

# The long struggle of the Kurds

Memet Uludag

A member of an oppressor nation must be “indifferent” to whether small nations belong to his state or to a neighbouring state, or to themselves, according to where their sympathies lie [...] to be an internationalist one must not think only of one’s own nation, but place above it the interests of all nations, their common liberty and equality.<sup>1</sup>

As one of the major political conflicts in the Middle-East, the Kurdish struggle has dominated the recent history of the region, spreading across the modern day countries of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran; and yet, little is known about the origins or the historical-political journey of the Kurds.

For centuries, the Kurds have lived in the region known as Kurdistan. Throughout their history, they have remained mostly under the rule of various empires and today under the regimes of modern day states. Since the early 20th century, the region of Kurdistan has been divided between Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, all of which have repressed their Kurdish minorities in various ways. Today, the Kurds, whose number is estimated to be around 40 million, are the largest ethnic group in the world without their own nation. They are not represented in any international body, such as the UN, European Council or the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, nor do they have minority rights; with the exception of Southern Kurdistan (Northern Iraq) where an autonomous Kurdish administration exists.

In this article we will be focussing on the recent political history of the Kurdish struggle with particular emphasis on the struggle of the Kurds in Turkey, but to have a more complete picture, it is worth delving a little

into the history of the Kurds.



A map of Kurdistan

## A brief history of the Kurds

The first question which comes to mind is that of the origins of the Kurds. Who are the Kurds and where do they come from?

Historians generally agree to consider them as belonging to the Iranian branch of the large family of Indo-European races. In 7th century BCE, the Medes founded an empire which, in 612 BCE (Before the Current/Christian Era), conquered the powerful Assyria and spread its domination through the whole of what is now modern Iran as well as central Anatolia. The date 612, is moreover, considered by [some] Kurdish nationalists as the beginning of the 1st Kurdish year.<sup>2</sup>

The political reign of the Medes came to an end by the end of the 6th century BCE, but the Kurds continued to exist in the region and their fate has remained linked to

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Discussion On Self-Determination Summed Up’, V. I. Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 22

<sup>2</sup> *A brief survey of The History of the Kurds*, Kendal Nezan, President of the Kurdish Institute of Paris

that of the other populations of the empires which succeeded one another, until and including the current nation states of the region. During the 7th century, the Kurdish tribes were conquered by the Arabs and converted to Islam. In the second half of the 10th century Kurdistan was divided into 4 big Kurdish principalities. Around 1150, Sultan Sandjar of the Seljuks annexed these principalities and created a Seljuk province from Kurdistan. During the 12th and 13th centuries, Kurdistan as a recognized geographical entity saw the blossoming of art and written literature in the Kurdish language. In the second half of the 15th century the Kurdish country was recovering from the effects of the Turko-Mongolian invasions and taking the form of an autonomous entity, united by its language but politically split into a series of principalities.

At the beginning of the 16th century, Kurdistan became the main stake in the rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Safavid Dynasty. Caught between two giant powers, the politically split Kurds had no chance of surviving as an independent entity. Confronted with either being annexed by Persia or formally accepting the supremacy of the Ottoman sultan, in exchange for very wide autonomy, the Kurdish leaders opted for the latter.

The Ottomans controlled some strategic parts of Kurdish land, but the rest of the country was governed by Kurdish lords. Despite imperial interferences from time to time, this particular status quo, to the general satisfaction and benefit of both the Kurds and the Ottomans, functioned without any major problem until the beginning of the 19th century. The Ottomans, protected by the powerful Kurdish barrier against Persia, were able to concentrate their forces on other fronts. As for the Kurds,

they were virtually independent in the management of their affairs.<sup>3</sup>

## **19th century: Kurds in the Ottoman Empire and the rising of Turkish nationalism**

During the latter part of the 19th century the Ottoman Empire was confronted by various nationalist movements, where minorities in the empire - especially in the European parts - aspired to the creation of their own nation states. The ever weakening empire also gave rise to a pan-Turkish ideology among the powerful ruling Turkish elite, with the aim of creating a Turkish state, stretching from the Balkans to the Middle-East. The period between the late 19th century and the end of the 1st World War also saw numerous attempts by the Kurds to establish a unified and independent Kurdistan. These mostly isolated and regional revolts against the central government were harshly defeated by the empire. There were many reasons for these defeats, one being the on-going political divide amongst the Kurds themselves.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, in August 1920 the Treaty of Sèvres between the Allies and the Ottomans concluded with the agreement to create a Kurdish state on part of the territory of Kurdistan. This agreement was never implemented.

Up until the victory over the Greeks in Anatolia (Turkey), the Turkish commander and leader Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) had promised the creation of a Muslim state of Turks and Kurds. However, after this war with Greece, at the conference in Lausanne in 1923, the Turkish delegation signed a new treaty which invalidated the Treaty of Sèvres without giving the Kurds any guarantees, independence or ethnic recognition. The new treaty annexed a vast majority of Kurdistan to the newly established Turkish state.

In the same period of the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, Syrian Kurdistan was an-

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, para 12

nexed to Syria in 1921 as part of the Franco-Turkish agreement, and placed under the French mandate (approved by the League of Nations, the forerunner of the UN). Similarly, Great Britain, despite Kurdish attempts for an independent state, obtained the annexation of Mosul province with Iraq and placed it under its mandate. This was done with the promise of setting up an autonomous regional Kurdish government. This promise was not kept by the British, or the Iraqi governments. Meanwhile, Iranian Kurdistan was under the control of the Persian central government.

