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An Interview with the PKK's Ocalan

by *Michael M. Gunter*

In early March 1998, I left the United States for a long journey to the Middle East and two days of lengthy, very revealing discussions with Abudllah (Apo) Ocalan, the long-time, reclusive leader of the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK) or Kurdistan Workers Party. Vilified in Turkey and officially listed by the United States State Department as a terrorist organization, the PKK had grown out of the leftist fervor in Turkish politics and rebirth of Kurdish nationalism that had occurred in Turkey during the 1960-70s. After several years of preparation, Ocalan had then officially created the PKK on 27 November 1978.¹

Ocalan began his current armed struggle with two well-coordinated attacks on Eruh and Semdinli, villages in southeastern Turkey separated by more than 200 miles of rugged, mountainous terrain, on 15 August 1984. By the spring of 1998, more than 27,000 people had been killed, 3,000 villages totally or partially destroyed, and up to 3,000,000 people in Turkey internally displaced. Despite official Turkish claims that the PKK has been all but defeated in recent years,² the PKK's struggle clearly continues and threatens the very future of Turkey. My meeting with Ocalan promised to give me new and valuable insights into his strategy and personality. I was not disappointed.

Through contacts I had made with various PKK fronts in Britain, I was able to obtain an invitation to visit Ocalan. I first flew to London and then on to Damascus where I was met at the airport by Ali Homam Ghasi. Urbane and well educated, the 62-year-old Ali Ghasi was the only son of Qazi Muhammad, the president of the short-lived, but among all Kurds much-admired Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad in Iran (1946-47).³ After being crushed by the Iranian government, Qazi Muhammad was hanged in March 1947. A half century later, the usually fractious Kurdish movements almost universally still hailed Qazi Muhammad's memory. Although his son Ali Ghasi was not a formal member of the PKK, clearly he lent valuable legitimacy to Ocalan for whom he had become an eminence grise.

I had two separate meetings with Ocalan over a period of two days. Each meeting lasted for some six hours and was broken by lunch and also a game of volleyball and soccer the second time. I was permitted to tape each meeting in its entirety and take numerous photographs.

On both occasions I was driven from my hotel in a circuitous route so that I would not know exactly where I was being taken. The first meeting was in a large apartment in the Kurdish section of Damascus. I had to wait for about an hour before actually seeing Ocalan because he was busy meeting with two Greek PASOK parliamentarians who later also had lunch with us. For this first meeting Ocalan spoke in Kurmanji Kurdish, a language I was told he had recently learned to speak much better.

On the second day I was driven a short distance outside of Damascus to a nondescript looking structure off one of the main highways. Inside the walled compound, however, was an impressive villa and garden. A few armed guerrillas kept watch from the roof. Attached to this compound was another somewhat larger walled compound containing modest living quarters for some 170 male and female guerrillas, a cemented athletic area where Ocalan and I played volleyball and soccer with some of his guerrillas, and an open green in the middle. A gilded statue of Mazlum (Mahsun) Korkmaz, the first leader of the PKK popular front Eniye Rizgarive Nevata Kurdistan (ERNK) or Kurdistan National Liberation Front, stood in a prominent place. Korkmaz had been killed in action in 1986.

I was told that the entire complex was a Kurdish-language, political training school. It also seemed to be a place for R & R. I met several wounded guerrillas while I was there. One even asked me to give his regards to relatives back in Britain. I was also told there was a similar Turkish-language, political training school in the vicinity. In addition, there was a military training camp somewhere in the Bekaa Valley, but I did not visit these other two locations.

Although our life experiences had varied greatly and our discussions were handicapped by the language barrier, I found Ocalan an engaging, polite host. On occasion he could be deadly serious and rather wooden when formally posing for a picture. The real Ocalan, however, more often than not smiled easily and at times almost mischievously. Frequently, he had a twinkle in his eyes and his conversation became very animated.

Indeed, he will have to learn how to let the translator finish his/her words before interrupting him/her with his continuing thoughts if the time ever comes for him to speak with diplomats. He will also have to be served by better and expert translators who not only can distinguish between the nuances of meanings, but convey the overall point without getting lost in confusing details. In addition, someone will have to tell him that he does not always have to speak for hours at a time over Med-TV, the PKK's television station that has been broadcasting to Europe and the Middle East since 1995. Sometimes short, to-the-point clips are what is called for.

What did Ocalan tell me?⁴ He wants to negotiate a just, democratic solution to his twenty- year-old struggle with Turkey within the existing Turkish borders. But he is obviously frustrated by Turkey's unwillingness to talk to him and the continuing willingness of the United States to serve as Turkey's mere "mouthpiece."

As Ocalan described how "Turkey looks at the United States as a child compared to its own 1000-year-old history of running its own empire," I was reminded how in earlier interviews he had declared he was more Turkish than Turkey's own leaders. Born and educated in Turkey and speaking Turkish more easily than Kurdish, Ocalan represents the Turkish leftist road not taken during the 1960-70s. If he were to die today, however, Ocalan's most important heritage would be his revival of Kurdish nationalism and its corresponding Kurdish self-awareness and dignity in Turkey.

