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A stylized illustration featuring a large, bright yellow sun with sharp, triangular rays. The sun is positioned in the upper left, partially overlapping a green, jagged mountain range that spans the bottom half of the cover. The background is a solid red color, which transitions into a white area behind the sun's rays. The overall style is graphic and minimalist.

Day of Revival

15 August 1984
and the PKK's Struggle
for Human Freedom

Edited with an Introduction
by Connor Hayes

Transcript of a panel discussion with Meral Çiçek, Salih Muslim, Thomas Jeffrey Miley, and Reimar Heider, moderated by Dimitrios Roussopoulos.

(<https://youtu.be/Sj6AUMCnkFQ>)

This pamphlet was produced by Black Rose Books, in cooperation with the Peace in Kurdistan Campaign, for the International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan--Peace in Kurdistan".

About the Text

This text is composed of the transcripts of speeches delivered during a panel discussion entitled "Your Freedom and Mine: Celebrating the History and Struggle of the Kurdish Freedom Movement," held on 15 August 2020, which is the 36th anniversary of the PKK's initiation of the armed struggle against the Turkish state. The title of the event was inspired by the 2018 book *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdoğan's Turkey*, edited by Thomas Jeffrey Miley and Federico Venturini, published by Black Rose Books.

The event was co-hosted by Black Rose Books, PM Press, and the Peace in Kurdistan Campaign. It was moderated by Dimitrios Roussopoulos, a political activist, ecologist, writer, editor, publisher, community organizer, and public speaker, co-founder of the Transnational Institute for Social Ecology (TRISE), and author of numerous books, including *Political Ecology: System Change Not Climate Change*, and *The New Left: Legacy and Continuity*.

This transcript is edited by Connor Hayes who is an activist and researcher, whose interests include philosophy and comparative political theory. He was a member of the 2019 International Peace Delegation to İmralı.

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Introduction

Connor Hayes

On 15 August 1984, militants from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) attacked Turkish military installations in Eruh and Şemdinli. With this seemingly small action, the PKK initiated its ongoing armed uprising against the Turkish state, and sparked a renaissance of Kurdish culture and identity across the region. Fast forward to today, and the echo of 15 August 1984 reverberates louder than ever; the PKK has emerged as the orchestrator of a profound experiment in radical democracy in the war-torn epicenter of geopolitical grand strategy, and a leader in the global struggle against capitalist modernity. To be sure, the PKK has continued to act in the self-defense of the Kurdish people against forces seeking their physical, cultural, and spiritual annihilation. However, it has blossomed into a force for the liberation of peoples the world over, taking trailblazing steps in humanity's millennia-long quest for freedom and self-determination in the 21st century.

This document is composed of the contributions from a panel discussion entitled "Your Freedom and Mine: Celebrating the History and Struggle of

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the Kurdish Freedom Movement,” held on the occasion of the 36th anniversary of the PKK’s initiation of armed struggle. The event brought together prominent scholars and activists of the Kurdish Freedom Movement to reflect on the living struggle of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and the enduring significance of the 15th of August 1984. This diversity of voices is underlain by a common spirit; your struggle is my struggle, and your freedom is my freedom. From a downtrodden and nearly-forgotten corner of the earth, in the cradle of civilisation, a movement of human revival has emerged, calling out for a new world. Today, it shines brightly as a beacon of global peoples’ liberation struggle, resonating around the world with increasing strength. The challenges that we face today as a species are unlike any we have encountered before; as we struggle in hope for a better future, it is now more imperative than ever that we do so together. This small series of speeches, collected together as texts in this document, represents a timely contribution to the ongoing, collective dialogue on how we can together achieve the ‘impossible,’ and walk towards a future of freedom and peaceful coexistence.

The Day of Revival: The Ongoing Significance of 15 August for the Kurdish Freedom Movement

Meral Çiçek

15 August 1984 marks the start of the armed resistance against imperialism, colonialism and occupation in Kurdistan. This date is referred to as “the day of revival”, referring to the fact that at that time the Kurdish people were presumed dead and gone, especially in the Northern (Turkish) part of Kurdistan.