By the end of 1925 Kurdistan was divided into 4 regions between 4 different states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. For the first time in their long history, the people of Kurdistan were completely deprived of cultural, ethnic and linguistic autonomy. Kurds in each of the divided regions of Kurdistan have experienced a common, but also specific to each region, oppression.

The multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious Ottoman society was replaced by the project of the new Turkish nationalism, and indeed the nationalism of the other states that were now occupying different regions of Kurdistan. This meant the forced creation of a uniform Turkish nation. As a result of this project, which began during the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians, Assyrians and other ethnic groups were to suffer as well. One of the most notable events of the century in the region was the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

In an effort to draw behind them the Turkish and Kurdish speaking populations of the old Ottoman Empire, nationalist “Young Turk” officers organised the extermination of the great majority of the empire’s Armenian speakers.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, a prominent Kurdish politician effectively acknowledged and confirmed what

<sup>4</sup>‘The return of the national question’, Chris Harman, *International Socialism* Autumn 1992

<sup>5</sup>Pro-Kurdish party leader apologizes to Armenians for 1915 incidents, [www.hurriyet.com.tr](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr), *Hürriyet Daily News*

Chris Harman had written in 1992. An apology was issued for the fact that Kurdish groups were also involved in driving out the Armenians and Assyrians from their homeland. Ahmet Türk, an elected prominent Kurdish MP said

Maybe Kurds have contributed to the loss of this (cultural) richness. We are ashamed when we look at our Armenian or Assyrian brothers.<sup>5</sup>

With the new Turkish state the Kurds were to be oppressed but there were also Kurdish groups who took part in the oppression others. The Turkish nationalism that had presented itself as the defender of the land against the imperialist occupation had rapidly turned into an aggressive and contradictory nationalism that dismissed the existence of the Kurds and other ethnic groups.

## Kurds in Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey

The decades following the division of Kurdistan have seen numerous revolts and political struggles by the Kurds. Almost all of these have been brutally suppressed by the respective states:

As one of the largest minority groups in **Syria**, the Kurds have faced routine discrimination, harassment and persecution by the Syrian regime.

In 1962, twenty per cent of Syria’s Kurdish population were stripped of their Syrian citizenship. This was due to the regime’s fear that the Kurds were gaining political power and control of their region. In 2011 the number of non-citizen, stateless Kurds in Syria, living in un-

certainty, was estimated to be around 300,000<sup>6</sup>.

Today they are fighting for freedom against the dictatorial regime of Assad.

In **Iran**, Kurdish political organizations supported the revolution against the Shah, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. But the new regime was not a friend of the Kurdish minority and turned against them. The newly formed post-revolution Iranian government saw the Kurds, with their cross-border alliances and historic connections, as a threat to the new regime. Kurds were denied seats in the 'Assembly of Experts' in 1979 and they were deprived of their political rights under the new Iranian constitution. Despite some political concessions under President Khatami's government, Kurds were continuously oppressed and some Kurdish revolts for ethnic, linguistic and political rights were suppressed by military force. In 2008 Amnesty International published a detailed report on human rights abuses in Iran against the Kurds<sup>7</sup>. As the torture and execution of Kurdish political prisoners continues, the Kurdish Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) have taken up arms against the state.

The history of the Kurds in **Iraq** has been a history of internal and external oppression, chemical warfare, and international imperialist struggle for domination of the oil rich region. Between 1919 and 1922 Mahmud Barzanji, an influential Kurdish leader, formed a Kurdish government and led two revolts against British rule. Lasting until 1924, the revolts were defeated by the British army using aerial bombardments and chemical gas.

As Secretary of State at the War Office in 1919, Winston Churchill was enthusiastic about the prospects of 'using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes

[Kurds and Afghans]' and authorized the RAF Middle-East command to use chemical weapons 'against recalcitrant Arabs as an experiment,' dismissing objections by the India office as 'unreasonable' and deploring the 'squeamishness about the use of gas' [] chemical weapons are merely 'the application of Western science to modern warfare.'<sup>8</sup>

Further revolts for independent Kurdish rule were suppressed by the Iraqi regime with British support. The period beginning in the 1960's saw one of the most complex developments in the region. The military coup of 1958 enabled the Kurds to establish regional autonomy under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani but they were constantly attacked by the central Iraqi government. Until the Ba'athist coup in 1968 the Kurds enjoyed victories over the Iraqi army. With the Ba'ath Party in power and rising tensions between Iraq and Iran, the Soviet Union intervened in the region and forced a peace plan in 1970. In 1973 the US armed the Kurds with the help of the Shah of Iran, but, following the Algiers Pact between Iran and Iraq in 1975, the Kurds found themselves without any powerful external ally and Iraq continued the Arabization of the oil rich Kurdish region.

Towards the end of the Iraq-Iran war, the Iraqi regime, accusing the Kurds of aiding Iran, carried out a chemical gas attack in Halabja, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Kurds.

