

“Living Freedom”

The Evolution of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey
and the Efforts to Resolve It

Adem Uzun

Berghof Transitions Series No. 11

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About this Publication Series

This case-study is one of a series produced by participants in a Berghof research project on transitions from violence to peace (*Resistance and Liberation Movements in Transition*). The project's overall aim was to learn from the experience of those in resistance or liberation movements who have used violence in their struggle but have also engaged politically during the conflict and in any peace process. Recent experience around the world has demonstrated that reaching political settlement in protracted social conflict always eventually needs the involvement of such movements. Our aim here was to discover how, from a non-state perspective, such political development is handled, what is the relationship between political and military strategies and tactics, and to learn more about how such movements (often sweepingly and simplistically bundled under the label of *non-state armed groups*) contribute to the transformation of conflict and to peacemaking. We aimed then to use that experiential knowledge (1) to offer support to other movements who might be considering such a shift of strategy, and (2) to help other actors (states and international) to understand more clearly how to engage meaningfully with such movements to bring about political progress and peaceful settlement.

Political violence is a tool of both state and non-state actors, and replacing it by political methods of conflict management is essential to making sustainable peace. With this project we wanted to understand better how one side of that equation has been, or could be, achieved. Depending on the particular case, each study makes a strong argument for the necessary inclusion of the movement in any future settlement, or documents clearly how such a role was effectively executed.

We consciously asked participants to reflect on these movements' experience from their own unique point of view. What we publish in this series is not presented as neutral or exclusively accurate commentary. All histories are biased histories, and there is no single truth in conflict or in peace. Rather, we believe these case-studies are significant because they reflect important voices which are usually excluded or devalued in the analysis of conflict. Increasing numbers of academics, for example, study "armed groups" from outside, but few actually engage directly with them to hear their own points of view, rationales and understandings of their context. We are convinced that these opinions and perspectives urgently need to be heard in order to broaden our understanding of peacemaking. For exactly this reason, each case study has been produced with the very close co-operation of, and in some cases authored by, members of the movement concerned. As the results amply illustrate, these perspectives are sophisticated, intelligent, political and strategic.

The reader may or may not agree with the perspectives expressed. But, much more importantly, we hope that the reader will accept that these perspectives are valid in themselves and must be included in any attempt at comprehensive understanding of violent conflict and its transformation. We urgently need to understand in more depth the dynamics of organisations who make the transition between political violence and democratic politics, in order to improve our understanding of their role, and our practice, in making peace.

The views expressed are those of the authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of the Berghof Foundation.

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Introduction

This report does not attempt to offer an exhaustive history of Kurdistan and the Kurds. Primarily focussing on the Turkish-occupied part of Kurdistan (recent developments in Syrian-occupied Kurdistan are described in Annex III), it sketches the evolution of the Kurdish people’s struggle for basic human rights and freedoms, as well as their right to self-determination, and especially their various attempts to reach a political solution.

Richly endowed with natural resources, and situated on the silk and spice routes used by Asian, European and African traders, Mesopotamia became the birthplace of many Middle Eastern religions and civilisations. Due to its central location in Mesopotamia, Kurdistan has been raided and exploited throughout history by external powers seeking to dominate the region and subjugate its people. The current impasse is rooted in developments in 19th-century Anatolia and Mesopotamia. England, the hegemonic power of capitalist modernity, considered these regions to be strategically important for controlling the Middle East, Caucasasia, Central Asia and India, and Western powers have acted to maintain the anti-democratic policies of the region’s sovereign states (such as Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) ever since. The unresolved ‘Kurdish question’ is closely tied to the interests of global powers, and as such is as much the problem of England, the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) as of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the region. In short, the Kurdish question is an international problem.

Because Kurds have always lived under the sway of others, they have had difficulty establishing the internal dynamics and motivation required for self-administration. The result has been a lack of societal unity and religious ideologies that sometimes conflict with one another – which explains the Kurdish people’s vicious cycle of dividedness, external reliance, inner conflict and subdivision into even smaller pieces. Over the past 200 years, many uprisings have attempted to break this cycle. None has succeeded, mostly because of a failure to extend beyond the immediate surroundings and form a cohesive approach encompassing the historical realities of the region. Some uprisings were provoked by outside forces, and all were followed by massacres by the Turkish state. The 1936 uprising in Dersim is a case in point.¹

This cycle of rebellions eventually led to the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), under the leadership Abdullah Öcalan, aimed at waging a struggle which “encompasses history, the present and the future” (Öcalan 2004). The PKK’s main dynamic of change is the perspective that ‘joint existence’ is crucial for success. Kurds will not be able to come “into [their] own” by insisting on the old approaches (Öcalan 2004). The Kurds’ current circumstances conflict with Kurdish society’s natural fabric: the organisation and construction of any society is not only about a political framework but also its moral, social and democratic components. Along with seeking a political solution to the Kurdish question, the PKK believes that an even more important struggle must be waged – to construct a democratic society. Their view is not that “we are going to see [the] beautiful and free days” of socialist jargon, but rather that “without postponing freedom to tomorrow” we must aim for it today.

The main objective of this report is to explain the emergence and internal evolution of the PKK within the Kurdish struggle for freedom and democracy against the repressive and nationalist policies of the Turkish state. It is based on face-to-face interviews with people who hold executive positions in the Kurdish movement, as well as books and media statements by Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan and other

¹ In the 1937–1938 Dersim Massacre, part of a military campaign against the Dersim Rebellion of 1936 that was launched to protest Turkey’s Resettlement Law of 1934, thousands of Alevi and Zaza Kurds died and many others were internally displaced. The city of Dersim (‘silver gate’) was renamed ‘Tunceli’ (Turkish for ‘iron fist’) and the surrounding region was massively depopulated. On 23 November 2011, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apologised for “one of the most tragic events of our recent history” (BBC News 2011).

representatives. My 25 years' experience with the subject helps me make use of news items, articles and op-eds published in Kurdish, as well as Turkish and international media outlets.

This report has three main parts. The first part (sections 1 and 2) examines Kurdish history and the bipolar (West/East) political and military balance of power in which the Kurdish movement developed. The second part (sections 3, 4 and 5) addresses the global changes of the 1990s and their impact on the Kurdish movement, as well as successive periods of peaceful efforts and renewed confrontation. The final part (sections 6 and 7) addresses the period that began with the official 'Oslo Meetings' between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2007, and ends with the latest 'İmralı peace process' in 2013.

1 A short history of the Kurds – from the Neolithic Age to the 1970s

The Kurdish people hail from the plateau and plains between the Zagros–Taurus Mountains and the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and have been known by various names since the Neolithic revolution (c. 10,000 BC). At the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) PKK-leader Öcalan argued that the Kurdish people constantly have had to defend themselves from hostilities inflicted on them and their geography (Eren 2012). Yet despite showing their strength by resisting, the Kurds also have always tended to live alongside other peoples. Since the time of the Sumerians, they have co-existed with Babylonians, Assyrians, Urartians, Persians, Hellenics, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Iranians and Turks – in various feudal and tyrannical empires.

In 1639, Kurdistan's land mass of 550,000 km² was divided into two by the *Qasr-e-Shirin* Treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian Safavid Empire. In 1923, after the Ottoman Empire collapsed, it was cut into four parts through a treaty signed in Lausanne by the newly formed Republic of Turkey and the victors of the First World War.² Unofficially, 20 million Kurds live in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey), 10 million in Eastern Kurdistan (Iran), 7 million in Southern Kurdistan (Iraq) and 2.5 million in Western Kurdistan (Syria) – with approximately 2 million Kurds more scattered across the globe. This means that there are almost 40 million Kurds worldwide.

Geographically, the land of the Kurds is broadly defined as the area between Mount Ararat and Lake Urmia in the north and east, and the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers – extending south through the Zagros Mountains to Lower Mesopotamia. The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European languages. Currently it is spoken between Anatolia, Caucasia, Persia and Arabia. Historically, Kurdish people have been called names that refer to various ethnic groups and languages – 'Kurtioi', 'Kurtie', 'Korticaykh', 'Korduh', 'Kordia', 'Bakurda', 'Korduene', 'Kardu', 'Karday' and 'Karda'. While at first, these names denoted separate clans, they now refer to an ethnic entity that includes all the clans of Kurdistan (Baran 2007).

This first section presents the socio-cultural, historical and political background to the Kurdish struggle, from its prehistoric origins until the 1970s.

² The Lausanne Treaty was greeted by the Turks as it offered them an international guarantee for a sovereign Turkish state, while for the Kurds it represented an "institutionalization of slavery and colonialism" (Besikci 1990: 21).

1.1 The Proto-Kurds’ social structure and struggle to survive

Given their geopolitical and sociocultural circumstances, Mesopotamian people have tended to use institutional unity as a defence against central authority. This has helped them to preserve their identity, with all its riches and contradictions, to this very day. The ethnic entities squeezed between the Hittite Empire and the Babylon–Assyrian Empire developed into powerful tribes. In 3,000 BC, the Sumerians called the ancestors of the Proto-Kurds who had developed a distinct ethnic awareness, ‘*Horrit*’ or ‘*Hurri*’ (people from the mountains). These mountain people also represented the parts of society who resisted being subjugated by central authority. The Hurrians maintained good relations with the Hittites and other ethnic groups in the region, and were the first to transmit the Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian cultures to the north and east through trade. ‘*Gutians*’, ‘*Kassites*’, ‘*Mitannis*’, ‘*Urtians*’ and ‘*Medes*’ (all descendants of the Hurrians) had strong bonds.

Instead of forming distinct entities, these clans preferred to live with their neighbours – and still do today. After the demise of the Hurrians, the Mitannis formed a stronger confederation between 1500 BC and 1250 BC. However, their perennial conflicts with the Hittites and Assyrians led to their political extinction under the Assyrian Emperor Salamanassar. In one of the fortuitous ironies of history, in 612 BC, the Medes, descendants of the Hurrians, defeated the Assyrian Empire, and then protected themselves from imperialist empires through a system of state governors, unifications and coalitions. Organised into semi-federal tribal entities, the Medes survived the Macedonians, the Roman Empire, and Parthian and Sasanian rule – until the invasion of Alexander the Great.

1.2 Turkish-Kurdish relations in the Ottoman Empire

In the Middle Ages, especially after the Middle East had been islamised, the Kurds were subjugated in turn by the Safavids, Umayyads and Abbasids, but continued to exist as autonomous or independent entities. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the Kurds were organised into various states, including the ‘*Mervani*’ confederacy and ‘*Seddadi*’ dynasty. Leaving Central Asia, the Turks moved through Mesopotamia, reaching Anatolia in the 11th century, establishing the first relations with Kurdish tribes, which developed into the first ‘*Seljuk*’ state. The Kurds allied themselves with the Turks and they fought side by side in the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 (when the Ottomans defeated the Persian Safavids and gained control over eastern Anatolia), and the Battle of Mercidabik in 1516 (when the Ottomans were victorious over the Mamluks). Until the 19th century and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish-Kurdish relations were based on alliances and partnerships.

1.3 Persecution and uprisings since the 19th century

In the 19th century, Kurdish landlords³ were the local authorities who conducted administrative, legal and economic affairs independent of the central authority. Their external affairs, however, were managed by the Ottoman Empire.

Threatened with decline in the early 19th century, the Ottoman Empire became more centralised. The local authorities – Kurdish squires – were replaced by centrally appointed governors, sent to the region just to collect taxes and draft soldiers. These measures sparked numerous Kurdish revolts, such as the *Babanzade* uprising in 1806, the *Revanduz* uprising in 1834–1835, the *Nehirli Seyh Ubeydullah* uprising in

³ Kurdish landlords represented landowners and aristocratic families. If they needed to protect their interests and maneuvering space, they would fight. Without a Kurdish liberation movement, they were the de facto representatives of the Kurdish people. The allegiance of certain tribes gave the landlords military strength to resist the central authority, and although their uprisings were usually confined to their localities, they left an important legacy for the modern Kurdish movement.

1880 and the *Mustafa Barzani* revolt in 1961. More than 30 uprisings took place (Birand 2008), all of which failed to extend beyond their immediate localities.

The Armistice of Mudros signed in 1918 between the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain (representing the First World War Allies) put an end to the Ottoman Empire. Kurdish cities were occupied by the various powers who dominated the region – Turkey, Great Britain, France and Russia. Earlier that year, US President Woodrow Wilson had announced a 14-point programme for world peace, and emphasised the need for self-determination of the various nationalities in the Ottoman Empire. Galvanised by his statement, Kurds rallied in many Kurdish cities, and formed organisations to inform the Western states that the Kurdish question was awaiting a solution. However, neither the US nor any of the European states showed any interest.

In 1919, Mustafa Kemal launched a national liberation movement to prevent Turkey being occupied after the break up of the Ottoman Empire. He strove to rally the Kurds by invoking Turkish–Kurdish fraternity and holding congresses in the Kurdish cities of Erzurum and Sivas. The Kurds were inspired by Kemal’s claim that “[T]he Kurds and Turks are inseparable brothers and this homeland is the joint homeland of these two constituent peoples” (Ciwanazad 2008). They accepted his invitation and fought with him, believing that once Turkey and Kurdistan were protected from foreign occupation, their Kurdish rights would be acknowledged in one common state. During this period, Kemal stated in many speeches that the Kurdish national and social existence would be accepted and developed.

With the help of the Kurds, the national liberation struggle was won: the Turkish Republic was proclaimed in 1923. However, the new state went on to annul all its promises and agreements with the Kurds and instead massacred Kurdish people. The Kurdish opposition was bloodily suppressed and Kurds were unable to assume their rightful position on the world stage. The Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 divided the Kurdish homeland into four parts that were placed under the sovereignty of other powers, a situation that continues today.

Targeting Kurdistan was of great interest for Western European states as well. Since the 19th century, the geographic position and underground riches of the Mosul-Kirkuk region (in present-day Iraq) had attracted outsiders. After World War I, it came into the sights of England and France (Karankik 2006). Kemal was forced to assert control of either the Turkish Republic or Mosul-Kirkuk – claiming both would have meant risking a war with the Great Powers, and he was too much of a realist to take that chance. History has since witnessed the Kurds’ tragedy: for the Turkish Republic to survive, Mosul-Kirkuk had to be ceded to England, but abandoning the region dealt a mortal blow to the Kurds. The Turkish Republic and England sacrificed the Kurds for their interests.

This modern tragedy, which began in 1925 with the first Kurdish uprising led by Sheikh Said (and resulted in the former Ottoman province of Mosul being assigned to the British Mandate of Mesopotamia), was to continue and become increasingly serious. Under Kemal’s successor, Ismet İnönü, then in the Turkish Republic of the 1950s, Kurdish reality was a taboo subject. The Kurds’ national project was ravaged before it could flower. It was not bad enough that Kurdistan was separated into four parts: the anti-Kurdish policies implemented in each of the four new states were worse than in the others. After 1925, the Kurds’ national reality can be characterised as a period of genocide – ‘colonialism’ does not adequately describe the policy of annihilation. Threatened with extinction until the 1970s, the Kurdish nation’s first priority was not attaining freedom, but rather surviving. Those long decades of military occupation, assimilation and threatened annihilation must be seen as a concerted effort to deprive Kurds of any national identity (Öcalan 1999).