Kurdish uprisings demanding local autonomy and national rights had been brutally crushed by the state powers. The Turkish state in particular had sought to eliminate everything about Kurdish identity to be sure that they would never again dare to organise and rise up. For this reason, the state had not only destroyed the self-rule of the Dersim region in 1937/38 - the last big Kurdish resistance before the founding of the PKK within the borders of modern Turkey - but had also committed physical and cultural genocide.

4 The Ongoing Significance of 15 August

After 4 decades of silence, a group of idealist students and workers dared to revive the Kurdish identity by founding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

When the PKK launched its guerrilla war on the Turkish army, they had no big forces or states sponsoring them. They were able to create a ground for the guerrilla war through solidarity based on internationalism, the approach to create a unified front with other Kurdish forces (while opposing nationalism) and an unshakeable belief in self-strength.

In this sense it marks the first independent Kurdish uprising. There was no reliance on state forces, with the consequent danger of instrumentalization for state interests or betrayal. It marks a severance with the idea that Kurds are not even able to raise their voices without the support of state powers.

The first bullet was fired against all manner of enslavement. It changed the reality of the Kurdish people from a passive, silenced, diffident existence to a nation fighting for its freedom and a life in dignity.

The first bullet was fired against collaborationism and betrayal, which had been seen as the main reasons for failure of all the Kurdish uprisings in the modern era. In this context, the first bullet did not only target the Turkish military and in this sense the 'external' enemy, but also the 'internal' enemy.

Most of the Kurdish uprisings in the 19th and 20th centuries were not able to overcome local borders and localism, or had a tribal character. But 15 August marks the announcement of the first national liberation movement in Kurdistan, which in addition openly challenged feudalism.

Not only men but also women actively participated in the preparation process of guerrilla warfare. Even though the number of women was limited in the first years, they played an important role in the development of the political, ideological and armed struggle. Moreover, for the first time Kurdish women commanded male fighters. The first female commander was Hanım Yaverkaya (nom de guerre Berivan), who was responsible for a unit of male fighters in Erüh, where the first military action of 15 August took place.

6 The Ongoing Significance of 15 August

15 August marks a cut with traditional gender roles in Kurdistan. The fact that male and female guerrilla fighters lived and struggled shoulder to shoulder, based on comradeship, in the mountains of Kurdistan had a very deep impact, especially on women in society. The change in the relationship between women and men in the guerrilla ranks, the very radical gender struggle, the redefinition of freedom and equality based on overcoming the mindset of masters and slaves, had an impact on the whole movement and society.

After 15 August, more and more women joined the guerrilla and in the first half of the 90s, the women's army was formed. Today the women's movement organises itself autonomously and has equal representation and participation in all mixed structures. The women's movement constitutes the main motor force and revolutionary dynamic within the struggle for freedom, and the building of a social and political system that is based on democracy, ecology and women's liberation.

I think another significant aspect of 15 August is that it showed us the essentialness and legitimacy of self-defence. That no individual, community or

people should consider her/himself helpless or powerless when faced with fascist dictatorship, state violence and genocidal attacks. In this sense, especially today, the Kurdish Freedom Movement is challenging the notion of the “monopoly of violence” owned by the state, which is actually the denial of peoples' right to resist. What started 36 years ago with a small force with light arms has today become a huge self-defence force, which was able to stop even ISIS.

And if we look at the dialectics of armed resistance and political struggle—not just in Kurdistan, but in the whole Middle East—we see that the armed struggle has created and is still creating the ground for political change and opportunities. In this sense armed resistance and political struggle complete each other. What shapes both is the Apoist ideology. This is fundamentally important because it prevents the armed resistance from becoming destructive for the movement, which might happen when strategy and tactics no more comply with the conditions and the objectives. One of the strengths of the Kurdish Freedom Movement is its ability to constantly self-reflect and renew itself, its organisational forms and its tactics.

8 The Ongoing Significance of 15 August

Handling difficulties and obstacles as resources of progress, as a main dialectic of revolutionary practice, made it possible for the Kurdish Freedom Movement to keep growing – not only since 15 August 1984, but since the very beginning.