It was only after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 that Washington's concern for Kurdish rights suddenly reappeared -during the build-up to the last Gulf War. George Bush Sr. proclaimed that Saddam Hussein was the new

<sup>6</sup> *Syrias Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org), International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch,

<sup>7</sup> *Iran: Human rights abuses against the Kurdish minority*, Amnesty International Publications, 2008, Index: MDE 13/088/2008

<sup>8</sup> 'Rogue States', Noam Chomsky, *Z Magazine*, April, 1998

Hitler and said that the U.S. was fighting to free the Iraqi population. But at the end of the war, when Shia Muslims in the South and Kurds in the North rebelled against the regime, the US abandoned them - even permitting the Iraqi military to use helicopter gunships to crush the insurrections. Washington preferred a unified Iraq under Saddam to successful rebellions that would have split the country and strengthened Iran.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1990's the US played a double game with its ally Turkey and the Kurds in Iraq. This was during a time when, on one hand the US did not want to alienate Turkey by prohibiting Turkish operations against the Kurds, and on the other hand pretending to protect the Kurds from Saddam's attacks by declaring a no-fly zone'.

Iraqi Kurds supported the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the region has become the most prosperous part of the country due to oil revenues after the removal of Saddam's regime.

[Following the invasion of Iraq] the intensifying conflict [between Turkey and the Kurds] put Washington in a precarious spot. The US has sought to balance between placating Turkey, an important strategic ally in the region, and assuaging the pro-US Kurdish forces that play a central role in the federal government in Baghdad and run the relatively stable Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) zone in northern Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>'No More Blood For Oil, The West's long record of betrayal, Will a U.S. war free the Kurds?', [socialistworker.org](http://socialistworker.org), 2003

<sup>10</sup> 'U.S. allies square off, Washington's dangerous game with Turkey and the Kurds', By Aaron Hess, *International Socialist Review*, Issue 57, January/February 2008

<sup>11</sup> *Turkey's Kurdish Question*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998

The on-going fight in Iran by the Kurdish PJAK, which is reportedly supported by the US behind the scenes, the historic struggle of the Kurds and the on-going peace process, along with the ceasefire in Turkey by the Kurdistan Workers' Party; the fight in Syria by the Kurds against the Assad regime and the relatively well settled regional Kurdish government of Iraq makes the political situation in the whole region ever more complicated.

At this point we need to look into the Kurdish struggle in **Turkey** and the recent developments, in order to come to conclusions on the wider Kurdish question. The main player in the political and armed struggle of the Kurds in Turkey has historically been the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK - Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), under the leadership of the now imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan.

## **Kurdish struggle and the founding ideology of the Turkish state**

In the newly formed Turkish Republic of 1923:

If the Kurds expected equality in the management of the new state they were sorely disappointed, as the new regime quickly embraced everything it deemed modern, from a centralizing mission to a secular approach that was to bring it into line with contemporary values of the nation-building process of the period. The state also assumed a Turkish character through a process by which the Kemalist regime reinvented the Turkish 'ethnie'.<sup>11</sup>

İsmet İnönü, later to be Atatürk's successor and Turkey's second president, summa-

rized the official position of the state in 1925:

We are frankly [] nationalists and nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. Our duty is to turkify non-Turks in the Turkish homeland, no matter what happens. We will annihilate those elements that oppose Turks and Turkism. What we are looking for in those who are to serve the country is above all that they are Turkish and Turkist.<sup>12</sup>

In the constitution of 1924, the terms “citizenship” and “citizen” were defined as “Turkishness”. Constitutionally, one had to be a Turk to become a member of parliament. Kurds could qualify as “Turks”, only if they denied their own ethnic identity.

Here then the seeds for eventual Kurdish dissatisfaction were planted: In a state now officially defined as “Turkish” the Kurds were not Turks, and only by giving up their ethnicity could they be treated as Turks. It is clear that the leaders of the Kemalist regime perceived un-integrated, un-turkified Kurds as both a backward element and a potential threat to the integrity of the modern state they were intent on constructing.<sup>13</sup>

With the exodus of Greeks and the population exchanges between Turkey and Greece that followed the establishment of the republic in 1923, the Kurds became the single largest unrecognised minority with the potential to challenge the state. In fact, Kurdish resistance to the extension of Ankara’s political,

economic, social, and cultural role had already begun in the early days of the republic.

Turkey’s key internal conflict centres on the role of its large Kurdish minority - ethnically and linguistically distinct - in a state that constitutionally consists only of “citizens of Turkey” -Turks - with no ethnic distinctions drawn.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey’s Kurdish population represent about fifty per cent of the Kurds in the Middle-East. The Kurdish question in Turkey is not only an internal but also an international question due the fact that they are divided across international borders. Therefore, the aspirations of a people in one country directly affect the aspirations and actions of the minority across the border.

There were many Kurdish revolts against the Turkish Republic since its foundation. Each of these revolts ended up with a bloody suppression by the Turkish state. Kurds were one of the worst effected groups by the horrors of the 12 September 1980 military coup. The last and on-going Kurdish revolt effectively began in 1984, during the post-military coup era in Turkey. PKK guerrillas attacked two military bases in South-East Turkey. Both the current and historical situation of the Kurds in Turkey seems sufficient to have pushed the Kurds into feeling their identity threatened and starting an armed struggle. However, it is useful to look into the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan’s writings, not only to understand the ideology behind the creation and management of the PKK, but also to see how the PKK and the Kurdish struggle evolved over the years.

