I offer the Turkish society a simple solution. We
demand a democratic nation. We are not op-
posed to the unitary state and republic. We accept
the republic, its unitary structure and laicism.
However, we believe that it must be redefined as
a democratic state respecting peoples, cultures
and rights. On this basis, the Kurds must be
free to organize in a way that they can live their
culture and language and can develop economi-
cally and ecologically. This would allow Kurds,
Turks and other cultures to come together under
the roof of a democratic nation in Turkey. This
is only possible, though, with a democratic
constitution and an advanced legal framework
warranting respect for different cultures.
Our idea of a democratic nation is not defined
by flags and borders. Our idea of a democratic
nation embraces a model based on democracy
instead of a model based on state structures and
ethnic origins. Turkey needs to define itself as a
country which includes all ethnic groups. This
would be a model based on human rights instead
of religion or race. Our idea of a democratic na-
tion allows for a state including all ethnic groups and cultures.

War and Peace in Kurdistan

Abdullah Öcalan

English

International Initiative Edition

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Perspectives for a political solution

of the Kurdish question

Abdullah Öcalan

Contents

1. Introduction

Everyday life in the Middle East is dominated by numerous conflicts, which often appear strange to Western eyes as they seem to elude the Western understanding of reason and meaning. This is also true for the Kurdish question, one of the most complex and bloody fields of conflict in the Middle East still awaiting a solution. However, as long as we refrain from discussing all the dimensions of this conflict equally, it will continue and even be aggravated further, thus creating new and far-reaching problems. The historical, economic and political dimensions of the Kurdish question exceed by far the Arab-Israeli conflict, which, in contrast to the Kurdish question, enjoys the attention of the international public. Knowledge about this conflict is limited, and because it is taking place in one of the most central regions of the Middle East, both with respect to demography and to geostrategic importance, this deficit often results in one-sided and superficial analysis of this complex problem.

Since the settlement area of the Kurds spans the present territories of Arabs, Persians and Turks, the Kurdish question necessarily concerns most of the region. A solution in one part of Kurdistan also affects other parts of Kurdistan and neighbouring countries. Conversely, the destructive approach of actors in one country may have negative effects on potential solutions to the Kurdish question in other countries. The rugged Kurdish landscape is practically made for armed struggle,

and the Kurds have been fighting colonisation or conquest by foreign powers since time immemorial. Resistance has become part of their life and culture.

At the beginning of every solution process the conflict needs to be recognised and defined. With a view to the Kurdish question, a realistic definition of the Kurdish phenomenon is therefore important. However, it is here that much of the disagreement begins. While the Arabs call the Kurds 'Arabs from Yemen', the Turks call them 'mountain Turks' and the Persians regard them as their ethnic counterparts. It is not astonishing, therefore, that their political stances on the Kurdish question are marked by arguments over definitions.

The Kurdish question has not been created out of the blue. It is the product of a long historical process and does not have much in common with similar issues in other parts of the world. In fact, there are a number of fundamental peculiarities and differences. Both of them need to be defined in a solution process. Any policy building merely on apparent common ground leads to irresolvable problems. A policy aiming at a solution needs to analyse realistically the phenomenon and include both the national, political and social background, and also all parties involved in the conflict. It is indispensable, therefore, to recognise the existence of the Kurdish phenomenon. This, however, is not possible without information about the historical background.

2. Etymology of the Words Kurd and Kurdistan

The name Kurdistan goes back to the Sumerian word kur, which more than 5,000 years ago meant something like 'mountain'. The suffix ti stood for affiliation. The word kurti then had the meaning of mountain tribe or mountain people. The Luwians, who settled in western Anatolia about 3,000 years ago, called Kurdistan Gondwana, which in their language meant land of the villages. In Kurdish, gond is still the word for village. During the reign of Assure (from the early to mid Bronze Age through to the late Iron Age) the Kurds were called Nairi, which translates as 'people by the river'.

In the Middle Ages, under the reign of the Arab sultanates the Kurdish areas were referred to as *beled ekrad*. The Seljuk sultans who spoke Persian were the first to use the word Kurdistan, land of the Kurds, in their official communiqués. The Ottoman sultans also called the area settled by the Kurds Kurdistan. Until the 1920s, this name was generally used. After 1925 the existence of the Kurds was denied, particularly in Turkey.

3. Kurdish Settlement Area and Kurdish Language

They do exist, though. Kurdistan comprises an area of 450,000 square kilometres, which is surrounded by the settlement areas of the Persians, Azeris, Arabs and Anatolian Turks. It is one of the most mountainous, forested and water-rich areas in the Middle East and is pervaded by numerous fertile plains. Agriculture has been practiced here for thousands of years. It was here that the Neolithic revolution began, when hunter-gatherers settled down and began farming the fields. The region is also called the cradle of civilisation. Thanks to its geographical position the Kurds have been able to protect their existence as an ethnic community until today. On the other hand, it was the exposed position of the Kurdish settlement area which often whetted the appetite of external powers and enticed them to embark on raids and conquest. The Kurdish language reflects the influence of the Neolithic revolution, which is believed to have begun in the region of the Zagros and Taurus mountains. Kurdish belongs to the Indo-European family of languages.

4. A Short Outline of Kurdish History

It is highly probable that Kurdish language and culture began to develop during the fourth ice age (20,000–15,000 bc). The Kurds are one of the oldest indigenous populations in the Middle Eastern region. About 6,000 bc they became distinct from other cultures. Historiography first mentions the Kurds as an ethnic group related to the Hurrians (3,000–2,000 bc). So it is assumed that the predecessors of the Kurds, the Hurrians and the descendants of the Hurrians – the Mittani, the Nairi, the Urarteans and the Medes – all lived in tribal confederations and kingdoms at the time. Kurdish society at the time was transitioning towards hierarchy and state structures, and can be seen as developing a strong patriarchy. Because during the Neolithic agricultural era women undertook more important functions within society, this led to women having more prominence within Kurdish society. It is highly likely that women relied on such strength for a long time and that this strength was drawn from the agricultural revolution.