Ocalan told me that his "present goal is to broaden the concept of the Turkish Republic to include the Kurds" qua Kurds. Turkey's "obstinate, ignorant refusal" to do so has led it and its citizens of Kurdish ethnic heritage into a "cul de sac it cannot get out of." "Only a dialogue between Turkey and its Kurds can get the victims out of this continuing trap." When Ocalan offers to negotiate, however, he is called "weak," and when he "shows his strength he is called a terrorist." This is "enormously illogical." If the PKK has been so weakened "why was it necessary just a few days ago to send 25,000 Turkish troops and 1,100 village guards ⁵ against a small PKK unit near Divarbakir." "Turkey only accepts the Kurd who denies he is a Kurd. The 70,000 village guards who claim they are the best Turks cannot even speak good Turkish," laughed Ocalan.

True, "the PKK has made mistakes." Ocalan acknowledged this. But "compared to what Turkey had done to the Kurds over the years, it should be obvious who is the real terrorist."

Ocalan also recognized that since so much blood has been shed, Turkey will find it difficult to negotiate immediately with the PKK. So "Turkey should establish a dialogue with the other Kurdish organizations that are out there." However, Serafettin Elci a long-time Kurdish politician in Turkey is "supported by virtually no one. 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."

The recent German willingness finally to talk to the PKK is "a good model."⁶ Germany, however, "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." It would "open the way to the most important change in US policy." This dialogue should commence "sooner rather than later." Jokingly, Ocalan then added that maybe it would be he who would be taking the risk to negotiate with the United States. "I could even increase the number of my enemies. Maybe I can increase my health by staying away from the US," he added mischievously.

Turning serious again, Ocalan asked why the United States gets so concerned as soon as a few people are killed in Kosovo, while it ignores the "extreme killing ground" Kurdistan has become. "Susurluk shows the facts," Ocalan declared. "Everything is said in the Susurluk report." The reference to Susurluk, of course, illustrated how the Turkish state, by its own admission, hired right-wing criminals on the lam to extrajudicially murder thousands of Turkish citizens 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.⁷ However, if the United States really thinks the PKK is finished, well then "let it carry on." The implication here meant that the United States and Turkey will continue to pay the price for refusing to negotiate with the PKK.

At this point I brought up one of my pet issues again. Ocalan should stress that a dialogue followed by a settlement between Turkey and the PKK would be good for Turkey and

make it stronger, since all the PKK now was asking for was real democracy in a Turkey that would constitutionally recognize Kurdish rights. I myself have always argued that Ataturk himself if he were alive today to see what bankrupt policy concerning the Kurds was being carried out in his name would settle the issue quickly and fairly.

Indeed, two days before I spoke with Ocalan, Andrew Mango the British expert on Turkey who is completing a new biography of Ataturk that will probably replace Lord Kinross⁸ as the standard work on the great Turkish leader told me in his London home just this. The Kemalist policies seemingly set in stone concerning the Kurds, Mango said, were established in a different time, for a different situation. Indeed, when Ataturk established his policies on the Kurds in the 1920s, said Mango, he did not have a "clue" regarding the Kurds. But if the great man were alive today, argued Mango, he would "allow some local government and expression" for the Kurds, while seeking to keep them "under the Turkish roof."

Certainly such a position is suitable for opening a dialogue with the Kurds. Ocalan told me that I could say that he agreed that "if Ataturk were alive today, Ataturk would change Turkey's policy." In other words, in the name of Ataturk and to preserve and strengthen Turkey, Turkey should open a dialogue with the PKK! Ocalan added here the obvious analogy between such a dialogue and what earlier had transpired between Israel and the PLO and in South Africa with Nelson Mandela.

Over lunch, Ocalan and I shared some lighter moments as he showed me the pigeons he keeps, smilingly let a honey bee alight on his finger and mused how it was "half sweet and half poison," and amazed me that he knew the names of such tennis players as Andre Agassi (his favorite), Pete Sampras, Jim Courier, Lindsay Davenport, Martina Navatilova, and Martina Hingis, among others. Ocalan explained that he admired tennis because "it involved strategy as well as strength and power."

Returning to more serious matters, Ocalan rhetorically asked why the Soviet Union had collapsed, while the United States did not. He replied that it was because "communism made the government everything, but the human being nothing." He vehemently denied that he was still a Marxist and pointed out that the PKK had officially dropped the hammer and sickle from its flag in 1995.

The PKK was fighting "a big war." It was "very difficult to control people. At any moment somebody could stab you in the back." Ocalan firmly believed, for example, that elements in the Turkish military had killed Turkish president Turgut Ozal (who died from a heart attack) and gendarmerie forces commander Esref Bitlis (who died in a rather mysterious airplane accident) in 1993 because they were willing to seek some sort of political settlement with the PKK.⁹ "It was more difficult to change the negative traditional Kurdish ways, than to split the atom." There were major organizational problems in running the PKK and its related fronts abroad. The PKK was financed through "voluntary donations, not through extortion or drug trafficking" as is widely believed in the West. The puritanical life style I saw around Ocalan would seem to square with this claim, but the looser situation in Europe and the tradition of smuggling in the

field would indicate other possibilities. Ocalan also wanted to send more students to England to be educated.