Meral Çiçek was born in 1983 in a Kurdish guest-worker family in Germany. She started political and women's activism at the age of 16 within the Kurdish Women's Peace Office in Dusseldorf. While studying Political Science, Sociology and History at the Goethe-University in Frankfurt she started to work as reporter and editor for the only daily Kurdish newspaper in Europe, Yeni Ozgur Politika, for which she still writes a weekly column. In 2014 she co-founded the Kurdish Women's Relations Office (REPAK) in Southern Kurdistan (Northern Iraq). She is also an editorial board member of the Jineoloji journal.

Peaceful Coexistence and Creating a Free People

Salih Muslim

First of all, I salute all the people who are still struggling in Kurdistan, and their friends everywhere. My greetings and thanks to these people and their friends, and to all who helped organise and arrange this event.

In reality, the events of the 15 August, 1984, were a result of creating free people; people who are free in their mind, or their mentality, and in the will. Mr Öcalan has been creating these free people since the 1970s. The 15 August was a result of these efforts, because the free people could no longer stand the conditions of the situation in which they lived. For example, those who were in prison in Amed (Diyarbakir) had burned themselves, and went on hunger strikes. The people had to do something to respond to these acts, and the result was the 15 August, 1984, when they started supporting their friends, and defending the people, their dignity, and their homeland.

10 Creating a Free People

The free man - one who is free in his mind, or his mentality, and has free will - can do anything. For this reason, the project was to create this man, who is free in mentality and in will. In my view, this is the revolution of Kurdistan, the real revolution, because free men and women can do anything. What we are seeing now, in all four parts of Kurdistan and even in the diaspora, is a result of the efforts to create such free people, who are free in their mind and will.

I will not discuss the details of what is happening in the four parts of Kurdistan, but in North and East Syria, of course there were many efforts to create such a free people. It is well-known that Mr Öcalan was in Lebanon and Syria for 20 years, and during this time many people there were students, who were educated and taught in a way that aimed to cultivate this mentality. And, of course, freedom is contagious amongst the people; since people are affected by each other, this mentality has now spread all over Kurdistan.

In Rojava in particular, we as a people began organising ourselves according to this idea. The regime in Syria was a dictatorship, repressing all Kurdish people. Since at least 2004, we have been organising for ourselves and struggling against

this regime. The Syrian revolution was an opportunity for us to move ahead with this project. We were forced to liberate our areas, because we did not want the fighting between the jihadists and the regime to come to our lands. Then in 2013, we established our Democratic Self-Administration, and we have continued to struggle until now. In the beginning, we struggled against the regime, and then against the brutal jihadists, like Daesh (ISIS) and others. Recently, after we defeated the jihadists, we have been struggling against Turkey, and others as well. Now Turkey is occupying the lands of Rojava in northern Syria, for example in Afrîn, Serê Kaniyê, and so on.

Our struggle still continues. I think that, through the efforts of our friends and supporters, the people of the world have been able to see the reality in all four parts of Kurdistan. By that, I mean they are able to see the most important things. For example, in the case of Turkey, we are not actually talking about Turkey; rather, we are talking about NATO, because Turkey acts with the backing of NATO. The fighting that is happening now is executed by NATO forces, using their sophisticated weaponry, and so on. Without this support, Turkey would not be able

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to occupy Afrîn, or Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. But even still, Europe places the PKK and others on the list of terrorist organisations. This is simply because European countries are forced to do so by NATO. We must be aware of this fact, and we should defend ourselves, because we do not want to lose this opportunity.

We know that our friends are also struggling with us, but there are many things we have to change. On the ground, we are fighting against Turkey and the Turkish occupation, including their tools like Daesh, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the other jihadist groups. But in reality, the actual entity behind them is NATO itself. If this were not so, why would they criminalise the PKK? They are even attempting to criminalise us, in North and East Syria. We have defeated those jihadists, we have defeated Daesh, and still they are not helping us, they are not standing by us. The situation now is truly a strange one.

Of course, we will defend ourselves, but what is important is the people. These Kurdish people, in all parts of Kurdistan and even in the diaspora, are a result of the efforts to create free people; those who are free in their mind and will. When you create such people, anything is possible.

What I mean to say is that everything happening now in Kurdistan is the result of the of August 15 1984. This includes all the developments that have happened up to this point, and all the progress that is being made in the regions of Kurdistan, such as the fight against Daesh and the jihadists, as well as the fight against the Turkish occupation. It is all a massive struggle.