The Republic of Turkey wanted to assure quiet in Kurdistan. To that end, Kurdistan was dotted with gallows, and villages, towns and cities were bombed and burnt. In order to destroy Kurdish identity, Kurdish villagers were exiled to cities in the west of Turkey, and Turks were settled in Kurdish cities and towns. The Plan for Eastern Restoration/Rehabilitation⁴ and the Law for the Maintenance of Public Order⁵

4 Şark Islahat Planı (passed by the Turkish Grand Assembly on 8 September 1925, giving the Government permission to take strict measures against ‘the East’, meaning the Kurds)

5 Takrir-i Sükûn Kanunu (passed by the Turkish Grand Assembly on 3 March 1925, giving the Government extraordinary powers)

of 1925 and the Resettlement Law of 1934,⁶ made this official. The names of Kurdish towns and villages were ‘turkified’: Kurdistan ceased to exist on a map. The Kurdish language was outlawed, including the three letters that are not part of the Turkish alphabet. These horrific policies conspired to suppress all mention of the Kurds until the 1970s. The Turkish state did its best to insure total silence, and believed that everything had been sorted out.

2 The PKK’s military and political struggle with the Turkish state

The World War II defeat of fascist states by democratic forces created a favourable atmosphere for national liberation movements in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Classic colonialist systems suffered blows that led to their dissolution and many people were liberated. Then ‘neo-colonialism’ replaced classic colonialism and the United States took England’s place; the British left Iraq and the French left Syria, leaving the administration of both countries to the Arabs. These developments affected Kurdistan.

The global political context of the late 1960s also affected Turkey. While youth movements were developing around the world, leftist youth in Turkey began to rally around the demand for an ‘independent and democratic Turkey’. Leaders spoke about the Kurdish people and their rights, emphasising Turkish-Kurdish fraternity. But many young leaders were massacred by the Turkish army, imprisoned or even sentenced to capital punishment; the Turkish Left was decimated. However, with time, the socialist-left wave in Turkey also captured the imagination of Kurdish youth who, as a result of their socio-economic analysis of Kurdistan, began to organise their own national liberation movement.

In 1978, the PKK was founded as a Kurdish movement that adopted the legacy of the massacred revolutionaries of the Turkish Left. Based on Marxist-Leninist theory and the strategy of a long-term ‘people’s war’, it aimed at achieving an ‘independent Kurdistan’. The Turkish Republic’s homogenising and monopolising nation-state system was contrary to PKK views. It used the Constitution, educational system, legal system and media – and when necessary, military violence – to insist that only ‘Turks’ live in Turkey. Kurds were referred to as ‘Mountain Turks’. Soon a merciless war against the PKK was started.

This section covers the establishment of the PKK in 1973, its campaign for the self-determination of the Kurdish people and the repressive reaction of the Turkish state until the early 1990s.

2.1 The rise of the PKK and its armed struggle

The PKK began with a group of young activists in Ankara led by theoretician Abdullah Öcalan who were first known as the ‘Apoists’ (from ‘Apo’, or ‘uncle’, Öcalan’s nickname). In March 1973, the group’s structure began to be formalised, and by 1975–1976, its influence had spread across Turkish Kurdistan. Its tremendous success in such a short time indicated how much Kurdish society thirsted for freedom: the notion of freedom resonated with people of the region, especially the youth. The PKK was officially founded on 27 November 1978, largely because its cadres believed that all legal ways of organising a national movement had been exhausted,

6 Mecburi Iskan Kanunu (‘Mandatory Law of Caving and Placement’ from 14 June 1934)

leaving only armed resistance to combat the colonialist powers. They felt that only an all-encompassing revolution could enable the threatened Kurdish identity to flourish. The PKK declared that legal struggle was impossible in a country that thoroughly denied Kurdish identity: only armed struggle could successfully resist its annihilation. The PKK aimed to create a new Kurdish society through a popular uprising.

2.2 The Turkish state's approach to the PKK

The Turkish state responded to the international leftist youth movements of 1968 and the PKK-led Kurdistan independence movement by staging a military coup on 12 September 1980. Shortly before the coup, PKK General Secretary Öcalan had fled through Syria to a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, but most PKK cadres in Turkey were captured and sent to the military prison in Diyarbakir. News of the cadres' torture and persecution and their subsequent struggles, as well as preparations for guerrilla warfare under Öcalan, ensured mass support for the PKK (Öcalan 2004). The demands of the imprisoned cadres in Diyarbakir led to the PKK's first military operation: on 15 August 1984 guerrilla units infiltrated all the Kurdish provinces in Turkey. Popular support for the PKK grew gradually in northern Kurdistan because of Turkey's denial and annihilation policies against the Kurds. Many people joined the PKK guerrilla, which they considered a legitimate defence force against Turkish repression.

At first, the Turkish state did not take these attacks seriously, announcing that the perpetrators would be dealt with quickly. Finally recognising in 1987 that it was confronted with a struggle that was broadly supported by the Kurds, Turkey declared a state of emergency. All powers were vested in a 'super' regional governor, which meant that the struggle was delegated from the state to the Turkish Armed Forces. With full authority, the governors waged a vicious war, introducing special tactics such as extra-judicial killings and the deployment of paramilitary 'village guards'.⁷ Turkey also sought foreign allies for its dirty war, using counter-insurgency methods learnt abroad to fight the Kurds.

2.3 The Kurdish people's legal political struggle and the military operations of the Turkish Armed Forces

The Turkish state policies of denial and annihilation were unable to defeat the PKK; on the contrary, mass support grew for the PKK, with the struggle waged not just by the guerrillas but also by people in the street. The most extraordinary examples of this were the (forbidden) mass celebrations of the Kurdish New Year, or '*Newroz*'.⁸ In the 1990s all public celebrations were banned, and the Turkish army attacked people who gathered without permission, killing hundreds. Yet the Kurds overcame their fear of the Turkish state and continued to celebrate *Newroz* each year.

The Kurdish struggle also reached the political realm. In 1989, in a defining moment, Kurdish Members of Parliament (MPs) Ahmet Türk, Adnan Ekmen, Mahmut Alınak and Salih Sümer were expelled from the Social Democratic People's Party (Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti, SHP) for attending a Kurdish conference in Paris. The next year, the same MPs formed a new political party called the People's Labour Party (Halkın Emek Partisi, HEP) and in 1991, for the first time, 18 members of the pro-Kurdish HEP were elected to the Turkish Parliament. Among them was Leyla Zana, who later received the Sakharov Prize from the European

⁷ Some 90,000 Kurdish villagers were first paid and provided with arms to defend their villages, then were used by the Turkish army to carry out domestic and cross-border military operations. Some of these 'village guards' are now being tried for their crimes. Village guards were used by the state for approximately 17,000 extra-judicial killings.

⁸ According to the legend in the Middle East, *Newroz* ('new day') symbolises the resistance and liberation of the blacksmith *Kawa* against the brutality of the tyrant *Dehag* – representing the liberation of subjugated people (Ayman 2013).

Parliament. The HEP was outlawed by the Constitutional Court in 1993 (Fendoğlu 2011)⁹; its MPs’ diplomatic immunity was revoked the year after. While Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Selim Sadak and Orhan Doğan were sent to prison the other HEP MPs fled to Europe, where they were granted political asylum and formed the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile (PKDW). With Kurds in Europe organising mass rallies, demonstrations and international conferences, support for the Kurdish people reached new heights.

The combined efforts of the people’s uprisings in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey), the diplomatic initiatives of Kurds in Europe and the influx of guerrilla fighters and their new offensives all threatened the Turkish state, which reacted by staging major military operations in the guerrilla strongholds of Botan, Dersim, Amed (Diyarbakir) and Serhat (the largest Kurdish cities in Northern Kurdistan). Since 1991, the Turkish state has also flaunted international law by carrying out cross-border military operations at the border of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Such operations have generally been carried out two or three times a year – using tens of thousands of soldiers, village guards and counter-insurgents. Each operation costs Turkish citizens millions of dollars.

All kinds of weapons have been used against the guerrillas, including chemical weapons, which allegedly are still being used (Steinvorth and Musharbash 2010). Marks and scars indicative of chemical weapons have been found on guerrillas’ corpses.¹⁰ Similar violence has been and continues to be used against the civilian population. It is estimated that since the beginning of the armed struggle in the 1980s, more than 40,000 people have lost their lives, with 17,000 people ‘disappeared’ in custody or assassinated by state agencies in extra-judicial killings. These crimes remain unresolved. In November 2011, 120 mass graves containing the remains of civilians and guerrilla combatants were discovered (Kurdish Human Rights Project 2011).

The Turkish state has attempted to isolate the guerrillas by forcing the Kurds to emigrate. Between 2,000 and 4,000 villages have been forcefully evacuated by security forces since the beginning of the armed struggle; some 3 to 3.5 million people are internally displaced. Villagers who are forced to move to urban centres face severe economic and social challenges and limited political will to assist them (Kurdish Human Rights Project 2011).

3 The pursuit of dialogue and the international conspiracy against Öcalan

After thousands had died, the two sides realised that they could not win by using violent means and began to search for political approaches. Confident of his massive political backing, PKK General Secretary Öcalan began to reorient his movement both structurally and strategically (as will be further described in the next section). Meanwhile, certain Turkish government circles began to seek a negotiated solution. This

⁹ This policy continues today: 27 parties have been banned because of the Kurdish question. But each banned Kurdish party is replaced by a new one.

¹⁰ For instance, the Turkish army is alleged to have used chemical weapons in the Kazan Valley (Geliyê Tiyarê) where 36 combatants were killed in clashes in the Çukurca district of Hakkari on October 22-24, 2011. Online at www.kurdishinfo.com/turkish-army-claims-they-didnt-use-chemical-weapon-in-kazan-valley.

section describes the intermittent dialogues between the PKK and the Turkish state in the period 1993–2004, marked notably by Öcalan’s kidnapping and imprisonment in 1999, and how the post-11-September 2001 ‘war-on-terror’ rhetoric has impacted the state’s attitude towards the Kurdish conflict.

3.1 The beginning of the PKK’s transition and the 1993 ceasefire

Changes within the PKK began with Öcalan’s political messages in 1993, and became official with the report he presented at the PKK’s Fifth Congress from 8 to 27 January 1995. At the same time, circles within the Turkish state began to seek paths for dialogue. President Turgut Özal sent a message to Öcalan, and in response, the PKK declared its first unilateral ceasefire at a press conference in the Lebanese town of Bar Elias on 20 March 1993 (CNNTURK 2010). For one month, both sides stopped all hostilities: not a single shot was fired. The Turkish and Kurdish people greeted this lull with relief. Then Öcalan held another press conference to extend the ceasefire, explaining why the PKK had taken up arms in the first place, the mountain guerrillas’ ambition and how the struggle should be conducted in the future. Given the significance of his speech, it is worth citing at length:

First of all, this process of ceasing fire has led to historical consequences; the ceasefire has started a new era. What is asked of us is to deepen this process. There is no doubt that our responsibilities are great. The Kurdish people are going through their roughest period in history. The Kurdish people have been subjected to persecution that has resulted in genocide and more. We never just took up arms for the sake of it. All we did was to open a road for our nation to freely develop. But we had no other means of struggle to adopt: that is why we had to take up arms and have brought the struggle to this stage. The Kurdish situation is, at heart, a Turkish-Kurdish situation. Our struggle has come to the point of the Turkish public accepting the Kurdish identity; it has seen it necessary to recognise Kurdish existence and solve the problem. [...]

We all support the development of this process. We hereby announce that with certain conditions the limited ceasefire could be made indefinite. These conditions are as follows: primarily, the ceasefire cannot be one-sided. All military operations should be ceased. The intense persecution of the people, arrests and extra-judicial killings must stop. If military operations persist, whether in three days or three months, we will have no choice but to effectively defend ourselves. This is the first point I would like to make. The government has some requests regarding the guerrillas coming down from the mountains. Our forces in the mountains have taken all possible risks to attain our political ambitions. They are there in support of our national existence and an honourable solution. If these ambitions are fulfilled, if our basic requirements are honestly fulfilled and the proper circumstances are arranged, then the problem of the armed guerrillas will be dealt with very easily. In this sense there is no problem with the guerrillas. Secondly, we have some immediate requests regarding the ceasefire process. I spoke of the cessation of all military operations. This goes not only for the guerrillas, but for the people in general. The third is a general amnesty. We do not see ourselves as guilty people, and expect all political prisoners to be freed. Of course we also expect certain cultural rights to be put in to practice. These are rights to a free press and media, Kurdish radio, television, newspaper and books, etc.

In short, the Kurdish language should be freed. We demand that the people who have been forced out of their villages be able to return and be compensated. We expect the state of emergency in the region to be lifted and the village guards to be disbanded. To pave the way to a solution, we declare a general amnesty for the village guards. This means that if they abandon their arms we will not touch them. All Kurdish organisations should be legalised. We demand the right to political association and organisation. In short, these are our expectations that will ensure a calmer, more peaceful atmosphere.

A further step that needs to be taken is the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity. All the above-mentioned points pave the way for a democratic federation. We would like these sorts of debates to be carried out with mutual respect.¹¹

While these demands were still being enthusiastically discussed in public, Turkish President Turgut Özal suddenly died. Everyone, including his family, believes that he was poisoned (Seibert 2012).¹² At a meeting of the Turkish-American Businessmen Council, Stephen Kinzer of the New York Times stated that he had suspicions regarding Özal’s death (Kinzer 2001). Forces in Turkey that were hostile to peace killed President Özal to reignite the war. After his death, the Turkish Armed Forces restarted their military operations against the guerrillas, then the PKK killed 33 soldiers – and the negotiations were ended.¹³ Military operations escalated: the war was rekindled.

With Öcalan continuing to insist on changing policy, the PKK declared eight unilateral ceasefires in 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2009 and 2010. Unfortunately, none of these ceasefires led to a durable peace. Instead, the Turkish state viewed them as signs of weakness and responded to them with conspiracies and provocations.

3.2 The PKK’s unilateral ceasefires of 1995 and 1998

Following the end of the 1993 ceasefire, Turkey developed a new concept of war against the PKK by seeking diplomatic backing from the USA and Britain through the ‘Dublin Process’ (Serxwebun 1995), and military backing from Kurdish organisations in Iraq, namely, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). But before the new concept was announced, in August 1995 the KDP and the PKK began hostilities that were to last three months.