<sup>12</sup> *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and reconciliation, Exeter Studies in Ethno Politics*, edited by Cengiz Gunes, Welat Zeydanlioglu

<sup>13</sup> *Turkeys Kurdish Question*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

## The ideological roots of the PKK

In 1978, Abdullah Öcalan formed the PKK and assumed the leadership of the leftist organization. Öcalan led the armed struggle until 1999 when he was arrested in Kenya by a coalition of secret services, and sent to Turkey. He was initially sentenced to death but the Turkish state subsequently abolished the death penalty and Öcalan's sentence was converted to life imprisonment. Currently in prison, Öcalan is still the undisputed leader of PKK and he is also recognized as the natural leader by millions of Kurds.

In 1978, the PKK's central committee published the "Founding Declaration" of the organization. This long text included a very detailed historical and political analysis of the region as well as the wider international situation. In this declaration the period of 1917 to 1945 was defined as follows:

The October Revolution enabled the Russian proletariat to establish its political dictatorship. By building alliances, based on equality and freedom, with the people oppressed by the Tsar regime, it was able to defeat the counter revolutionaries in Russia and the outside imperialist forces. This enabled the revolution to build a socialist economy. The fight against Trotskyism that had lent itself to be the agent of imperialism had been won successfully. Stalin established heavy industries as well as cooperative farming after the breakup of Kulaks.

In the same document the era after WWII (until the 1960s) involves:

the rise of US imperialism and the defeat of fascist cliques by

people's fronts in Eastern European countries, with the help of the Red Army. The support from the Soviet Union enabled the founding of peoples' republics and the building of socialist economies in these countries. The Eastern revolutions of China, Vietnam and Korea have developed further towards the creation of [true] socialist societies. Countries, united under the leadership of Soviet Union have built a strong solidarity network in their fight against imperialism. The achievement of socialist nations influenced other nations in their fight for freedom, democracy and socialism<sup>15</sup>

The long document continued with the analysis of the Middle-East and the delayed beginnings of a struggle in Kurdistan due to the complete isolation and oppression of the Kurds. In this document, the PKK also assumes the role of challenging the chauvinist bourgeoisie and social movements representing the dominant nation (Turks), and the reformist nationalist movements. Marxist-Leninist theory is identified as the ideological backbone of the PKK and its methods in the fight for national emancipation.

The PKK defines its objectives as:

To free the Kurdish people from imperialist exploitation and to establish a free, independent and united Kurdistan based on democratic dictatorship of Kurdish people; with the ultimate goal of achieving a classless society.<sup>16</sup>

The PKK also defined the Kurdish national struggle as being part of the international socialist revolution. The following decades and the changing conditions in the region and around the world were to prove this initial analysis to be problematic; especially in relation to the understanding of Stalinism

<sup>15</sup> Translated from *PKK Kurulu Bildirisi* (PKK Founding Declaration) Weanen Serxwebn, 1978

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, para 24

and the so called international socialist solidarity of the Soviet Union. Today the leadership of the PKK and its practical-political analysis is quite distanced from the position in 1978. The PKK had emerged from the political scene in Turkey in the 1970's and were part of the faulty political analysis of Stalinism of that era from groups looking to the Soviet Union for practical support or inspiration.

## The years of armed struggle

1980 was the year of yet another military coup in Turkey. The Turkish military since the foundation of the republic had always been an extremely potent force in the state apparatus. Using the political turmoil in the country and the rising radical left movements, the military staged the third coup of its kind on 12th September 1980. As a result, all democratic institutions, political parties, civil associations, trade unions etc. were banned. The parliament was sacked and thousands of activists, journalists, trade unionists and political leaders were arrested. It was another intervention by the Turkish military to re-align the population with the Kemalist, pro-Nato, pro-Western and Turkist ideology of the state and ensure the return of 'law and order' to maintain the historic status quo.

The military coup had horrific effects in Kurdistan. It is now an undisputed fact that the military prison in Diyarbakr was a centre for systematic torture and killing. One of the horrific aspects of the coup was the hundreds of disappeared people. To this day, the Kurdish relatives (and the Turks as well) of the disappeared people are looking for answers from the Turkish state. 33 years on, many of the horror stories of the military era are yet to be unearthed. All over the country, the rising working class consciousness and radical movements on the left were suppressed by the military coup. The military council drafted a new constitution that, when compared to all previous constitutions, was probably the worst in terms of democratic-civil rights and political freedom. In a nutshell, this was a document

that did not allow anything other than being a "Turk" as prescribed in the founding ideology of the state. This constitution, with some progressive changes in 2010, is still the constitution of the country.

In 1983 elections were held. The National Security Council, heavily dominated by the generals of the military coup, vetted and approved a limited number of political parties and candidates to attend the elections. The right-wing conservative party ANAP (Motherland Party) won the elections and started a rapid neo-liberalisation agenda. Although the country was now governed by an elected party, the control of the country by the military and its political influence continued during the following decades. A return to a parliamentary system did not mark an end to the problems for the Kurds; it was only the beginning of further oppression.