Now we are seeing this freedom, the free mentality and the free personality, being transmitted to other peoples of the region also. For example, now the Arabs and the Kurds are living together in North and East Syria. Only recently, we were speaking with the Arab tribes and others, and they are looking for this administration to develop. They are tied to Öcalan's ideas, to this mentality of freedom, and they are seeking fraternity, for the peoples to live together. It turns out that, in reality, everyone was looking for democracy, fraternity, and for a solution in Syria so that all peoples can live together. For this reason, we must support the administration in North and East Syria.

In closing, I will make a brief point about the Kurdish movement's aims for peaceful coexistence between peoples by discussing their relationship with the Palestinian struggle. As

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many know, when the first groups from Northern Kurdistan went to Lebanon, they had good relations with the Palestinians. In the present, they continue to maintain some relations, and of course we would like to have good relations with them. However, the Palestinians have moved away from the Kurdish people and our movements, because radical Arab nationalism is leading them away from us. Now, they are afraid to deal with us. For example, there are Palestinians in Syria, and we are trying to contact them, but they are afraid to have any connection with us.

Beyond this point, we think that what we are building here in North and East Syria, the democratic nation solution, could be a solution for Palestine's problem with Israel as well; to live together with the Jewish people as two nations in one state. Thus, the Palestinians can benefit from our practice, where we are creating a way for Kurds to live together with the Arabs, Syriacs, and others in our shared lands. Perhaps the Palestinians can do the same. In this way, I think our experiment could be helpful for them as well. However, as I said, as a result of extreme Arab nationalism, the Palestinians are moving far away from us now. As the Ba'athists say, we are

separatists, and we are going to divide Syria. These are rumours of course, and we do not accept such claims, but this is what the Arabs think, and even the Syrian opposition is thinking the same way. But we are trying to cultivate good relations with them.

Nobody should be afraid of the Kurdish people's revolution, because it is about democracy; women's rights, or equality between women and men; and creating a way for peoples to live together. Instead of being against this project, everyone should try to understand what is going on in North and East Syria, because it is a practical way to realise a democratic nation, or the peaceful co-existence of peoples.

Salih Muslim was born in 1951 in a small village called Sheran (Arslan Tash) just outside of Kobanî. He graduated with a BA in Chemical Engineering at Istanbul Technical University in 1977. He has been active in politics and as a result was frequently imprisoned and tortured by Bashar Assad's intelligence services, both in Damascus and Aleppo. He was one of the founders of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003. In 2012, he was re-elected co-president of the PYD, together with Asya Abdullah.

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Meral Çiçek

Salih Muslim



Thomas Jeffrey Miley

Reimar Heider



Images taken from the livestream discussion:
<https://youtu.be/Sj6AUMCnkFQ>

Democratic Confederalism and Re-Imagining the Struggle for Self-Determination*

Dr Thomas Jeffrey Miley

It is a great honor to get the chance to speak alongside these distinguished activists and organic intellectuals all associated with the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Especially on this most emblematic day, 15 August, which marks the 36th anniversary of the PKK's campaign and struggle for freedom.

Human rights atrocities and state terror have been, and continue to be, inflicted upon the Kurdish minority by Turkish security forces, most brutally in the early nineties, and now again with increasing intensity since the breakdown of peace negotiations in July of 2015. All-out war against the Kurdish Freedom Movement, both inside Turkey and across the

** This text is based on an excerpt of a piece written by Thomas Jeffrey Miley with Luqman Guldivê, entitled "Representative Democracy and the Democratic Confederal Project," published in Gunes, Cengiz. (2020). The Political Representation of Kurds in Turkey: New Actors and Modes of Participation in a Changing Society. I.B. Tauris. pp. 131-159.*

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border in Syria, has been the centrepiece of President Erdoğan's alliance with the far-right. Now, more than ever perhaps, the struggle for democracy in Turkey is thus intimately intertwined with the urgent need for a peaceful resolution to the so-called "Kurdish question."

The historical trajectory of the Kurdish Freedom Movement has been profoundly influenced by the context of militarism, authoritarianism and paramilitary violence in which and against which it initially emerged, and has never ceased to be in conflict. The Republic of Turkey, we must remember, was on the frontlines of the Cold War, a NATO member, and its security apparatus was armed to the teeth, and consistently permitted, encouraged, to be ruthless in its efforts to eradicate threats to capitalist social-property relations.