It was Zoroastrianism which had a lasting impact on the Kurdish way of thinking, between 700 and 550 bc. Zoroastrianism cultivated a way of life that was marked by work in the fields, where men and women were equal to each other. Love of animals played an important role, and freedom was a high moral good. Zoroastrian culture influenced Eastern and Western civilisation equally, since both Persians and Hellenes adopted many of its cultural influences. The Persian

civilisation, however, was founded by the Medes, believed to be the predecessors of the Kurds. In Herodotus' histories there is much evidence for a division of power among both Medes and Persian ethnic groups in the Persian Empire. This is also true for the subsequent Sassanid Empire.

The Hellenic era of classic antiquity left deep traces in the eastern hemisphere. The principalities Abgar in Urfa and Komagene, the centre of which was near Adiyaman-Samsat, and the kingdom of Palmyra in Syria were deeply influenced by the Greeks. One might say that it is there that we can find the first synthesis of oriental and occidental cultural influences. This special cultural encounter lasted until Palmyra was conquered by the Roman Empire in 269 AD, which brought about long-term negative consequences for the development of the entire region. The appearance of the Sassanid Empire did not end the Kurdish influence either. We may assume that during this time (216–652 AD) feudal structures were formed in Kurdistan. The development of feudalism reflects the divergence within ethnic structures. Kurdish society developed bonds of an increasingly feudal structure. At this developmental stage of feudalism the Islamic revolution occurred. Islam essentially transformed the strict relationships of slavery and ethnic bonds – which obstructed development – on the basis of urbanization. At the same time a mental revolution regarding the ideological basis of feudal society began to develop.

The decline of the Sassanid Empire (650 AD) helped Islam create a feudal Kurdish aristocracy, which was strongly influenced by Arabisation. It became one of the strongest social and political formations of its time. The Kurdish dynasty of the Ayyubids (1175–1250 AD) evolved into one of the most potent dynasties in the Middle East, exercising great influence on the Kurds.

On the other hand, the Kurds maintained close relations to the Seljuk sultanate, which took over the rule from the Abbasids in 1055. Dynasties of Kurdish descent like the Sheddadis, Buyidis and Marwanides (990–1090) developed into feudal petty states. Other principalities followed. The ruling class of the Kurds enjoyed significant autonomy in the Ottoman Empire.

With the onset of the nineteenth century Kurdish history and society entered a new phase. In the course of deteriorating relations with the Ottomans several Kurdish uprisings occurred. English and French missionaries brought the idea of separatism into the Armenian and Aramaic churches, contributing to a chaotic situation. Furthermore, the relations between Armenians (Assyrians) and Kurds became notably worse. This fatal process ended in 1918 after World War I, with the almost complete physical and cultural annihilation of the Armenians and Aramaeans, who were the bearers of a culture several thousand years old.

Although the relations between Kurds and Turks had been seriously damaged, it did not result in a complete rupture like the Armenians and Arameans. This allowed for the continued physical existence of the Kurds.

5. Struggles for Resources, War and State Terror in Kurdistan

In the past, its geostrategic position has made the country a pawn in struggles over the distribution of resources, and invited wars and state terror. This is still true today, and dates back into early history, as Kurdistan has been exposed to attacks and raids by external powers for its entire history. The terror regimes of the Assyrian and Scythian Empires between 1000 and 1300 bc, and the campaign of conquest by Alexander the Great, are the best-known examples. The Arab conquest after the onset of Islam triggered the Islamisation process of Kurdistan. Much as Islam as a word evokes peace it is an effective Arabic national war ideology and was able to spread quickly in Kurdistan. Islam proceeded into the foothills of the Taurus and Zagros mountains. Tribes that put up resistance were exterminated. In 1000 AD Islam had reached its peak in Kurdistan. Then in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Mongols invaded Kurdistan. Flight and displacement followed. After the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, which saw the Ottomans victorious, the natural eastern border of the empire was shifted further eastward. The treaty of Qasr-e Shirin officially established the Iranian and Turkish borders and concluded the partition of Kurdistan, which has continued into the present. Mesopotamia and the Kurds found themselves for the most part within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Until 1800 a relative peace had prevailed between the Ottomans and the Kurdish principalities, which was based on the Sunni

denomination of Islam that they had in common. Alevitic and Zoroastrian Kurds, however, were defiant and took to resistance in the mountains.

After 1800, until the decline of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan was shaken by numerous rebellions, which were usually bloodily crushed. After the end of the Ottoman Empire the Kurdish partition deepened even further, exacerbating the atmosphere of violence. The rising imperialist powers of Britain and France redrew the boundaries in the Middle East and left Kurdistan under the rule of the Turkish republic, the Iranian peacock throne, the Iraqi monarchy and the Syrian-French regime.

Influenced by the loss of a large part of its former territories, Turkey switched to a strict policy of assimilation in order to enforce the unity of the remaining parts of its former empire. All indications of the existence of a culture other than Turkish were to be exterminated. They even banned the use of the Kurdish language.

The aspiring Pahlavi dynasty in Iran proceeded in the same way. The rebellion of the Kurdish tribal leader Simko Shikak from Urmiye and the emancipation struggle of the Kurdish republic of Mahabad were crushed in blood. The shah established a terror regime in the spirit of the nationalist-fascist epoch that rose at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Iraqi and Syrian parts of Kurdistan, Britain and France suppressed the Kurdish emancipation efforts with the help of their Arab proxies. Here, too, a bloody colonial regime was established.

6. European Colonialism and the Kurdish Dilemma

Driven by ambitions for geostrategic supremacy and boundless greed, the European intervention policy in the Middle East became increasingly colonialist at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its primary goal became the submission and control of the Middle East. This added a new form of colonisation to what the Kurds had already experienced over a history dating back into Sumerian times. However, Western capitalism changed it in unimagined ways. For the Kurds, this meant that they were again confronted with new colonialist actors and that the solution to the Kurdish question had become even more difficult.

