

Interview with Abdullah Öcalan

“We Are Fighting Turks Everywhere”

Abdullah Öcalan

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Abdullah (Apo) Öcalan is the founder and leader of the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK) or Kurdistan Workers Party, an organization the U.S. government deems to be terrorist. Born around 1948 in southeastern Turkey, Öcalan was a sometime student in political science at Ankara University in 19678, where he began to form his ideas on Kurdish nationalism. Öcalan created the PKK in November 1978, moved to Syria in May 1979, and began the current war against Turkey in August 1984. By the spring of 1998, the PKK's activities had led to more than 3,000 villages partially or totally destroyed, 27,000 deaths, and up to 3 million people displaced. Michael M. Gunter, professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University and author of three books on Kurdish issues, interviewed him in Damascus on March 1314, 1998.

Interviewer's Introduction

My visit to Syria began by my obtaining a standard singleentry tourist visa to the country, which I did without any political contacts or sponsorship by the Syrian government. I paid my own way and flew into Damascus on British Airways. Having alerted the PKK (via contacts in Britain) to my arrival, I was met at the Damascus airport by PKK operatives.

On each of my two days of discussions with Abdullah Öcalan, I was driven from my hotel in downtown Damascus via a circuitous route to my destination; presumably, the roundabout trip was to prevent me from knowing exactly where I was going. The first meeting took place in a large apartment in the Kurdish section of Damascus. The second one took place a short distance outside of Damascus, in a nondescript structure off a main highway. Inside the walled compound, I found a surprisingly impressive villa and garden. Armed guards kept watch from the roof of the villa. Attached to the villa compound was another, larger, walled compound containing simple living quarters for some 170 male and female fighters, an open green area, a cemented athletic area, and a lifesized gilded statue of Mazlum Korkmaz, a PKK hero. The compound also seems to be a place for rest and recreation; I met several wounded fighters there, including

one who asked me to send his regards to relatives living in Great Britain. I was informed that this complex is a Kurdishlanguage political training school. I learned that a similar Turkish language political training school exists in the vicinity but did not see it. I also heard about a military training camp in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, but did not visit it either.

Each of my meetings with Öcalan lasted for some six hours and was interrupted by lunch. Each day, Öcalan had me wait while he attended to other business. The first day, I waited about an hour as he met with two parliamentarians of the PASOK Party, the Greek socialists (who later joined us for lunch). The second day, he excused himself immediately after lunch for a telephone call with his subordinates that lasted about an hour and a half.

I found Öcalan an engaging and polite host. During lunch breaks, for example, he showed me the pigeons he keeps. He also let a honey bee alight on his finger and mused how it was "half sweet and half poison." On my second day, I was invited to play volleyball and soccer with Öcalan and his followers. When formally posing for a picture, Öcalan turned deadly serious and rather wooden but at other times he smiled easily. His conversation was often very animated. He showed a surprising knowledge of international tennis stars, deeming André Agassi his favorite but also talking about Jim Courier, Lindsay Davenport, Martina Hingis, Martina Navatilova, and Pete Sampras. Öcalan told me that he admires tennis because "it involves strategy as well as strength and power."

I was permitted to take many photographs and to tape record each meeting in its entirety. In the first meeting, Öcalan spoke in Kurmanji Kurdish, a language I was told he had recently learned to speak much better; the second day, he spoke in Turkish. The discussions on both days were rendered somewhat amateurishly into English by translators Öcalan provided.

Why did Öcalan agree to see me and provide extensive taped remarks? Probably because he saw me as a useful vehicle by which to convey his thoughts to a primarily American public.

Why, given that the Syrian authorities routinely deny Öcalan's presence on Syria territory, did he (and implicitly, they too) allow me to see and photograph him in Syria? I can only speculate that it might have been to send a signal to the Turks. All I can say for sure is that no one in the PKK ever requested that I not mention where I had met Öcalan.

Turkey

MEQ: Why do you fight against Turkey?

Öcalan: In Turkey, they say there are no Kurds, that they don't exist. The government says this.

Even the professors at universities say this. The Turks don't want to accept the Kurds; they want to finish [with] them. Turkey only accepts the Kurd who denies he is a Kurd. The 70,000 Village Guards [Turkish Kurds armed by the government to support the government] who claim they are the best Turks cannot even speak good Turkish. [laughs] Turkey's obstinate, ignorant refusal to negotiate with me has led to a culdesac it cannot get out of. Only a dialogue between Turkey and its Kurds can get the victims out of this continuing trap.

