**-- Transcript of Interview with Nilüfer Koç - 14/11/20 --**

**Today we will be discussing the developing situation in Northern Iraq, or South Kurdistan. In the past few weeks, forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) have deployed near the areas held by guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in South Kurdistan. Tensions between the PKK and the KDP have escalated dramatically; last month, the PKK was been blamed for the assassination of a security forces official affiliated with the KDP, which the PKK has vehemently denied.**

**These developments have been taking place as Turkey continues to escalate its interventions into the Iraqi Kurdistan region, as part of its ongoing conflict against the PKK. There has been conflict between the KDP and PKK in the past, and Turkey has consistently sought to deepen the divide between these parties in order to advance its own agenda. Recently, Murat Karayilan, a member of the executive council of the PKK, issued a public call for peace and dialogue between the parties, and has warned that if the situation continues to develop in this way, it will lead to an intra-Kurdish war that will be devastating for all of Kurdistan.**

**For a greater understanding of what is happening, and what can be done to cultivate a process of dialogue between these groups, we will be speaking with Nilüfer Koç. Nilüfer is the former co-chair of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK). The KNK, sometimes referred to as the ‘Parliament in Exile’ of Kurdistan, operates as a representative body for organisations from all four parts of Kurdistan, and seeks to promote unity and dialogue amongst the various Kurdish political parties. Presently, Nilüfer serves on the executive council of the KNK, as the chair of the Commission on Foreign Relations. She has worked extensively in multiple regions of Kurdistan, including Iraqi Kurdistan.**

**Nilüfer, thank you for joining us.**

Thank you, Connor, for having me.

**Maybe you can begin by giving us a brief overview of the recent developments in Iraqi Kurdistan, and tell us what you are able to about what the situation is now on the ground, as well as offer us some background as to why these developments are happening now, for example why the KDP is acting as it is, and what role Turkey is playing in these developments.**

When we speak about Kurdistan, we must consider that whenever there is conflict happening locally in Kurdistan, it has regional and global aspects also. That’s why it is important; everything that is happening locally is at the same time regional and global, regarding problems in Kurdistan. And the current situation, the increasing escalation of political tensions between KDP and PKK has directly something to do with the changes of political balances in the Middle East and globally. That’s why I wouldn’t say it’s an intra-Kurdish conflict – the tensions between PKK and KDP – one can say clearly Turkey is behind all these problems, or conflicts, because after the Syrian war, Turkey has been permanently destabilizing the whole area for the Turkish concept of having a greater Turkey, in the vacuum of the Middle East. The first step is to occupy two parts of Kurdistan, for the dream of having a greater Turkey before 2023.

**And this is under the National Pact agreement from the Ottoman Empire, is that correct?**

Yes, from 1921. And then particularly, Erdogan is interested in changing the borders which were drawn by the Lausanne Treaty in 1923 - today’s borders of Turkey, he wants to change them. As a first step, he wants to change the borders between Turkey/Syria and Turkey/Iraq, but both sides are inhabited by Kurds; the Turkish part is inhabited by Kurds, and the Syrian part on the other side of the border, and the same I can say for Iraqi Kurdistan. And the Kurds as such, under the leadership of PKK, are defeating Turkey, preventing any further development of the strategy of occupation of our land. And Turkey has done everything to weaken the Kurdish freedom movement; Erdogan was leading the jihadists in the last 9 years against the democratic model of North and East Syria/Rojava. Erdogan has done everything to make Iraqi Kurdistan economically dependent on Turkey, and built several military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan – they have now nearly 40 military bases – this is all part of the strategy of the occupation of Kurdistan. But he was not able to succeed in his concept, because as I said, the PKK was resisting as a mass movement with the Kurds, and now he is looking for a weak point of the Kurds – Erdogan and his regime.

The weak point he is using is the natural conflicts, the political conflicts between the Kurds. There have been for 40 years, since the foundation of the PKK, ideological and political conflicts with the KDP and other political parties. This is natural, because the PKK has a different understanding of democracy, and it’s looking for the co-existence of the people as part of a solution for Kurdistan, and it’s looking for a democratic area where the Kurds can live freely, and it is interested to change the society, for example offering women the opportunity to become free, and all other oppressed peoples and religions. This is the PKK. On the other hand, you have the KDP, which is very conservative and Islam-oriented; in many cases, you will find applications of Sharia law against women particularly, and there is a lack of democracy – a very, very serious problem. These are natural conflicts, two different political perspectives, and this has been happening for 40 years.

