

# Lay Down Your Arms! The Dramatic Call of the PKK Leader in Turkey

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**Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish underground group PKK, made a dramatic call on February 27 for the organization's militants to disarm and dissolve. This declaration marks a significant turning point in efforts to end the violent chapter of the Kurdish struggle against the Turkish government. While abandoning the PKK's long-standing fight, which began with the organization's founding in 1978, will entail considerable challenges, there is evident willingness to act in accordance with Öcalan's statement, at least regarding the PKK's operations within Turkey. Developments in Turkey have repercussions for the broader Kurdish population in neighboring states, weakening the ability of the Kurds in Syria to maintain their autonomous governance and enhancing Turkey's influence in Syria, which may also increase the threat to Israel.**

On February 27, representatives of Turkey's pro-Kurdish party, the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), [read](#) a letter from Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in solitary confinement in Turkey since 1999. In the letter, he called on the PKK to cease its violent struggle and completely disband. Although there have been ceasefires in the past between Turkey and the PKK, Öcalan has never before called for the organization's dissolution. A few weeks prior, rumors suggested that Öcalan might make such an announcement, but details remained unknown. The opacity surrounding the negotiations with him suggests a high degree of seriousness. The absence of significant leaks, which could have prompted a backlash, enabled the declaration, which may indeed have transformative implications.

Several factors have contributed to this announcement. One is the personal transformation Öcalan underwent in prison, shifting away from calls for Kurdish independence. In his statement, he asserted that the conditions that originally necessitated the PKK's creation no longer exist. Militarily, since 2021, Turkey has [intensified attacks](#) on PKK militants taking refuge in northern Iraq, likely weakening the organization. In fact, much of the recent conflict between Turkey and the PKK has taken place outside of Turkey. Additionally, technological advancements, particularly in Turkey's defense industry and its production of drones, have further complicated the PKK's ability to counter Turkish military efforts. Turkish drone strikes have resulted in [greater Kurdish casualties](#) while minimizing Turkish losses. Consequently, Öcalan entered negotiations from a position of weakness.

From the Turkish government's perspective, many analysts highlight President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's desire to amend the Turkish constitution as a key motivation in negotiating with Öcalan. Specifically, Erdoğan wishes to seek another presidential term in the 2028 elections; however, under the current constitution, he is limited to two terms. To run again, he would need to amend the constitution or call early elections to avoid completing a full second term

as an executive president.<sup>1</sup> Achieving constitutional changes requires broader parliamentary support, and Erdoğan appears to be courting Kurdish voters—even if only temporarily. His move also seems aimed at fragmenting Kurdish voting patterns and drawing more Kurdish votes toward his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Already, some Kurds align with the AKP’s conservative agenda, a trend that may strengthen. Beyond electoral considerations, the Kurdish minority issue is a fundamental challenge for Turkey. The decades-long conflict with the PKK has claimed over 45,000 lives. Whoever succeeds in transforming relations with Turkey’s Kurdish minority, which comprises approximately one-fifth of the population, could propel the country forward, aligning with Erdoğan’s vision of a “New Turkey.”

For Ankara, developments in Syria since the fall of President Bashar al-Assad also play a central role in its willingness to negotiate with Öcalan. Turkey views the autonomous Kurdish-led administration in northeast Syria as a security threat and an extension of the PKK’s operations within Turkey. In Turkey’s vision for Syria’s post-Assad future, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—which control northeast Syria and include Arab, Kurdish, and other minority groups—should be dismantled and integrated into the Syrian army as individual fighters. Given the dominance of the PKK’s Syrian branch within the SDF, Turkey hopes Öcalan’s call will encourage PKK-linked elements to withdraw from Syria.

### **Challenges Facing the Peace Process**

Given the long-standing conflict and its toll, reconciliation must reach all segments of the population. However, Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies—including his harsh treatment of the opposition and efforts to delegitimize it—raise concerns. In particular, the continued arrests of elected Kurdish mayors in southeastern Turkey (where Kurds form a majority), on charges of PKK collaboration, cast doubt on Turkey’s readiness to support a genuine peace process. Amid Turkey’s democratic decline over the past decade, Öcalan’s assertion that only democracy can provide a solution rings hollow.

Unlike the previous decade’s Kurdish-Turkish dialogue, which ultimately failed, this time Erdoğan appears to be keeping his distance, possibly to disavow the process should it falter. The unexpected call in October 2024 for Öcalan to disarm—along with an invitation to address the Turkish parliament if he complied—came from Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli. Bahçeli’s support for this move was unpopular among his supporters, and his fragile health raises concerns about the process’s stability.

It remains unclear what the Kurdish side gained in exchange for Öcalan’s declaration. By asserting that the conditions necessitating the PKK’s creation no longer exist, he significantly weakened Kurdish demands for cultural rights. Even if Öcalan personally recognized the need to disband the PKK, Turkey’s fundamental challenge in dealing with its Kurdish minority persists. Above all, there is concern that granting cultural rights could translate into a political

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, this is already Erdoğan’s third term as president, but his first term was before the change in Turkey’s system of government.

and security threat to Erdoğan's continued rule. However, Öcalan is correct in noting that the conflict and its consequences have led to significant Kurdish migration to western Turkey, making territorial separation less feasible than before. Yet, this demographic mixing and the Kurds' higher birth rates compared to the rest of Turkey could heighten perceptions of them as a threat unless genuine reconciliation occurs.

Regarding northeast Syria, while SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi [welcomed](#) Öcalan's statement, acknowledging its potential positive regional impact, he emphasized that it applies only to the PKK and not to the SDF. Since Turkey considers these groups indistinguishable, Abdi's remarks could fuel Turkish concerns. However, on March 10, Abdi and Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa reached a groundbreaking [agreement](#) to integrate the SDF and elements of the autonomous administration in northeast Syria into Syrian government structures. If implemented, this agreement could significantly alleviate Ankara's fears.

Recent shifts in Turkish-Kurdish relations underscore the dilemmas facing Israel regarding its policy towards developments in Syria. The fall of Assad and the Abdi-Sharaa agreement diminish the likelihood of continued Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Abdi publicly [stated](#) that the SDF is open to Israeli assistance, but given Turkey's direct security interests in the region, Israeli involvement there would be perceived by Ankara as provocative. Israel prefers that US forces remain in Syria, but Erdoğan may present his dialogue with Öcalan and the Abdi-Sharaa agreement to US President Donald Trump as evidence that Turkey no longer threatens the Kurds, thereby justifying a US military withdrawal. Notably, in 2019, Trump nearly withdrew US forces from Syria but reversed his decision at the last moment. Without an American presence, and if northeast Syria indeed stabilizes, Ankara could shift its focus to expanding its influence in southern Syria—a development that might increase threats to Israel's operational freedom.

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