MEQ: How have you been able to keep up the fight for so long?

Öcalan: Anyone who thinks as a Kurd in Turkey is with the PKK. If Turkey finishes the PKK, then it will have only the wall to talk to. I use Turkish stupidity to build a Kurdish movement. This is very important. Turkey's harsh, ignorant treatment of the Kurds has helped give birth to a greater sense of Kurdish nationalism. I use Turkish mistakes to build up my power.

MEQ: What type of settlement do you seek with Turkey?

Öcalan: I accept the current Turkish borders. Nobody wants Turkey to be divided. This is very important! I want to negotiate a just, democratic solution to this twentyyearold struggle. The Turks must accept the Kurdish identity. They should say in the constitution that there are other people in Turkey and accept a federal system, as in the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and Spain.

MEQ: How can federalism work in Turkey when more than half the Turkish citizens of Kurdish ethnic heritage no longer live in the southeast?

Öcalan: It is a question of good will and terminology. We can find a solution. When the existence of the Kurds is accepted, 70 percent of the [Kurdish] problem will have been solved.

MEQ: If Atatürk were alive today, what do you suppose he would do to solve the Kurdish problem? Andrew Mango, a British historian writing a biography of Atatürk, says he would allow some local government and expression for Kurds while seeking to keep them under the Turkish roof.

Öcalan: We have two Atatürks, the one before and after 1925. Before 1925, Atatürk took a more positive attitude towards the Kurds. But after that date, he began a very negative policy. If Atatürk were alive today, however, he would not act like the Turkish leaders are now. He

would see the bankrupt result of his policy and change it. I agree that if Atatürk were alive today, he would change Turkey's policy.

MEQ: What Turkish politicians do you think might be willing to negotiate a political solution with you?

Öcalan: None of them are ready. [Former Turkish president Turgut] Özal wanted a political solution, but they [elements in the Turkish military against a political solution] killed him. They also killed [former gendarmerie forces commander Eşref] Bitlis.

MEQ: What would a political settlement mean for the future of Turkey? Will Turkey's granting what you consider to be genuine democracy to all its citizens solve its Kurdish problem and save the country, or would it simply encourage more Kurdish demands and eventually break up Turkey?

Öcalan: A dialogue between Turkey and the PKK followed by an agreement would be good for Turkey and make it stronger. All I am asking for is real democracy in Turkey. I am more Turkish than the Turkish leaders!

MEQ: How much has the PKK been hurt by Turkish military actions in southeast Turkey and northwest Iraq in recent years? Is it true as the Turks say that you have been marginalized?

Öcalan: We don't have fighting in the towns, but our guerrillas are stronger than before. We are fighting everywhere, even on the Black Sea. It is just a Turkish tactic to say we are finished. Why was it necessary just a few days ago to send 25,000 Turkish troops and 1,100 Village Guards against a small PKK unit near Diyarbakır? We have become even more powerful. Five days ago in Istanbul, 20,000 people made a demonstration for us in Taksim [Square] and just yesterday in Gazi Osman Paşa [Istanbul]. If they really think the PKK is finished, well, let them carry on.

MEQ: Are there any signs that the military leaders, the ultimate source of authority in Turkey, are willing to consider a political solution to the Kurdish problem?

Öcalan: In secret they are saying they want it [discrete negotiations], but not openly. All the Turkish army wants is to finish us. The key is in the military.

MEQ: Is there anyone in the military who can bring peace? How about Deputy Chief of Staff General Çevik Bir?

Öcalan: I am afraid he is playing a game like [former Turkish prime minister Tansu] Çiller. Çevik Bir is America's man in Turkey. If he wanted to, he could bring a settlement very quickly.

MEQ: What happened to the 1996 agreement of cooperation you signed with Dev Sol [a leftwing Turkish terrorist movement now called the Revolutionary Peoples Liberation Army Front or DHKPC]?

Öcalan: We tried, but since they killed some people in Turkey like [prominent businessman Özdemir] Sabancı we cannot work with them. We have no agreement with Dev Sol. It is opposing us on many fronts. Dev Sol is an instrument of the Turkish police. It is the same situation as with [Abdullah] Catlı [of Susurluk notoriety].¹ The Turkish police use Dev Sol on the left and [used] Catlı on the right.

MEQ: What is the relationship between the PKK and the Islamists in Turkey?