Beginning in 1984, the next 25 years saw heaviest armed fighting in the history of the state in Northern Kurdistan (South-East Turkey). The reaction of the Turkish state to the first ever PKK attack was dismissive and the Kurdish guerrillas were described as "a small group of terrorists that will immediately be crushed by the Turkish army". But this was not to be the case. As the PKK grew to become a strong and determined armed campaign fighting for national freedom, so did the size and power of Turkish military forces in the region. Years of armed fighting killed an estimated 50,000 people. Most of the deaths were Kurdish (PKK members and civilians) as well as soldiers in the Turkish army. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were forced to immigrate to other parts of the country, especially to major cities, such as Istanbul. This was a time of a mass internal refugee crisis and it had all sorts of long lasting social and political effects. Kurds had been settled in all corners of the country and not just in Turkish Kurdistan. Now, hundreds of Kurdish villages were being forcibly evacuated due to suspicion of aiding PKK and in order to cut off popular support.

Between 1987 and 2002 a state of emergency was put in place in the region, ef-



fective in more than 10 Kurdish cities and counties. A special regional governor was appointed with extra-ordinary powers. New laws were enacted to give the military commanders and courts special powers. During this time most of the already very limited basic democratic rights were practically removed and the South-Eastern part of the country was effectively (and officially) placed under military control. The economy of the whole region was on its knees. Unemployment and poverty were extremely high. It was during these years that Europe received Kurdish refugees fleeing war conditions.

As the fighting went on, the Kurdish question became the most dominant agenda in the country. The state and the Turkish government, using the war in Kurdistan as political propaganda were able to suppress all kinds of democratic and civil rights elsewhere in the country. Even speaking Kurdish was seen as an act of terror against the state. As the killing intensified, there was rising racism and hatred in the country against the Kurds aided by the constant state propaganda. The state was able to manipulate Turkish workers into becoming anti-Kurdish, all so called, in the interest of the Turkish nation and its future. Basic myths of nationalism were put into action, by enforcing a common Turkish national unity against the “terrorist” Kurds.

During the years of struggle, the political consciousness of the Kurdish people rose to new levels and the demands for ethnic, democratic rights and recognition of Kurdish identity were raised by millions of ordinary people. There were of course the Kurdish upper classes that comfortably coexisted within the Turkish nationalism and who continued to protect their political and economic privileges. Some Kurdish modern-day feudal tribal leaders became MPs as members of rightwing and nationalist Turkish parties. Kurdish landowners were of course exploiting the Kurdish peasants. But the support for the PKK was very strong among the peasants, working class and middle-class Kurds

and the PKK emerged as an increasingly successful national liberation movement. There were also significant events in the region, such as the Iraq war and the rising tensions between Syria and Turkey, which shaped both the policies of Turkey and the strategies of the Kurdish movement. The PKK leadership was also adjusting to the ongoing stalemate in armed conflict and changing regional conditions. The PKK came to realize that they could not win the armed fight but years of military response to the Kurdish struggle did not bring about a victory for the Turkish state either. It was evident that the PKK and the Kurdish demands would not to be eliminated by military power alone and that the PKK now had the popular backing of the Kurdish people. As the dynamics in the Kurdish movement were changing so too was the political situation in Turkey, with new forces challenging the Kemalist-nationalist status quo of the republic in the form of the neoliberal Islamism of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK Party or AKP)

## Peace process?

During the later years of conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state there were a number of ceasefires and attempts for peace talks but all of these ended without any progress. In 2013, the on-going, fragile and complex peace talks started between the Turkish state, Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK. The peace process was not a generosity on the part of the Turkish state but an outcome of the long and committed Kurdish struggle and changing political conditions in Turkey, and indeed in the wider region. Following on from Chris Harman’s analysis<sup>17</sup>, where he discussed the various peace processes, we can’t yet predict whether the Kurds will ultimately get less than what they have bargained for but one thing is sure, “what failed in the past will not work in future” and armed conflict did fail to bring about freedom. The Kurds are looking at alternatives that do not involve surrender

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<sup>17</sup>‘Thinking it through, Less than they bargained for’, Chris Harman, *Socialist Review*, No.234, October 1999

to the status quo. The PKK and the Kurds have long broken with the narrow view of nationalism and also agitate now around the suffering of Turkish oppressed classes. The PKK had evolved from an armed guerilla movement in the 1980's and 1990's to a mass political campaign and radical civil and ethnic rights movement. Backed by millions of Kurds, and turning into a mass grass-roots revolt, the events of the past 25 years have taken dramatic twists and turns; and the current on-going peace process under the leadership of Öcalan, has the potential to change the course of the history of the Kurds and shape the region as a whole.

History shows us that nothing happens just by chance. There were also major developments within the Turkish state and the Turkish ruling class that influenced the direction of the Kurdish struggle. In 2002, AKP came to power and played a different role in the government-state relationship.

Turkey's ruling Islamic AKP party has been committed to neoliberalism and expanding Turkey's regional influence but there has also been a major re-shaping of the relationship between society, the state and the once all powerful Turkish military. The Turkish-Sunni, Muslim-secular Turkish Republic had a number of fundamental problems which were originating from its founding ideology: First, the population were not all Turkish. Something like a fifth were Kurds, and there were many other ethnic groups in smaller numbers. Second, not all were Muslims. There were large numbers of Armenians, Greeks and Jews, as well as smaller communities of Assyrians and others. Third, a large part of the Muslim population were Alawites (similar to Iran's Shiites) and not

Sunni Muslims. Finally, even the Sunni Muslim Turkish majority did not fit the Kemalist state's picture of a "modern" population. It was too religious and too "Eastern".<sup>18</sup>

The military-dominated state was against practically every section of the society outside of the ruling class. While the oppression of the Kurds continued, there were also attacks on other sections of society in terms of religious expression, workers' rights and all sorts of democratic freedoms. Capitalising on the grievances of people against the state, and promising reforms, AKP came to power in 2002 and has won three elections since, with ever increasing electoral support. The Turkish nationalist status quo has tried its best to overthrow the AKP government, including using a military takeover, but subsequent AKP governments won the struggle against these attempts.