This war was ended by a mutual ceasefire on 11 December 1995. Öcalan did not want to limit this ceasefire to the two Kurdish parties, and attempting to open a path for a political solution to the Kurdish question, declared that their ceasefire was intended to also stop Turkish state operations. Regrettably, his attempt was in vain and attacks against the Kurdish people continued at full pace. In spring 1996 the Turkish state launched an extensive military operation throughout Kurdistan – demonstrating its total disregard for the PKK ceasefire. On 6 May 1996, a commando ordered by then-Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller tried to assassinate Öcalan in a house in Syria – but he was not at home. After such a provocation, the PKK resumed hostilities.

On 1 September 1998, the PKK declared its third unilateral ceasefire. Later it was understood that many circles in Turkey had been in dialogue with the PKK – indirectly. The Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and the commander of the Turkish Armed Forces had requested that the PKK declare a ceasefire, and the Turkish government had indirectly informed the PKK about a mechanism for administering the peace process and said that the people should be prepared for peace. However, this positive atmosphere was short-lived: it was immediately followed by an international conspiracy to capture Öcalan.

11 Online at www.serxwebun.org/arsiv/136/

12 “Rumours that Ozal was murdered, possibly from members of the state security forces who resisted his efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem, have lingered for years. Media reports have said that shortly before his death, Mr Ozal opposed the adoption of a counter-guerrilla strategy by the state, including the deployment of right-wing hit men, to hunt down leaders and alleged sympathisers of Kurdish rebels” (Seibert 2012).

13 The killing of these soldiers has always been a contentious matter: Öcalan himself, as well as certain advocates of peace in Turkey, have requested an independent inquiry into the incident. Many believe that Turkish soldiers reported their comrades’ route to the PKK because they wanted the conflict to continue.

3.3 The conspiracy against Öcalan and his subsequent arrest and resistance

Although the PKK continued to insist on talks, the Turkish state never truly believed in bilateral political dialogue, and used every opportunity to attempt to eliminate PKK members. Extra-judicial killings carried out by the Turkish state between 1990 and 1999¹⁴ aimed to incite the PKK to spread the war to Turkish cities. The Kurdish people generally supported Öcalan's policies, but from time to time they criticised the PKK leadership for not further escalating the war. Despite the pressure, Öcalan continued to pursue a political solution and declared four more unilateral ceasefires before 1999. The Turkish state viewed these ceasefires as signs of weakness and defeat, and escalated its military operations against the PKK. With political and military support from EU states and the USA, Turkey pressured Syria to force Öcalan to leave the country. In 1998, First Army Commander General Atilla Ateş made a fiery speech at the Syrian border. With American and Israeli warships offshore, it appeared that Turkey was preparing to go to war against Syria (Bila 2010).

Believing that these manoeuvres were in protest at Öcalan's residence in Syria, the Syrian government asked him to leave the country. As he later explained, Öcalan decided to leave Syria to spare the country being victimised because of him and to search elsewhere for a political solution to the Kurdish question. On 9 October 1998, Öcalan began a four-month odyssey through Russia, Italy, Greece and Kenya, where he was finally kidnapped and handed over to Turkey: the "fate of the Kurds of the past few centuries was [...] relived" (Rojbas 2011).

Many observers expected that if Öcalan was captured, the Kurdish movement would suffer a major blow and its struggle would wither away. Then-US Secretary of State Madeline Albright addressed the US Senate, calling on the countries that had welcomed Öcalan to put him on trial (US Senate 1999). After Öcalan's capture, she had to admit her surprise at the Kurdish people's hefty reaction to her words: apparently those who had sought Albright's support had not briefed her on Öcalan's significance. The Kurdish struggle did not let up and nobody surrendered; on the contrary, the Kurdish people demonstrated unprecedented defiance. The slogan "You Cannot Eclipse Our Sun" served to strengthen the resistance and support their leader, Öcalan. For some weeks, demonstrations were held daily, along with hunger strikes. Many Kurds set themselves committed acts of self-immolation, including mothers and a 10-year-old girl in eastern Kurdistan, despite calls from Öcalan and the PKK to stop.

A few Greek MPs had met Öcalan in Syria and invited him to Greece. However, on 9 October 1998, Öcalan was refused entry there. He then went to Moscow where he stayed for a month. During this time, Turkey offered Russian Prime Minister Primakov a deal: Turkey would not meddle in any Russian affairs if Russia stopped meddling in Turkey's Kurdish question and stopped helping Öcalan. Primakov agreed, and ignoring the Russian Parliament's invitation to Öcalan when he was still in Syria, began to assist Turkey. Öcalan realised that he had to leave Moscow, and went to Rome.

European states did not want Öcalan to stay in Europe because of Turkey's geopolitical status and their military, political and economic relations. Öcalan's application for political asylum was accepted by the Italian authorities, but never made official. Tens of thousands of Kurdish people camped in Rome in freezing weather to demand permission for Öcalan to stay and for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. In Rome, Öcalan made various statements declaring that he was ready for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question and that European states should play an active part in promoting and supervising a peace process. However, the Europeans had decided that they wanted Öcalan to leave and started to pressure Italy to this end. When Öcalan saw that he was not being accorded the protection usually accorded political refugees, he decided to leave Italy. On 16 January 1999, on the basis of certain assurances, Öcalan returned to Moscow. But once again, he was not allowed to stay in Russia: on 29 January he left for Athens.

¹⁴ Attacks carried out by state-sponsored counter-guerrilla forces (under various names) claimed the lives of 17,000 civilian Kurds including women, children, businessmen, intellectuals, journalists, academics and non-PKK-militia members.

The Greek government had just one wish: for Öcalan to leave the country. They convinced him that it was not safe for him to remain there, and announced that they were making preparations for him in South Africa. A small jet was readied in Corfu and the flight to Africa took off. Onboard, Öcalan was informed that he was being flown to Kenya. On 1 February 1999, he was brought to a house in Nairobi belonging to the Greek Embassy. At Greece’s request, a delegation consisting of the Kenyan president’s son, members of the secret service and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were in constant contact with Öcalan. On 15 February, the Greek Embassy told Öcalan that everything was ready for him to go to The Netherlands and made assurances that he would be safe there. While Öcalan reluctantly accepted, believing the Greek government’s promise, their spokesperson issued a statement that “Öcalan had left the house of the Greek Embassy on his own accord”. Öcalan was escorted to one car and the rest of his party to the car behind it. However, Kenyan officials and secret services separated Öcalan’s car and drove him straight to the airport, where they handed him over to Turkish secret service agents and officials of the Turkish Armed Forces who were waiting aboard a plane.

The world had united to conspire against Öcalan. For days he had roamed the skies, was refused asylum, and in defiance of the norms of international humanitarian law, he was handed to Turkish state officials, who imprisoned and isolated him in a jail of his own on İmralı Island.¹⁵

3.4 Meetings with Öcalan in prison

At the time of Öcalan’s arrest, the PKK was holding its Sixth Congress. It decided not to choose a new leader, declaring that “rather than disregard our imprisoned leader, we will embrace him even more than before”. Kurdish people’s anger at the international conspiracy inspired them to hold daily mass protests (demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, meetings, hunger strikes, etc.) in Turkish and European cities to demonstrate their support for and allegiance to Öcalan. There was even talk of a Turkish–Kurdish war. To diffuse the situation, the Turkish state retreated slightly: officials met with Öcalan in prison and stated that if he would calm the protests, they would take some positive steps. Öcalan later told the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that he had accepted the state’s offer in order to avoid a Turkish-Kurdish conflict and create the proper foundation for the transition and reconstruction he envisioned. He called for protests to end. The atmosphere calmed and a new era began.

On 2 August 1999, the PKK declared that it would withdraw its forces from Turkey; it did so on 1 September 1999. The following month, in a separate show of goodwill, again following a suggestion from Öcalan, the PKK sent two ‘peace groups’ to Turkey, one from the mountains in Southern Kurdistan (Northern Iraq) and one from Europe. Unfortunately, these goodwill gestures went unheeded. The entire guerrilla group that went to Turkey was immediately arrested and each member sentenced to a minimum of 10 years. One of them died in prison. The members of the group from Europe were all given prison sentences of 15 years. Some of them are still imprisoned.

Despite these developments, Öcalan continued to seek a paradigm shift and to reconstruct the PKK. He stated that, “[W]ithout expecting the state to change, the PKK must take the first steps to change – not as a simple step, but rather, as a strategic development. The current paradigm has realised its ambitions. What is needed now is a new paradigm to fulfil the demands for a solution.” The PKK showed its determination to solve the Kurdish question peacefully, by launching a Peace Project in its Seventh Extraordinary Congress on 20 January 2000. Other initiatives calling for peace and dialogue followed, including: the Urgent Action Plan for Peace and Democratisation (4 November 2000); the statement of urgent demands to prevent war and develop the process of solution (19 June 2001); the Charter for Urgent Solution (22 November 2002); and numerous letters enunciating PKK views on how to solve the Kurdish question and addressed to the president, prime minister, general commander of the army and all political parties – in both 2000 and 2002.

¹⁵ For Öcalan’s own recollection and interpretation of this conspiracy, see Öcalan (2010).

Despite these active efforts towards peace and dialogue, the Turkish state continued its efforts to annihilate the PKK. The coalition in power, namely the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), the Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Partisi*, DSP) and the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP), wanted to exploit the international conjuncture dominated by the post-11-September 2001 ‘war-on-terror’ rhetoric. Believing that it provided the opportunity to secure enough international support to eradicate the PKK, they froze the dialogue process. PKK overtures were interpreted as signs of weakness or evidence that the problem was ‘finished’. The usual official Turkish policy was, “If guns are not firing, then the problem does not exist”. So, besides a few regulations regarding democratisation, the Turkish state did not address the root causes of the Kurdish question and the constitution drawn up after the military coup of 12 September 1980 remains in effect.

3.5 International impediments to resolving the Kurdish question

In May 2002, just as a channel for dialogue was being opened between Öcalan and the Turkish authorities and intelligence services, the EU put the PKK on their list of ‘terrorist organisations’, overlooking the fact that an armed conflict has been raging between the Turkish Armed Forces and the PKK since 1984. The PKK fulfils the characteristics of a military structure as specified by the 1949 Geneva Protocols and has signed an agreement compelling its obedience to the laws of armed conflict (Breau 2006).

Including the PKK in the EU list of terrorist organisations is a case of the EU disregarding its own rules because it did not clarify why the PKK was included (Breau 2001). The EU decision dealt a massive blow to peace efforts. Not only did it strengthen the hand of the Turkish state in applying its usual repressive tactics (allowing the government to stamp any Kurdish organisations and activists as ‘terrorists’ or ‘terrorist supporters’), but the timing was most unfortunate. The PKK had just started its period of transition: clearly they were no longer using arms and had abandoned separatist aspirations in favour of searching for a solution within Turkey. Three years previously, the PKK had declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrawn its armed forces outside Turkey’s borders. Moreover, the PKK was gradually giving up its aspirations for a Kurdish nation-state, aspiring instead to a decentralised political system based on equality, enhanced cultural and linguistic rights, popular and social freedom, and the active participation of citizens in shaping their society. In fact, in January 2002 the PKK had officially dissolved itself during a press conference in Brussels attended by many international journalists. The EU decision, which seemed to ignore all the positive steps taken by the Kurdish movement, caused many Kurds to lose faith in the EU and question why the EU was working against them. The European states’ historical role in dividing up Kurdistan, the broken promises of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the EU’s treatment of Öcalan and finally labelling the PKK a ‘terrorist organisation’ confirmed Kurds’ belief that the EU supported the Turkish state’s war against them. The saying, “Kurdish people have no friends but the mountains”, was shown to be true once again.

The AKP government, who had just come to power in Turkey, interpreted the EU decision to list the PKK as a terrorist organisation as international support for taking a violent approach to the Kurdish issue. It repeated the same mistake when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, calculating that after the US had removed Saddam’s threat to the region, they would cooperate with Turkey against the PKK as part of the ‘war on terror’. Turkey discarded its policy of dialogue and stepped up its violent persecution of the Kurdish freedom movement. On 1 June 2004, the PKK decided to shift from ‘passive self-defence’ to ‘active self-defence’. It also changed its method of struggle from continuous to periodic conflict, whereby PKK guerrilla forces staged attacks to dissuade the Turkish Armed Forces from attacking and oppressing the people – and to protect themselves. PKK activity was accompanied by mass demonstrations showing the Kurdish people’s support for its new policy.

4 The PKK’s transformation and the new paradigm

The capture of their leader by means of an international conspiracy dealt a massive blow to the PKK and the Kurdish people, causing them to be embroiled in internal arguments from 2000 to 2004. Some cadres (with support from external forces such as the US government), sought to destroy the very essence of the PKK and failing to do so, left the movement and started a propaganda campaign against it. In response to the internal disputes, Öcalan developed a new strategy that was embraced by the mainstream PKK (the founding cadres) and created a new sense of direction that revived the movement.

Since the early 1990s, Öcalan had been aware of the changing balance in world politics, especially the disintegration of the bipolar (East/West) world system. He believed that the PKK had to adopt certain strategic changes in order to survive as an independent movement. Formed in the late 1970s, the PKK was strongly influenced by the Real-Socialist system that had moulded global revolutionary movements and national liberation struggles. It had adopted the jargon of that age and the Marxist-Leninist approach to a nation’s right to self-determination through state formation. Within this framework, the PKK adopted the slogan of ‘independent, united and democratic Kurdistan’ – meaning it aspired to form a nation-state. Its political and military wings were organised accordingly.

The subsequent end of the Real-Socialist system, along with new global developments and practical experiences in Kurdistan, forced the PKK to search for a new strategy. After introducing the Kurds of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq to the international arena, the movement had to analyse global and regional developments anew and revise its quest for change into a comprehensive strategy: to that end, it redefined itself within Kurdistan, the region and the world. This section describes the evolution of the PKK’s ideology and structure in the period 2002/2005.

4.1 Establishment and features of the KCK system

Educational activities and discussions based on Öcalan’s defence to the ECHR led to changes in the PKK. The movement developed the thesis of ‘democratic modernity’, based on a democratic, ecological and gender-emancipatory system, and switched from being a party to a congressional system.

During its congress in April 2002, the PKK dissolved itself and a new Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) took its place. Öcalan continued to reflect and analyse the situation, and as part of the ongoing quest for change, KADEK dissolved itself in 2003 and was replaced by the Kurdistan People’s Congress (*Kongra-Gel*, KGK). This was an important stage in the search for a new paradigm. Öcalan, who was writing his book, *In Defence of the People* (2004), deemed Kongra-Gel an appropriate structure, but insufficient on its own.

In 2004, the PKK was reconstructed with a new identity: it became the ideological centre of the new system. The Union of Communities of Kurdistan (*Koma Komalên Kurdistan*, KKK) was established as the umbrella organisation of the new system at *Newroz* in Diyarbakir in 2005. One year later, the Kurdish name was changed to *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (the Kurdish Communities Union, KCK), reflecting a slight change in emphasis. Kongra-Gel became the legislative assembly of the system, which continues to develop as an ideological, political and organisational tripartite.