But the problem is, why is Turkey now using this conflict? It of course has something to do with the crisis in Turkey. As we have seen with current developments in Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey could not achieve its goal, and even Turkey was not able to achieve its goal in the conflict of the East Mediterranean Sea, and Turkey’s attacks in North and East Syria can’t continue. All these are of course affecting Turkey’s internal politics; spreading Turkish interests, or Turkish expansionism, is very expensive for the Turkish economy, because the whole budget of the state is going to the military, or for militarization. So, people are protesting Erodgan’s policy, he is in a serious crisis, internationally/diplomatically, economically, socially, and politically.

And the same, I can say, is happening in Iraqi Kurdistan. I won’t speak about the Regional Government, because unfortunately, the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan weren’t able to have democratic self-governance; it is a one party-led government. However, there is a coalition government, but the KDP is acting without respecting others, without the participation of others, and as you mentioned before, as happened a few days ago, they were accusing the PKK of planning to attack some foreign diplomatic organisation, or institutions, and that was the reason they sent tanks and heavy military to the region of the military bases of the PKK. And they said this was a decision made by the National Security Council of the Kurdistan Regional Government. But the PUK said this is not true; the National Security Council consists of five people, three are members of the PUK, two from KDP, and they denied this. Then the minister of the Peshmerga said, “Well, the PKK is preparing for attacking the Kurdistan Regional Government,” and then the commander of the Peshmergas from PUK said, “this is not true, we don’t have sign in this manner.” So you can see it is one party-led politics in Iraqi Kurdistan, unfortunately.

And since the fall of oil prices in the beginning of the year, South Kurdistan is in a deep economic crisis; for one year they have not been able to pay the salaries of the people. Then on Thursday, the Iraqi parliament passed a new resolution in which they rejected to pay the salaries of the people who are working on behalf of the Iraqi government in Iraqi Kurdistan. This is deepening the economic crisis. At the same time, there is trouble between Baghdad and Erbil because of KDP’s policy towards Turkey; according the Iraqi constitution, KDP belongs to Baghdad, so there is a pact between them and Baghdad, there is an agreement between them, but what they do is to reject cooperating with Baghdad, and instead are more cooperating or collaborating with Turkey. This is creating other problems with Baghdad, with the central government.

And the other problem, which was increasing after 2017, with the referendum for independence; after that, we lost 40% of the land of South Kurdistan to the Iraqi central government, and now, because of the 40 military bases of Turkey, we have lost 20% of our land to Turkey now; it’s happening practically now. And the journalists are questioning this, the people are questioning this, but nobody is giving any response for the backstage issues. For that reasons, nearly 16 journalists were arrested last month; they’re asking, “Why don’t you pay salaries? Why do you bring Turkey to our land? And why do you reject to cooperate with Baghdad?” for example. And then you can see, there is a crisis also in Iraqi Kurdistan.

If you look from this perspective, both sides – Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly KDP, and AKP in Turkey – they are in deep crisis, and they are looking for ways to overcome this crisis. For that purpose, they are now planning on having a war against the PKK, to overcome, or to cover the crisis. But it wouldn’t solve the problems - particularly it wouldn’t solve the problems of the KDP - it will create a national problem for all of us as Kurds. You must imagine; Kurdistan is in the centre of the Middle East, and the Middle East is now currently the centre of the Third World War. When we are speaking about the Third World War, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and particularly after the beginning of the Gulf War. So there are tens of powers who are looking for any opportunity to implement their hegemony in the Middle East, through Kurdistan. So it means if you have now an intra-Kurdish fight between KDP and PKK, I don’t think Iran would watch, Iran would intervene. And then several European countries would intervene, and then the Arab states would intervene, so then it would become a regional war, and then of course a global problem. That’s why it’s not just a Kurdish problem. So it is important to see the whole frame; it seems that it’s a local problem, but it will have regional and global consequences for all of us.