With a view to their interests, the new imperialist powers deemed it more advantageous to seek cooperation with the sultan and the empire's administrative rulers in order to win allies, instead of breaking up the Ottoman Empire with unforeseeable consequences. This approach was meant to facilitate direct control over the region and to tame its rebellious peoples. This method, which was widespread throughout the British Empire, found its way into the history books as the 'divide and rule' strategy. In this way Ottoman rule was extended for another hundred years. France and Germany had similar strategies. The frictions between them did not influence the balance of power in the Middle East.

Yet another focus of imperial preservation of power was on the Christian ethnic groups. On the one hand, Western colo-

nialism pretended to protect the Anatolian Greeks, Armenians and Aramaeans; on the other hand it incited them to rebel against the central power, which responded with repressive measures. The subsequent annihilation campaign was watched impassively by the Western powers. Eventually, this policy antagonised the nations of the Middle East. Again, the Kurds were only pawns in a game of foreign interests. In the past the Kurdish aristocracy had collaborated with the Arab and Turkish dynasties. Now they allowed foreign powers to use them as part of their colonialist intrigues. By winning the cooperation of the Kurds the British succeeded in tying the anxious Turkish and Arab rulers to their interests. Then again, they were able to further tie the Armenians and Aramaeans to the colonial powers, which in turn were hard-pressed by Kurdish feudal collaborators. However, the Turkish sultan, the Persian shah and the Arab rulers were not merely victims of this policy. They played a similar game in order to preserve their own power and to curb the greediness of the Western powers. It was the people who suffered.

7. The Ideological Basis of Colonial Oppression and Power Politics in Kurdistan

Both the partition of Kurdistan and ways in which the Arab, Persian and Turkish regimes ruled were social setbacks for the Kurds in each part of Kurdistan. The societal backwardness of today's Kurds, who still retain their feudal structures, is a product of these power relationships. With the coming of capitalist structures, from which the Kurds were mostly excluded, the development-related divide between them and the Arab, Turkish and Persian hegemonic societies grew larger. The power structures of feudal rule mingled with bourgeois-capitalist power structures, which helped to preserve the dominance of their corresponding nations. Although these structures depended on imperialism, they were able to build up their own national economies, further develop their own cultures, and stabilise their own state structures. In the areas of science and technology a national elite was coming of age. They forced all other ethnic groups in their countries to speak the official language. The media in the official language became a force on its own. With the help of a nationalist domestic and foreign policy they created a national ruling class, which saw itself as a hegemonic power with a view to other ethnic groups. The police and military were expanded and strengthened in order to break the resistance of the people. The Kurds were not able to respond to that. They were still suffering from the impacts of imperialism. They were confronted with an aggressive national chauvinism from the states that had power in Kurdistan, with

the legitimacy of their power being explained through imaginative ideological constructions.

Denial and Self-Denial

The hegemonic powers (i.e. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) denied the Kurds their existence as an ethnic group. In such surroundings the Kurds ran a risk when they referred to their Kurdish roots. This is beyond being colonized. If people did so in spite of this, they could not even expect to be supported by members of their own ethnic group. For many Kurds, open commitment to their origin and culture resulted in exclusion from all economic and social relations. Therefore, many Kurds denied their ethnic descent or kept quiet about it – something that the respective regimes systematically encouraged. This denial strategy produced many absurdities. The chain of reasoning was that there was no such thing as the Kurds, if they did exist it was not very important, and if it was important it was dangerous to reveal them. For the Arab regime, they feel that the Islamic conquests give them the right. Can there be a greater right than to conquer in the name of God? This is the premise and is still strongly put forth.

The Persians went a step further and declared the Kurds to be an ethnic subgroup of the Persians. In this way, the Kurds were granted all their rights in a natural way. Kurds who nonetheless demanded their rights and stuck to their ethnic identity were regarded as people who threw mud at their own nation and who therefore received the appropriate treatment.

The Turkish regime derived its claim to supremacy over the Kurds from alleged campaigns of conquest in Anatolia a thousand years ago. There had not been other peoples there. Therefore, Kurd and Kurdistan are non-words, non-existent and not allowed to exist according to the official ideology. These words are unimportant and dangerous, and their use

can even amount to an act of terrorism and is punished correspondingly.

Assimilation

Hegemonic powers often use assimilation as a tool when they are confronted with defiant ethnic groups. Language and culture are also carriers of potential resistance, which can be desiccated by assimilation. Banning the native language and enforcing the use of a foreign language are effective tools. People who are no longer able to speak their native language will no longer cherish its characteristics, which are rooted in ethnic, geographic and cultural factors. Without the unifying element of language the uniting quality of collective ideas also disappears. Without this common basis the collective ties within the ethnic group break up and become lost. Consequently, hegemonic language and culture gain ground in the conquered ethnic and language environment. Forced use of the hegemonic language results in a withering of the native language until it becomes irrelevant. This happens even faster when the native language is not a literary language, as is the case with Kurdish. An assimilation strategy is not restricted to the use of language – it is applied in all public and social areas controlled by the state.

Kurdistan has often been the stage of cultural assimilation attempts by foreign hegemonic powers. The last hundred years of its history, however, have been the most destructive. The creation of modern nation-state structures in the hegemonic countries, and the creation of a colonial system of rule in Kurdistan, aggravated the assimilation attempts directed at the Kurdish language and culture.

Like Persian and Arabic previously, now Turkish, too, became a hegemonic language by force. The Kurds of the past, before modernity had been able to preserve their culture and

language, were now pushed back by three hegemonic languages and cultures, which also had modern media and communication tools at their disposal. Traditional Kurdish songs and literature were banned. Thus, the existence of the Kurdish language, which had produced many works of literature in the Middle Ages, was threatened. Kurdish culture and language were declared subversive elements. Native language education was banned. The hegemonic languages became the only languages that were allowed in the education system, and thus the only languages used to teach the achievements of modernity.

