



Turkey: outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) chief calls for ceasefire in 'historic' move

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Abdullah Ocalan, imprisoned since 1999, called for a truce to a conflict of almost 30 years in which more than 35,000 people have died in a struggle for the establishment of an ethnic Kurdish homeland in the south-east of Turkey. If all goes well this will end one of Europe's most intractable problems of political violence by a group classified as a terrorism organisation by the EU, the US and Turkey.



Ocalan chose the beginning of the Kurdish New Year for a message of his to be read out to tens of thousands of jubilant Kurds in Diyarbakir. This followed several months of talks between Ocalan, jailed on an island off Istanbul, and the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Ocalan said the door to democracy was opening in Turkey and PKK fighters should lay down their arms. 'Let guns be silenced and politics dominate', read the statement. 'It's not the end; it's the start of a new era'.

It certainly looks that way. Under the deal, whose details are sketchy, there are likely to be greater constitutional, political and linguistic rights for Kurds and the release of some activists and others jailed for speaking or writing about the Kurdish cause. The government is not expected to declare a blanket amnesty, as this would be a step too far for the armed forces, though they have lost a lot of their power and influence in the 10 years since Erdogan took office as prime minister.

The constitution, drafted by generals following a coup in 1980, is to be reformed and an article describing all Turkish citizens as 'Turks' is to be scrapped, as will the one banning education in the Kurdish language.

The anti-terrorism law, which blurs the line between incitement to violence and the expression of non-violent ideas, will also be reformed. Turkey has become the world's leading jailer of journalists, many of them Kurds. Turkey was placed 154th in the 2013 Reporters Without Borders **World Press Freedom Index**, compared with around 100th in the mid-2000s.

This law, among others, was criticised by the EU in its last progress report on Turkey's accession negotiations which began in 2007 and are **moving at a snail's pace**. One third of all the world's terrorism arrests made between 2001 and 2011 were in Turkey, including several thousand non-violent Kurdish activists placed in preventive detention.

Several ceasefires in the past failed. This one looks more likely to stick. Ocalan told Kurdish politicians who visited him earlier this week that his declaration would be 'historic'. The PKK



military leadership over the border in the mountains of northern Iraq endorsed the truce. Ocalan still commands respect, despite spending the last 14 years in prison.

The PKK has also dropped its previous demands for an independent state, something that could go some way towards calming ultra nationalist sentiment, particularly in the security forces which fought a 'dirty war' in the Kurdish south-east of the country during the 1980s and 1990s where most of Turkey's estimated 15 million Kurds live. Many thousands of deaths remain unexplained. A particularly feared unit was Jetem, part of the Turkish gendarmerie charged with intelligence gathering and counter terrorism, which caused people suspected of ties with the PKK to disappear.

Ocalan's views have mellowed since he was captured in Kenya in 1999. His death sentence for treason was commuted to life imprisonment in 2002 after Turkey abolished the death penalty as part of the drive to enhance the country's credentials for EU membership. Ocalan told a delegation from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which visited him in February, that if the Kurdish movement continued to push for 'democratic autonomy' it would be 'sabotaging' the talks with the government. There was speculation that Ocalan could be 'rewarded' for his stance by being moved from the island prison to house arrest, which would enable him to play an active role in the post-ceasefire period.

The ceasefire has restored the momentum of reform to the government. It has notched up economic successes –per capita income quadrupled over the last decade and last year Fitch gave Turkish Treasury issues investment-grade status– but progress on the political front has stalled. The Economic Intelligence Unit's **Democracy Index 2011** placed Turkey 88th as a 'hybrid regime', a category below 'flawed democracy', the same place it was in 2007.

If the ceasefire holds and there is a permanent solution to the Kurdish problem, Erdogan's name could be etched into history in much the same way that the abolition of slavery enshrined President Lincoln's memory for Americans more than a century ago, according to Murat Yetkin, editor-in-chief of the *Hurriyet Daily News*.

Spain knows about these things as it has a longer history of terrorism by the Basque terrorist group ETA, whose ceasefire announced in October 2011 is still in force, though the group has yet to lay down its arms.

Erdogan was probably motivated not just by a desire to get his name in the history books, which is guaranteed anyway because he is Turkey's longest-serving prime minister and looks set to become the next president when direct elections for the post are held in 2014 for the first time.

Other considerations include enhancing the chances of benefiting from the oil and gas-rich lands of Kurdish northern Iraq, much nearer than those in Russia which supply Turkey with energy. Furthermore, the fast-growing economy, though less so than in 2010 and 2011, is increasing Ankara's energy needs. State-owned Turkish companies have been negotiating taking stakes in oil and gas fields.

The peace deal with the PKK could also remove the threat in neighbouring Syria where a PKK affiliate, the Democratic Union Party, controls a string of Kurdish towns left to them by President Bashar Assad.



The truce comes at a time when France and Germany have expressed a greater readiness to kick-start Turkey's paralysed EU negotiations. France is allowing EU documents to refer once again to an eventual EU 'accession' for Turkey, and is prepared to open one of the five chapters it has blocked in the negotiation process, the first in two and a half years.

Erdogan's ambition to become president, and with powers equivalent to those of the French presidency, could be realised with the help of the BDP as Erdogan's Justice and Development Party and the BDP command sufficient seats to ram through constitutional changes. An unholy alliance between Erdogan and Ocalan is putting it too far, but the two men could end up needing one another.