

# Inside the Latest PKK Talks (Part 1): Kurdish Actors and Interests

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Although past peace efforts have fallen apart due to diplomatic stumbles and Kurdish opposition, the situation on the ground in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey has changed dramatically enough to warrant optimism about Ankara's current talks.**

**T**urkey is reportedly on the cusp of a [historic announcement \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-pro-kurdish-party-says-jailed-militant-ocalan-will-make-historic-call-2025-02-04/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-pro-kurdish-party-says-jailed-militant-ocalan-will-make-historic-call-2025-02-04/) by Abdullah Ocalan, jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with sources indicating he may soon ask the movement's members to disband and end their longstanding fight against the government. Resolving the state's five-decade conflict with a designated terrorist group would have momentous repercussions on a wide range of issues, from Turkish politics at home to bilateral ties abroad. For one, it could remove the PKK thorn from U.S.-Turkish relations and pave the way for their anticipated reset under the second Trump administration. It would also affect developments next door in Syria, where Washington has partnered with the PKK's Syrian branch, the People's Defense Units (YPG), since 2014 to fight the Islamic State—rousing Turkey's ire in the process.

Yet what are the deal's actual chances for success, and what specific implications might it hold for the many relevant actors in the region and beyond? Part 1 of this PolicyWatch analyzes the Kurdish angles in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq; [Part 2 assesses \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-2-implications-turkish-and-us-policy\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/inside-latest-pkk-talks-part-2-implications-turkish-and-us-policy) broader U.S. and Turkish policy considerations.

## The Deal's Key Elements and Actors

**T**he details behind Ocalan's anticipated announcement have been purposefully shrouded in mystery, in part because Ankara's two previous dialogues with the PKK (2009-11 and 2013-15) failed miserably, resulting in deeper violence and eroding the popularity of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This time, Erdogan has been more

calculated about releasing updates on PKK diplomacy, enforcing news embargos at each phase of the dialogue until he is confident that specific steps are irreversible. Even so, some of the emerging deal's most important elements and implications seem clear:

**Ocalan.** Turkey apprehended the PKK leader in 1999 and sentenced him to death the same year. In 2002, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment as part of Turkey's efforts to join the European Union. Ocalan has now served twenty-six years in solitary confinement on Imrali, a wuthering islet in the Sea of Marmara. Via intermediaries in the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), Erdogan has apparently promised the ailing seventy-five-year-old leader that he can leave the island for house arrest on the mainland—but only if he announces the PKK's termination and secures the membership's compliance under the DEM Party's supervision.

**The Qandil collective.** Although Ocalan has not formally commanded the PKK for decades, he is said to be respected among the rank and file as the movement's "visionary founder" and longtime leader, serving as its "honorary chairman" while in prison. These sentiments are generally shared by leaders at the PKK's headquarters in the Qandil Mountains, a rugged, cavernous, nearly impenetrable area straddling the Iran-Iraq border. Collectively known as "Qandil," these leaders include Murat Karayilan, Cemil Bayik, and Duran Kalkan, among other figures. Most of them share Ocalan's pedigree: Turkish-born Kurds who dropped out of prestigious universities in the 1970s to establish the PKK as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary group. They then dedicated their lives to serving as the intellectual avant-garde of this "national-liberation revolution," often resorting to violence in the hope of benefiting Kurdish peasants in Turkey.

Of course, much of this ideology has become moot since the Cold War, while many Turkish Kurds have moved to big cities and joined the middle class. Yet it is unclear if the Qandil leadership has moved forward with the times. They might also suspect that Turkey will not grant them concessions on par with the house-arrest deal offered to Ocalan. In fact, some Qandil leaders likely fear they will be assassinated by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) down the road even if they are promised amnesty-in-exile in the short term. Elderly commanders might also object to disbanding the PKK entirely or immediately without achieving any of its original goals—an outcome that could suggest they have thrown their lives away for nothing.

**PKK rank and file.** In recent years, Ankara has taken effective counterterrorism measures against the PKK and greatly diminished its presence inside Turkey, which was estimated to number thousands of fighters just a decade ago. Elsewhere, Turkish forward operating bases in northern Iraq have denied the PKK operational space and an easy route from Qandil into Turkey, while drone strikes have steadily eliminated PKK cadres in Iraq and YPG cadres in Syria. Recognizing that these operations have likely eroded morale among the group's foot soldiers and mid-ranking officers, Erdogan may aim to capitalize on their fears by having Ocalan offer a tempting respite—namely, "lay down your weapons and you will live." At the same time, after years of fighting the PKK, Erdogan no doubt understands that it can still do substantial political and literal harm to Turkish interests even from afar. Hence, formally disbanding the group has remained an imperative for Ankara despite the recent CT successes.

**Iraqi Kurds.** Turkey's previous attempts to disarm the PKK via Ocalan failed in part because they did not fully leverage Iraqi Kurdish interests, including those of the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party. This time around, Ankara seems to be engaging the party more wisely, proposing that the KDP pressure the PKK to listen to Ocalan's call in return for a future role among Syria's Kurds (previously, the YPG has cracked down on KDP allies and other Kurdish groups).

**Syrian Kurds.** In 2014-15, an emboldened YPG opposed PKK peace talks with Turkey. The YPG's fortunes were soaring at the time—in 2014, it established a partnership with the United States to fight the Islamic State, and within a year it had secured leadership over the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), captured large parts of the country

(including many oil fields), and begun establishing a state-like entity in the northeast.

More recently, however, the YPG/SDF's fortunes have been trending downward. Following the Assad regime's ouster last December, the new **Turkish-backed leadership** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-age-turkish-relations-syria>) in Damascus has stated that it wants to bring all of Syrian territory under its control, including Kurdish-held areas. In response, YPG/SDF officials have reportedly been negotiating with Damascus on the modalities of returning their territories to the Syrian fold. They are presumably motivated at least in part by the continued presence of Turkish drones hovering in Syria's skies, not to mention President Trump's signals that he will remove their essential security blanket by withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria. As such, the YPG will likely heed Ocalan if he asks them to play nice with Turkey, even if some leaders in Qandil advise the group to do otherwise.

**DEM Party.** The base of Turkey's pro-Kurdish DEM Party is unlikely to fully support Ocalan's directive, though for different reasons than Qandil. Since 2014, DEM has informally backed Turkey's main opposition faction, the Republican People's Party (CHP), to further their shared goal of defeating Erdogan. Accordingly, some DEM voters may not embrace an Ocalan deal for fear that it will strengthen Erdogan in the polls. Yet the party's base is split in two: between those who want to secure Kurdish rights and get Ocalan out of jail first, and those who want to defeat Erdogan first. Splinter groups may therefore emerge, even though DEM leaders will fully support a deal after weeks of mediating between Erdogan, Ocalan, and the PKK.

## Impact on U.S.-Kurdish Relations

The United States has long encouraged Turkish-Kurdish dialogue and an end to the PKK conflict. Although Washington has little or no influence over Turkish political actors like the DEM Party, it can lean on the YPG/SDF in Syria. And it has ample reason to do so—removing the PKK from Syria's political landscape would pave the way for Turkey to cooperate with Washington and the Syrian Kurds on many issues beneficial to U.S. interests, such as containing the Islamic State, rebuilding the country, and establishing stable Turkish ties with different Syrian groups. To this end, Washington should continue privately encouraging the YPG/SDF to heed Ocalan's call once his announcement goes public.

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