

# Turkey, the United States, and Ocalan:

## The Stakes

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Nov 20, 1998

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

The arrest of Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan in Italy last week was a rare example of the capture of a major terrorist group leader. In contrast, an Italian court's decision today to release him under a loose form of "house arrest" is widely seen as a prelude to a grant of asylum, giving the case fresh urgency. Italy's ultimate decision to extradite Ocalan or give him asylum may have a decisive impact on the Turkish-PKK conflict. Arrest could lead to the collapse of already faltering PKK "armed struggle." Asylum might lead to Ocalan's resurrection as a political leader with wide European recognition. For the United States, the stakes are also high, with implications for the success of U.S.-led international efforts to combat terrorism and for Turkey's future relations with the West.

What happens next? Today's court decision -- a dismissal of a Turkish arrest warrant on the basis that Italy cannot extradite to a country that has capital punishment -- is not necessarily the end of the story. If Turkey were to abolish the death penalty or give guarantees that it would not be applied to Ocalan, extradition theoretically could still be arranged. As a practical and political matter, however, extradition to Turkey is, at best, the most remote of possibilities. A German extradition request would almost certainly be honored by the Italians, though the new "red-green" coalition in Bonn has announced it is disinclined to pursue extradition now. Only Turkey and Germany are possible sites for extradition; no other state had an international warrant out for Ocalan's arrest.

Italy's reluctance to extradite Ocalan to Turkey reflects, in addition to its opposition to the death penalty, skepticism about the Turkish judicial system, widespread sympathy for the PKK among leftists and greens in the ruling coalition, and fears of incurring PKK wrath and making Italians the object of PKK terrorism. On the other hand, Rome worries about possible economic retaliation from Turkey -- Italy's 12th largest export destination, at \$4.5 billion, in 1997 -- if it grants Ocalan asylum. Already, the Italian employers' federation Confindustria reports a flood of order cancellations. Turkey probably would get the worst of a trade war with Italy, but angered Turks may be willing to accept that burden.

> Italy no doubt wishes to rid itself of the Ocalan burden and has appealed to European Union states to share the burden of decision-making. Other European Union (EU) states have shown no inclination to get involved, however.

Misconceived "opportunity". Having made his way to Europe, Ocalan now claims to have "abandoned terrorism" and to want to begin a "political dialogue with Turkey, Europe, and the U.S." This has sparked suggestions by Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema and German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer that Ocalan's presence creates an opportunity to solve Turkey's Kurdish problem through peaceful political means. This suggestion has no prospect of realization. It is counter-productive to Turkish-European relations and probably to the Kurdish reform cause as well. With thousands of deaths of its citizens killed by the PKK, the Turkish government almost certainly would never negotiate with Ocalan or the PKK. What is more, having gained the upper hand in fighting against the PKK, Turkey has no incentive to do so. Moreover, Turkish resentment over the EU's exclusion of Turkey from its roster of candidates for full membership leaves the EU bereft of influence on this issue in Ankara. The best hope for EU influence on Turkey's Kurdish issue is the one the EU has so far rejected: engaging Turkey, as a full-fledged EU candidate, in a detailed discussion of the criteria for EU membership.

The U.S. stake. Three substantive considerations drive U.S. interest in the Ocalan affair. First, the United States seeks to avert a dispute between two key southern-flank NATO allies. It is difficult to underestimate the importance Turkey attaches to Ocalan, whom it sees not only as a terrorist but as somebody who has tried to harm Turkish territorial integrity and has been a willing tool of enemy states. Thus, the potential for harm to Turkish-Italian relations -- and, consequently to NATO -- is enormous.

> Second, the United States has an important stake in Turkey's membership in the Western world, which Turkey serves as a key geostrategic asset. The EU's decision last year to exclude Turkey from its group of full-fledged candidates for membership has seriously alienated Turks from Western Europe. An Italian decision to grant Ocalan asylum would widen the gulf considerably, greatly enhancing prospects that Turkey will ultimately drift out of the West's orbit.

> Third, the West's commitment to counter-terrorism coordination, long advocated by Washington, is on the line. A major theme of U.S. counter-terrorism policy has been to treat terrorists as criminals, irrespective of the cause they claim to champion. If the United States cannot convince its allies to seek to try the leader of a major terrorist group notwithstanding their views on the cause he claims to represent, that U.S. policy effort will have suffered a serious setback. For its part, Italy will be seen to be encoring its 1985 performance when it released Abu Abbas following the Achille Lauro incident.

What the United States should do. In calling upon Rome to find a way to extradite Ocalan to Turkey, Washington has performed commendably. Now it should do more:

- In its public diplomacy, Washington should underscore the PKK's role as a terrorist organization -- something ill-understood in Western Europe. The United States should emphasize PKK violence against civilians. The PKK has often glorified the fact that it has targeted civilians, particularly school teachers in the southeast (seen as agents of Turkish propaganda) and wives and children of Kurdish auxiliaries who fight on behalf of the Turkish state. In all, Turkey claims some 5,000 civilian deaths, including over 150 teachers, at the hands of the PKK. Whether or not that figure is accurate, it is clear that large numbers of civilians have been PKK targets and victims. Ocalan's claim this week that the PKK would now "abandon terrorism" is, in fact, an explicit acknowledgment of PKK behavior. Furthermore, the United States should, more explicitly than heretofore, emphasize that the PKK issue is separate from the case for reform on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. This approach tracks with U.S. anti-terrorism policy that political grievances do not justify violence against civilians.
- Washington should seek to convince the German government to pursue its extradition case. Germany, which does not want to antagonize its large Kurdish population (but may in the process stir up its even larger Turkish population), has indicated it will not seek extradition for now. Still, given the stakes, the United States must

appeal to Bonn's more principled side and seek against odds to reverse Bonn's thinking. The United States also should seek backing for Ocalan's extradition to Germany, if not to Turkey, from more Turkey-friendly EU states such as the U.K., Holland, and Spain. Without waiting for Bonn's final decision, Washington should mediate between Rome and Ankara in an attempt to establish a basis for extradition.

- The United States should raise the profile of the Ocalan issue and dramatize its own interest in his arrest by sending to Rome and Berlin a senior-level official -- preferably somebody from the law-enforcement side, such as Attorney General Janet Reno or FBI Director Louis Freeh -- to state the case for extradition.

None of these goals is easily accomplished. For the sake of its own broad counter-terrorism initiative as well as its stake in Turkey as a Western strategic asset, however, the United States must make the Ocalan case a major policy issue and seek through all diplomatic and legal means to assure that a terrorist chief is tried for his crimes.

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Policy #352

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