The PKK’s transformation into the KCK was based on historical analysis, and also represented an ideological and political revolution embodying the effort to create an organisational model suited to the

new paradigm and ideological outlook that Öcalan described in his writings. The movement developed specific solutions for each part of Kurdistan; the thesis of ‘democratic autonomy’ was developed for Turkish Kurdistan: a voluntary joint existence that did not require changing the borders of the current nation-state or demanding a separate state was desirable.

The first Chairman of the KCK Executive Council, Murat Karayılan, outlined the reasons for such a transition:

The KCK system represents a new understanding, a new mentality, a new organisational method, a new school and a new democratic understanding. Civilisation that developed out of the eco-system from the agricultural revolution in the Zagros region attained the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. Along with the Industrial Revolution came the nation-states as a reality of human life. In our day, the nation-states that derived from the Industrial Revolution are hindering development in the face of a globalising world. Although financial capital that has developed under the system of nation-states is trying to shape the globalising world towards its own interests, it is unable to surpass the chaos the system is undergoing. Solutions proposed in capitalist systems are unable to solve the problem. This is because the state and especially the nation-state are now retrogressive factors in Syria. Therefore, to find a fundamental solution – namely, an escape from the chaotic reality of the system – we need to approach the problem with a new mentality and method of organisation. Just like in the past, when Mesopotamia was the site of the first revolution in human history, today it will be the locale for the intervention to the current crisis of the system. Our leader (Abdullah Öcalan), through his practical struggle and his theorisations, has developed ‘democratic confederalism’ as the formula for the solution to the current crisis faced by humanity. We see the KCK as a model for its solution.¹⁶

It was not easy for an organisation that for so long had aspired to and struggled for an ‘independent, united and democratic’ Kurdistan to change its aspirations. At first, PKK cadres and movement sympathisers found the change difficult to comprehend. Along with misconceptions and misunderstandings, certain cadres were dismissive. The Turkish media – under unofficial state control – misconstrued Öcalan’s appeals for a peaceful solution and presented them as if he had “surrendered to the state and was sorry” (Milliyet 1999). Efforts were made to destroy Öcalan’s character and values. Meanwhile, various Kurdish cliques wanted to take advantage of this momentous period of transition and, using various derogatory terms for the PKK and Öcalan, tried to depict themselves as alternatives. However, the backbone of the PKK – made up of the leading cadres, guerrillas and enthusiastic masses – embraced the transition and declared that despite all the efforts to smear Öcalan, they were determined to effect change. They announced the formation of organisational mechanisms in conformance with the transition, as well as reconstruction committees to support it. The KCK declaration presented at *Newroz* 2005, explained the new system and the means needed to construct it.

Here are a few excerpts from this document:

[...] 2. The principle of a nation’s right to self-determination as developed in the beginning of the 20th century, has been interpreted to mean the right to form a state. The nation-states formed on this basis are now a hindrance to development. The United Nations model is no longer an effective institution. The Gulf War and the situation in Iraq are proof of this.

3. The way out of this situation is not globalisation on the model of the nation-state, but rather the democratic confederative system that is supported by the people. The state is not eternal, nor is the nation-state immortal. Today, the nation-state is being superseded by globalisation. However, because the imperialist powers have been unable to develop a significantly new model, the crisis of the current system has deepened into chaos.

16 Online at www.serxwebun.org/index.php?sys=arsiv&arsiv_id=9

[...] 6. *The self-determination of Kurdistan is about the aspiration to form a democracy that is not concerned with political borders – rather than the formation of a state on nationalist principles. Kurdish people in Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq will form their own federations and unite in a confederal superstructure.*

Democratic confederalism aspires to turn the state into an institution sensitive to democracy by removing all barriers to its democratisation. Three systems of law now rule Kurdistan: EU law, unitary state law and democratic confederal law. As long as the unitary states of Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria recognise the Kurdish people’s confederal law, the Kurdish people will reciprocate by recognising their laws so that a consensus can be reached.

Democratic confederalism aims to solve all problems through peaceful means and relies on peaceful politics. Any hostile actions against the land, the people or their liberties will result in legitimate acts of self-defence. (Foreword of the KCK agreement)

As for the international level, it is important to mention the establishment of the Kurdistan National Congress (*Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan*, KNK) in Amsterdam in May 1999, which aims to: incarnate the moral unity of the Kurdish nation, without ignoring how Kurdistan has been divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria; resolve disunity or conflict between Kurdish political parties; elaborate norms of solidarity and develop a concerted strategy for democratic solution to the Kurdish question. Membership is also open to the Assyrian-Syriac-Chaldean, Armenian, Jewish, Arab, Turkmen, Azeri, Turkish and Persian minorities in Kurdistan.¹⁷

4.2 The PKK and the women’s struggle

The participation of women in the PKK’s founding congress anchored the attitude that women’s struggle for liberation is the basis of the social struggle. Starting in 1987, Kurdish leader Öcalan concentrated on writing about women, family, society, patriarchy and the social, philosophical, cultural, economic and psychological effects of women’s colonisation. He determined that women’s enslavement is the fundamental contradiction preventing societal freedom and championed women’s liberation as the only way to bring about social enlightenment, democratic change and an emancipatory mentality. Women guerrillas are not just provided with military education, they are also encouraged to become the new individuals of a democratic free society. The Kurdish women’s movement has developed into a philosophical and social movement and female PKK militants have become its leading social force. The women’s movement takes its own decisions, democratically choosing its goals and administration in its congresses and conferences. Among the numerous parties and organisations pursuing this ideology of women’s liberation under the umbrella organisation, the High Women’s Council (*Koma Jinên Bilind*, KJB), are: the intellectual and strategising Kurdistan Women’s Liberation Party (*Partiya Azadîya Jin a Kurdistan*, PAJK); the grassroots-level Unions of Free Women (*Yekitiyên Jinên Azad*, YJA); the Free Women’s Units ‘Star’ (*Yekmîyên Jinên Azad Star*, YJA Star) which employs strategies of legitimate self-defence; and the Committee of Young Women who engage in organising their peers. Women’s struggle for liberation is not viewed as a mere fight for equality – since constitutional equality is meaningless if the cultural structure and mentality of the society remain unchanged. The struggle must address every aspect of the revolution. Women must decide for themselves, meaning that the women’s struggle must organise throughout Kurdistan using a more horizontal organisation and overcoming marginal party politics. The Kurdish women’s movement helps guarantee the social transformation required for a free society.¹⁸

¹⁷ The KNK could be perhaps best compared with the African National Congress (ANC) in apartheid South Africa, or with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) prior to the Oslo Accords – although it is not a military organisation.

¹⁸ A more detailed description of various women’s organisations established throughout the Kurdish struggle is found in Annex III (Chronology).

4.3 The PKK and its policy of armed resistance

The PKK considers that its most significant transition was in its approach to war and violence. At first the PKK was a movement that aimed at power and statehood using armed struggle to achieve this end. Later, the principle of national liberation was understood as self-defence, since global examples of the past 70 years showed that using arms had not helped people liberate themselves.

On 15 August 1984, six years after its establishment, the PKK formed the Kurdistan Liberation Forces (*Hêzên Rizgariya Kurdistan*, HRK), acting as the army of the liberation movement. In 1986, the HRK was replaced by the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan (*Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan*, ARGK), which idealised the 'guerrilla' army. Following Abdullah Öcalan's entrapment, the ARGK pulled out of Turkey on 2 August 1999, and relocated to South Kurdistan (Northern Iraq), where it underwent a period of transition and was replaced by the People's Defence Force (*Hêzên Parastina Gel*, HPG) in 2000.

The HPG announced that rather than fighting a war of liberation it would organise around the principle of self-defence described by the United Nations, stating: "[W]herever there is a degradation of humanity, where justice does not prevail and violence diminishes human values, the people being victimised have the right to defend themselves in every way possible". Organisational, war and defence tactics were reorganised. The movement endorsed and signed the Geneva Convention and the additional protocols of June 1977 on the protection of victims of armed conflicts. On 18 July 2006, Kongra-Gel and the Swiss NGO, Geneva Call, signed a 'deed of commitment' banning anti-personnel mines which is supported by the UN, in the Alabama Room at the Geneva Town Hall, where many historical agreements have been signed:

International humanitarian law and human rights include all sides to armed conflicts... Acknowledging the norm of a total ban on anti-personnel mines established by the 1977 Ottawa Treaty[...we] solemnly commit ourselves to the following terms. (Ongan and Aktas 2006)

5 Unilateral ceasefires, indirect dialogue and political repression

Although the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which came to power in 2002, hesitated at first, eventually it began to dialogue with the PKK. As a result, the PKK declared unilateral ceasefires in 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2010. Unfortunately, none of these steps brought about a lasting peace, mostly because of the AKP approach: the government took steps just before general and local elections, attempting to create conflict-free periods. But it was obvious that the AKP was aiming to strengthen its grip on power by developing tactical short-term relations and temporary steps – not a strategy to bring about a lasting solution. This section describes the period 2005–2010, marked by a series of attempts at conflict resolution, along with periods of renewed confrontation characterised by state repression of Kurdish political activities.

5.1 From the KCK’s declaration of military inaction to the October 2006 ceasefire

Following the PKK’s return to ‘active self-defence’ in 2004, some Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals concluded that the conflict was heating up because of the AKP government’s faulty analyses. In August of 2005, they visited the Turkish Prime Minister and demanded a democratic solution to the Kurdish question. A few days later, Erdoğan visited the city of Diyarbakir, where he stated that the “Kurdish problem is my problem and ... will be solved with the deepening of democracy”.

His statement raised hopes in the Kurdish community, and there were calls for the PKK to declare a ceasefire. In response, on 19 August 2005 the KCK Executive Council declared a month-long period of military inaction that was later extended for another month. However, at the same time, the Turkish army declared that “military operations will continue until there is not one single person in the mountains” and stepped up attacks. Heavy clashes ended the PKK’s declared period of military inactivity. Intense clashes followed in spring and summer of 2006, accompanied by ongoing talks. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Masud Barzani, were in dialogue with both sides and called for a ceasefire. The US Secretary of State made similar calls. Most importantly, the Turkish state was talking with the *Kurdish Democratic Society Party* (DTP) – the first time that the Turkish state accepted Kurdish names. Meetings with Öcalan also took place. The concrete steps needed to resolve the issue were discussed at these meetings, which included two PKK peace groups (one from Europe and one made up of PKK militants deployed in South Kurdistan); in return, the Turkish state was supposed to begin amending certain laws. In light of the positive news the PKK declared a ceasefire on 1 October 2006.

These positive developments occurred just before a general election in Turkey, causing some of the Kurdish electorate to interpret them as the Kurdish Freedom Movement’s approval of the AKP. As a result the AKP gained in Kurdish areas in the 2007 elections. But once again, the AKP misread the situation by pointing at the support it received from Kurds and claiming to be the number one party in the region and the representative of the Kurdish people.

After using opportunities offered by the PKK to win the elections, the AKP began to change its stance on the Kurdish question. The quest for a peaceful solution was replaced by policies of armed annihilation and views that “There is no Kurdish question if you do not think about it” and “Our security forces will do whatever is necessary regardless of whether it involves women or children”.¹⁹ On 17 October 2007, a bill was passed giving the military permission to conduct cross-border offensives attacking the PKK. On 5 November 2007, seeking international support, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited US President G. W. Bush in Washington, DC, who declared that the PKK was their common enemy and that the US government would support Turkey’s war against the PKK by all possible means, including supplying intelligence. Predator drones began to monitor the mountains of Kurdistan and Turkish bombings caused numerous civilian casualties. The Turkish state also shared intelligence received from the United States with Iran, who bombed civilian settlements in Iraqi Kurdistan, trying to hit guerrillas of the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, PJAK), an Iranian Kurdish Movement. The ‘enemies’ – Iran and the USA – became allies against the Kurdish people. The Turkish military then conducted operations on both sides of its borders and met with even bigger offensives from the guerrillas. After a year or so, a new quest for peace began to emerge, leading to renewed calls for a ceasefire. Both the Turkish and Kurdish people were feeling the painful consequences of war and started to call for a peaceful solution.

19 Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at the Turkish Grand Assembly in March 2008.

5.2 The unofficial ceasefire of December 2008 and the declared ceasefire of April 2009

In order for the people to be heard and to allow the 2009 general elections to be securely conducted, the PKK ceased fire unofficially in December 2008. The Turkish state learned of this decision through intermediaries and, with the Turkish Armed Forces also generally inactive, the elections were held in a peaceful atmosphere. En route to Iran, on 10 March 2009, the President of Turkey made a very positive speech about the Kurdish question to journalists, stating, “Good things are about to happen”. This raised expectations and created a positive atmosphere.

In March 2009, the DTP won 99 local councils, doubling its share of votes. The AKP, who had not expected the Kurdish party to be so successful, displayed its discomfort in a speech by the Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek, who said, “[The DTP has] pushed to the border of Armenia”. Indeed, the Kurdish party had won the city council of Iğdir, a Kurdish city on the Armenian border. Throughout history, Armenians and Kurds have been described as “enemies wishing to divide Turkey”.²⁰ In the PKK’s early years, the Turkish state and army claimed that although Kurds were Muslim, the PKK was actually an Armenian (non-Muslim) organisation bent on dividing Turkey. The Çiçek statement shows that this mentality persists. People threatened by the Kurdish party’s success claimed that Kurds and Armenians were going to join forces to avenge history and divide Turkey, a view that is still heard in Turkey.

Despite these negative developments and encouraged by the DTP’s electoral success, the PKK made its ceasefire official on 13 April 2009. However, the state sabotaged its decision: just as everyone was expecting a positive response from the AKP government, 52 key members of the DTP, including deputy leaders, were arrested. Since then 1,700 Kurdish politicians have been arrested, including Hatip Dicle, the co-chair of the civil-society movement, Democratic Society Congress (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, DTK).

While arrests were ongoing, the government announced the ‘process of democratic opening’ and conducted a ‘Kurdish workshop’ at the Ankara Police Academy on 1 August 2009. Although in some quarters this was seen as a positive development, these attempts occurred when persecution was intensifying, causing others to understand that the government had no serious project for a solution, but was hoping to stall the process. The government was seen as trying to ensure a period of military calm for a referendum on changes to the constitution – just as it had before the local elections in March 2009.

Discussions about military inactivity, a democratic opening and a solution were being held at the same time as the ‘KCK Operations’.²¹ On 11 December 2009, the Constitutional Court banned the DTP and expelled 37 Kurdish MPs including party co-chairs Ahmet Turk and Aysel Tuğluk. In response, the remaining Kurdish MPs that had been elected as independent candidates boycotted Parliament and returned to Diyarbakir, effectively cutting all relations between Kurds and the Turkish state, and sending a strong message that Parliament did not represent Kurds in Turkey. The AKP government was so shocked by this move that it immediately sent representatives to visit Öcalan in prison. They argued that they were aiming to make changes but that the judiciary were preventing them, and that they were unhappy with its ruling and planned to discuss the matter in Parliament. Öcalan responded that Parliament was the address for a solution. Kurdish politicians called off their boycott – but the AKP government soon forgot its promises and continued its repressive policies, leading Öcalan to state, “[I]f no positive steps are taken as soon as possible, on 31 May I will pull out of everything”. The AKP took no note of him, and the KCK released a statement on 1 June 2010, declaring that all the steps they and their leader had taken for a peaceful and democratic solution had been rebuffed, and were even being used against the PKK. For this

²⁰ At the time of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, in the name of creating a homogenous nation, the Turks massacred Armenians and forced hundreds of thousands of them to flee. Since 1923, Turkey’s official history and schoolbooks have taught that the Armenians were trying to divide the country and brought about ‘conflict’. The Turkish nation has always been poisoned with nationalism and hatred towards the Armenian people.