The Turkish, Persian and Arab nation-states pursued a systematic assimilation policy using varying repressive means – both institutionally and socially – denying Kurdish language and culture any legitimacy. Only the language and culture of the hegemons were supposed to survive.

Religion and Nationalism

The hegemonic powers also used religion and nationalism to preserve their supremacy. In all parts of Kurdistan, Islam is a state religion used as a tool for controlling the population. Even if these regimes embrace secularism, the entanglement of political and religious institutions is obvious. While in Iran there is an openly theocratic regime in power, in other countries the instrumentalisation of religion for political interests is kept concealed. In the Turkish state religious authorities employ more than a hundred thousand Imams. Perhaps even Iran does not possess such an army of religious leaders. The religious schools are under the direct control of the state. Quran schools and theological institutes and faculties employ almost half a million people. This makes the constitutional postulate of secularism look absurd and rather like a varnish.

In addition, wherever sectarianism meets active politics it produces even more chaotic situations. Under the DP

(Democracy Party) and the AP (Justice Party) governments, religion was openly politicised. The military coups in March 1971 and September 1980 modified the Turkish ideological framework and redefined the role of religion. This initiated a re-Islamisation of the Turkish republic, in a similar way to what had happened in Iran after Khomeini had seized power in 1979, albeit not as radical. In 2003 the AKP (Justice and Development Party) came into power and with it, for the first time, came Islamic ideologues. This election victory was no accident, but was the result of the long-term religious policy of the Turkish state.

Bourgeois Nationalism

Another ideological tool of the hegemonic powers is the nationalism of the bourgeoisie. This ideology was most important in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when it became the dominant ideology of the nation-states. It formed the basis for the bourgeoisie to proceed against the interests of the workers and real socialist tendencies. Eventually, nationalism emerged as a logical result of the nation-state bearing almost religious features.

The Turkish form of nationalism that came into being after 1840 was an attempt to prevent the decay of the Ottoman Empire, which had begun to show. Early Turkish nationalists were originally legalists. Later they turned against the sultanate of Abdulhamid II and became increasingly radical. The nationalism of the Young Turk movement expressed itself in the Committee for Unity and Progress, which worked for constitutional reform of the state and aspired towards gaining power within the empire. Apart from that they had made it clear that they wanted to strengthen the empire again, which was externally weak and internally threatened by decay, by systematically modernising it politically, militarily and economically. The

opening of Germany's foreign policy towards the Middle East and Central Asia then added a racist component to Turkish nationalism. The genocide of the Armenians, Pontic Greeks, Aramaeans and Kurds followed. The young Turkish republic was marked by aggressive nationalism and a very narrow understanding of the nation-state. The slogan 'one language, one nation, one country' became a political dogma. Although in principle this was a classless state approach that did not grant privileges, the instruments to actually implement it were lacking. Its abstractness carried the danger of ideological fanaticism. Nationalism degraded into a tool of the ruling circles and was used mostly to cover up their failures. Under the flag of the 'superior Turkish identity' the entire society was sworn to an aggressive nationalism.

The war in Kurdistan and the state terrorism this involved created a separate power block. As in other systems where certain power blocks derive their power from military potential and base their existence on war, so they formed the Turkish society accordingly.

This is also why the political system lost its ability to solve conflicts. This is a system that has been formed by war and state terror, where it remains unclear which power centres serve which interests and goals – with equally disastrous effects for Turkish and Kurdish communities.

8. Kurdish Identity and Kurdish Resistance

The identification process of the Kurds as a nation occurred comparatively late. Even if there was a commitment to being Kurdish in the Kurdish rebellions of the nineteenth century, it did not go beyond opposition against the sultanate and the rule of the shah. There were no ideas regarding alternative forms of life. A commitment to the Kurdish identity involved the creation of a Kurdish kingdom, in the sense of the traditional sultanates. For a long time the Kurds were far from identifying themselves as a nation. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the idea of a Kurdish identity began to develop in the course of intellectual debates, mostly from the Turkish left. However, this shift lacked the intellectual potential to overcome more traditional ideas of Kurdish identity affiliated with tribal order and sheikdom. Both the real socialist-leaning communist parties and the liberal and feudal parties struggled to understand the idea of a Kurdish nation or the idea of the Kurds as an ethnic group. Only the left-leaning student movement of the 1970s was able to contribute substantially to the awareness that there was a Kurdish identity.

The ethnic identification process developed in the conflictual relationship between Turkish chauvinist nationalism and Kurdish feudal national understanding. On the one hand there was the confrontation with the ideological hegemony of the system, which was often dressed up to look left-wing,

and on the other hand there was the confrontation with the Kurdish aristocracy, who traditionally cooperated with the system. Liberation from these societal, political and ideological forces did not come easy. It required both intellectual debate and practical organisational work. This led directly to resistance. The Kurdish emancipation efforts had not yet come of age in the 1970s, but after 35 years had passed Kurds had become more aware of their own identity and offered approaches for a solution of the Kurdish question. It is also true that the Kurds and their emancipation cannot be suppressed by force in the long term. No system can survive for long, when it tries to transform its social contradiction forcibly. The Kurdish emancipation efforts also demonstrate that people cannot develop if they do not reconquer their societal dignity.

9. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

Short Outline of the History of Origins of the PKK

In April 1973, a group of six people came together in order to form an independent Kurdish political organisation. They acted on the assumption that Kurdistan was a classic colony, where the population was forcibly refused their right to self-determination. It was their prime goal to change this. This gathering may also be called the birth of a new Kurdish movement.

Over the years, this group found new followers who helped them spread their beliefs within the rural population of Kurdistan. More and more they clashed with Turkish security forces, armed tribesmen of the Kurdish aristocracy and rival political groups, which violently attacked the young movement. On 27 November 1978, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was founded in a small village near Diyarbakir. Twenty-two leading members of the movement took part in the inaugural meeting in order to set up more professional structures for the movement. In an urban environment the movement would not have survived, so they focused their activities on the rural Kurdish regions.