The big threat to the Kurds is that we would lose everything. Unfortunately, I see that the Turkish government is backed by, for example, the US, under the Trump administration. And I think before Trump leaves power, it will be his final gift to the Kurds, as he has done in North and East Syria. He was not keeping his promises. And we know him as a man who was really not keeping his promises; one day he’s saying this, and another day a different thing, the opposite. And I think before he leaves the White House, he will give a new gift; a war, by provocating Turkey to attack us. Because the US is seeking Kurds who will follow US interests, and they know Turkey’s sensitive issue is the Kurds. So they know Turkey is hostile to the Kurds, because the Kurds prevent Turkey’s strategy of expansionism and occupation of two parts of Kurdistan. So they’re pouring oil on the fire now.

And the same is being done by some European politicians; for example, after the escalation started, the US State Department and the French Minister of Foreign Affairs were the first who accused the PKK. But the truth is that the PKK has been for 40 years in the region of Gare, and it was the KDP who sent their troops to the region of the military bases of the PKK, it was not the opposite. Then you ask, “Why do you accuse without any evidence?” The evidence says that the KDP went to the places of the KDP; this is the truth, and this was said also by the PUK, Gorran, and other political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan. So then you ask, “Well, they have different goals when they are acting like this, they are all looking now for a conflict in the Middle East so that they can advance their strategy of becoming a hegemonic power in the Middle East through the ’Kurdish card’, or through the intra-Kurdish conflict.” So that’s why it’s not just our conflict, and I wouldn’t say it has only to do with us; such a conflict will destabilize the whole area.

**As a part of Turkey’s escalating intervention in the region, they have also steadily increased military activity and airstrikes in the Yazidi-majority area of Shengal (Sinjar) in Northern Iraq, with the justification that the PKK is allegedly active in the region. In addition, one month ago, in October, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq reached an agreement to assume control of the administration of Shengal, dissolving the self-governance structures and self-defence units that the people of Shengal established for themselves following the 2014 genocide by the Islamic State. Many have come out in opposition to this agreement on the grounds that the people of Shengal were not involved in these negotiations, including the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella coordinating body of the Kurdish movement, of which the PKK is a member organisation. Can you tell us how the Shengal region fits into these developments taking place now in South Kurdistan?**

First of all, I have to remind everyone that turkey is always using the PKK as a pretext. And I would ask, “Is the PKK in Libya?” Or I would ask, “Is the PKK in Armenia, in Nagorno-Karabakh? Is the PKK in Somalia, or Mali, where Turkey is busy destabilizing the politics there? Was the PKK in the Eastern Meditteranean Sea?” So I think this is a pretext. The truth is the PKK said, “Well, whoever is going to have a concept of attacking against the Yazidis, we will defend the Yazidis,” like they did in 2014. So I think it’s a shame when the Iraqi government, and the US, are talking about agreements concerning the Sinjar region, concerning the Yazidis, when they weren’t able to defend them in 2014. And accusing the PKK, who were able to defeat ISIS. The whole defence started with 12 guerrilla fighters of the PKK in August 2014; they trained the Yazidis, they said to the Yazidis, “We have to fight together,” they educated the people for self-defence. Otherwise, we would have no Yazidis today. So Turkey was clear, by backing ISIS, in supporting ethnic cleansing or genocide against the Yazidis, but it was the PKK who saved them. Then changing the truth – this is an unbelieveable lie, what they do now.

So I’m asking the Baghdad government, “Where were you in 2014? You have helicopters, military artillery, the US has digital military technology, why could you not save the Yazidis from ISIS in 2014?” You are now punishing the power who was able to save the people there. This is an unbelievable lie, what they do, it is a hypocrisy; for me, as a woman and a Kurd, as a human, it is really not acceptable what kind of lie they are producing the media and trying to use to provocate Kurds. When you go deeper into the background on the whole story, it seems that the US - or the current US administration under Trump, I don’t know how it will be under the leadership of Biden and Harris – but I do believe that Trump was clearly pro-Erdogan administration. We have seen this in North and East Syria, and we are seeing this now in Iraqi Kurdistan. So it seems the policy is pro-Turkish, anti-Kurdish.