²¹ This refers to massive repression of any kind of Kurdish activism in Turkey – that began in 2009 and continues today.

reason, the decision to halt military activity had to be reviewed: their forces returned to the position of active self-defence.

5.3 The unilateral ceasefire of August 2010

In summer 2010, major clashes occurred all over Turkey and Kurdistan. The Turkish media was filled with reports of disturbances and the heavy loss of life. On 12 September 2010, a major referendum was scheduled on constitutional amendments, and the government wanted to conduct it in a calm atmosphere. For that, they had to talk with Öcalan and urge him to declare a ceasefire. Many civil society organisations, intellectuals, the DTK and also the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) that had replaced the banned DTP, called for a mutual ceasefire. Taking note of these requests, Öcalan stated that he was still “hopeful of peace, and if a serious and sincere approach to peace develops then I will be more than happy to play my role”. Believing that dialogue was a sign of progress, he called upon both sides to engage in sincere dialogue. His call was made at a time when clashes were leading to all-out war.

Öcalan’s message led the KCK to declare that for the referendum on 12 September to be conducted in a peaceful atmosphere during the sacred month of Ramadan, in response to calls from various quarters, including the DTK and the BDP, they had taken a meaningful decision. The KCK listed a number of conditions that had to be met before it would declare a unilateral ceasefire, some of which had to be urgently implemented, while others were about principle. The KCK stated that from 13 August to 20 September their forces would not conduct any military offensives but would defend themselves against any hostilities to themselves or the people. It further stated that in order for this temporary process to be permanent, the Turkish state should cease all military and political operations. Another demand was the release of all 1,700 imprisoned Kurdish politicians and members of peace groups. It further stated that the time had come for Öcalan to be a party to the negotiations.

The Muslims of Turkey enjoyed a peaceful Ramadan. The ceasefire also strengthened the AKP government’s effort to push through certain constitutional amendments: 58 per cent of the voters approved amendments on judicial reforms, abolishing protection for leaders of the 12 September 1980 coup and for military personnel, as well as economic and social rights and individual freedoms. However, the BDP and over half the population of southeast Turkey boycotted the referendum (Wikipedia 2010), because it included nothing to satisfy the Kurdish people. In particular, it did not address their demands for democratic autonomy, or their fundamental rights and freedoms. Yet the AKP read voter approval as encouragement to increase its repressive policies rather than take steps towards a peaceful solution.

6 The Oslo Meetings: official dialogue between the Turkish state, PKK and Öcalan

Although state repression intensified during 2009 and 2010, the referendum had indicated that the public favoured the two sides reaching a peaceful solution. Many intellectuals were publishing articles that called for an open dialogue instead of closed-door meetings. It was becoming clear that both the Kurdish and Turkish people wanted to move from violence to peace. Finally, secret communication with Öcalan was replaced by a series of official meetings. Although he had had many direct and indirect contacts with the state since 1993, these meetings were far more significant and substantial – especially because they had the approval of the Turkish public. Öcalan was also allowed to meet regularly with his lawyers (who were flown to İmralı Island by helicopter), whereas in the past their meetings had always been blocked by trivial excuses.

Parallel to these meetings, high-level talks were being conducted between the Turkish state and the PKK in Oslo, Norway – although they were only disclosed to the public later. The PKK had already conducted meetings with Turkish officials, but the state had always sought to gain time for new offensives. Its approach to the Oslo meetings was similar. According to Prime Minister Erdoğan, “[I]ntelligence agents met the Kurdish representative to gain information, and to act accordingly” (Korucu 2014). For its part, however, the Kurdish Freedom Movement approached the meetings seriously, seeking to prepare society and the state for a solution, and repeatedly declaring ceasefires. The process of dialogue undertaken by the PKK from 2009 to 2011 is described below.

6.1 The PKK roadmap

In 2010, after initial talks with the government delegation, Öcalan announced the need for a roadmap to solidify the dialogue and quest for a peaceful solution. He called upon all parts of society to consider the project and inform him of their thoughts and opinions. The Kurdish people began a period of discussion and presented their views to Öcalan. Similar excitement inspired democratic quarters and columnists in Turkey and hopes and expectations grew. For the first time Turks and Kurds believed that a solution was close. On 15 August 2009²² Öcalan declared that he had finished the roadmap and given it to the prison administration to be sent to the ECHR. But the Turkish state held on to the document for fourteen months. Many well-known authors and columnists commented that the PKK had presented its project for a peaceful solution but the Turkish state did not appreciate its roadmap and had no counter-proposal. Öcalan declared that despite the state’s apparent lack of a project or game plan, he would take further steps in order to break the impasse.

22 This represents a symbolic date in the Kurdish struggle: on this date in 1984 the PKK launched its guerrilla war.

6.2 The peace groups

With the aim of opening dialogue between the government and the PKK, under Öcalan’s leadership, a peace group composed of 34 people from the United Nations (UN) Mahmur refugee camp and eight guerrillas from Kandil (both in South Kurdistan) entered Turkey on 19 October 2009. After being questioned at the border, they left for Diyarbakir, escorted by hundreds of thousands of jubilant people. Interpreting joyous cries as provocative triumphalism on the part of the PKK, Turkish nationalists and government members ensured that the joy was short-lived. Once the peace groups had arrived, the main opposition – the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) and the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) – began to advocate repressive measures. Some members of the peace group were arrested while others declared that they could not safely remain in the country and returned to South Kurdistan. Because the government lacked any serious project for a solution, they characterised the displays of joy as a crisis of the ‘democratic opening’,²³ claiming that the “PKK’s and the Kurdish people’s joy thwarted us”. That joy should have been interpreted as an ecstatic response to the approach of peace. The Turkish state’s reaction and declaration that any other peace group would face similar consequences caused another peace group planning to come from Europe to cancel its journey.

6.3 Operations and pressure against legal Kurdish politics

In the operations against Kurdish politicians that had begun in April 2009, hundreds of people were arrested – including former MPs, local mayors, representatives of civil institutions and party activists. The DTP was banned, and its MPs forbidden to be politically active.

The Kurdish movement had anticipated the DTP’s banning and quickly formed the BDP. But it, too, was unable to escape the state’s repressive measures. In order to overcome the 10 per cent threshold in the general elections of 12 June 2011, the BDP entered independent candidates in a coalition with a few other political parties, and succeeded in getting 36 of its candidates elected to Parliament.²⁴ Six of the candidates were in prison and were not released.²⁵

The Turkish state wants the BDP to sever its ties with the PKK and declare the PKK a terrorist organisation. Officials in the EU and USA second this demand. The BDP maintains that it has no organic ties with the PKK but that the overwhelming majority its supporters also support the PKK. The BDP views the PKK as armed opposition to the state, and claims that its relationship with the PKK helps it pressure the latter into renouncing arms, although the BDP does not regard that as its role. The BDP argues that if the state really wants to solve the Kurdish question, it must negotiate directly with the PKK. The BDP supports the Turkish state meeting with Öcalan in İmralı Prison and with PKK officials in Oslo. However, the state overlooks the party’s positive stance, and constantly pressures the BDP, claiming that it is “supporting terrorism”.

6.4 Cessation of dialogue

Within the framework of the peace talks, the government committee had accepted Öcalan’s proposal for a three-step process to resolve the conflict (ceasefire, constitutional reform and normalisation, with the

²³ The government first announced a process of ‘Kurdish opening’ but in reaction to nationalists’ rejection later called it the ‘democratic opening’. The name had to be changed once more to ‘the process of national unity and fraternity’. But ‘national unity’ defines all people living in Turkey as ‘Turkish’.

²⁴ The 10% threshold is an anti-democratic measure introduced to keep Kurdish politicians out of Parliament and forces Kurdish parties to present independent candidates. Without that threshold, the same proportion of votes would have yielded the BDP closer to 60 MPs. In the previous election, the Kurdish party had also entered independent candidates and obtained 22 seats in Parliament.

²⁵ Four of the six elected MPs started open-ended hunger strikes in prison on 15 February 2012, the anniversary of Öcalan’s capture, demanding that negotiations be restarted with Öcalan and a peaceful solution be found to the Kurdish question. The court was forced to release all the MPs in January 2014.

PKK becoming a political actor in Turkey); a positive approach was expected after the general election in June 2011. However, using the death of soldiers who were on a military operation in the Silvan region of Amed (Diyarbakir) and the DTK's declaration of 'democratic autonomy' (see below) as excuses, the AKP government declared, "[N]othing will be the same as before, they will pay a heavy price: nobody should expect good will from us" – and implemented its long-planned policy of asymmetric war. From 27 June 2011, the government stopped meeting with Öcalan and also prevented him meeting with his lawyers and family.

The government then used the state-controlled media to promote the idea that the "PKK had cut off the meetings". On 5 October 2011 Murat Karayılan, Chairman of the KCK Executive Council, wrote a letter to the editor of *Taraf*, a newspaper that vigorously upheld the state's claims. His letter (see Annex II) explained the reasons for ending the meetings and exposed the manipulation and disinformation surrounding the Kurdish question. It also shed light on what had transpired in the Oslo talks and what is needed to create an atmosphere conducive to forging a lasting peace.

6.5 The search for alternative democratic methods

When its efforts at dialogue were rebuffed, the Kurdish movement declared that if the state refused a democratic constitutional solution, it would seek to force one upon the AKP through alternative democratic methods – and if this did not succeed, the Kurdish people would have to create their own democratic political solution. Expecting nothing more from the state, the DTK declared the Kurdish people's 'democratic autonomy' on 14 July 2011. This model for autonomy for Kurds in Turkey is not about power: the PKK has distanced itself from ruling. But it believes this is the way for Kurdish society to develop its political will and achieve basic democratic rights.

Apparently these developments threatened the AKP because it had no proposals of its own for a democratic solution. Why else would it be so afraid of Kurds attempting to develop democracy by structuring their own democratic autonomy? The government attempted to annihilate the will of the Kurdish people who were demanding a democratic solution by using the judicial system against the BDP. It sought to make it impossible for Kurds to demand a democratic solution.

Then the 'KCK operations' begun in 2009 were revived, leading to thousands of arrests (Yuksekovahaber 2013). Most of Öcalan's lawyers were arrested, along with many Kurdish journalists. Since April 2009, 8,000 people, including MPs, mayors, journalists, solicitors, human rights activists, intellectuals, writers and academics, have been arrested; hundreds of Kurdish children languish in Turkish prisons for throwing stones at the police during demonstrations.

6.6 The power struggle within the state structure

On 13 September 2011, a recording of the secret meetings in Oslo between PKK officers and Turkish officials was leaked on the Dicle News Agency's website without the knowledge of the site's administrators. Later, the Bianet website reported that in a meeting with Turkish journalists in early 2013, Murat Karayılan, Chairman of the KCK Executive Council, had stated that the 'Oslo Meetings' had actually started in 2005. The manner in which the tape was leaked on the Dicle website and subsequent announcements made clear that a third party was involved. Yet Prime Minister Erdoğan blamed the KCK for leaking the tape and announced that the meetings had ended (Milliyet 2012). Soon after, the AKP government further isolated Öcalan by postponing meetings with his lawyers.

On 7 February 2012, state prosecutors called on Hakan Fidan, the director of the National Intelligence Service (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, MIT), MIT assistant director, Afet Güneş, and former MIT director, Emre Taner, to issue statements about their meetings in Oslo regarding the "case of the KCK" (Aynaheber 2012). The prosecutors clearly intended to send state officials who had attended the meetings to prison.

Concerned that he himself was being targeted, Erdoğan insisted that neither Fidan nor any other MIT officials would provide statements. The friction between the executive and the judiciary made it clear that the Oslo meetings were ended because of a conflict within the state structure. However, believing it was being cornered, the AKP once again changed its approach and opened a new battlefield with the KCK. Two days later the government passed a law requiring the prime minister’s permission to try MIT officials.

7 The status quo: fear of peace

Instead of opting for peaceful and democratic means to resolve the conflict, the Turkish state has repeatedly shown its contempt for democracy by arresting, detaining and repressing legal political representatives of the Kurds (e.g. denying them the right to express themselves in their mother tongue). But Kurdish leaders have taken the initiative once again by launching a bold programme of democratic negotiations aimed at introducing long-due legal and judicial reforms. This last section describes these recent developments, from late 2012 until the end of 2013.

7.1 The 2013 İmralı Peace Process: a new hope?

In the second half of 2012, imprisoned PKK members began an indefinite hunger strike in response to the AKP government’s aggressive approach (Bestanuce 2013). On 17 November 2012, as the hunger strikers were nearing death, Öcalan called on them to stop. He also warned of serious developments in *Rojava* or Western Kurdistan (Syria).²⁶ Öcalan’s call was heeded; the imprisoned PKK militants ended their strike. Shortly thereafter, Erdoğan announced that a new dialogue process between state officials and Öcalan had started on İmralı Island.

On 23 February 2013, Öcalan told the BDP delegation visiting him on İmralı Island that the state prosecutor’s efforts to bring the MIT officials to trial five months earlier were an attempted coup. He said that he had subsequently written to the government, an effort that led to a new dialogue process. Öcalan stated that he was going to submit written documents to the KCK administrators and the BDP and make a public announcement at the 2013 *Newroz* celebrations in Diyarbakir.²⁷

That is indeed what happened. Öcalan’s historic manifesto was read to more than a million people gathered in Diyarbakir for the *Newroz* celebrations on 21 March 2013. Öcalan declared the start of a new era (Sendika 2013). He called upon the KCK to declare a ceasefire and withdraw its armed units from North Kurdistan. He also made detailed suggestions to the government, noting the necessary legislative amendments and steps required to advance the process.

In response to Öcalan’s call, the KCK declared a ceasefire on 23 March 2013. In May 2013 its announcement of preparations for a retreat – the beginning of the guerrillas’ withdrawal from North Kurdistan – was observed by the international press.

²⁶ For a description of the ongoing revolution in Syria and Western Kurdistan, see Annex III.

²⁷ For the full text of the declaration in english, see www.kurdishinfo.com/ocalans-newroz-letter-meaning-and-consequences.