Throughout all our conversations, Semdin Sakik a.k.a. Parmaksiz (Fingerless) Zeki, was the only PKK leader Ocalan criticized by name. A few days later Sakik defected to Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), an Iraqi Kurdish opponent of the PKK and major participant in the Kurdish civil war dragging on in northern Iraq since 1994.¹⁰ Ocalan told me that he and Sakik had had differences over tactics and strategy and also criticized Sakik for killing civilians. "We put him [Sakik] out of his duty."

Given his seeming isolation from most of the other PKK leaders and guerrillas in the northern Iraqi and southeastern Turkish field on the one hand and Europe on the other, I wondered how Ocalan continued to control the organization from the relative isolation of Damascus. In reply, he told me he kept in daily contact with his lieutenants via telephone and radio. Indeed, during our second day of talks he excused himself immediately after lunch for a telephone call that lasted for about an hour and a half. The sincere deference he was shown and charisma he exuded were also obvious.

Despite Ocalan's desire to negotiate, it seems unlikely that either Turkey or the United States will want to talk with him, at least in the near future. Based on my research over the years and what I learned from my visit with him, I think this is a mistake. Clearly, Ocalan and his PKK speak for the vast majority of Turkish citizens of Kurdish ethnic heritage who have come to think of themselves as Kurds.

Given Ocalan's express willingness to recognize Turkey's existing borders, his offer to negotiate should be discreetly tested. If Ocalan proves to be insincere in his intentions expressed here and simply ups the ante to full independence, Turkey will be in a stronger position for having at least shown its good will by offering to negotiate.

Unfortunately, with the exception of the late President Ozal, Turkey has shown no flexibility on this point. As Ocalan repeatedly explained to me, "Turkish chauvinism allows no place for the Kurds [qua Kurds] in Turkey." The prospect, therefore, is for a continuing armed struggle that bodes ill for the future of Turkey.

Endnotes

1. For background, see my two books on the Kurdish problem in Turkey: *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997); and *The Kurds in Turkey: A Political Dilemma* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990). Also see Kemal Kirisci and Gareth M. Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An Example of a Trans-state Ethnic Conflict* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller, *Turkey's Kurdish Question* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); and Ismet G.

Imset, *The PKK: A Report on Separatist Violence in Turkey (1973-1992)* (Istanbul: Turkish Daily News Publications, 1992).

2. See, for example, the claims denied by Ocalan that the PKK "has been reduced to its 1983 level " of "armed propaganda." Mahmut Bulut, "Rebellion Against Apo in the PKK," *Sabah* (Istanbul), 7 December 1997; as cited in Foreign Broadcast Information Service West Europe, 7 December 1997.

3. For an assessment of the so-called Mahabad Republic fifty years after its fall, see the special issue of the *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* entitled "The Republic of Kurdistan: Fifty Years Later," 11, nos. 1 & 2, (1997). Also see William Eagleton, Jr., *The Kurdish Republic of 1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); and Archie Roosevelt, Jr., "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *Middle East Journal*, 1 (July 1947), pp. 247-69.

4. For an edited transcript of my interviews held with Ocalan on 13-14 March 1998, see *Middle East Quarterly*, 5 (June 1998), forthcoming.

5. The same 70,000 village guards formed from Kurdish villagers loyal to the Turkish government were first created in April 1985 to help ward off PKK attacks. The PKK regards them as traitors. Many of the reported massacres perpetrated by the PKK were of the village guards and their families. In recent years, the PKK has greatly reduced its attacks against the civilian families of village guards and accepted the applicable standards of the Geneva conventions concerning armed conflict.

6. More than 500,000 Kurds now live in Germany, by far the largest Kurdish exile community in the world. Following PKK-inspired violence against Turkish property in 1993, the German government officially banned the PKK in November 1993 as a terrorist organization. Following discreet negotiations and assurances of no further violence in Germany, the "terrorist" appellation was lifted early in 1998. While the German government still regards the PKK as a "criminal" organization, it is clear that the two are now at least talking.

7. For an analysis of *Susurluk*, see Michael M. Gunter, "Susurluk: The Connections Between the Intelligence Community in Turkey and International Crime." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 11 (Summer 1998), forthcoming.

8. Lord Kinross, *Ataturk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey* (New York: William Morrow, 1965).

9. On the Middle Eastern penchant to believe in conspiracy theories in general, see Daniel Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996). Turkey is specifically discussed in *ibid.*, pp. 385-89.

10. For an analysis of the Kurdish in-fighting in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Michael M. Gunter, "The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq," *Middle East Journal*, 50 (Spring 1996), pp. 225-41.