Of course there are people in the US administration who are not agreeing with Trump’s strategy, but the ruling power in the Trump administration is clearly anti-Kurdish. One of the representatives of the US State Department said after the agreement was signed between KDP and the Iraqi government – and I’m sure we will find evidence that Turkey was involved, because a few days before the agreement was signed, the head of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT) was in Baghdad, and the Turkish ambassador was active in drafting the agreement – and then the State Department representative said on his Twitter account, “Well, it will be good if Turkey and Iraq would run the administration of the Sinjar area.” What does Turkey have to do in Iraq? Iraq is a sovereign state; why should Turkey run the Sinjar region together with Iraq? Turkey is a different state, Iraq is a different state; there are borders, and international law. How can the US call publicly for violating international law by allowing a country to come and occupy another country? You can see power politics has nothing to do with humanity.

The Yazidis, who were saved from IS by the PKK – and still they are a threatened people in the Middle East because they are non-Muslim and non-Christian; a very old, ancient Kurdish faith and Kurdish culture is preserved by them. The people are living peacefully in the area, and they have escaped many massacres to come settle themselves in the deserts of Sinjar. Sinjar is not a very beautiful place; I have seen the place myself in 2014. So the people settled there to protect their existence, and now the people are being threatened with another genocide. And you can be sure that Turkey wouldn’t allow the existence of the Yazidis, since Erdogan is clearly following the line of his pan-Islamism; he is saying, “The Middle East must be under the control of the Ottomans, and the Ottomans were Sunni-Hanafi Islam. All those who are not Sunni-Hanafi Islam are going to be destroyed.” And the Yazidis have nothing to do with Islam. So this is the ideological perspective of the current Turkish regime under Erdogan.

The other point is that historically this area belonged to the Mosul province of the Ottoman empire. So if you look at the areas where they are trying to attack the PKK – like Gare, Heftanin, until Sinjar – this area is a former province of the Ottoman Empire called the ‘Province of Mosul.’ And Erdogan is repeatedly often saying, “We will get back what they have stolen from us. We will implement the Misak i-Milli,” which means enacting North and East Syria as the province of Aleppo - the former province of Aleppo of the Ottoman Empire - and Mosul. For that, he is implementing a policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Yazidis, and also the other civilian Muslim Kurds in the area which is in Kurdish called ‘Behdinan’. They destroyed several Kurdish villages there, and people were forced to leave their land, in the past one year. Not just Yazidi Kurds, but others also are threatened. So it is a power-sharing issue between the US and Turkey.

I also think they are using the Iraqi government because it is a weak government, and next year there will be elections, and so you can imagine; after the election, it will take two years’ time until they have a government, like we have seen in the past. It is a very weak state, the Iraqi state. The US is seeking Turkey as a powerful state, because they benefiting from Turkey’s policy of destabilisation, so then they can come as the saviours. But in this, they are using the PKK as a pretext. And not just a pretext, the US is not happy with the strategy of the PKK; the PKK is clearly preventing the hegemonic policy of divide and rule, because the PKK is insisting on the co-existence of the ethnic groups. They are bringing the peoples together, making them into a power. So they educated the Yazidis for self-governance, the Yazidis now how their people’s councils. And there is a move towards the modernisation of the social structures amongst the Yazidi society; there is a new awareness amongst the Yazidis. So the Yazidis clearly said, “Ok, you can come, we will defeat you.” And this is thanks to the PKK’s help; they helped them to be able to help themselves. This is of course an intervention against the hegemonic policy, which is led globally by the US, and regionally by Turkey; Turkey’s a sub-imperialist state now. And I think they wouldn’t be able to occupy again, and I don’t think the Yazidis would allow for a second genocide, or attempted genocide, like in 2014.

And you ask, “Why is this system the Yazidis are using harming them?” It is clearly within the frame of the Iraqi constitution, which allows autonomy, and the Yazidis are asking for cultural and religious autonomy.

