

Will the PKK Take Turkey's Olive Branch?

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Articles & Testimony

Last spring, Turkey launched a peace initiative meant to disarm the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a group that has haunted Turkey with terror attacks. But, does the PKK want peace and will it respond to Turkey's opening? The rhetoric suggests otherwise.

Will the PKK disarm? Abdullah Ocalan, the founder and leader of the PKK who is currently in jail, said on January 4, 2009, that: "Some intellectuals and writers are renewing calls for the disarmament of the PKK and pulling it outside Turkey's borders. But what they do not understand is that the most that can happen is a ceasefire, and for a ceasefire to take place there must be the desire to do so." More recently, on June 23rd, Ocalan went a step further, threatening Turkey:

"If a solution does not develop, I will withdraw myself from the process. In a month or month and a half, things might take a different direction. Until autumn, much might change. If a war breaks out, 'Kurdistan' will secede. We defend peace, and those who do not bring peace will be responsible. The Kurds cannot accept the status quo in Turkey. A war would cause both sides to lose; the people would lose. Afghanistan and Pakistan's situation is clear, for example."

Ocalan's stance is not promising for peace. Perhaps, this is because he is frustrated after having spent a decade in jail. But, how about the rest of the PKK leadership? What is their strategy, and what do they want?

Duran Kalkan, a senior PKK leader who runs their terror infrastructure from the Kandil enclave in northern Iraq, where the group has many bases, seconded Ocalan on March 18. "First off, such a thing as disarmament is meaningless. Instead of disarmament, we can talk of undertaking new duties. Within this framework, the reorganization of the guerillas can be kept on the agenda . . . [and] of course the Kurdish people need their own defense forces. Without this, how can our community defend itself?"

On June 23, Kalkan added: "Surrendering weapons is not even a subject of discussion. The guerillas [his term for PKK members] will never surrender their weapons." Kalkan also asked for hard-to-deliver demands:

"If a general amnesty would include giving leader Apo [Abdullah Ocalan] his freedom, then the PKK might consider a ceasefire, like in 1999, but it will not give up its weapons."

The PKK wants Ocalan to be released, will not disarm, and says it will fight to its death if its demand is not met. So far, this is not very promising, since no government in a democracy can deliver such a demand.

However, things only get more unrealistic from here: on June 18, Cemil Bayik, another top PKK leader, added another demand: "Either the Kurds will become independent or not live at all. This is the decision reached by the Kurdish people."

Before reaching a dead end, is amnesty, perhaps, a solution? Feyman Huseyin, top military leader in the PKK, answered this question on January 2, "we have never asked to be pardoned, and do not want to be either." Huseyin also added a warning: "Our people must prepare for 2009 as if it is going to be a year of war, and get ready for all out

resistance against attacks meant to destroy and massacre them. Our people must build on their inherent defense knowledge and organization to prepare themselves." While Turkey is talking about peace, the PKK is calling for war.

For the PKK, violence is an indispensable part of the group's core identity for without it, there would be no PKK. Hence, the group's leadership asserts that it will not dispense with violence. For instance, on June 24, Kalkan said: "Our stance has been 'The road to peace goes through resistance in the mountains.' Those who want to win peace must take to the mountains. I believe the situation is very clear. If there are peace talks now, this is only because there has been freedom fighting in the mountains, and they derive from the strength of the guerillas. Therefore, for peace to win, the guerilla forces must become even stronger."

Turkey appears euphoric about the initiative to deal with the Kurdish question and end PKK violence. Will the PKK end violence before its maximalist demands are met? The group's leadership says otherwise.

Perhaps this is only rhetoric, but like all rhetoric, such talk matters.

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