Torture and extra-judicial killings of leftist and pro-Kurdish militants propelled a process of polarisation and radicalisation that took place from the late sixties, which escalated after successive coups in 1971 and 1980, coups that were intended to crush the left, and that reduced the legal channels for mobilising anti-capitalist opposition to a bare minimum.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, launched its military offensive against the Turkish state on this day in 1984, four years after the 1980 coup had triggered a bout of severe state repression, and two years after the 1982 Constitutional reform had further entrenched military prerogatives, effectively confining and constricting the terrain of civilian politics. In a word, the PKK's offensive was a product and response to this context of state aggression and denial of basic civil liberties.

At its inception, the PKK was structured in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist principle of democratic centralism, and conceived simultaneously as a vanguard political party and as a para-military force, a guerrilla, committed to waging a "prolonged peoples' war" for national liberation. Its goal was originally the attainment of a Kurdish nation-state—indeed, a state-communist utopia which would unite Kurds from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria in a Greater Kurdistan. A utopian dream, no doubt, equal to if not even exceeding in ambition the dystopian project against which it was struggling, that of the Kemalist Republic, with its intransigent goal of assimilating, if need be annihilating, all traces of

Kurdish identity into a homogenised Turkish national imaginary.

The PKK, as a para-military guerrilla force, has from the time of its inception been considered by the state authorities of the Republic of Turkey to be a terrorist organisation. Indeed, Turkish authorities have consistently treated the PKK as public enemy number one and as a result, those suspected of belonging to the organisation, or even sympathising with it, have been the victims of successive waves of brutal state terror. At the height of the war between the Turkish state and the PKK in the early nineties, thousands of Kurdish villages were forcefully evacuated, tens of thousands murdered, a mass exodus provoked. More recently, since the breakdown of peace negotiations in 2015, another brutal wave of state terror has been unleashed, this time including urban settings, leaving another bloody trail of thousands killed and hundreds of thousands forcibly displaced.

The devastation and trauma wrought upon the Kurdish people by the Turkish security forces, the systematic state terror, the total evacuation of thousands of villages, the killing of tens of thousands, the displacement and exile of

millions, made it abundantly clear to the PKK's undisputed leader, Abdullah Öcalan, by the early nineties that the Maoist-cum-Guevarista strategy of a "prolonged people's war" by the PKK could not lead to military victory, to "national liberation," to the creation of an independent socialist Kurdish nation-state. The military might of NATO's second biggest army, exercised within its own sovereign territory, was simply too brutal, too overwhelming a force, to overcome. Faced with the realization of the impossibility of victory, even the prospect of total annihilation, Öcalan began to reach out to European politicians, from his refuge in the Bekaa Valley and in Damascus, in search of a way to end the war without sacrificing the dignity of the Kurdish people, in search of a way towards a peaceful and democratic resolution to the raging conflict.

The end of the Cold War undoubtedly also influenced Öcalan's burgeoning conviction that the party and the movement which he had brought into being was in dire need of reformation, indeed, of fundamental reorientation. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the disappearance of a state-communist bloc capable of patronising and protecting a "liberated," single-party socialist Kurdish republic, inevitably wedged between

hostile, neighboring nation-states. It simultaneously signified the definitive death knell for the credibility of the state-communist ideal. In sum, it induced a crisis both at the level of realpolitik, and at the level of principles.

There were also developments originating from the grass-roots in Bakur, which were amplified, encouraged and promoted by the organised diaspora in Europe, operating within the orbit of the movement. These developments included the spread of “public celebrations and mass protests,” most emblematically around the annual Newroz festival, reconstrued as a myth of Kurdish resistance; as well as in events organised to commemorate the self-immolation of PKK prisoners and other “heroic acts of sacrifice” among PKK “martyrs.” Indeed, a whole repertoire of “representation of resistance practices” emerged, congealing around the myth of Newroz, and also hoisting up a host of “exemplars,” a veritable pantheon of revolutionary martyrs, the public commemoration, even worship, of whom burst onto the streets in a wave of so-called *serhildan* (or “rebellions”). From the early nineties, such “[b]ourgeoning civil resistance” against the security forces came increasingly to complement the on-going guerrilla campaign.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the repertoire of “representation of Kurdish resistance” that emerged from the early nineties onwards was the prominent place of women. Not only did women “participate in large numbers in numerous serhildan;” they also “took an active role in the activities of the legal political Kurdish parties,” indeed, they “came to the forefront of the resistance” and were increasingly “constituted” and commemorated “as ‘exemplars’.”