**Because the newest Iraqi constitution provides for a federal system, is that correct?**

Yes. They are not going to change the borders like Turkey is doing. So then you say, “Well is the US interested in changing the borders of the Lausanne Treaty or not?” That must be clarified by US policy I think. We are clear as Kurds, and I think the PKK is clear, they say, “We can imagine having a solution within the currently-existing borders,” like it is implemented in North and East Syria. They understand themselves as a part of Syria, but a new Syria, a democratic Syria, which is implemented in North and East Syria.

**Recently, the Kurdish movement has announced a world-wide campaign for freedom for Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999. Öcalan, as the architect of the democratic confederalist system and the democratic nation project, has long been a voice for peace and reconciliation, and at this stage is almost universally recognised as the key figure in realising a peace process in Turkey and achieving a political resolution of the Kurdish question. What role does the campaign for Öcalan’s freedom have in promoting dialogue and de-escalating the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan?**

I think the campaign “The Time Has Come – Freedom For Abdullah Ocalan” is very important at this stage. The campaign is now backed by some resolutions of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. The CPT recently published a report in which they criticised Turkey for violating international law regarding Ocalan’s rights as a prisoner. And the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also passed a resolution, which was very critical of Turkey, and there were some recommendations on Imrali, concerning the imprisonment status of Abdullah Ocalan. They also urged Turkey to fulfil its obligation as a member of the European Council; Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe, and after 21 years, for the first, the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) and the Council of Europe were raising the issue of Ocalan. So it is the first time; they were very clear with their critiques and recommendations on Turkey.

Because, I think, the political background is that they see Turkey as a new threat; in Europe, Turkey became a threat now, by using the jihadists everywhere. When a European country is threatening or criticizing Erodgan, he is then repaying it through the pan-Islamism structures like the jihadists, who are organised in mosques and in civil fascist organisations in all of Europe. So, as I said previously, the US is backing Turkey, turkey is producing the jihadists in the area where they have occupied – for example in Afrin, in Idlib, in Sere Kaniye, Gire Spi, they became centres for recruiting jihadists. And they were sent to Azerbaijan, to support Azerbaijan against the Armenians. So Erdogan can also send these troops to Europe. And I think the reason why they made some changes in their policy, the Council of Europe and the CPT, regarding Ocalan, has something to do with the fact that Turkey is now a threat.

Like Ocalan said immediately after the Arab Spring - he was really trying his best under very unbelievable circumstances of imprisonment – in 2013-2015 he was trying to prevent Turkey from becoming aggressive, becoming the new threat, not just for the Kurds. And I think now they understand what Ocalan tried to do in the so-called ‘process of negotiations,’ in 2013-2015. And when the peace process broke down because of Erdogan in April 2015, then the total war started. I guess that the Europeans are aware that the one who can stop this problem is Ocalan. Since he has the support of millions of Kurds - he is recognised as their leader, as the Kurdish leader, particularly by women - and more and more millions of Arabs are supporting him and his ideas, because the democratic administration in Northern Syria is an implementation of Ocalan’s ideas; the idea of the co-existence of peoples, faiths, and men and women, the new understanding of being responsible for the environment, for ecology, a different art of economy. It is a model that can be implemented in all regions of the Middle East. It is an alternative. So that’s why Arabs are supporting Ocalan, and the majority, I would say 99% of the Kurds, are feeling that he is the right leader for them. And I think the state has seen that Ocalan is one who is able to be a leading figure in finding compromises with turkey, diplomatic compromises in negotiations. He has shown this various times in the past.

And stopping Turkish fascism – fascism means, internally in Turkey, homogenisation of the whole society, beginning with the Kurds, but implemented on the Alawis, the Christians, like we have seen the changes of churches to mosques, as in Hagia Sophia, and the increasing pressure on Christians and Jews, on other different Islamic orders that are not Sunni-Hanafi, and then particularly increasing violence against women, domestic and state violence against women, because Erodgan is a real Sunni Muslim Hanafi and Salafi; he is a Salafist, I would say, ideologically. And he has his sons as Salafi soldiers, like the jihadists. So he is a threat to all of us, and unfortunately his power is growing everywhere; not just in the Middle East, but in Europe, in north Africa, in Asia, in whole continents, even in Latin America he is recruiting people. So he is now a threat, leading the new fascism, and through the policy of expansionism destabilising all areas. The one who can stop him is Abdullah Ocalan. I think that is the reason why Turkey is insisting on having an intra-Kurdish fight, to weaken this position of Ocalan and the PKK, for a peaceful future.