With the political domination of the military weakened, number of coup attempts foiled, now the AKP government had to face what no nationalist or Islamic government could avoid anymore. The Kurdish question was still the fundamental issue in the country and the Turkish population was becoming increasingly unhappy about the on-going situation without a resolution in sight. Kurds had already shown their intent of supporting a meaningful and democratic resolution. Years of nationalist agitation by the Turkish state did not stop the Turks asking questions about the body bags of soldiers coming from Kurdistan. Having their leader in prison for life was not going to stop the Kurds from their fight for recognition, democratic and linguistic rights. It was clear that continuing with the military response was not going to bring about total state control in Kurdistan. There were not many options as far as the situation was concerned; either all out, long lasting war; or peace.

The political wing of the Kurdish leadership had long established cooperation with

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<sup>18</sup> 'All change in Turkey', Roni Margulies, *Socialist Review*, April 2013

some of the Turkish socialists and progressive groups. In the last election of 2011 the Kurdish Party Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), along with components from the Turkish left had won 29 seats in the parliament of 550. All of these conditions and the relative defeat of the Turkish military status quo led to the effective start of resolution of the Kurdish question in early 2013. Unlike the 2009-2010 peace talks in Oslo (which became public knowledge much later), the new peace talks are not held in secret.

At the time of writing this article, on 27 October 2013, the umbrella organization People's Democratic Congress (HDK) has transformed itself into a new political party as the People's Democratic Party (HDP). The strongest component of HDK was the Kurdish party BDP. This initiative is supported by the Kurdish leadership. In the process of becoming a nationwide political party, the new HDP and BDP will co-exists in the immediate term. This is not due to a political split but a strategic decision towards an immediate electoral challenge to AKP in the local elections of 2014; both in the Turkish western part of the country and in the Kurdish east. It is expected that HDP will encompass BDP in 2015 parliamentary elections. The current structure can be interpreted as an electoral challenge to both, Kemalism and AKP neo-liberalism.

Abdullah Öcalan was one of the main players behind the idea of a new broad Kurdish-Turkish party that also includes many components from other groups. To understand the significance of the HDK/HDP it is important to list all the components in this bloc: Political Parties: Kurdish BDP, Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party (DSP), Socialist Party of the Downtrodden (ESP), Labour Party (EMEP - Not to be confused with Labour parties as in the West), Socialist Democracy Party (SDP), Green and Left Future (YSGP), Socialist Re-Establishment Party (SYKP). LGBT Movements: Hevi LGBTİ, İstanbul LGBT, Kaos GL. Women's

Movement: Rainbow Women's Association, Democratic Free Women Movement (DÖKH). Political Groups: Initiative of 78's, Democracy and Freedom Movement (DÖH), Workers Voice, Marxist Approach, Partisan, Socialist Solidarity Platform (SODAP), Theory Politics, Social Freedom Party Initiative (TÖPG), Reality of Turkey. Environmentalists: Global Action Group (KEG), Munzur Protection Committee. International Solidarity and Support Groups: Democratic Pomaks Movement, Association for Solidarity with People of Palestine (FHDD), Nor Zartonk (Armenian civil rights group), Free Democratic Alawites Movement. Trade Unions: Glass and Ceramic Workers Union, Revolutionary Workers Union Food Sector Branch, Limter Shipyard Workers Union.<sup>19</sup>

Recent state repression against mass anti-government protests in Gezi Park and the 'democratization package' announced by AKP in September 2013 have shown us that the AKP government cannot be trusted in its commitment to the peace process and bringing about full democratic change to the country. There was nothing regarding Kurdish rights in this much awaited reform package. The parliamentary commission for constitutional change is not progressing as promised. But this does not mean that AKP solely controls the peace process and can call all the shots in the negotiations. Turkey enjoys the on-going ceasefire and all of the progress in the peace process so far, is due to the committed steps by PKK and Öcalan. AKP cannot afford to completely abandon the peace process and there is general pressure from below for it to act. During the Gezi Park protests, despite attempts by the Turkish nationalists there was huge support and solidarity with the Kurds. As the AKP maintains and enjoys a strong popular vote, the people of the country also enjoy the ceasefire that continues despite the inaction by the government. AKP has invested politically in the peace process and any return to armed conflict will have significant consequences for its future rule. During the ini-

<sup>19</sup> People's Democratic Congress, <http://www.halklarindemokratikkongresi.net/hdk/bilesenler/hdk-bileseni-kurumlar/517>

tial days of the peace process, the Kemalist and nationalists hoped to create a popular Turkish uprising against AKP by accusing PM Erdoğan of negotiating with the “terrorists” but this did not connect with or stimulate any widespread national anger amongst Turks. Large Republic Demonstrations’ organized by the nationalist in 2007 had already died out over time. In early 2013, 65% of the Turkish population and almost 90% of the Kurds supported the peace talks. This strong support continues despite the difficulties in the process caused by the Turkish government.