7.2 Unfulfilled obligations in the new peace process

The peace process that the KCK negotiated with the government was supposed to consist of three stages. The first stage consisted of a bilateral ceasefire, trust-building steps and the implementation of practical mechanisms. The second stage was concerned with the legal and constitutional amendments that are at the heart and root of the Kurdish question. The third and final stage, described as ‘normalisation’, foresaw the prisons being emptied, the return of Kurds in the mountains and in exile, and everyone being permitted to take part in politics.²⁸ Unfortunately, the government did not stick to its agreement, deeming the calendar ‘ineffective’.

While the Kurdish side has taken gradual and strategic steps forward, the AKP government has not moved at all. By now, a truth and reconciliation committee should have been formed, Parliament should have passed legal amendments in support of the process, terminally ill prisoners should have been released and an advisory group formed. All these steps have been prevented by the government, which passed a law to protect its own civil servants but did not take any similar measures to protect the peace process. As it stands, anyone taking part could be accused of breaking the law and be jailed at any moment.

The AKP’s active insistence on hindering the main actors of the peace process shows that it has an ulterior motive. In particular, the fact that Öcalan, the architect of the process, continues to be prevented from having any contact with the outside world casts doubts on the government’s sincerity. BDP Co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, announced, “[T]he government promised to assist the retreat of the guerrillas and enable Öcalan to have contact with the public; but these promises were not kept” (Haber 2013). The government has not refuted his statement. Instead of making legal amendments to enable a smooth process, it actually has enforced arbitrary measures to raise its stature within the dialogue; for instance, it banned publication of photographs taken on İmralı Island of Öcalan and the BDP delegation.

The AKP, or more precisely, Prime Minister Erdoğan, formed a group of experts that also amounted to nothing. The group included 62 ‘wise people’ (including 12 women) – artists, politicians, academics, journalists, business people and civil society delegates, from Turkey’s seven regions. The group prepared a report that was presented to the prime minister with the expectation that the recommendations would be addressed by Erdoğan’s ‘democratisation’ packet. That did not happen. Professor Baskın Oran, a member of the group, announced that he quit because the government did not take the legislative steps promised after the guerrillas had begun their retreat. The group is presently inactive (Milliyet 2013).

Instead of the promised legislative amendments, the AKP government is pressing ahead – building more fortress-like military barracks in Kurdistan and stepping up military activity. It appears that the government intends to maintain the military option. The Turkish military practically ended the ceasefire by killing a civilian during a protest against one of the barracks in Şirnak. In response to the governments’ tactics aimed at dragging out the peace process, on 9 September 2013 the KCK announced that the ceasefire was being held but the guerrillas’ retreat would be halted. At the same time that a ceasefire was implemented in Turkey, the government was supporting the war against the Kurds in Syria by supporting *Al-Qaeda*-affiliated jihadist organisations such as the *Al-Nusra* Front.

In a meeting with his family on 18 November 2013, Öcalan described the government’s stance:

“We told them to make the legal amendments and the guerrillas would leave the country. They could have left sooner, in just two months. But the state and the government did nothing. Because they did nothing, this is the most that could have happened. No legal framework was prepared. Had the state done this, the guerrillas could have even left in buses, retreating comfortably. But the framework was not prepared. This is why the process is continuing like this today.”²⁹

²⁸ Online at <http://firatajans.com/news/guncel>

²⁹ Online at <http://firatajans.com/news/guncel>

The Turkish state’s mentality prevents even the most basic laws being passed to support the peace process, let alone make a paradigm shift. It prefers to address the Kurdish issue with its ‘terror law’ mentality. A sweeping change is needed in the official ideology; without that, there is no platform for permanent peace. With the revival of EU–Turkey negotiations, it is incumbent upon the EU to persuade Turkey to adopt a principled paradigm shift. This must be the litmus test for relations between the EU and Turkey.

Conclusion

When it was founded, the PKK believed that there was no possibility of mounting a political campaign on behalf of the Kurdish people when even small-scale activism was severely punished. Inspired by other national liberation movements and agreeing with their tactics, the PKK adopted their ideological and military approaches. It opted for waging a long-term people’s war to defeat Turkish colonialism and force the Turkish government to acknowledge the Kurds.

Over the years, the PKK’s view of war evolved and it adopted a new strategy to replace the classic “defence, balance, attack” mentality of a revolutionary people’s war. After 1990, the Kurdish people’s struggle was characterised by guerrilla war and mass uprisings. Since the turn of the millennium, the democratic political struggle has grown in importance, and along with mass uprisings has become as important as guerrilla warfare, which was reoriented towards acts of legitimate self-defence. The PKK struggle has become more complex, with a broader array of strategies. Especially since 1993, PKK leader Öcalan has emphasised the importance of a democratic political solution by declaring various unilateral ceasefires. The global situation, the Kurdish people’s organisational maturity and consciousness, as well as the broader general awareness of the Kurdish question – including on the part of the Turkish public – all make a democratic political solution possible. A need no longer exists to defeat the Turkish state and its army through the methods of war alone.

Despite all these efforts, however, the Turkish state has shown no interest in a democratic political solution and has attempted to exclude the PKK from a possible solution. The AKP has repeatedly claimed that it would solve the Kurdish question, yet it refuses to accept the Kurdish people as a national community with a democratic will that can determine its own fate. Kurdish demands for education in their mother tongue, the use of Kurdish in the public domain and cultural freedom have never been taken seriously. The Turkish state apparently believes that it could make a few minor reforms and allow some individual rights and the problem would disappear. It has never touched on the roots of the problem or sought to understand its history. As a result, the proposed solutions have continued the usual state policies of suppression, elimination and annihilation.

Although Turkey is considered to be one of the most modern states in the region, its rulers are unable to resolve a problem democratically. They regard the Kurdish struggle for democracy as a threat that will eventually rock their authority. The same problem confronts Iranian and Arab states, where one nation and one religion are prioritised and other ethnic and religious groups are alienated and prohibited from forming their own democratic civil organisations. Any activity that is not part of the official ideology, the official nation, the official language, the official culture and the official politics is viewed as a crime, and labelled ‘treacherous’.

When one compares the tools available to the Turkish state with those available to the PKK, it is obvious that the state is far better equipped to take larger and more significant steps. However, the state has almost always wanted to come out on top by expecting the Kurds to ‘surrender’ or be satisfied with minimal

compromises, supposedly because of a need to satisfy the opposition. But 90 per cent of the people and the opposition support the government taking positive steps towards a peaceful solution. Occasionally the government claims that its own laws obstruct progress, which is nonsense given the fact that the ruling party received 50 per cent of the general vote in an election when it promised to draft a new constitution. All opinion polls show that the people of Turkey support solving the Kurdish question through a new constitution.

In an article in *Taraf* from 5 May 2012, Turkish journalist Roni Margulies explained why the Kurdish question has not yet been resolved.

The problem is neither the Kurds, the PKK, nor arms. The problem is the attempts, since 1926, by the state to resolve this issue using violence. We must not forget this. The solution remains stopping the injustice. As long as the state attempts to resolve the issue using a military approach, those seeking justice with arms will not stop, cannot be stopped and will continue. There is no example in history where people have been oppressed forever with guns and military methods. For this war to end it is the responsibility of everyone who is Turkish, righteous and mindful to demand rights for everyone who is demanding their rights – and to explain that the only way for this war to end is for the people who are demanding their rights to be given them. To appeal for one side in the war to lay down their arms while the war is going on is pointless. Arms can only be put down after certain conditions are met and guarantees given. The responsibility of intelligent Turks is not to call for one side to lay down their arms, but to call on the other side to recognise that side's rights.

The Turkish people are ready for a solution, but there is no courageous political will to solve the problem.

The history of the Turkish and Kurdish people could be transformed into a tremendous forward march towards democracy that is as important, if not more, for the people as water and petrol. A future based on democratic norms is crucial for the Turkish, Iranian and Arab peoples. Kurds do not seek to threaten; they want to live in peace with others. Rather than being used as a tool to 'divide and rule' they want to be a unifying force on a strong and free basis. They do not want to be the tools of oppressive forces but rather deserve to be viewed as a democratic force in the region's march towards democracy. This project could serve as a role model for the whole Middle East.

Institutionalising democracy requires sensitivity. Sovereign religions and sovereign nations represent similar mentalities that are ill suited to democracy. Transitioning to democratic institutionalisation is particularly difficult because democratic institutions define themselves in terms of the state. The new democratic version of the Turkish nation-state presupposes freedom of language and culture.

At this stage, the EU and the US are as important as the Turkish government in solving the Kurdish question. Unfortunately their support encourages the Turkish state to leave the problem unsolved. Were this support to become conditional, the road to peace would be smoother. The most significant step which might be taken in support of a peaceful solution would be to remove the PKK from the so-called EU terrorist list.

When we regard the Kurdish struggle and its current phase, we can see that a solution to the Kurdish question is forcing itself onto the global agenda. However, it cannot be solved using a narrow national approach: the Kurdish people want to forge a common future with other people of the region. The roots of the problem are universal in nature and the solution to the problem must be universal. Only a broad perspective can ensure a permanent solution to the Kurdish question. The dialogue process between the Turkish state and the PKK and Öcalan must be restarted. No solution that excludes Öcalan and the PKK is possible.

This paper has sought to show that the Kurdish people have sought to solve the Kurdish question through peaceful dialogue and negotiation, while the Turkish state's approach has used policies of assimilation, delay and oppression. Had the state taken a different approach to the process of dialogue and the numerous peace proposals presented by Öcalan, we might have been discussing this situation differently today. Nevertheless, I believe that only negotiations will lead to a solution.

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Annex I:

List of Acronyms

AKP	<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>	Justice and Development Party
ANAP	<i>Anavatan Partisi</i>	Motherland Part
ARGK	<i>Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan</i>	People’s Liberation Army of Kurdistan
BDP	<i>Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi</i>	Peace and Democracy Party
CHP	<i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i>	Republican People’s Party
DSP	<i>Demokratik Sol Partisi</i>	Democratic Left Party
DTK	<i>Demokratik Toplum Kongresi</i>	Democratic Society Congress
DTP	<i>Demokratik Toplum Partisi</i>	Democratic Society Party
DYP	<i>Dogru Yol Partisi</i>	True Path Party
ECHR		European Court of Human Rights
ENKS	<i>Encumena Niştîmaniya Kurdên Sûriyeyê</i>	National Assembly of Syrian Kurdistan
HEP	<i>Halkın Emek Partisi</i>	People’s Labour Party
HPG	<i>Hêzên Parastina Gel</i>	People’s Defence Force
HRK	<i>Hêzên Rizgariya Kurdistan</i>	Kurdistan Liberation Forces
KADEK	<i>Kongreya Azadî û Demokrasiya Kurdistanê</i>	Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress
KCK	<i>Koma Civakên Kurdistan</i>	Kurdish Communities Union
KDP	<i>Partîya Demokrata Kurdistanê</i>	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KJB	<i>Koma Jinên Bilind</i>	High Women’s Council
KKK	<i>Koma Komalên Kurdistan</i>	Union of Communities of Kurdistan
KNK	<i>Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan</i>	Kurdistan National Congress
KGK	<i>Kongra-Gel</i>	Kurdistan People’s Congress
KRG	<i>Hikûmetî Herêmî Kurdistan</i>	Kurdistan Regional Government
KSC	<i>Desteya Bilind a Kurd</i>	Kurdish Supreme Committee
MGRK	<i>Meclîsa Gelê Rojavaya Kurdistan</i>	People’s Assembly of Western Kurdistan
MHP	<i>Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi</i>	Nationalist Movement Party
MIT	<i>Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı</i>	National Intelligence Service
OHAL	<i>olağanüstü hal</i>	state of emergency
ISIS		Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
PAJK	<i>Partîya Azadîya Jin a Kurdistan</i>	Kurdistan Women’s Liberation Party
PJAK	<i>Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê</i>	Free Life Party of Kurdistan
PKDW	<i>Parlemanê Kurdistan Derveyê Welat</i>	Kurdistan Parliament in Exile
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan</i>	Kurdistan Workers’ Party
YNK/PUK	<i>Yekîtîya Niştîmanî Kurdistan</i>	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtîya Demokrat</i>	Democratic Union Party
SHP	<i>Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti</i>	Social Democratic People’s Party
SNC		Syrian National Council
YJA	<i>Yekitiyên Jinên Azad</i>	Unions of Free Women
YJA Star	<i>Yeknîyên Jinên Azad Star</i>	Free Women’s Units ‘Star’
YPG	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>	People’s Protection Unit
YPJ	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Jin</i>	Women’s Protection Unit

Annex II: Extracts of a letter by Murat Karayilan, the then Chairman of the KCK Executive Council, to the *Taraf* newspaper editor (5 October 2011)

(...) Mr. Altan, in the past five years we have had contact with the state; the first two years consisted of indirect contact and the last three years consisted of direct contact. A recording of one of these meetings has been leaked into the public domain from an unidentified source. It was agreed that these meetings would be kept secret until they had reached a substantial level. There are previous examples from the past of such dialogues that have been kept secret till a certain stage then announced to the public domain when it has been seen fit to do so. It is a well-known fact that the same delegation also had meetings with our leader in İmralı prison. Both meetings were held and developed in parallel in a complimentary manner.

However, we did not cut off the meetings as you claim. You ask “why did you leave the negotiations and intensify the war?” You then claim that to this we reply “we left the negotiations because of the KCK operations”. Before everything else, I would like to say that I have never used a sentence like “we left the negotiations because of the KCK operations”; purely because we did not leave the negotiating table. What I did say is that the KCK operations were one of the main reasons as to why negotiations ended without a positive result. (...)

We are not an organisation that wants to fight or is in love with war or arms, we are not even an organisation that is seeking to attain its aspirations through the use of arms. We have removed the use of arms as means to revolution. According to us, the use of arms had fulfilled its duty in the 90s by putting the Kurdish question on the agenda. It is for this reason that the leader of our movement has made efforts solve this problem peacefully and we are working in parallel for such a solution. However, this is also a reality: there exists in the mountains an organised armed force that have formed their own system beginning in 1984 and systematically developing from 1999 onwards. This force consists of thousands of fighters does not consist of a few hundred people as is the case in the examples of the IRA and ETA. The existence of this force is one of the realities of the Kurdish question; we, however, on the grounds of a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question, have openly stated that we are open to reorganising this force. The solution of the Kurdish question and the guerrilla forces are closely tied to one and other. Those who are incapable of perceiving this reality will be unable to develop a plausible solution. This force has taken to the mountains for freedom, it has not suffered defeat, but rather it has succeeded in spreading its struggle to millions. You cannot expect such a force to just dissolve itself. Only in the case of a peaceful solution can this force be incorporated into social life. This is only possible through dialogue and societal reconciliation. (...)

You claim that just as the state was about to fulfil the demands of the Kurdish people we ruined everything. We are not the side who restarted the war. In Sirnak-Guclukonak on the 14th of March in 2011, in Bingol-Adakli on the 18th of March, in Hatay-Hassa on the 1st of April, in Maras Pazarcik on the 20th of April, in Dersim-Pulumur on the 27th of April, in Sirnak-Uludere on the 15th of May and in Sivas-Imranli on the 14th of May 49 of our friends were martyred as a result of the state’s military operations. At the time, these friends of ours were not conducting any military activities and were only active in fulfilling daily needs, required to stay alive. They were murdered – most of them through means outlawed in international law (chemical weapons etc.) – by the state that you claim was about fulfil the demands of the Kurdish people. Even the clash in Silvan was born out of a military offensive conducted by the Turkish army to annihilate our guerrillas. However, in a clash not only one side always suffers losses, sometimes the other side can suffer heavy losses too. This is what happened in Silvan.