The Turkish authorities reacted harshly to the propaganda efforts of the PKK. Detentions and armed clashes followed. Both sides experienced losses. The situation in Turkey, however, was also coming to a head. The first signs of an imminent military coup were already visible in 1979. The PKK respond-

ed by withdrawing into the mountains or into other Middle Eastern countries. Only a small number of activists remained in Turkey. This step helped the PKK to secure their survival. On 12 September 1980, the Turkish military overthrew the civil government and seized power. Many of the PKK cadres who had remained in Turkey were imprisoned by the military junta.

In this situation, the PKK had to determine whether they wanted to become an exile organisation or a modern national liberation movement. After a short phase of reorganisation, a majority of members returned to Kurdistan and took up armed resistance against the fascist junta. The attacks on military facilities in Eruh and Şemdinli on 15 August 1984, proclaimed the official beginning of the armed resistance. Although there were shortcomings, the move towards becoming a national liberation movement had been made.

Originally the Turkish authorities – Turgut Özal had just been elected prime minister – tried to play down the incident. State propaganda called the guerrillas a 'handful of bandits', which showed the mindset of those in charge. A political approach to the conflict was not conceivable. The clashes grew into a war, which claimed numerous victims from either side.

It was only in the 1990s that the situation became less gridlocked, when the state seemed to become ready for a political solution. There were statements by Turgut Özal and Suleyman Demirel, then president, indicating that they might recognise the Kurdish identity, raising hopes for an early end of the conflict. The PKK tried to strengthen this process by declaring a ceasefire in 1993. The sudden death of Turgut Özal deprived this process of one of its most important protagonists. There were other obstacles, too. Some hardliners among the PKK stuck to the armed struggle; the situation among the leadership of the Turkish state was difficult and marked by conflict-

ing interests; the attitude of the Iraqi-Kurdish leaders Talabani and Barzani was also not helpful in furthering the peace process. Up to that point it was the biggest opportunity for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question, and it was lost.

Subsequently, the conflict escalated. Both parties experienced large losses. However, even this escalation did not lift the deadlock. The years of war between 1994 and 1998 were lost years. In spite of several unilateral ceasefires on the part of the PKK, the Turkish state insisted on a military solution – they didn't even respond to the PKK ceasefire in 1998. Rather, it stirred up a military confrontation between Turkey and Syria, which brought both countries to the edge of a war. In 1998 I went to Europe as the chairman of the PKK in order to promote a political solution. The following odyssey is well known. I was abducted from Kenya and brought to Turkey in violation of international law. This abduction was backed by an alliance of secret services from different countries, and the public expected the conflict to escalate further. However, the trial on the Turkish prison island of İmralı marked a political U-turn in the conflict, and offered new perspectives for a political solution. At the same time, this turn caused the PKK to reorient itself ideologically and politically. I had been working on these issues before my abduction. This was truly an ideological and political break. But what, then, were the real motives?

Main Criticism

Doubtless my abduction was a heavy blow for the PKK. It was nonetheless not the reason for the ideological and political shift. The PKK had been conceived as a party with a state-like hierarchical structure similar to other parties. Such a structure, however, causes it to contradict dialectically the principles of democracy, freedom and equality: a contradiction in principle

concerning all parties whatsoever their philosophy. Although the PKK stood for freedom-oriented views, we had not been able to free ourselves from thinking in hierarchical structures.

Another contradiction lay in the PKK's quest for institutional political power, which correspondingly formed and aligned the party. Structures aligned along the lines of institutional power, however, are in conflict with societal democratisation, which the PKK was espousing. Activists of any such party tend to orient themselves according to their superiors rather than society, or in a way that demonstrates their aspiration to such positions themselves. All the three big ideological tendencies based on emancipative social conceptions have been confronted with this contradiction. Real socialism and social democracy, as well as national liberation movements when they tried to set up social conceptions beyond capitalism, could not free themselves from the ideological constraints of the capitalist system. Early on, they became pillars of the capitalist system while seeking institutional political power instead of focusing on the democratisation of society.

Another contradiction was the value of war in the ideological and political considerations of the PKK. War was understood as the continuation of politics by different means, and was romanticised as a strategic instrument.

This was a blatant contradiction of our self-perception as a movement struggling for the liberation of society. According to this, the use of armed force can only be justified for the purpose of necessary self-defence. Anything beyond that would be in violation of the socially emancipative approach that the PKK felt itself obliged to uphold, since repressive regimes throughout history have been based on war or have aligned their institutions according to the logic of warfare. The PKK believed that the armed struggle would be sufficient for winning the rights that the Kurds had been denied. Such a

deterministic idea of war is neither socialist nor democratic, although the PKK saw itself as a democratic party. A really socialist party is neither oriented by state-like structures and hierarchies nor does it aspire to institutional political power, the basis of which is the protection of interests and power by war.

The supposed defeat of the PKK that the Turkish authorities believed they had accomplished through my abduction was eventually reason enough to look, critically and openly, into the reasons that had prevented us from making better progress with our liberation movement. The ideological and political change the PKK underwent turned an apparent defeat into a gateway to new horizons.

10 New Strategic, Philosophical and Political Approaches

A comprehensive treatment of the main strategic, ideological, philosophical and political elements underpinning the process of change cannot be accomplished in this essay.

However, the cornerstones can be outlined as follows:

• The philosophical, political and value-related approaches that the newly aligned PKK embraces find adequate expression in what is called 'democratic socialism'.

• The PKK does not derive the creation of a Kurdish nation-state from the right of the people to self-determination. However, we regard this right as the basis for the establishment of grassroots democracies, without seeking new political borders. It is up to the PKK to convince Kurdish society of their conviction. This is also true for any dialogue with hegemonic countries exercising power in Kurdistan. It is to be the basis for a solution of the existing issues.

• The countries that presently exist here need democratic reforms going beyond mere lip-service to democracy. It is not realistic, though, to go for the immediate abolition of the state. This does not mean that we have to take it as it is. The classic state structure with its despotic attitude towards power is unacceptable. The institutional state needs to be subjected to democratic changes. At the end of this process, there should be a lean state existing simply as a political institution, which only functions in the fields of internal and external security

and in the provision of social security. Such an idea of the state has nothing in common with the authoritarian character of the classic state, but would rather be regarded as a general public authority.