Alongside and helping to propel such emergent symbolic and organisational prominence of women in the movement, over the course of the nineties, Öcalan would formulate an elaborate theoretical critique of patriarchy. Indeed, he would come to consider women as the “first colony,” and even to “redefine national liberation as first and foremost the liberation of women.”

Öcalan’s emphasis on the primacy of the struggle against patriarchy was quite developed even before his abduction and imprisonment; and has featured prominently in his copious prison writings, perhaps especially in his original synthesis and articulation of the long history of hierarchy, his vision of the dialectic of domination and resistance.

In Öcalan's account of patriarchy, its origins are intimately intertwined with the emergence of the state. And especially since his imprisonment, Öcalan's thought has taken a radically anti-statist turn. What began as a pragmatic, realistic appraisal of the impossibility of attaining a Kurdish nation-state through a guerrilla war against Turkish security forces, and as a compromise proposal calling for respect for human rights and cultural rights, alongside measures of decentralisation or autonomy, developed, under the influence perhaps especially of Murray Bookchin, into a principled rejection of the state. In effect, Öcalan advanced a redefinition of self-determination, now understood as radical, direct democracy, against the state.

Under Bookchin's influence, Öcalan would also take up the theme of the urgent need for social ecology. Even so, as with the emphasis on the struggle against patriarchy, the sensitivity of the movement to ecological issues was not just born like Athena. It did not just spring spontaneously out of Öcalan's head. Instead, it was forged in concrete struggles, most emblematically, the struggle to save the ancient village of Hasnkeyf in the province of Batman, set to be submerged under water by the Turkish state's Ilisu Dam

project. A struggle in which the European environmentalist movement would forge organic links with the Kurdish movement, thereby prefiguring the overlapping, decentralised networks of resistance envisioned by the democratic confederal ideal.

Öcalan's articulation of democratic confederalism grows out of a deep disenchantment with and critique of Marxism-Leninism, which, in quasi-confessional terms, in a series of penetrating self-criticisms of his own previous mentality, he accuses of reproducing the cult of hierarchy, of behaving as organisations like mini-states, acting in accordance with a logic of conquest and domination, rather than resistance and freedom. The emphasis on the struggle against patriarchy, the fostering of awareness of the urgency of social ecology, the thoroughgoing critique of the state, the promotion of popular assemblies and championing of radically decentralised, direct democracy, all of these components of the "paradigm shift" are explicitly contrasted to the democratic-centralist model and mindset.

Likewise, Öcalan's critique of Marxism-Leninism includes a critique of its scientism, of its hostility to the realm of myth, of its bias in favour of

secular-fundamentalism. In this latter vein, in recent years, Öcalan has urged the Kurdish movement to organise a Democratic Islam Congress, with the purpose of elaborating a liberationist interpretation of the ethical and political implications of professing and practicing authentic Islamic faith. Whether, in practice, the tradition and perception of militant secularism among movement cadres and supporters has been transformed is another matter – certainly worthy of close empirical investigation, given not only the history of conflict with Kurdish Hezbollah, but also in terms of countering the appeal of Erdogan's AKP and its brand of patriarchal, neoliberal Islam, not to mention the struggle against reactionary jihadists in Rojava. The fact that the first Kurdish rebellions against the Kemalist republic were mobilised along the secular-religious divide, in the name of the community of believers, is not irrelevant in the present. Indeed, the proper relation between religion and politics continues to be a source of dispute and contestation, capable of dividing contemporary Kurds. The movement's attempt to articulate a Democratic Islam is intended to transcend such divisions; how serious and successful this attempt will no doubt condition the contours and horizons of

support for the ambitious democratic confederal project advanced by the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

Finally, and crucially, the principled rejection of the strategy of “national liberation,” understood in terms of the pursuit of a Kurdish nation-state, has included a rather elaborate set of arguments against the insidious evils of what Öcalan refers to as “feudal nationalism,” most often in reference to the example of Barzani in South Kurdistan. The ideological and programmatic re-orientation of the Kurdish Freedom Movement thus includes not just a renunciation of the goal of a state, but more ambitiously, the aspiration to transcend altogether the confines of the “nationalist imaginary.” A transcendence which should not be confused with repudiating pride in Kurdishness, but rather, with escaping the dialectic of “majority” versus “minority.” Indeed, as Öcalan has insisted, “in democratic confederalism there is no room for any kind of hegemony striving.”