That’s why supporting campaigns for the liberation of Abdullah Ocalan will be a contribution towards the resolving the problem of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, because there are millions of Kurds in this region, and Kurdistan with its four parts can play a vital role in improving democracy for the region, since the Kurds in Turkey, in Iran, in Iraq, and in Syria are supporting him, they would listen to him. It depends if you want democracy or war; so this question must be asked of the US policy; Turkey is clearly anti-democratic, but those who are benefitting from Turkey, they must respond to the question. And I hope the new US administration will follow a little bit of a different way, and recognise the status of the Kurds as a political actor in the region, with their principles or their perspective of a solution.

In this, Ocalan will play a key role. That’s why it’s not just an issue of asking for a Kurdish leader to become free; his freedom will ensure the freedom of all of us. That’s why it’s really vital to support the campaign. Under the circumstances of COVID-19, still the Kurds in Europe and everywhere are very active in this campaign, and in other parts of Kurdistan also. And for the Kurds, I mean Ocalan was trying his best on his prison island in Imrali, whenever he has the opportunity to give a message, he was reminding the Kurds of national unity; at least on the 27th of April, when he got for the first time after 21 years to speak with his brother on the phone – he was just once allowed to speak on the phone after 21 years – and the first message he gave was, “Kurds shouldn’t fight against each other, they must come together. Otherwise the fire in the Middle East will burn the Kurds.” That was his last message in the 15 minutes he got the right to speak. So he is also a key figure in national unity amongst the Kurds.

**The Kurdistan National Congress, of which you are a member of the executive council, has long worked for peace, dialogue, and unity across all parts of Kurdistan. What can you say about the position of the KNK with regards to the situation and the KDP at this time, and the work that is being done to bring these actors into dialogue and prevent conflict?**

This is a very, very challenging time now. The question is can we succeed in coming together, having common national principles; like, let’s say, all of the Kurdish political parties have to accept that collaborating with the state who is hostile to the Kurds is a national betrayal, or a national enemy. So these are the red lines of our congress. We wrote a 2007 paper on a strategic policy of national unity, and in this we say, “All the Kurdish political parties can have bilateral relations with any state, except if their collaboration or cooperation with that state is harming the Kurds in the other parts.”

Let’s say Turkey is anti-Kurdish against the Kurds in Turkey; that means neither the PUK nor the KDP should act together with Turkey, because acting with Turkey means strengthening Turkey in their anti-Kurdish policy in Bakur Kurdistan. So this is a red line for the KNK; we have a strategic document which says, “then what should the KDP do?” According to this paper, they should act with the PKK. So if the Kurds in Iran are threatened by the Iranian regime, then the PUK should reconsider their relation with Iran, and act with the Kurds in Iran, supporting them, and not supporting the Iranian regime. I mean, even if they have diplomatic ties, these ties must be used for the rights of the Kurds in Iran. So this is the frame of the KNK. And we say now, “The KDP is next to our red line.” The red line of KNK, the red line of principles; when they are going to attack the PKK, it means they are strengthening Turkey.

So then it is not important whether they are Kurds or not Kurds; then it means clearly they are acting with our enemy; with the enemy of our people, with the enemy of women, with the enemy of the people of the Middle East. This is Turkey. So we are saying this clearly, “You are very close to our red line, and we remind you, pull back. You are threatening the whole of Kurdistan, not just Turkish Kurdistan or Iraqi Kurdistan.” When Turkey is going to occupy Iraqi Kurdistan, imagine what Iran will do against the Kurds in East Kurdistan. And what will Bashar al-Assad do? He will do the same. We have weakened Bashar al-Assad, but he will get strength from Turkey, to roll back all the democratic achievements of North and East Syria.