1 million people listen to a letter from Abdullah Öcalan

Abdullah Öcalan is in prison but he is the ultimate representative of the Kurds in the on-going peace talks. However much the AKP government tries to present the problem of PKK terrorism’ and the problem of Kurdish rights as two separate issues, and pretends to solve just the Kurdish problem, Kurds in Turkey are fully united behind the leadership of the PKK. In our final analysis we should refer to the current ideological position of the PKK and the Kurdish movement from the writings of Öcalan. In his 2011 booklet, *Democratic Confederalism* Öcalan starts with a reference to and critical analysis of the 70’s PKK:

For more than thirty years the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has been struggling for the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people. Our struggle, our fight

for liberation turned the Kurdish question into an international issue which affected the entire Middle East and brought a solution of the Kurdish question Within reach. When the PKK was formed in the 1970s the international ideological and political climate was characterized by the bipolar world of the Cold War and the conflict between the socialist and the capitalist camps. The PKK was inspired at that time by the rise of decolonialization movements all over the world. In this context we tried to find our own way in agreement with the particular situation in our homeland. The PKK never regarded the Kurdish question as a mere problem of ethnicity or nationhood. We also recognized a causal link between the Kurdish question and the global domination of the modern capitalist system. Without questioning and challenging this link, a solution would not be possible. Otherwise we would only become involved in new dependencies<sup>20</sup>

In terms of “what next?” Öcalan describes a proposal for democratic confederalism’ rather than a separatist national independence:

The right of self-determination of a people includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm

<sup>20</sup> *Democratic Confederalism*, Abdullah Öcalan, first edition 2011, Translation: International Initiative Published by Transmedia Publishing Ltd. - London, Cologne

of the oppressed people. In the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by the capitalist system and its imperial powers which only damage democracy. The propagation of grassroots democracy is elementary. It is the only approach that can cope with diverse ethnical groups, religions, and class differences. It also goes together well with the traditional confederate structure of the society. Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is an anti-nationalist movement as well. It aims at realizing the right of self-defence of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning the existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation-state.<sup>21</sup>

To achieve a resolution to the Kurdish question Öcalan analyses the conditions of war and peace in the country and makes the following offer to the Turks:

I offer the Turkish society a simple solution. We demand a democratic nation. We are not opposed to the unitary state and republic. We accept the republic, its unitary structure and laicism. However, we believe that it must be redefined as a democratic state respecting peoples, cultures and rights. On this basis, the Kurds must be free to organize in a way that they can live their culture and language and can develop economically and ecologically. This would allow Kurds, Turks and other cultures to come together

under the roof of a democratic nation in Turkey.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

The Turkish state and the AKP government is still too far away from any of the proposals made by the Kurdish leadership but abandoning the peace talks at this stage would be a disaster for everybody. It is difficult to forecast the final outcome of the Kurdish struggle, if there will ever be such a thing as a final outcome, until international socialism is achieved and all capitalist systems and imperialism have been destroyed, leading to a free and classless socialist world without oppression.

The PKK is clearly committed in talking peace with a government of a historically oppressive state. What is more, the state has successfully attacked all other working class gains during the years of armed fighting and the Turkish working class have been poisoned with racism and nationalism that only benefited the ruling elites of the country. A people, both Kurds and Turks, that are in desperate need to break away from the chains of a militarized state can only advance their class struggle by a new era of peace. This will obviously not mean the end of all oppression or a start of a new society but it will enable the people to look forward, rather than being stuck in war conditions and it will allow the battle for Kurdish rights to be pursued by means of mass struggle rather than guerrilla warfare. One can argue that, the Gezi protests were a direct outcome of the political environment created by the cease-fire. For three decades the first segment of each and every news program was about the deaths, killing and brutal scenes from Kurdistan, followed by nationalist propaganda. Human rights, workers' rights, women's rights, children's rights, LGBT rights, environment, democratic demands (including by the Turks),

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<sup>21</sup>ibid

<sup>22</sup>'War and Peace in Kurdistan', Abdullah Öcalan, *Perspectives for a political solution of the Kurdish question*, second edition 2009, Translation: International Initiative Published by International Initiative 'Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan - Peace in Kurdistan

and indeed the economy were always secondary subjects. The Kurdish people and the Turkish working class have not gained from a war that had no end in sight.

The Gezi Protests came after a long lasting ceasefire and it was a first in the history of Turkey when so many different sections of the society had the courage to stand-up against police brutality and attacks by the government. Gezi was also a test for the wider Turkish society. There were anti-Kurdish, Kemalist elements in the protests (*the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal* - as they call themselves) that hate the AKP government and would only be happy if the military could take the traditional approach of toppling the government by a coup. The test was passed and huge sections of the protestors, not only understood the brutality of their own police force in the control of the government, but also came to see how the state and corporate media were completely untrustworthy in their reporting of the protests. Some of the highlights of Gezi were the socialist-Muslim interaction and solidarity, the recognition and acceptance of the LGBT movement by all sorts of sections of society and the strong solidarity messages sent from the Turkish protestors in Istanbul to the Kurdish protestors in Lice.

