

Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century, by Abdullah Ocalan. Translated and edited by Klaus Happel. Transmedia Publishing Ltd., 2011. 180 pages. \$35.00.

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This is a remarkable book, especially considering that Abdullah Ocalan, since its inception in 1978, has been the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization officially classified as “terrorist” by Turkey, the United States and the European Union (EU), but considered by many as a Kurdish liberation organization. What is more, although Ocalan has been imprisoned in Turkey since February 1999, he was still able to write this book without any notes or other research materials.

The book is divided into two parts. The first elaborates Ocalan’s comprehension of Middle East history from prehistoric times to the present, with the purpose of specifically understanding how the Kurdish question fits into the scheme of things. His analysis is often arcane and jargon-filled, but certainly informed. Basically he applies a modified Marxist matrix that includes the roles of mythology, religion, philosophy, science and technology in historical change. Thus, he rejects any single causal explanation in order to allow for historical indeterminacy. In conclusion, he argues for a post-state-centric, democratic federation/civilization that combines the universal democratic values of the European enlightenment with the deeply rooted cultural values of Middle Eastern societies. “This is how, I believe, the current clash of civilizations between Europe and the East will end: reconciliation and eventually something new” (p. 40). One is impressed that Ocalan’s words, penned several years ago, seem to have predicted the popular revolt and possible political transformation the Middle East is currently undergoing.

Although he blames “gangs within our organization and open banditry, [which] arranged needless, haphazard operations, sending young people to their death in droves” (p. 54), Ocalan also repeatedly admits his own past errors. “The intensity of the war was caused by the widespread petty-bourgeois mentality, a certain peasant stupidity and the political and military leadership’s irresponsibility and incapability” (p. 64). “Our theory, programme and praxis of the 1970s produced nothing but futile separatism and violence and even worse.... The nationalism we should have opposed infested all of us” (p. 44). Turkey does not escape blame either: “When in the years after the Second World War democracy became the fundament of contemporary civilization, successive Turkish governments failed to follow suit.... They sought to preserve their oligarchic power” (pp. 74-75).

The second part of Ocalan’s book deals specifically with the PKK and its role in the Kurdish movement and the transformation of the Middle East. Here the text suddenly becomes much easier to follow. Ocalan’s main point is his proposed solution to the Kurdish problem, a proposal he returns to repeatedly. “We want to work towards a situation where all the geographic parts of Kurdistan will form democratic political unities with the states that they presently belong to.... A separate, isolated Kurdistan is the wrong political objective” (p. 62). Again, Ocalan emphasizes that “we need to recognise the existing borders of the Middle East as fixed and therefore lead a struggle for basic rights and democracy *within* the existing countries and states” (p. 90). The result would be that “a Turkish nation which recognizes the existence of the Kurds as an ethnic group in their own right will only result in more respect from the Kurds and less desire for secession” (p. 79). Thus, “a new constitution is needed, a constitution oriented towards democracy” (p. 78). To accomplish this goal, “we should always be willing to compromise.... Violence should only be used where self-defence is legitimate and necessary” (p. 68). Indeed, “we need to create a willingness to forgive the other side” (p. 44). Taken at face value, these are not the words of a terrorist,

but those of a reasonable Kurdish leader who has learned from bitter experience. Turkey and its supporters should take up his offer.

Ocalan also discusses civil society, women's rights, the reasons for past Kurdish failures, and the often debilitating role of Islam, among other things. "Our new field of activity is civil society... We must build political structures which can extend their radius of activity legally into all areas of society and contribute to all areas of public discussion" (p. 124). Since he penned this thought, the PKK has spawned a host of new organizations, including the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), a new umbrella organization; Kongra-Gel (KGK), the KCK's parliament; the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), a pan-Kurdish congress created earlier in 1999; the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), a grass-roots gathering that organizes the activist Kurdish population; the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), a legal Kurdish party in the Turkish parliament; as well as numerous other legal NGOs such as the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), which lobbies the EU for Turkish accession as a way to help solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey.

Furthermore, "the Kurdish struggle is closely tied to the struggle for women's liberation in Kurdistan. Women hold leadership positions in all important areas of the democratic struggle" (p. xvii). In critiquing his own unsuccessful marriage to Kesire Yildirim (1978-87), Ocalan declares that "the family as an institution of Kurdish society resembles a monster which subdues the Kurdish man at the early age of 15 to 20 and paralyzes him" (p. 132). Indeed, "the oppression of women... [plus] marriage as we know it and prostitution are two complementary forms of the relationship of the patriarchy" (p. 136).

On several occasions, Ocalan criticizes the "primitive nationalism" (p. 47) of the Barzanis' Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq as little more than one of the many conspiracies against the Kurds. "The rising Kurdish nationalism was to be channeled by former tribal leaders and well-known members of old families and descendants of princely families.... The KDP prevented the creation of a revolutionary-patriotic organization in Kurdistan" (p. 109). On this point, Ocalan clearly seems to have missed the relative success currently being enjoyed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq.

Islam is "an alien religious ideology" (p. 9) that has led to "feudal bondage and absolutism" (p. 46). Indeed, "when independent interpretation of Islamic law... was banned, a dark period in the history of [the] Middle East began — a time in which blind and empty dogmatism exerted its reactionary rule" (p. 33).

In his final chapter, Ocalan gives numerous interesting insights into the formative years of the PKK, among numerous arcane conspiracies. The murder of Haki Karer, for example, probably "by an activist of a KDP-affiliated group" (p. 114), helped lead to the formation of the PKK in 1978, while the abysmal Diyarbakir prison conditions helped lead to the PKK's violent uprising against Turkey in August 1984. "Just as Karer's fate had led to the proclamation of the PKK, the revolt in Diyarbakir led to the beginning of the armed struggle" (p. 116). "The so-called Apo bonus was the chance to make good profits under the conditions of the war" (p. 141) and illustrates how some people benefit from keeping the conflict going. As for the murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme on February 28, 1986, "the PKK was suspected, although the organisation itself had nothing to do with it" (p. 117). "One day it will become clear how far Gladio, at that time a powerful paramilitary network within NATO, was involved in the Palme plot" (p. 143). As for his own capture/abduction in Kenya on February 15, 1999, Ocalan gives considerable detail, blaming in large part the United States. "It had something to do with keeping Turkey and Israel on the same side in the Middle East" (p. 151). The Greeks helped, too, because "they hoped for concessions on Cyprus and the Aegean issue" (p. 153).

An appendix analyzes how "European law and the European Court [can] find an approach to my case that will also help towards a solution of the underlying Kurdish problem" (p. 156). The

book also contains three pages of notes by the able editor Klaus Happel, and seven pages of “preliminary notes” by Cemil Bayik, one of Ocalan’s long-time top associates. It concludes with 33 brief endnotes and an index but lacks a bibliography. This present tome is the second of a projected three-volume set already written, but yet to be translated and published in English. (Ocalan’s first book in this series, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, was reviewed in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14 (2007): 166-167). Thus, the present study does not cover the most recent events, but it remains very germane, given its elucidation of Ocalan’s current basic approach and the Turkish state’s continuing secret negotiations with him.