¹ A Nov. 1996 traffic accident in the town of Susurluk uncovered how the Turkish state, among other misdeeds, hired rightwing criminals on the lam to murder extrajudicially hundreds of Turkish civilians of Kurdish ethnic heritage in an attempt to silence their support for Kurdish rights and the PKK. In exchange, the state turned a blind eye to their drug trafficking and other criminal activities. For an account, see James H. Meyer, "Çiller's Scandals," Middle East Quarterly, Sept. 1997, pp. 2930.

Öcalan: There is no cooperation between us. Çevik Bir is saying that there is only propaganda.

THE PKK

MEQ: Whom does the PKK represent?

Öcalan: Clearly, the PKK speaks for Turkey's Kurds. If anyone doubts this, let them have fair, democratic elections and see what happens. But the Turks are not even brave enough to consider the concept.

MEQ: Are there divisions within the PKK?

Öcalan: We have suspicions regarding [PKK commander Şemdin Sakık a.k.a. Parmaksız] Zeki. Sometimes Zeki says we should not kill soldiers and other times he wants to even kill civilians. The first time civilians were killed in Turkey was by Zeki. We removed him from his duties.²

MEQ: How are you able to maintain control of your organization from what appears to be this relatively isolated place?

Öcalan: I keep in daily contact with my associates by telephone and radio. Still, there are major organizational problems in running the PKK and its related organizations abroad. The PKK is fighting a big war and it is very difficult to control people. At any moment somebody could stab you in the back. It is more difficult to change the traditional Kurdish ways than to split the atom.

MEQ: At its fifth congress in January 1995, the PKK removed the hammer and sickle from its flag and continued to deemphasize its earlier Marxism. What do you say to those who say this was a cosmetic change and that you are still a Marxist, a communist?

Öcalan: This is just propaganda. It is not possible for us to be communists. Why did the Soviet Union collapse and the United States has not? It is because communism made the government everything, but the human being nothing. The United States represents development.

MEQ: When will the next PKK congress be?

Öcalan: At the end of 1998.

MEQ: What role will you and the PKK play in Turkey if the current struggle comes to a negotiated end?

Öcalan: We can play an active role. If there is a federal state, we will want to run it. The PKK is the voice of the [Kurdish] people.

MEQ: Will you seek to play a role in Turkish politics?

Öcalan: Yes, of course.

Non-PKK Kurds

MEQ: How can the Kurds achieve greater unity?

Öcalan: When the Turks stop interfering, Kurdish unity will be there. The Turks say "let one dog kill the other" when they deal with the Kurds. The Kurdish National Congress will be a solution for the Kurdish divisions.

MEQ: When will you create this congress?

Öcalan: We are not very far from it. The PKK will be the biggest group in it. Then the PUK [Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan]. The KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party of Barzani] is

² Zeki defected to Mas'ud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, an opponent of the PKK, just days after this interview, and shortly afterwards was captured by Turkish commandos.

near. Also there are many prominent Kurdish personalities like Ibrahim Ahmad and Mahmud Osman who support it. Only [Kemal] Burkay, [the leader of the Kurdistan Socialist Party (Turkey)] is not joining.

MEQ: What do you think of [the Iraqi Kurdish leaders] Barzani and Talabani?

Öcalan: There is a major difference between me and Barzani and Talabani. The PKK is a new movement. Barzani and Talabani are like caricatures of Saddam. Have you ever seen a more povertystricken policy than theirs? Why did they have to kiss Saddam? Where are their principles? Barzani is like a collaborator. When Iran asks Barzani to kill Iranian Kurds, Barzani does so. You cannot call Barzani's movement a Kurdish movement.

MEQ: So who speaks for the Kurds? Who will negotiate for the Kurds?

Öcalan: Barzani and Talabani are like feet or arms, but I am the main head or mind. The United States should speak with me, the mind. I have twentyfive years of experience.

MEQ: What happened to your agreement with Kemal Burkay in 1993?³

Öcalan: It still stands. We follow it. There is no difference between our views and Burkay.

MEQ: Would you be willing to let other Kurdish organizations play a future political role in Turkey after the PKK reached a negotiated settlement with Ankara?

Öcalan: If I am the problem, Turkey should establish a dialogue with the other Kurdish organizations that are out there.

MEQ: Whom do you have in mind, Serafettin Elçi [a longtime Turkish politician in Turkey of Kurdish ethnic heritage] or HADEP [a legal proKurdish party in Turkey]?

Öcalan: Elçi is supported by virtually no one.

The Outside World

MEQ: What foreign support do you get?