So that’s why it is a very clear national red line we have put down in front of KDP, and we say, “You pull back your military forces against the PKK, you come to the umbrella of a national conference” – which Ocalan called for in 2013; he was calling to Mr Masoud Barzani, “Let’s have a Kurdish national conference, or congress, you can become the president of the congress. I give all my rights to you. You can act on behalf of me also.” I was a member of the preparatory committee of the Kurdish National Conference in 2013, we acted under the leadership of Mr Masoud Barzani for four months. It was a project of Ocalan, he said, “Please, bring the Kurds together, we have the opportunity to get more achievements in the vacuum of the Middle East.” But he was not listening to him. And the result is that he then moved more and more to Turkey, to AKP.

The other thing that I cannot understand is, Turkey is now criticized by the majority of the states who are a member of the UN; the Arabic states are criticizing Turkey, the states in Asia, even India and South Africa now have trouble with Turkey because he is using Islam against the communities in these countries. And France has a problem with the pan-Islamism of Erdogan. Austria is the same, Germany has a problem. So the whole world is saying, “Erdogan is becoming a threat.” Even in the last meeting of the heads of the European Union this weekend, they all were speaking about Islamic terrorism, and who do you believe is behind it? It is Turkey! And then, if the world is saying he is a bad guy, how can you be a friend of this guy? Even diplomatically, if you are looking for power, this is the wrong approach the KDP is taking.

We have now the support of the majority of the Kurds; all the political parties are supporting our current policy of the KNK. We have sent recently a delegation led by our co-chair; he is now mediating, and bringing all the political parties together, and the civil society - because for us it is important to have civil society in the boat also, it is not just an issue of political parties; if a war is coming, then it will affect all the people. So our delegation consists of representatives from Rojava, from Bashur Kurdistan, from Iranian Kurdistan, unfortunately not from Bakur Kurdistan, because it is too dangerous for them, but they are now holding meetings with different groups.

And as I said, all the people in Kurdistan are very aware of the situation, and there are now hundreds of initiatives; one was developed in Europe, amongst the diaspora, with 1,500 intellectuals, high-ranking politicians, former peshmerga fighters, they all called for preventing an intra-Kurdish fight. And the civil initiatives in Iraqi Kurdistan, all the Kurdish political parties in Bakur Kurdistan, the Turkish part of Kurdistan, they called on KDP to withdraw its forces from the areas of the PKK. So it’s clear that the society is against this war, and is criticizing publicly the KDP, and particularly the Barzani family, because they say, “Not all the KDP people are behind this strategy, it is led by the Barzani family.” This is what they people are saying in their statements and writing in their documents. This is good that there is a political awareness amongst the Kurds, which is supporting us, and ensuring that we can go ahead in being very clear in our demands for mediating the conflicts.

**What has been the role of foreign governments, for example, the governments of the US, the UK and Europe, in the developments thus far? What message would you give to these governments as to how they can act to facilitate a resolution of this situation, and what message would you give to the people of these countries regarding how they can support the Kurdish movement and work to promote peace in the region?**

It is a difficult issue; state and peace, I don’t know how to answer. We are right in the midst of the third world war, and this war is about sharing the area, designing a new area of the Middle East, which the US called in the 1990s the ‘Greater Middle East Project.’ In this the US has allies, like the UK and other states. All of them are looking for the opportunity to settle their interests in the region. So it seems there is no big interest in peace now. That’s why they are producing intra-Kurdish conflicts, like they did in the past century. But I would remind them by saying, “The Kurds are not the old ones.”

A smart thing the Kurds did was they said to the people, “Hey, we are not the only one, the Arabs are oppressed also, the Christians are oppressed.” They created a strategy for unity of oppressed peoples, by overcoming any kind of nationalism. They said to the societies, according to Ocalan’s strategy, “If you want to have more democratic rights, then start with yourself; democratize yourself, by offering women the free participation in decision-making on issues,” and call to the women, “Organize yourselves autonomously, you are the key to social democracy, changing the societies.” And this idea has left Kurdistan and the Middle East; today Kurds have millions of friends world-wide. There are hundreds of people who are writing their PhD on this model. So Kurdistan is not just in the Middle East, and the Kurdish idea is not just in the Middle East. So it won’t be so easy to attempting ethnic-cleansing massacres against the Kurds now, since they are not alone, and the slogan ‘The Kurds have only the mountains as their friends’ is gone; we have friends. And this is the strategic strength we have, as a people at a very critical area in the world.

