within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is officially a militia organisation that unites the Kurdish YPG and YPJ with various Arab tribal militias. However,

the overall leadership lies with the YPG, whose fighters also come from non-Syrian Kurdish regions. The organisation regularly transfers senior commanders from Syria to Europe where they take on leadership roles. The SDF have served the USA as infantry in its fight against IS and other Islamist groups. The situation of the Kurds deteriorated significantly when the “Syrian Liberation Movement” (HTS), which emerged from Al-Qaeda and the Nusra Front, seized power in the country at the end of 2024.

The new Syrian government maintains close relations with Ankara; the Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan and intelligence chief Kalın were among the first visitors to Damascus, and the new head of government Ahmad al-Sharaa visited Turkey in January 2025. It can be assumed that the Syrians granted their Turkish partners access to Syrian secret service files on the PKK and Öcalan. Encouraged by Turkey, the new rulers in Damascus reject any form of Kurdish self-administration. However, on March 10, Syrian interim-president Ahmad al-Sharaa and the YPG’s Mazlum Abdi signed an agreement, which includes general terms such as the recognition of the Kurdish identity in Syria, return of refugees and an immediate cease-fire. On the other hand, the Kurds are to handover control over all critical infrastructure (i.e. border crossings, oil fields) and Kurdish fighters have to integrate on an individual base and not as units into a new Syrian army, which is tantamount to disbanding the YPG and leaves the fate of the women’s combat units and the internationalists in doubt.

Regional aspects

The new situation stirs ambitions among the regional powers. Against the backdrop of increasing Turkish-Iranian tensions, Tehran openly speculated about supporting the Syrian Kurds against Ankara, which became a moot point with the signing of the Sharaa-Abdi agreement.

Even so, Israeli support seems to be still an option. From Tel Aviv's point of view, a stabilised Kurdish region in north-eastern Syria would reduce Turkish control over Syria and prevent the Syrian regime from strengthening to the point where it could pose a threat to Israel. And finally, the USA is faced with the question of how to proceed with the SDF. In the face of the most recent massacres against Alawites and Christians, dropping their Kurdish ally and halting military support for the SDF would inevitably lead to the collapse of the AANES and further destabilise the fragile situation. In the meantime, an old plan devised by influential Israeli and American circles is being discussed again: To allow the YPG and all Kurdish units allied with it to infiltrate Iran via northern Iraq to stymie Iran's position in the region once and for all or in preparation for a robust US intervention against the Islamic Republic. As the case of AANES/Rojava approaches a solution acceptable for Turkey, Ankara may raise no objections for such an Iran scenario.

Derivations for Europe

Like anyone else, Öcalan's call to the PKK to lay down its arms, came as a surprise to the EU. This offers Turkey the opportunity to deal with Kurdish questions no longer along the paradigm of fighting terror but exclusively within the framework of human and minority rights on the basis of the Turkish constitution. If a political process actually comes about in Turkey, Europeans would have the opportunity to endorse this process with the help of NGOs if desired by the parties involved.

With regard to Syria, the way AANES/Rojava transforms and integrates into the new Syria depends on the success of DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) and a security sector reform (SSR). Europe could support the process with expertise and advice, perhaps in cooperation with the UN. However, if the transformation fails, AANES/Rojava will collapse. In this case, masses of refugees will find their way to Europe, among them experienced fighters and cadres.

Finally, the European organisational arm of the PKK deserves greater attention. Öcalan's rejection of the armed struggle and of central Kurdish demands, such as cultural rights, must disquiet its professional cadres and sympathisers. The question now arises as to how the KCD-E's large intelligence and propaganda apparatus, which works conspiratorially in its core elements, will react to this. Above all, the question of raising funds through so-called taxes from business people of Kurdish descent can degenerate into protection rackets if the ideological factor is removed. The disbandment of the PKK in Europe only concerns the structure of the professional cadres and their militant structures but not the abundant system of Kurdish associations that has been acting for the Kurdish people in a peaceful and democratic manner for decades. It is in the interest of European states and European Kurds alike to keep these two elements separate.

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