

The Ocalan Affair:

What's Next?

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Brief Analysis

The arrest of Abdullah Ocalan is a U.S. victory in the global war against terrorism; for elated Turks, it is the equivalent of Israel's 1976 Entebbe rescue operation or the United Kingdom's 1982 Falklands victory -- a thrilling national triumph after a long period of frustration. Now, having supplied crucial help to Turkey's capture of Ocalan, Washington is likely to increase its efforts to convince the Turks to undertake reform on the Kurdish issue.

Ocalan's Fate. Given the magnitude of the crimes of which he will likely be accused -- he has already been charged with treason -- it is a near-certainty that Ocalan will be found guilty and receive the death penalty. Death penalties in Turkey must be ratified by parliament, and there have been none since 1984. Whether Ocalan is executed, however, may depend on how Turkey reads the event's likely impact on the PKK and on its own Kurdish population. Executing Ocalan will make him a martyr; keeping him imprisoned, however, will encourage PKK hostage-taking in an effort to free him.

Turkey's desire to conduct a fair and open trial probably will be limited by one major priority: to ensure that Ocalan cannot transform the proceeding into an international spotlighted trial of Turkey's Kurdish policies. In that respect, Ankara is likely to allow some international press to observe the trial but, quite likely, not international television. Turkey has already said that it will not allow formally designated "observers," as requested by the European Union (EU). European demands regarding the trial will likely have little impact on Turkey. Since the EU excluded Turkey from its list of potential candidates in 1997, it has lost considerable influence in Ankara. Turkish alienation from the EU has deepened as a result of European behavior during Ocalan's recent odyssey, including Italy's refusal to extradite Ocalan to Turkey, Germany's refusal to request extradition, and the failure of the EU to reprimand EU member Greece for harboring him. The trial reportedly will begin in March or April in a state security court (one military and two civilian judges), which human rights groups view as lacking independence.

The PKK's Future. Even before Ocalan's capture, the military tide had been turning against the PKK for several years. According to Turkish government statistics -- the only ones available -- the insurgency has tapered off to its lowest level since the early 1990s; last year, the PKK killed 367 Turkish soldiers, police, and pro-government Kurdish auxiliaries, the lowest total since 1991. Although that level is not inconsiderable, it has allowed Turkey generally to

ease curfews in southeastern towns and cities and to return a semblance of normality to life there. Despite some Turkish-Kurdish protest following Ocalan's arrest -- including rare outbursts in Istanbul -- there seems to be no sign of an incipient "intifada."

Ocalan's capture has inspired expectations that the PKK will fractionalize and that its previously faltering Kurdish insurgency will disintegrate. That is not yet clear. For now, the PKK continues to maintain a foot-hold in both Syria and northern Iraq and still commands significant support and financial resources. Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit wisely proposed a "repentance law" that would ease sentences for PKK fighters who surrender. He says parliament will consider such a law only after the April 18 national elections, however. By waiting, he may be missing an opportunity to take advantage of the PKK's current presumed disarray.

Presuming that Ocalan's days as leader of the PKK are over, his replacement will face the immediate question of whether to give precedence to sustaining the PKK insurgency or to press the PKK's political agenda in western Europe. Most early indications are that the new leader is likely to be somebody fighting "in the mountains" -- probably either Ocalan's brother Osman or the military commander Cemil Bayik -- rather than one of the more politically oriented spokesmen in Europe. If so, this would suggest that the "armed struggle" will continue to take priority for the PKK.

Despite their sympathy for the cause of Kurdish reform, even most West Europeans hold the PKK in low regard. France and Germany label the PKK "terrorist," and PKK supporters in the European Parliament (EP, the legislative arm of the European Union) badly failed in their efforts to get the issue of Ocalan's asylum on the EP agenda. Moreover, Ocalan's inconsistent statements in Italy -- for example, first renouncing violence and then declaring "war" -- and the post-arrest rampage against diplomatic institutions in Europe probably did little to win friends for the PKK. Washington's strongly held view that Ocalan and the PKK are "terrorist" further dampen pro-PKK tendencies in Western Europe.