Self-administration and autonomous organisation of direct democratic assemblies, not to mention, of self-defence militias, for all ethnic and religious groups as the alternative to the tyranny of the majority, to the “hegemonic striving”

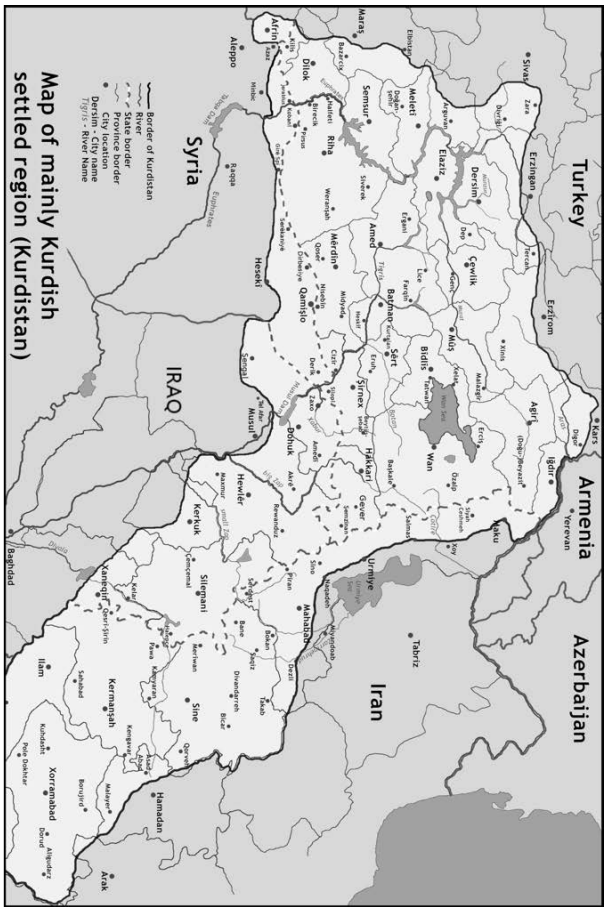
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deeply ingrained in the ideology of nationalism. A tall order to ask from a movement that has sacrificed so many lives for the dream of a Greater Kurdistan. An exercise in democratic leadership, if ever there was, on the part of Öcalan; his attempt to get his followers to dream internationalist dreams of radical democracy, to imagine forms of confederation that cut across and beyond the mental borders imposed by the cult of national community. Easier to pronounce than to achieve.

The struggle against patriarchy, the struggle for social ecology, the struggle against the nation-state, the struggle against sectarianism in all its forms, the struggle for radical, direct democracy – these are all significant departures from the original articulation of the struggle for “national liberation” understood as the creation of a state-communist Greater Kurdistan. Indeed, ambitious aspirations, and a thorough-going re-orientation of the goals of the movement, which have taken on a life of their own with the revolutionary developments in Rojava.

Thank you.

Dr Thomas Jeffrey Miley is a Lecturer of Political Sociology at the University of Cambridge, a member of the Board of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC) and a patron of Peace in Kurdistan. He is co-editor, with Federico Venturini, of Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdoğan's Turkey (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2018).



Achieving the Impossible: Abdullah Öcalan and Peace in the Middle East

Reimar Heider

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this event, I am glad to have the opportunity speak here alongside all of you.

From my position with the International Initiative “Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan—Peace in Kurdistan,” I would like to further emphasise Öcalan’s role in the developments we have been discussing, because occasionally, it can be somewhat overlooked, as he has been in prison now for more than 20 years.