However, the AKP government, who had already decided a year ago to eradicate our movement, used the Silvan incident as an excuse. If this was not the planned route, then an agreement would not have been struck with Iran during the winter months and large budgets would not be decided upon for plans to form a special army and police force.

It is true that the KCK operations had started on the 14th of April 2009. You ask me “why did you leave the negotiations now and not two years ago?” I must first state that the delegation that we were meeting was claiming that they too were against the political operations against Kurdish politicians and were trying

to bring an end to them. They were even saying that when the court cases began the prisoners would be freed in gradual stages. However, what actually happened was that when the cases began the prisoners were not even allowed to defend themselves in Kurdish let alone be allowed to walk free. On top of this, the political operations continued.

If the state had the intention of freeing the Kurdish politicians why are they making such an issue out of defending themselves in their mother tongue? Was it really so difficult to solve this problem? Is it not a contradiction that on the one hand you claim to have wanted to solve the question through political means but on the other hand you are imprisoning the very people who are the political force behind the solution as members of the KCK?

Other than what I have already stated, the main reason as to why the negotiations ended was that the protocols for a solution presented to the Prime Minister was not accepted by him and left unanswered (The delegation of the state had asked Öcalan on İmralı and the PKK in Oslo for a preparation of a protocol which was subsequently prepared Mr. Öcalan). If the state, as you claim, had stated that they were going to “give autonomy, language rights and free Öcalan” then surely at the very least it would have stopped its military operations and not a single bullet would have been fired. I must say that the first time I had heard the above mentioned pledges was from you. It is true that these demands are in the protocol. However, although the delegation that we met did not approach these demands in a negative manner, the government itself did not even see the need to reply to these demands and even more to the contrary sharpened its language against us.

I do not know if you do not follow or watch the developments. When the process entered an impasse, our leader Apo, in his meeting with his solicitors on the 18th of July, said “the Prime Minister can make a call; if he says that ‘we do not believe that this problem can be solved by the use of arms. We are going to solve this problem through a democratic constitution’ then we can solve this problem in a week”. Did you not hear this call? Of course you must have heard it. It is obvious that you behave as if you haven’t heard it because it does not suit your calculations. I do not say this to you personally, but to all those who blame us on this issue. Did our leader make these statements on behalf of our organisation or not? It is certain he did because they are published documents. Well then, was their any statement of intent in response to our leaders statement from the Turkish Prime Minister, or anyone related to the government for that matter. No. Instead the government was using strong language in indicating it will crush terrorism. Did you not watch this either? It is at this point that I would like to remind you of the language that AKP representatives were using regarding the crisis of the elected MPs in prison. In short, when we look at this process as a whole we see that no mentality of a solution was developed by the state or the AKP. Let alone fundamental pledges for “autonomy, language rights and the freedom of our leader Apo”, not even soft messages were being given. (...)

Mr. Altan, some of the writers at your newspaper, people whose names I do not even want to mention, are constantly trying to show that we restarted the war by apparently quoting some of the speeches made by our friends as a way to clear the AKP by distorting the truth. I know I have written too long but I must clarify this point: At every juncture in history, the Kurdish people have always been deceived by states. This has almost become fate. So much so, that when I was a child I had heard the village elders say that “even if the state is a donkey, still do not ride it”. Another example may be the words of Seyit Riza before he was hanged during the uprising of Dersim which we will never forget, “I could not cope with your deceit may this be a lesson to me, but I did not kneel down to you and may that be a nuisance to you”. These words are the words of experience but at the same time are the reminders of the fact that the Kurdish people have always been deceived by states.

I am not arguing that the state is deceiving us now; because for the first time in their history, the Kurdish people have a leader and organisation that will not be deceived and mislead. We knew that the state did not possess a mentality for solution but saw that the delegation had intended to put effort in towards this end. We knew that we also had the responsibility of developing this mentality in the state and this is what we tried to do. We continued to stay at the negotiation table despite many of the promises that

had been given to us not being fulfilled. However, as the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, from the lessons we have learnt from the past, were always prepared for the possibility of this being another manoeuvre intended to eradicate our movement. We were fully sincere in our quest for a peaceful solution but were also weary of a hostile approach.

Mr. Altan, as you are aware, the Kurdish question is a fundamental problem of the Republic. There is a need for a political will and a historical leadership for the solution of the problem to materialise. It is certain that this type of leader must take huge risks while walking the path he or she believes is the path to the peaceful future of its people. The Prime Minister took such risks in order to win the elections. The Prime Minister's perspective consists of certain reforms to please the Kurds in order to tie them to his party... he wanted the 2009 local elections to be conducted in a peaceful atmosphere and we ensured that this was the case. Then it became important for the Prime Minister to secure a peaceful atmosphere for the referendum on the 12th of September, this was realised too. He may not have particularly liked our stance on the referendum topic but his main concern was military inactivity. In order to succeed in the 12th of June elections, there had to be a peaceful atmosphere, this too was provided. The ceasefire was ongoing from the referendum and continued through to the elections, despite us suffering casualties in the spring. However, the Prime Minister wrote all these down as his own successes. He disregarded our leader's efforts and our movement's efforts in securing the above mentioned details. He thought these all came about from the success of his witty foresight. Finally, after the elections on the 12th of June, he put into action his real plan. This is what happened. If you really want to know the truth, here it is.

(...) The Prime Minister is hoping for us to take a step backwards and is deploying the massive military might in his power because he thinks he can achieve this. I know very well that he has been working tirelessly for the past two years to acquire technological weaponry, such as unmanned planes for assassination, in order to have us assassinated. I am asking you: why would someone that is apparently in a quest for a peaceful solution be in the hunt for such technologically advanced weapons of assassination?

(...) The AKP government by isolating our leader, deploying military offensives against our movement and conducting political operations against Kurdish politicians is aiming to intimidate and suppress the movement. In the Prime Minister's words he is aiming to marginalise us in this way. This is a comprehensive project that the state has been working on for the past year or so. It is no coincidence that many media representatives close to the government kept giving the Tamil's as an example. However, as soon as Iran's ill advised attempt in Kandil faltered, the Turkish Prime Minister made statements rejecting the Tamil example.

(...) This is why we are insisting that: there is no more need to shed more blood. If you continue to suppress this people, they will begin to look for alternatives. However, our primary preference is a voluntary and free union. This is why, just as Mr. Hasan Cemal says, even if this war continues for decades, the eventual destination will be the negotiating table. It is now clearly evident that the opposing forces cannot eradicate one or the other through war. This is why no one should force the other to degrade or dishonour itself. We must solve this problem through mutual respect. This problem is not a problem of terrorism, it is a social problem. We are ready for a peaceful solution on these grounds, but we as the PKK, or any honourable Kurd for that matter, cannot accept dishonour and annihilation.

(...) We are hoping to solve this problem through peace, not war. This is our strategy. When we say this, the first thing we hear is "then leave your weapons and declare a ceasefire". Until today we have declared eight ceasefires but all have been dismissed. If the state wants to solve the Kurdish question peacefully, then the Prime Minister must respond to the call made by our leader Apo. In order to secure a permanent peace our leader must be given the necessary opportunity to do so through a "healthy, secure and free" atmosphere and then this problem will be solved within a week".

Annex III: The revolution in Syria and in Western Kurdistan (Rojava)

The peace process in Turkey cannot be separated from developments in other parts of Kurdistan and the Middle East. Any development, whether positive or negative, directly impacts the peace process. The Turkish state continues to oppose any positive developments in the rest of Kurdistan on the grounds that they will inspire its Kurdish population. This can easily be seen in Syria where the Turkish state secretly supports Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, both logistically and militarily. In return for its support of rebels, Turkey demands that the Syrian National Coalition not recognise the Kurds. The British magazine, *The Economist*, wrote in October 2013 that the subject with the greatest potential to derail the peace process between the Turkish government and Abdullah Öcalan is government support for the Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups fighting the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) in northern Syria, also called Western Kurdistan or Rojava.³⁰

It has been three years since the uprising started in Syria, and it seems that its fate will determine the destiny of the Middle East. Although it appears to be a war between the Baath regime and an armed opposition, the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey and many European states have become involved. Some of these states are supporting the regime, while others are backing the opposition – causing the war to drag on, and leading to tens of thousands of people dying, millions fleeing and Syria being destroyed. Hatred among various peoples and inter-faith violence grows by the day. Since the beginning, however, the Kurds have insisted that they prefer peaceful methods for solving the current problems, and refuse to side with either the regime or the opposition, because neither recognises the Kurdish people’s natural and democratic rights. All contacts between the Kurdish people and the opposition have come to nought because of the latter’s chauvinist demeanour.

In an interview with the Turkish daily newspaper *Taraf*, Veysel Ayhan stated:

When the initial movements began against Bashar Assad in Syria, Turkey was saying that it was prepared to support the rightful demands of the people of Syria. Today there are regions that are being governed by the Syrian National Council (SNC). Funnily enough, we are not demanding the abolishment of these administrations, yet we are calling for the disbandment of the administrations in the Kurdish regions. We are opposing the autonomous administrations established in the Kurdish regions, yet we are not demanding anything similar for the administrations in the Sunni Arab regions. We do not say that Arabs “should not form autonomous regions”. Syria is home to Christians, Alawites and Druse. Maybe an autonomous Alawite region will be formed. If the Alawites and the Druse say, “[W]e will form an autonomous region” will Turkey also oppose them?³¹

The Kurds have distanced themselves from both violent sides, preferring their own ‘Third Way’, which proposes fair representation of all peoples and identities within a unitary Syria; it welcomes a diplomatic solution, regards no one as an enemy and seeks only to defend itself against external hostilities. It works for the application of the democratic autonomy project founded on the principle of the peoples’ shared destiny. The Kurds have chosen an alternative that foresees a joint future, not only for ethnic groups such as Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Chechens and Turcomans, but also for religious identities such as Christian, Muslim, Yezidi, Sunni and Alawite. The Kurds did not take part in the war and only organised themselves both socially and militarily to defend their regions. On 19 July 2012, the Kurdish People’s Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) stormed government buildings in the Kurdish city Kobanê³² and forced government forces to leave the city. The city administration fled without a fight, and the town was handed over to the People’s Assembly of Western Kurdistan (MGRK). The same later happened in

³⁰ Online at <http://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiye-el-kaideye-destegi-surdururse-cozum-sureci-raydan-cikar/241147>

³¹ Online at www.taraf.com.tr/nese-duzel/makale-veysel-ayhan-kurtler-ucuncu-yolu-tercih-etti.htm

³² Kobanê is a city in West Kurdistan on the Turkish border with only Kurdish inhabitants.

two other Kurdish border towns, Efrîn and Cizrê: both towns were ceded to the people. What has now gone down in Kurdish history as the ‘Revolution of Western (*Rojava*) Kurdistan’ has consolidated Kurdish aspirations: The Kurds have reinforced their autonomy and organised themselves in a bottom-up fashion – from civil organisations for doctors, engineers, teachers and youth, as well as trade unions and women’s assemblies, to general assemblies. They have also formed economic committees. Now the Kurds want to be granted political status, or at the very least, want the areas they defend and control to be recognised.

It would be useful to take a look at the history of the situation to better understand the current circumstances and the feasibility of the Kurdish project.

Syria was formed as a result of the 1921 London Agreement between France and the Kemalist administration. As a consequence of this agreement, a border was drawn between the Kurds of the North and the Kurds of the southwest: the former group was ruled by Turkey, the latter by the French mandate power in (Arab) Syria.

The nearly three million Kurds living in Syria were never granted citizenship by the Baath regime. The Kurds mostly live in the Cezîre, Kobanê and Efrîn regions, sandwiched between North Kurdistan (Turkey) and South Kurdistan (Iraq), with a 700-km-long border with Turkey. Familial relations exist between the Kurds in Syria and the Kurds in Turkey, despite the border that runs right through the centre of some cities. Artificial borders have not prevented the Kurds from maintaining cross-border relationships.



Source: <http://guncelyorum-canadil.blogspot.fr/p/bat-kurdistanrojava-devrimi.html>.

When the Baath Party seized power in Syria in 1963, the situation of the Kurds took a turn for the worse. The Baathists singled out the Kurds from the Cezîre region, seeing them as a potential threat, and adopted a policy of displacing them and repopulating the region with Arabs; this was the beginning of the ‘Arab Belt’.³³ The Baath Party even went as far as forcefully seizing land from the Kurds and handing it over to the new Arab settlers, forcing tens of thousands of Kurds to flee to Aleppo and Damascus. Furthermore, the regime made it illegal for Kurds to use Kurdish in school and refused to grant them citizenship or passports; the Kurds became an oppressed, stateless minority. They could neither buy land nor attend university.³⁴

Despite oppressing the Kurdish people, the Baath regime always turned a blind eye to Kurdish

³³ The ‘Arab Belt’ is the name of the policy of arabising the Kurdish regions. Since 1963, the Baath Party, under the slogan ‘Protecting the Arabness of Cezîre’, began to move Syrian Arabs to the Cezîre region. See <http://guernica.tv/rojavad-savas-ve-devrim/>. For example, the town of Til Ebyad, located between Cezîre and Kobanê, now populated by both Kurds and Arabs, is part of the Arab Belt. It has been controlled by the terrorist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) since March 2013.