The other point with the states is that the states are understanding a different language. The competition between each of the states who are involved in the Middle East, it is growing and increasing. This is offering Kurdish politics, especially the PKK, the opportunity to act in a vacuum; to find new partners, because they are very flexible. And trying to convince the states, “Listen, you can’t change Kurdistan like you did in the past.” So when I said Turkey has been fighting against the PKK for the past 40 years, it means that the PKK was fighting a member of NATO; Turkey got all the support from NATO. And with NATO - I don’t know how many member states NATO has, I think it is about 50 – and Turkey was always asking for Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, which says, “When one member state is threatened, the others have to help,” and they did. Because Turkey was always saying, “Oh, Article 5, I’m threatened by the PKK,” and they all helped them by putting the PKK on the list of terrorist organisations, or ensuring Turkey diplomatic guarantees.

You see, they have done everything, and then the PKK was able to survive over these 40 years, and not just survive, but spreading their ideas amongst the Kurds. You see, today it is not so easy to produce intra-Kurdish conflict; it started in the beginning of the year, and from January until now, there is a game which Turkey is playing as a key state, but others are supporting Turkey, in defeating the PKK, weakening the PKK. But you see, the Kurds say, “No.” So the PKK has the support of the majority behind them. And they say to the UK, to the US, “What do you want? We are not going to change the borders, it is your partner who wants to change the borders, it is Turkey.” And they say, “We are not terrorists,” then, when we are terrorists, “What about the jihadists? What about the Islamic State, which is financed by Turkey?” We are not imposing pan-Islamism, and we are not going to impose a pan-Kurdism, but there is a pan-Turkism.

So we say to the state, “You can stay here, but we have the right to stay here also,” as co-existence between Kurdish autonomy and the state. So it is not the old art of revolution where they say ‘we will destroy all the states,’ no, they say, “It’s a co-existence with state and nation-state, you can stay here, but with mutual respect; I recognize you, you recognize me.” So then what can the US say then? What can the UK say then? In the past, they said, “Turkey you are right, the PKK is a separatist organisation.” Then the PKK said, “No, it’s not me; I’m not in Idlib, I’m not in Libya, I’m not in the Mediterranean Sea, I’m not in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Armenia. It’s Turkey, not me. I’m here in the ancient land of the people, and we are looking for democracy. What’s wrong about democracy?” So then this question must be asked to the US, the UK, Germany, France, and others.

And I’m much more optimistic than before, because I see Turkey’s promoting of fascism, expansionism, pan-Islamism, and the PKK is representing democracy, unity of oppressed peoples, is strengthening oppressed women, and is looking for co-existence in the current existing borders. And it is not the old left-wing anti-imperialism in this manner, it has enough self-confidence to say, “I can speak to you as the US. I don’t mind, I can mediate with you, I can negotiate with you.” So they said, “We are ready, but the problem is you, not us.” So then the problem is not the PKK, the problems are those who are seeing the PKK in this frame as a problem. And we are close to having Kurdish politics recognised, including the PKK, because whenever someone will support Turkey, they will support their own threat. And then Europe will decide. You can be sure Erodgan will continue with his aggression, with expansionism, sexism, pan-Islamism. Then again, like in 2014, when the PKK was the leading figure in defeating Islamo-fascism, again it will play such a role.

And if you want to destroy the pan-Islamism that Erdogan is using, it must be done at the roots, starting in the Middle East, particularly in Kurdistan. So that’s why Kurdistan will stay every time in the centre of the conflict; even if you solve the problem with Turkey, then there is Iran, and there are 15 million Kurds. So whoever is going to act in the Middle East, they will have to deal with the Kurds. There is no new Middle East without the Kurds, it can’t be. So the issue is are they going to recognize the Kurds or not? Because we have a problem, we don’t exist legally as a people, as a nation, let’s say. And this problem must be solved.

**Absolutely. Thank you very much for speaking with us Nilufer**.

You’re welcome.