Boost for Ecevit, Turkish self-confidence. As a result of Ocalan's arrest, Ecevit is likely to gain votes -- marginally but significantly -- in the April 18 elections. Ecevit probably had little responsibility for Ocalan's capture. (To his credit, he has refused to claim any.) The pursuit of Ocalan began well before Ecevit's minority government took power last month. Still, Ecevit has presided over the two most emotional national triumphs of Turkey's past half-century, the 1974 Turkish intervention in Cyprus on behalf of Turkish Cypriots (in which he did play a crucial role) and now the Ocalan arrest. At the least, the arrest reminds Turks of Ecevit's popular role in 1974 and associates his name with national success. His successful performance as national spokesman since the arrest also redounds to his credit, elevating him beyond his previously perceived status as mere "caretaker" prime minister. Given the narrow margins in Turkish politics -- the top six parties were separated by thirteen percentage points in the last election, in 1995 -- even a gain of one to three percentage points for Ecevit could be highly significant in government formation.

Turkey emerges from the Ocalan capture as a more self-confident regional power. Even taking into account the crucial role played by U.S. intelligence in Ocalan's capture, the Turks' role in Kenya -- as reported -- suggests a level of sophistication never previously associated with Turkey. Turks are also likely to see the arrest as a retroactive validation of their strong-arm policy toward Syria last autumn, when Ankara's threat to use force prompted Ocalan's departure from his long-time Syrian base. That may have implications for the Greek-Turkish front where Greek support for Ocalan and the PKK has deeply embittered Turks and further inflamed the Greek-Turkish tinderbox.

Washington's Response. The U.S. government deserves bouquets for its effective pursuit of Ocalan and for standing alone among Western nations in supporting Turkey. Washington views itself as the international leader in the fight against terrorism. Given the PKK's responsibility for hundreds of civilian deaths (at the most conservative estimates -- more likely, it is thousands), Washington behaved appropriately in tracking Ocalan and tipping off the Turks.

The United States has correctly distinguished between opposition to PKK terrorism and support for democratic reform in Turkey. Whereas Washington has long urged reform on the Kurdish issue in Turkey, it has been indulgent of Turkey's reluctance to appear to make concessions to terrorism. Now, having helped Turkey nab Ocalan -- and particularly once the PKK appears clearly vanquished -- the United States almost certainly will expect Ankara to begin taking positive steps toward widening the parameters of Kurdish cultural and linguistic expression. Probably no issue creates more problems in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations than does the Kurdish issue. For example, Turkey's efforts to buy U.S.-made attack helicopters have been stymied for years due to its perceived treatment of the Kurds.

There are signs that Turkey, its self-confidence boosted by its success against the PKK, indeed may be easing some restrictions on use of the Kurdish language. Last month, Ankara approved establishment of an Iraqi Kurdish satellite television station beamed from northern Iraq, marking the first time Turkey has ever approved receipt of Kurdish-language broadcasts on its territory. Turkish authorities also have begun to tolerate some Kurdish-language radio and TV stations broadcasting inside Turkey, according to a new Turkish foreign ministry English-language publication, as well as anecdotal evidence.

Reform is likely to be a slow process, however. Turkey remains wedded to the concept of a "unitary state" that doesn't recognize a corporate existence for minorities. Within that framework, it is possible to envision a reform process that would include fewer restrictions on use of the Kurdish language and greater freedom of expression regarding Kurdish affairs. But it is impossible to envision autonomy, federation, or any other state structure that endows Kurds with a separate corporate or geographically-based status. If Turkey starts to open up the system a bit, Kurds, too, will have a responsibility -- namely, to respond in a moderate fashion that shows awareness of Turkish fears regarding separatism. If Kurds flaunt separatist feelings, any flickers of reform will probably be quickly snuffed out, as was the case in some instances in the early 1990s.

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