³⁴ See www.zaman.com.tr/yorum_suriyede-kurtlerin-kalbini-kazanma-mucadelesi_1247081.html

leaders residing in Syria, a stance that had to do with Syria’s problems with Iraq and Turkey: it saw Kurdish organisations as useful bargaining chips against neighbouring states. This is why many Kurdish organisations that were unable to get established in neighbouring countries settled in Syria and why the Kurds of Rojava Kurdistan have always been close to the centre of Kurdish politics and been able to remain active throughout the years. The PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, lived in Syria between 1979 and 1998, when the PKK was founded, and led the PKK armed struggle and mass mobilisations from Syria. According to PKK records, thousands of Kurds from Rojava Kurdistan have joined the PKK. The PYD, which adopted Öcalan’s ideology and projects, is the most widely supported party in Rojava. The People’s Assembly of Western Kurdistan (*Meclîsa Gelê Rojavaya Kurdistan*, MGRK) and the National Assembly of Syrian Kurdistan (*Encumena Niştîmaniya Kurdên Sûriyeyê*, ENKS) signed the Erbil Agreement forming the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC) on 24 July 2012, in Qamishlo, the largest Rojavan city. The KSC carries out military, civilian and political work. On 21 January 2014, the KSC declared the Kurdish cantons – inspired by the Swiss model – to be autonomous, in a step towards democratic autonomy. The Turkish daily newspaper *Milliyet* announced this news on 18 February 2014:

*The Autonomous Rojava Legislative Assembly declared that it had divided the region into three cantons which are Cezîre, Kobanê and Efrîn. Each canton will form its own autonomous administration. The Legislative Assembly accepted the Social Contract. According to this, the four pillars of the new system are the Canton system, the Legislative Assembly, Administration, Justice and the Supreme Election Council. The Legislative Assembly, as the representative of the Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chechens and Armenians, see Rojava Kurdistan as an integral part of a future decentralised Syria.*³⁵

Kurds from Rojava Kurdistan, who regard themselves as part of a democratic Syria, must fight against regime forces and Al-Qaeda-affiliated Salafist groups such as *Jabhat Al-Nusra* (formed in July 2011 as the initially-unofficial Syrian wing of Al-Qaeda in Iraq) and ISIS. Kurdish military forces of the YPG and the Women’s Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ) have successfully repelled these Salafist organisations, although it has reportedly cost the lives of some 600 Kurdish fighters. The Salafists aim to establish an Islamic state in the Kurdish regions. According to the news portal *ntvmsnbc.com*: “[A] general of the Free Syrian Army ... stated that Al-Qaeda is beginning to implement an Islamic state in the north of the country”.³⁶ Considering the aspirations of these organisations and the Syrian regime, it is clear that the Kurdish people have their work cut out for them. The KSC was not invited to the second Geneva Conference held on 22 January 2014. But the Kurds insist that they are not hostile to anyone and just want to live freely among all the peoples of a democratic Syria. For the peace process to succeed in Turkey (North Kurdistan), the Turkish state must change its attitude towards Rojava Kurdistan. Öcalan has always stated that the Turkish state should adopt a more friendly approach to the Kurds of Rojava Kurdistan. To assure stability in the Middle East, the status of the Kurds of Rojava must be recognised.

³⁵ Online at <http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/suriyeli-kurtlerden-ozerklik-ilani/gundem/detay/1825157/default.htm>

³⁶ Online at www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/25455209/

Annex IV: CHRONOLOGY

From the PKK to the KCK

- 1973** Abdullah Öcalan, a sympathiser of the leftist movement in Turkey, meets with a few of his friends to discuss the need to organise independently.
- 1977** After Hakki Karer, a leading member of the group, is murdered the PKK is formed.
- 1978** In the Kurdish city of Maraş, fascists encouraged by the Turkish state massacre one thousand Alevis. Prior to the attack the homes of Alevi citizens were marked. Öcalan's group gains mass support. State-backed feudal landowners begin to attack the group, and both sides suffer heavy casualties – especially in the region of Hilvan–Siverek. **26–28 November:** The PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) is officially founded.
- 1980** **12 September:** A military coup is staged; the prime minister, leader of the opposition, government ministers and tens of thousands of people are imprisoned. Many prisoners are sentenced to death and most of the sentences are carried out. The Army chief who led the coup then drafts a new fascist constitution and declares himself president.
- 1980-1984** Abdullah Öcalan and a few other PKK cadres go to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon (under Palestinian control) for political and military education.
- 1981** **22–27 September:** The First Congress of the PKK is held.
- 1982** **21 March:** One of the founders of the PKK, Mazlum Doğan, commits suicide to protest the treatment suffered by prisoners in Diyarbakir Prison. On the Kurdish holiday of *Newroz*, traditionally celebrated with bonfires, he lights three matchsticks, calling on the Kurdish people to revolt, then hangs himself.
- 17 May:** Four PKK prisoners (Ferhat Kurtay, Eşref Anyık, Mahmut Zengin and Necmi Öner) hold hands and burn themselves alive to protest their inhumane treatment in Diyarbakir Prison.
- 14 July:** PKK prisoners in Diyarbakir announce that they are going to fast to death. This is a turning point in Kurdish politics; a death fast is being conducted for the first time on Kurdish lands. The leading cadres of the PKK, Hayri Durmuş, Kemal Pir, Ali Çiçek and Akif Yılmaz, die in September. Witnesses relate, "There was a battle of wills there. That battle was won by those people who put their lives on the line for a people".
- 20–25 August:** The PKK's Second Congress is held near the Turkish–Jordanian border. Major decisions are taken on such issues as returning to Kurdistan, cooperating with leftist movements, undertaking diplomatic activities, establishing military and political organisations, and Abdullah Öcalan's continued leadership.
- 25 August:** The Kurdistan Liberation Forces (HRK) are formed. Öcalan states that the only response to the struggle in Diyarbakir Prison is to step up the struggle.
- Kurdish artists in Europe form HUNERKOM, a cultural organisation (now known as 'TEVCAND').
- 1983** In the first elections since the military coup, Turgut Özal is elected prime minister of Turkey. (He later becomes president and in 1993 initiates a dialogue with the PKK.)
- 1984** **16 August:** Under Mahsum Korkmaz's command, the PKK launches its guerrilla war by attacking Turkish army bases. The state first claims that this was carried out by a few bandits; later it is obvious that this was not so.
- 1985** The Turkish state begins to understand that it needs help to cope with the PKK and forms a militia called the 'village guards'.
- 21 March:** The National Liberation Front of Kurdistan (ERNK) is formed in Kurdistan and later opens diplomatic bureaus in many European countries.

- 1986** **28 February:** When the Swedish Prime Minister is assassinated, the Turkish state and Swedish intelligence service seek to blame the PKK in order to criminalise the organisation in Europe. Swedish intelligence later admits that the PKK was not involved.
28 March: Commander Mahsum Korkmaz (‘Agit’) is shot in the back and is killed. This represents a major setback for the organisation. The People’s Liberation Army of Kurdistan (ARGK) is formed in his remembrance.
25–30 October: The PKK holds its 3rd Congress, which is remembered as bringing ideological clarity to the PKK, in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.
- 1987** A state of emergency that gives the regional governor all authority is declared in Kurdish towns.
 Women take interest in the struggle and their numbers increase. A meeting with 2,000 female delegates is organised in Cologne, Germany; the Kurdistan Patriotic Women’s Association (YJKW) is formed. The name is later changed to the Kurdistan Women’s Freedom Movement (TAJK).
 The Union of Kurdish Youth (YCK) is formed (now called TECAK).
- 1988** The German government begins police operations against the PKK in February. Leading cadres are arrested and tried in what is later called the Düsseldorf Case. (Duran Kalkan and Ali Haydar Kaytan are released from prison in 1993.)
- 1989** **21 March:** The first mass Newroz celebrations take place. Despite being forbidden, thousands of people attend and are attacked – many are killed – by Turkish security forces.
- 1990** **26–31 December:** The PKK holds its 4th Congress in the mountains of Kurdistan. At this congress, it is decided that guerrillas should aim to control land.
- 1991–1992** State-backed counter-insurgency forces start to carry out extra-judicial killings. Eventually, more than 17,000 people are eliminated, including human-rights activist, Vedat Aydın, 74-year-old Kurdish intellectual Musa Anter, MP Mehmet Sincer and Kurdish businessmen, Behçet Canturk and Savaş Buldan.
- 1992** **21 March:** *Newroz* celebrations are again attacked by state forces. More than 100 people die in the towns of Cizre, Şirnak and Nusaybin.
May: The first Kurdish daily newspaper ‘*Ozgur Gundem*’ is founded; bombs kill 13 employees in its offices.
May: Elections are held for the Kurdistan National Assembly (in Iraq), with a turnout of 90,000 voters. Delegates are elected from Kurdistan and Europe.
 The Turkish state – with US backing and 300,000 soldiers – conduct a cross-border military operation against 10,000 guerrillas in Iraqi Kurdistan. NATO forces fight the PKK for the first time.
 Kurds living in Germany organise a Kurdish Cultural Festival that is attended by 60,000 people.
- 1993** **20 March:** The PKK declares a unilateral ceasefire in response to a call from Turkish President Turgut Özal.
 The German state bans the PKK and its activities and closes down 34 Kurdish centres.
- 1995** **8–27 January:** In Kurdistan the PKK conducts its 5th Congress, during which the PKK’s programme and flag are changed.
8 March: Female guerrillas congregate in the Medya Defence Region’s Metina area and in a meeting with 200 delegates (and no men) announce the formation of their autonomous ‘Free Women’s Union of Kurdistan (YAJK)’. In 1999 some 300 women meet and change the YAJK’s name to the ‘Kurdistan Women Worker’s Party (PJKK)’.
 The PKK signs the Geneva Convention, promising to abide by internationally agreed rules of war.

The Kurdish Parliament in Exile (PKDW) is formed and the first Kurdish TV station (Med-TV) goes on air.

The PKK announces a second unilateral ceasefire.

- 1996** Failed attempt to assassinate Abdullah Öcalan in the city of Sam. The PKK resumes hostilities against the Turkish state.
- 1998** **8 March:** PKK leader Öcalan presents his perspectives on women's struggle as the 'Woman's Liberation Ideology'.
- 1999** **1 September:** The PKK declares a third unilateral ceasefire.
- 1999** **15 February:** The international conspiracy that had forced Öcalan out of Syria on 9 October 1998 eventually delivers him to Turkish officials in Nairobi, Kenya.
- January** The PKK holds its 6th Congress in Kurdistan. Öcalan's capture is announced during the Congress, and the congress participants declare an all-out struggle.
- 24–26 May:** The Kurdistan National Congress (Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan, KNK) is formed in Amsterdam.
- 1999–2000** Öcalan's trial begins on İmralı Island. He is sentenced to death but the ECHR intervenes to prevent the sentence being carried out. Öcalan announces strategic changes and advises the PKK to pull its armed forces out of Turkey. It does.
- 2000** **23 January:** The People's Defence Force (HPG) is established as part of the PKK's strategic transition with a military strategy based on self-defence.
- 2002** **May:** The EU lists the PKK as a 'terrorist organisation', strengthening the hand of the Turkish state just when the PKK had declared that it would quit active war. The decision of the EU strikes a blow to peace.
- 4–10 April:** The PKK dissolves itself and forms the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK).
- 2003** **27 October – 6 November:** KADEK is replaced by the People's Congress (Kongra-Gel), open to all people, not just cadres, and presided by a civilian.
- 2004** The PKK declares that it is going to concentrate on ideological activities and not deal with administrative matters.
- The Party of Free Women (PJA) changes its name to the Kurdistan Women's Liberation Party (PAJK). The leading ideological party in the Kurdish women's revolution, its programme focuses on free life, free women, free men and society, and militant leadership.
- 2005** **17 May:** The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) is established as a result of Öcalan's theories. Representing Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan, it is run by an executive council.
- 2006** **7–18 April:** The establishment of the High Women's Council (KJB) strengthens the Kurdish women's movement.
- October:** The KCK declares a ceasefire at the request of government circles. However, the Turkish Armed Forces immediately launch military operations.
- 2007** Indirect dialogue between the Turkish state and the PKK is initiated by intermediaries in Oslo.
- 2009–2011** Öcalan meets regularly with the same Turkish delegation that meets with PKK officials in Oslo and agrees to write a roadmap for peace. However, the state confiscates the roadmap and only releases it 14 months later.

- 2011** Öcalan prepares a protocol requested by the Turkish government delegation. He presents it to the PKK, which accepts it; he then presents it to the government, which leaves it unanswered and continues with its usual persecution and suppression.
September: A Turkish news agency releases audio recordings of failed peace talks secretly held in Oslo between the MIT and senior PKK officials.
October: Kurdish rebels kill 24 Turkish soldiers in one of the deadliest attacks for years.
December: Thirty-four civilians are killed in a botched Turkish airstrike in Roboski near the Iraqi border. **September:** Hundreds of imprisoned Kurds launch a hunger strike, demanding language rights and better prison conditions for Öcalan.
- 2012** **December:** Ankara acknowledges nascent peace talks between the MIT and Öcalan with the goal of disarming
January: Two Kurdish lawmakers pay a landmark visit to Öcalan in prison.
- 2013** Three Kurdish activists, including PKK co-founder Sakine Cansız, are shot dead in Paris.
23 February: A second delegation of Kurdish lawmakers visits Öcalan in prison as part of the new peace efforts.
13 March: Kurdish rebels free eight Turkish prisoners in response to the peace push.
21 March: Öcalan calls for a ceasefire in a letter issued to mark the Kurdish New Year, telling militants to lay down their arms and leave Turkey.

A history of banned and reformed legal Kurdish parties

- 1990** **7 October:** The People’s Labour Party (HEP) is founded by 15 Kurdish MPs from the Social Democratic People’s Party (SHP) of Turkey who were kicked out for attending a Kurdish conference in Paris.
- 1991** The HEP wins 18 seats in general elections.
- 1992** The Constitutional Court bans the HEP. The Freedom and Democracy Party (OZDEP) is formed to replace it. Soon after, the court also bans OZDEP.
- 1993** **7 May:** With the HEP case ongoing, the Democracy Party (DEP) is formed.
- 1993** **July:** The Constitutional Court outlaws the HEP; all its MPs join the DEP.
- 1994** **2 March:** Kurdish MPs Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, Ahmet Turk, Sırrı Sakık and Mahmut Alınak lose their diplomatic immunity and are tried in the State Security Courts. They are sentenced to a total of 895 years.
16 June: The DEP is banned. Most Kurds boycott the local elections.
May The People’s Democracy Party (HADEP) is founded under the leadership of Murat Bozlak.
- 1995** **24 December:** HADEP takes part in the general elections in a coalition with a few leftist parties, but falling short of the 10% election threshold, is not represented in Parliament.
October: The Democratic People’s Party (DEHAP) is formed under the leadership of Tuncer Bakırhan.
- 1999** **18 April:** DEHAP wins no seats in Parliament due to the 10% threshold, but wins 37 local councils in the local elections.
- 2003** **13 March:** HADEP is banned by the state and 46 of its activists are banned from politics. HADEP was the longest lasting legal Kurdish party. Threatened by banning efforts, DEHAP dissolves itself.
- 2005** The Democratic Society Party (DTP) is founded and wins 69 local councils. It introduces the co-chair system to Turkish politics: Ahmet Turk and Aysel Tuğluk are appointed.

- 2007** **22 July:** The DTP decides to participate in general elections by running independent candidates in an effort to pass the threshold: it wins 22 seats in Parliament.
- 2008** **May:** The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) is founded
- 2009** **November:** A case is opened against the DTP. The party wins 99 local councils.
11 December: The Constitutional Court bans the DTP and expels Ahmet Turk and Aysel Tuğluk from Parliament.
- 2010** The DTP MPs join the BDP. Kurds boycott a referendum on amending the constitution because no amendments aim to solve the Kurdish question.
- 2011** **12 June:** The BDP takes part in the general elections by supporting independent candidates through the 'Labour, Democracy and Freedom' bloc. The party wins 36 seats in Parliament (including six imprisoned candidates who are not released).

Annex V: Map of Kurdistan



Source: www.kurdica.com/News-sid-Sprachen-in-Kurdistan-767.html