I will remember forever the Turks questioning the media propaganda and police brutality and asking, "If this is what they do to us, and if this is how they report the events in the western part of the country, what must they have done to the Kurds, and what sort of lies were we told by the state about them during all these years?"<sup>23</sup>

With other events in the region and especially the revolutionary struggle in Syria, things can change in a very short period of time. The Kurdish national struggle is not a struggle played out just between a single oppressive nation state and the Kurds within the borders of that state. Iran has recently exe-

cuted a leading member of the Kurdish PJAK party, the only Kurdish group still locked in armed struggle with Iran. PJAK responded by stating, 'Our senior leader Golparipour was hanged by the Islamic Republic and he died like a martyred hero [...] These attacks and the execution of Bahoz Sina will not go unanswered.'<sup>24</sup> PJAK had agreed to a ceasefire with Iran in 2011, but that has been breached many times.

In Turkey, within the nationalist right and the left there are various different attitudes towards the Kurdish struggle. The nationalist right still see the PKK as a terrorist organization and are dismissive of the Kurdish struggle and the demands of the Kurds. For them terror should be responded to and crushed by military force. 'Their call for PKK to disarm itself is in affect a call for surrender of the Kurds.'<sup>25</sup> This is not a new position and ultimately failed to attract support from the masses. Turkish society for many reasons does not support further military response to the Kurdish struggle.

More problematic is the situation within the nationalist-secularist socialists. They are pre-occupied with discussing the social and political nature of PKK and dismiss it simply by calling it "Kurdish nationalism". They accuse PKK of coming to agreement with the AKP government "because they are a nationalist movement and not a class based struggle." For nationalist socialists, the only way to recognise and support the Kurdish struggle is if they abandon all their ethnic demands, reject AKP and dissolve themselves into the Turkish socialist movement. This view is also shared by Kemalist-left, who believe that the republic of Mustafa Kemal is a progressive state and must be defended against separatists and the AKP government. All of these arguments are basically asking the Kurds to postpone their long struggle against oppression until such time comes when the Turkish

<sup>23</sup> 'Gezi Park - What did we learn over a month?', Memet Uluda, *Minor Details*, [www.minordetailsnews.net/article/gezi-park-what-did-we-learn-over-month](http://www.minordetailsnews.net/article/gezi-park-what-did-we-learn-over-month), 26 June 2013

<sup>24</sup> *Rudaw* English Newspaper, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/271020132>, 27 October 2013

<sup>25</sup>'The philosophy and the formula of peace', Memet Uludağ, *Taraf* Newspaper, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/haber/barisin-felsefesi-ve-formulu.htm>, 21 November 2011

socialists can create a socialist republic and can grant the Kurds their ethnic rights within this framework. The PKK and the wider Kurdish leadership have already answered these accusations with their actions and political stand.

In the final analysis, it is correct to define the PKK as a “national movement for freedom of the oppressed Kurds,” but it is not just a static and textbook definition of a national movement. The struggle of oppressed people for national-ethnic rights cannot simply be dismissed as “nationalism”. The political gains of the Kurdish struggle have also helped the political consciousness of the Turkish working classes. The Kurdish struggle gets its momentum from the poor and dispossessed working class and peasants of Kurdish society. It has proven to be a struggle that is reaching out to the Turkish working class and socialists for a united struggle against oppression. People of Kurdistan have shown the whole country that they won’t be crushed by military force and despite suffering thousands of deaths, torture and poverty they won’t give up their demands. Therefore, the Kurdish movement cannot be accused of simply “backward nationalism” during any stage of their struggle; both during the armed conflict period and now during the, still possible peace process.

Marxists are internationalists not nationalists. Therefore they would reject the nationalist assumptions of national identity, characteristics, common interest and loyalty to any state. But all of this does not simply mean to categorically reject a national struggle against oppression. In fact, Marxists, as internationalists, take the position of supporting the genuine national liberation struggles of oppressed nations. The rejection of nationalism and its ideological assumptions does not simply equate to the rejection of each and every national liberation struggle. The role of the Turkish socialists must be to fight against Turkish nationalism and not against national

demands of the Kurds. This was the correct political stand during the armed struggle and it is also the correct position to take during the peace process. This is the only way socialist can confront and defeat nationalism.

If “internationalism cannot be achieved by the arithmetic addition of different nationalisms, but by a conscious opposition to them all”<sup>26</sup> I would argue that the current Kurdish struggle and the direction it has taken will be proof of this. And the role of internationalist socialists in Turkey and indeed in other nation states sharing Kurdistan must be “to understand the only way to bring workers of different nationalities together is to insist on free association. Internationalism does not mean identification with existing states. Workers who regard themselves as having a certain nationality cannot unite freely with other workers within the same state, unless they know those workers defend their right to secede if they so wish.”<sup>27</sup>

The following statement from Chris Harman is a guide to identifying the role of socialists in the case of the Kurdish national question: In the fight for socialist revolution, “[Kurdish] workers will not unite with [Turkish] workers unless the [Turkish] workers defend their rights - including the right to secession. Only by the workers of different nationalities defending each other’s rights can they create circumstances in which nationality ceases to be of significance to any of them.”

And that’s why Marxists should welcome any moves by the Turkish state to end its war on the Kurds while continuing to support the fight for full Kurdish equality including defending the right of the Kurdish people in Turkey and throughout the region to secession and self-determination. In this context the PKK ceasefire can be step forward - we do not call for a resumption of armed struggle - but the war needs to be replaced by mass political struggle not collaboration with the Turkish state.

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<sup>26</sup> ‘The return of the national question’, Chris Harman, *International Socialism* Autumn 1992

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