• The Kurdish liberation movement is working for a system of democratic self-organisation in Kurdistan with the features of a confederation. Democratic confederalism is understood as a non-state democratic nation organisation. It provides a framework, within which inter alia minorities, religious communities, cultural groups, gender-specific groups and other societal groups can organise autonomously. This model may also be seen as a way of organising a democratic nation and culture. The democratisation process in Kurdistan is not limited to matters of form but, rather, proposes a broad societal project aiming at economic, social and political sovereignty in all parts of society. It advances the building of necessary institutions and creates the instruments for democratic self-government and control. It is a continuous and long-term process. Elections are not the only means in this context. Rather, this is a dynamic political process which needs direct intervention by the sovereign, the people. The people are to be directly involved in the institutionalization, governance and supervision of their own economic, social and political formations. This project builds on the self-government of local communities and is organised in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. The citizens themselves are the agents of this kind of self-government, not state-based authorities. The principle of federal self-government has no restrictions. It can even be continued across borders in order to create multinational democratic structures. Democratic confederalism prefers flat hierarchies so as to further discussions and decision-making at the level of communities.

- The model outlined here may also be described as people's democratic self-governance in Kurdistan plus the state as the general public authority, where the state-related sovereign rights are only limited. Such a model allows a more adequate implementation of basic values like freedom and equality than traditional administrative models. This model need not be restricted to Turkey, but may also be applicable in the other parts of Kurdistan. Simultaneously, this model is suitable for the building of federal administrative structures in all Kurdish settlement areas in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Thus, it is possible to build confederate structures across all parts of Kurdistan without the need to question the existing borders.

- The decline of real socialism was also a result of how socialist countries used their power both internally and externally, and of the fact that they misconceived the importance of the gender issue. Women and power seem to be contradictory things. In real socialism, the question of women's rights was a subordinate issue which, it was believed, would be resolved once economic and other societal problems were solved. However, women may also be regarded as an oppressed class and nation or an oppressed gender. As long as we do not discuss freedom and equal treatment of women in a historical and societal context, as long as no adequate theory has been devised, there will not be an adequate practice either. Therefore, women's liberation must assume a key strategic role in the democratic struggle for freedom in Kurdistan.

- Today, the democratisation of politics is one of the most urgent challenges we face. However, democratic politics needs democratic parties. As long as there are no parties and party-affiliated institutions committed to the interests of the society instead of fulfilling state orders, a democratisation of politics will not be possible. In Turkey, parties are simply propaganda tools of the rentier state and are nothing but instruments that

distribute rents once they are in power. Their transformation into parties committed exclusively to the interests of society, and the creation of the necessary legal basis to facilitate this, would be an important part of any political reform. The founding of parties bearing the word Kurdistan in their name is still a criminal act. Independent parties are still obstructed in many ways. Kurdistan-related parties in coalitions serve democratisation as long as they do not advocate separatism or the use of violence.

• There is a widespread individual and institutional subservient spirit, which is one of the biggest obstacles blocking democratisation. It can only be overcome by creating an awareness of democracy in all parts of society. Citizens must be invited actively to commit themselves to democracy. For the Kurds, this means building democratic structures in all parts of Kurdistan and wherever there are Kurdish communities, which advance the active participation in the political life of the community. Minorities living in Kurdistan must be invited to participate as well. The development of grassroots-level democratic structures and a corresponding practical approach must have top priority. Such grassroots structures must be regarded as obligatory, even where basic democratic and legal principles are violated as in the Middle East.

• Politics needs independent media. Without them state structures will not develop any sensitivity to questions of democracy. Nor will it be possible to bring democracy into politics. Freedom of information is not only a right of the individual. It also involves a societal dimension. Furthermore, independent media always have a societal mandate. Their communication with the public must be marked by democratic balance.

• Feudal institutions like tribes, sheikdom, aghas and sectarianism, which are essentially relics of the Middle Ages, are like

the institutions of classic nation-states – obstacles preventing democratisation. They must be urged to join in with democratic change. These parasitic institutions must be overcome as a priority.

• The right to native-language education must be respected. Even if the authorities do not advance such education, they must not impede civic efforts to create institutions offering Kurdish language and culture education. The health system must be legitimised by both state and civil society.

• An ecological model of society is essentially socialist. The establishment of an ecological balance will only be accomplished during the transition phase from an alienated class society based on despotism to a socialist society. It would be an illusion to hope for the conservation of the environment in a capitalist system. These systems largely participate in ecological devastation. Protection of the environment must be given broad consideration in the process of societal change.

• The solution to the Kurdish question will be realised within the framework of the democratisation of the countries exercising hegemonic power over different parts of Kurdistan. This process is not limited to these countries, but rather extends across the entire Middle East. The freedom of Kurdistan is tied to the democratisation of the Middle East. A free Kurdistan is only conceivable as a democratic Kurdistan.

• Individual freedom of expression and decision is indefeasible. No country, no state, no society has the right to restrict these freedoms, whatever reasons they may cite. Without the freedom of the individual there will be no freedom for society, just as freedom for the individual is impossible if society is not free.

• A just redistribution of the economic resources presently in the possession of the state is particularly important for the liberation of society. Economic supply must not become a tool

in the hands of the state for exercising pressure on the people. Economic resources are not the property of the state but of society.

An economy close to the people should be based on such redistribution and be use value-oriented instead of exclusively pursuing an economy based on commodification and profit. The profit-based economy has not only damaged society but also the environment. One of the main reasons for the decline of society lies in the level of expansion of financial markets. The artificial production of needs, the more and more adventurous search for new sales markets and the boundless greed for ever-growing profits lets the divide between rich and poor steadily grow and enlarges the army of those living below the poverty line or even dying of hunger. Humanity can no longer sustain itself with such an economic policy. This is therefore the biggest challenge for socialist politics: progressive transition from a commodity-oriented society to a society producing on the basis of use value; from production based on profit to production based on sharing.