Öcalan: Of course, we would like the world to support us. If the United States were objective, it must have a moral code, a sense of honor, and support us. But if we wait for some government to help us, we will be finished. The PKK is selfreliant. It is financed through voluntary donations from Kurds, not through extortion or drug trafficking, as the Turks' propaganda claims. Turkey receives a great deal of foreign help from many different sources to use against the Kurds. Turkey is like the woman married to seven different men, satisfying them all at the same time.

MEQ: In the time of Mulla Mustafa Barzani, Israel gave covert support to the Kurds. Now, however, Turkey has close relations with Israel. Your thoughts?

Öcalan: The Turks made an agreement with Israel to kill Kurds. This time the Turks are getting the green light from Israel; earlier it was from the United States.

MEQ: Your thoughts on the United States?

Öcalan: The United States is a great power. It is a very objective country, but it does not have positive knowledge about us. Turks look upon the United States as a child beside their own thousandyearold history of running their own empire. Before you kill somebody, you should ask him. We don't want too much. I don't think the United States and NATO will accept

³ In which the Kurdish factions agreed to respect each other's existence, settle their differences peacefully, work toward establishing a common front, and adopt a common approach toward the Republic of Turkey.

massacres against the Kurds. Why does the United States become so concerned as soon as a few people are killed in Kosovo, while it ignores that Kurdistan has become an extreme killing ground? The recent visits of [assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor John] Shattuck to Turkey's prisoners including Leyla Zana is a positive development, but just stressing human rights is not enough. The United States helped Çiller without any conditions. The Americans believed that Çiller was one of them because she had a U.S. passport and had been educated in the United States. The Turks killed many Kurds under the cover of Çiller. When Çiller was killing those people, she was sitting on America's shoulders. Now the Turks are saying Çiller was responsible for Susurluk, that Çiller is a spy for the Americans. It's a big game. [laughs] This is also very dangerous politics.

MEQ: What do you say to the U.S. charge that the PKK is a terrorist organization?

Öcalan: The Americans have a blind spot on the PKK; they act as Turkey's mouthpiece. I am the real victim of terrorism. The United States is hanging me without judging me. This is an ignorant, blind policy without rational terms. It is extrajudicial killing. Let them bring me the proof. Once Arafat and Mandela were called terrorists, but look at them now. When I offer to negotiate, I am called weak, and when I show my strength I am called a terrorist. This is enormously illogical. The PKK has made mistakes. This is true. But compared to what Turkey has done to the Kurds over the years, it should be obvious who is the real terrorist. Susurluk has the facts. Everything is said in the Susurluk report.

MEQ: What one message would you direct to Americans?

Öcalan: [hesitates] The Kurds want the conditions the United States wants for itself—democracy, equality. We don't want anything else. Have respect for life.

MEQ: Should the United States or the European Union be diplomatically more aggressive on the Kurdish issue, perhaps as the United States has been in the former Yugoslavia and Cyprus? For example, should they take a more active role to bring about a ceasefire, then push for Government of Turkey PKK negotiations?

Öcalan: Of course, they should—it's the only solution, but only if America doesn't play games. Recent German willingness finally to talk to the PKK is a good model. But Germany does not see itself as having an international role; the United States is the main protagonist. A dialogue between the United States and the Kurds is most important, and it should begin sooner rather than later. It would open the way to a most important change in U.S. policy. This dialogue, by the way, would be a risk not just for the United States but for me, too. It would increase the number of my enemies. Maybe my health would do better if I stayed away from the United States! [laughs]

Personal

MEQ: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Öcalan: I have two younger brothers, Osman [a highranking PKK commander] and Mehmet. Mehmet lives in Adana; Turkey arrested him when he tried to leave the country. I have three sisters; two are older than I. They are very simple people. One sister lives in Europe.

MEQ: And your parents?

Öcalan: My mother died the same week that Özal died [in April 1993].

MEQ: What language do you speak best, Turkish or Kurdish?

Öcalan: Naturally, I know Turkish better than Kurdish.

MEQ: When did you live in Ankara?

Öcalan: I came to Ankara in 1966 and left in July 1978. I did not live in one place in Ankara, but was moving around.

MEQ: What did you do during your Ankara years?

Öcalan: I was a student. I studied in political science for four years but not very seriously because I did not want to go to the military. Normally I would have graduated in 1974, but I continued for another four years to avoid military service. I spent many years in Ankara going to the libraries and reading all the books on the Kurds. In the beginning I was not a Kurdish nationalist. I did not accept so easily being a Kurd. I fought within myself for a long time whether to be a Turk or a Kurd. Later after my studies, I came to the conclusion I should consider myself a Kurd.

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