As the previous speakers have emphasised, the 15 August 1984, is a significant turning point for the Kurdish people, because it seemed so unlikely and so impossible. After the military coup of 1980 in Turkey, everything was banned; the whole Left was in tatters, but also the political right, as all kinds of political parties were banned. Nobody thought it was possible to organise an armed resistance; if at all, then maybe in the cities, but

certainly not in Kurdistan. Öcalan tried to convince people that this is possible; he gave them inspiration, he gave them belief, and he organised for this aim. It didn't happen out of the blue; he had a plan, a strategy, and he organised to make it a reality.

When the armed resistance of 15 August 1984 occurred, people still did not believe it; the government said, "This something that will be crushed in a week or a month." But looking back, this event is only the first in a long string of developments that seemed very unlikely, or even impossible, which Öcalan believed in, and inspired other people to believe in also. For example, Meral emphasized the role of the women's movement; who would have thought that the strongest women's movement in the Middle East, or possibly right now in the world, would come from Kurdistan? But Öcalan believed in this; he believed that it was possible, and he opened doors that helped to make it possible.

To take another example, who would have believed that after the 2011 rebellion in many Arab and North African countries, all of these rebellions would be over after a couple of years, and that in many countries very little or nothing

would come out of it, but that a revolution would take hold in a part of Syria, Rojava, that would change the face of the Middle East? There are a lot of these seemingly impossible things, which Öcalan foresaw long ago, and organised for in the long term, motivating people and organising them to make it happen in reality.

Another point, which Salih Muslim also emphasised, is that very soon after the beginning of the armed struggle, Öcalan reached out not only to politicians in Europe, but also in Turkey, for example to the heads of state (e.g. the prime ministers and the presidents), to say, “Look, this is something we need to resolve together; we need to resolve the conflict that is at the root of what is happening between the Kurds and the Turkish state. Let’s sit down at the table, and find a political and peaceful resolution to this conflict.”

Since then, Öcalan has taken every opportunity to urge for such a solution. For example, a large portion of his prison writings, the books he has penned in prison, is dedicated to this issue. Furthermore, since 1999, every opportunity he has had to speak publicly, or to make some kind of call, goes in that direction; finding a peaceful resolution to this conflict. I think this is another

thing that may seem very unlikely now; for example, there were times when a political resolution seemed a bit more likely. However, Öcalan is still able to make many people believe in this possibility and strive for this cause, because it is necessary for the next step in the development of the Middle East; to make Kurdistan into the centre-point of a wave of peaceful political solutions to numerous conflicts in the region.

Öcalan has additionally taken important steps towards resolving religion-based violence and sectarianism in the region. Öcalan has written extensively on religion; not only on Islam, but on all the monotheistic religions, and older forms of religion as well, which date back 5000 years to the Sumerian era. His interpretation is that all of these religions have a kind of double character; they serve as social movements, or liberationist movements, that often have an oppositional character, calling for justice, criticising the people in power. But in time, they very often get adopted by the people in power, and then serve as a religion of the people in power, or for instance as a state religion.

Specifically concerning Islam, which Öcalan knows best of all the religious systems, he has explained how this historically developed; that is, which parts of historical Islam were progressive, and served progressive goals for the communities, and how Islam was very early on converted into a tool of state-building, ruling, and conquering, thereby losing much of its progressive character. Öcalan emphasises and focuses on the progressive traditions within Islam, consisting both of some of the original moves of Islam, and also of oppositional traditions inside of Islam (of which there are many, that in the west are often not well-known). On this basis, he suggested that the mosques should be used as they were before; as spaces for open discussion about all kinds of political issues, issues of the community, and thus be used in a progressive way. This suggestion was well-received, having been taken up by a number of Muslim scholars, and by peoples from various communities as well.

This is why we are trying to promote a campaign for Öcalan's freedom; it is a central, essential point for a peace process in the Middle East, and

especially between Turkey and the Kurds, or the Kurdish movements. Öcalan is the political head of a large population, with millions of people demanding his freedom. A number of years ago, there was a signature campaign that collected 10.3 million signatures for Öcalan's freedom, which is probably unique in the history of campaigns for political prisoners. Öcalan's freedom is not a small thing, or a side issue, but a central aspect of the struggle. Öcalan is the architect of the armed struggle, but he is also the architect of the peace process; he deserves to be free, and his role in this process should be recognised much more than it is currently.

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