• Although Kurds assign a high value to the family, this is still a place where freedom does not abound. Lack of financial resources, lack of education and lack of health care do not allow for much development. The situation for women and children is disastrous. So-called honour killings of female family members are a symbol of this disaster. They become the targets of an archaic notion of honour, which reflects the degeneration of the entire society. Male frustration over existing conditions is directed against the supposedly weakest members of the society: women. The family as a social institution experiences a crisis. Here, too, a solution can only be found in the context of an overall democratisation.

11. The Present Situation and Suggestions for a Solution

Kurdish–Turkish relations in Turkey play a key role with a view to a solution to the Kurdish question. The Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Syria alone can not bring about an overall solution to the Kurdish question. The Kurds in Iraq are a good example. The semi-state Kurdish autonomy is indirectly the result of worldwide efforts on the part of Turkey, the US and their allies to denounce the PKK as a terror organisation. Without consent by Ankara this 'solution' would not have been possible. The chaos caused by this solution is obvious, and the result unforeseeable. It is also unclear which direction the feudal-liberal Kurdish national authority in Iraq will take in the long run and how it will affect Iran, Syria and Turkey. There is the danger of a regional escalation of the conflict similar in shape to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A flare-up of Kurdish nationalism might even radicalise the Persian, Arab and Turkish nationalists further, making a solution to the problem more difficult.

This prospect needs to be contrasted with a solution free of nationalist aspirations, which recognises existing territorial borders. In return, the status of the Kurds will be made official in each country's constitution, thus enshrining their rights concerning culture, language and political participation. Such a model would be largely in accordance with the historical and societal realities of the region.

In light of this, making peace with the Kurds seems inevitable. It is highly improbable that the present war or any future war will yield anything but a Pyrrhic victory. Therefore, this war must be ended. It has lasted too long already. It is in the interest of all countries in the region to follow the example of other countries and take the necessary steps.

The Kurds only demand that their existence be respected; they demand freedom of culture and a fully democratic system. A more humane and modest solution is impossible. The examples of South Africa, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Corsica demonstrate the ways in which different modern countries have been able to solve similar problems in the course of their history.

Furthermore, these comparisons help us to find a more objective approach to our own problems.

Turning our backs on violence as a means of solving the Kurdish question, and overcoming the repressive policy of denial at least in part, are closely connected to the fact that we upheld the democratic option. The ban on Kurdish language and culture, education and broadcasting is in itself a terrorist act and practically invites counter-violence. Violence, however, has been used by both sides to an extent that goes beyond legitimate self-defence.

Many movements today take to even more extreme methods. However, we have declared unilateral ceasefires several times – we have withdrawn large numbers of our fighters from Turkish territory, and thus refuted the accusation of terrorism. Our peace efforts, however, have been ignored over the years. Our initiatives were never met with a response. Rather, a group of Kurdish politicians sent out as ambassadors of peace was detained and handed long prison terms. Our efforts for peace have wrongly been interpreted as weakness. There is no other explanation for statements like 'the PKK and Öcalan are

practically finished', or that our initiatives were only tactical. So they claimed they only needed to act a little bit tougher in order to smash the PKK. So they increased their attacks on the Kurdish liberation movement. Nobody asks, however, why they never succeeded. It is impossible to solve the Kurdish question by means of violence. The attitude described above also contributed to the failure of the ceasefire that began on 1 October 2006. I had called on the PKK to offer this ceasefire. Some intellectuals and non-government organisations had demanded such a step. However, again it was not taken seriously. Instead, racism and chauvinism were stirred up, creating an atmosphere of confrontation. Besides, we must not forget that the AKP also uses this issue to play down their own problems with the Kemalist elite, by making compromises with the army and speculating on the escalation of the Kurdish problem. Presently, the government restricts itself to some half-hearted measures in order to wrench some concessions from the EU. They are trying to win time with the help of the harmonisation laws enacted in the context of the EU accession process. In reality, these supposed reforms are just waste-paper.

The exacerbating conflict is cause for concern. Nevertheless, I will not give up my hopes for a just peace. It can become possible at any time.

I offer Turkish society a simple solution. We demand a democratic nation. We are not opposed to the unitary state and republic. We accept the republic, its unitary structure and laicism. However, we believe that it must be redefined as a democratic state that respects peoples, cultures and rights. On this basis, the Kurds must be free to organise in a way that revitalises their culture and language and allows them to develop economically and ecologically. This would allow Kurds, Turks and other cultures to come together under the roof of a democratic nation in Turkey. This is only possible, though,

with a democratic constitution and an advanced legal framework warranting respect for different cultures.

Our idea of a democratic nation is not defined by flags and borders. Our idea of a democratic nation embraces a model based on democracy instead of a model based on state structures and ethnic origins. Turkey needs to define itself as a country which includes all ethnic groups. This would be a model based on human rights instead of religion or race. Our idea of a democratic nation embraces all ethnic groups and cultures.

Against this background, let me summarise the solution I propose:

• The Kurdish question is to be treated as a fundamental question of democratisation. The Kurdish identity must be put down in the constitution and integrated in the legal system. The new constitution shall contain an article with the following wording: 'The constitution of the Turkish republic recognises the existence and the expression of all its cultures in a democratic way.' This would be sufficient.

• Cultural and language rights must be protected by law. There must not be any restrictions on radio, TV or the press. Kurdish programmes and programmes in other languages must be treated by the same rules and regulations as Turkish programmes. The same must be true for cultural activities.

• Kurdish should be taught in elementary schools. People who want their children to get such an education must be able to send them to such a school. High schools should offer lessons on Kurdish culture, language and literature as elective courses. Universities must be permitted to establish institutes for Kurdish language, literature, culture and history.

• The freedom of expression and organisation must not be restricted. Political activities must not be restricted or regu-

lated by the state. This must also be true in the context of the Kurdish question without restriction.

• Party and election laws must be subjected to democratic reform. The laws must allow the participation of the Kurdish people and all other democratic groups in the process of democratic decision-making.

• The village-guard system and the illegal networks within state structures must be disbanded.

• People who were evicted from their villages during the war must be allowed to return without impediment. All administrative, legal, economic or social measures necessary must be met. Furthermore, a developmental programme must be initiated in order to help the Kurdish population to earn a living and improve their standard of living.

• A law for peace and participation in the society should be enacted. This law would enable the members of the guerrilla movement, the imprisoned and those who are in exile to take part in public life without any preconditions.

Additionally, immediate measures regarding how to reach a solution need to be discussed. A democratic action plan must be formulated and put into practice. In order to reconcile society, truth and justice commissions need to be set up. Both sides must find out what they have done wrong and discuss it openly. This is the only way to achieve the reconciliation of society.

Whenever states or organisations cannot make progress anymore, intellectuals may serve as mediators. South Africa, Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone have had positive experiences with this model. They may take the role of arbitrators, with whose help both parties can be moved in the direction of a just peace. The commissions may include intellectuals, lawyers, physicians or scientists. When the day comes that we put down our arms, it will only be into the hands of such a

commission, provided it is a commission that is determined to achieve justice.

Why would we surrender our arms without the prospect of justice? The beginning of such a process also depends on good-will and dialogue. Should a dialogue come about, we will be able to begin a process similar to the last unlimited ceasefire.

I am prepared to do all I can. The government, however, needs to show its desire for peace. It needs to take the initiative. This is what they need to do if they do not wish to be solely responsible for the consequences. If our efforts for a peaceful solution fail, or are sacrificed in the name of day-by-day politics, power struggles or profit-seeking, the present conflict will exacerbate and its end will be unpredictable. The chaos following will see no winners.

At last, Turkey needs to muster the strength to recognise its own reality, the reality of Kurdish existence and global dynamics. A state which denies reality will eventually and inevitably find itself on the brink of existence.

It is crucial, therefore, to take the steps that will lead this country to a lasting peace.

On the Author

Abdullah Öcalan, born in 1949, studied political sciences in Ankara. He actively led the Kurdish liberation struggle as the head of the PKK from its foundation in 1978 until his abduction on 15 February 1999. He is regarded as a leading strategist and one of the most important political representatives of the Kurdish people.

Under isolation conditions at İmralı Island Prison, Öcalan has written more than ten books, which have revolutionised Kurdish politics. Several times he initiated unilateral ceasefires of the guerilla and presented constructive proposals for a political solution to the Kurdish issue. The so-called "peace process" started in 2009 when the Turkish state responded to Öcalan's call to resolve the Kurdish issue politically. This process broke down in April 2015, when the Turkish state unilaterally terminated the talks and returned to a policy of annihilation and denial.

Since 27 July 2011, Öcalan has been held again in almost total isolation at Imrali Island Prison. Since 5 April 2015, the whole prison has been completely cut off from the rest of the world.

On the International Initiative

On 15 February 1999, the President of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Öcalan, was handed over to the Republic of Turkey following a clandestine operation backed by an alliance of secret services directed by their corresponding governments. Disgusted by this outrageous violation of international law, several intellectuals and representatives of civil organisations launched an initiative calling for the release of Abdullah Öcalan. With the opening of a central coordination office in March 1999, the International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan" started its work.

The International Initiative regards itself as a multinational peace initiative working for a peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish question. Even after long years of imprisonment, Abdullah Öcalan is still regarded as an undisputed leader by the majority of the Kurdish people. Hence, the solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey will be closely linked to his fate. As the main architect of the peace process, he is viewed by all sides as key to its successful conclusion, which puts Öcalan's freedom increasingly firmly on the agenda.

The International Initiative is committed to play its part to this end. It does this through disseminating objective information, lobbying and public relations work, including running campaigns. By publishing translations of Öcalan's prison writings it hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the origins of the conflicts and the possible solutions.

Publications by Abdullah Öcalan

Books
Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish
Question (1999)
Prison Writings I: The Roots of Civilisation (2007)
Prison Writings II: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the
21st Century (2011)
Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations (2012)
Civilization: The Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings
(Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I) (2015)
Capitalism: The Age of Unmasked Gods and Naked Kings
(Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume II) (2017)

Upcoming and Untranslated
Sociology of Freedom
(Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume III)
Bir Halkı Savunmak (Turkish 2004)
Ortadoğu'da Uygarlık Krizi ve Demokratik Uygarlık Çözümü
(Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume IV) (Turkish 2010)
Kürt Sorunu ve Demokratik Ulus Çözümü (Manifesto for a
Democratic Civilization, Volume V) (Turkish 2012)

Brochures
War and Peace in Kurdistan (2008)
Democratic Confederalism (2011)
Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution (2013)
Democratic Nation (2016)

More information and translations in other languages:
www.ocalan-books.com

Free Öcalan

Ազատություն Էօճալանին Свобода Оджалану
Öcalan askatu   Libérez Öcalan   ئۆجەلان بۆ ئازادى   Libertà per Öcalan
厄賈蘭的自由   თავისუფლება ოჯალანს   ئۆجەلان کە لێک ئازادى
Frankîz evit Ocalan   ナ   ناردى بۆ ئۆجەلان   Freiheit für Öcalan
Libertate lui Ocalan   ジ   Öcalani oxuşk'vit
אזעט אז חירות   ヤ   سەربەستى بۆ ئۆجەلان
Vapautta Öcalanille   ラ
Khululanu u Ocalan   ン   Frihet för Öcalan
Vrijheid voor Öcalan   に   Öcalan'a Özgürlük
Libertad para Öcalan   目   الحرية لاوجلان
Scaoileadh saor Öcalan   由   الحرية لاوجلان
Liberdade para Öcalan   を   Llibertat per a Öcalan
¡Kachariychik Ocalanta!   ئۆجەلان لا مكنا دچا
Ελευθερία στον Οτσαλάν

Azadî ji bo Öcalan