



2021 İmralı Peace Delegation

REPORT

Report of the February 2021 İmralı Peace Delegation

Introduction

On the occasion of the 22nd anniversary of the abduction of the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, Abdullah Öcalan, an international peace delegation convened for the purpose of a virtual fact finding mission. The delegation consisted of ten members, including prominent politicians, trade unionists, academics, lawyers, and social movement activists, hailing from a diverse array of countries, including Iceland, India, Italy, the US, and the UK. Together, we sought to continue the tradition of former delegations who have come to Turkey in recent years in support of the reopening of the peace process between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdish leadership, which was abruptly ended in 2015.

It is our conviction that, like Nelson Mandela, Abdullah Öcalan is a crucial role player for the construction of a peaceful and democratic resolution to the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish freedom movement. We thus believe that the time has come not only for an end to the isolation, but in fact for the freedom of Mr. Öcalan, since, as Mandela once said, “only free men can negotiate.”

Prior to our meetings we had written to the Turkish Minister of Justice, Mr. Abdulhamit Gül, asking his assistance in arranging that our delegation be given permission to visit Abdullah Öcalan on İmralı Island virtually. We also requested a virtual meeting with the Minister. There was no response.

During our fact-finding mission, we met with Kurdish politicians, representatives of the women’s movement, trade union leaders, human rights activists, lawyers’ associations, and members of Abdullah Öcalan’s legal team, all of whom briefed us on the atrocious human rights situation in Turkey, with a special focus on the oppression of the Kurdish people and women.

Our interlocutors consistently conveyed a marked deterioration of human rights in Turkey—across all the fields we covered—conditions in prisons, women’s rights, trade union rights, political rights. As a spokesperson for the Human Rights Association emphasized: ***“Turkey is under an authoritarian regime, which is showing all its features.”***

Massive Human Rights Violations

The Turkish state continues its ruthless policies of all-out war against the Kurdish people, both within its borders and beyond. The illegal occupation of parts of the Kurdish-controlled north-east of Syria continues unabated, with the ethnic cleansing of Afrin increasingly consolidated. While in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, cross-border operations and airstrikes against PKK targets have killed and injured civilians, as Human Rights Watch has denounced (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>). Meanwhile, inside Turkey, the brutal wave of repression of the Kurdish people that broke out in 2015 after the breakdown of the peace process persists.

We learned about how women’s organizations had been closed down and women’s social rights restricted. We were told gruelling stories of individual women being abused and molested, often by uniformed authority. We were given evidence of increased brutality in the prisons, the way lawyers and trade unionists were being persecuted and political rights eroded; how kidnappings and disap-

pearances by the police were commonplace: ***“We have had enough dead bodies delivered to our doorsteps,”*** we were told.

The long list and details of human rights abuses which our interlocutors relayed are harrowing. A regime of impunity reigns, in which the rape, kidnapping and torture of Kurdish women by Turkish security forces is rampant. Political prisoners are routinely tortured, and denied access to health care and even personal hygiene. Under the pretext of the pandemic, demonstrations are banned. Graveyards are ransacked across the Kurdish region, tombs are defiled, and the bones of PKK militants end up on the streets of Istanbul. Two people are thrown from a police helicopter in Van, and those who report it are detained and put on trial.

Press freedom is basically non-existent. ***“You can expect a knock on your door the day after you criticize the government,”*** we heard. Critical newspapers are shut down, and members of the board are charged with belonging to a terrorist organization. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the press is by now owned by companies close to the government, or otherwise avoids making critical comments, according to Human Rights Watch, at the end of 2020 “an estimated 87 journalists and media workers were in pretrial detention or serving sentences for terrorism offenses because of their journalistic work” (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>).

The independence of the judiciary has been thoroughly undermined. Lawyers are charged for defending their clients. Judicial persecution of all opponents of the Erdogan government is systematic, and political repression against the pro-Kurdish opposition is especially fierce. On the second day of our visit, fully 718 people were detained, mostly from the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). Thousands of its members have been arrested over the past few years. Many have been subjected to threats by security forces, asked to spy, and when such requests have been denied, have been kidnapped and tortured. There have been forced disappearances, too.

Moreover, former HDP co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ remain in prison on terror charges, where they have been ever since November 2016, and a December 2020 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that Demirtaş must be set free was explicitly dismissed by the government’s Interior Minister as “meaningless,” on the grounds that “Demirtaş is a terrorist” (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/echr-ruling-on-terrorist-hdp-leader-is-meaningless/2087175>). While, according to Amnesty International, 18 of the 20 “HDP-affiliated elected mayors of municipalities where trustees were appointed by the state [who had been] remanded in pre-trial detention since municipal elections in March ... remained in pre-trial detention” at the end of 2020 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkey/report-turkey/>).

In relation to the judiciary, a representative from the Free Lawyers’ Association (ÖHD) would remark: ***“The judiciary has never been independent; but in recent times, since the purges after the 2016 attempted coup, the judges basically take orders. Prosecutors and judges think, how would Erdogan decide? Their decisions are not based on law.”*** Human Rights Watch agrees. According to their 2021 report on events in Turkey: “Executive interference in the judiciary and in prosecutorial decisions are entrenched problems, reflected in the authorities’ systematic practice of detaining, prosecuting, and convicting on bogus and overbroad terrorism and other charges, individuals the Erdoğan government regards as critics or political opponents. Among those targeted are journalists, opposition politicians, and activists—in particular members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP)” (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>).

The situation is most dire, indeed.

The İmralı Isolation System

Again and again, our interlocutors linked the deterioration of human rights across the country to the intensification of the regime of isolation on Mr. Öcalan. ***“The İmralı system,”*** they contend, ***“has not only spilled over to other prisons but in fact spread throughout all of society.”*** Such extension of the İmralı system of isolation signifies the institutionalization of fascism. The Constitution is not applied, the laws of Turkey are not applied, international law is not applied, international court decisions are not applied. Instead, impunity, tyranny, are the order of the day.

In the words of a spokesperson for the Peoples’ Democratic Congress (HDK): ***“Turkey is now in a circle without solution, and Turkey is in a crisis, in chaos, right now. But first of all, everything is actually connected to the isolation in İmralı ... It is very clear that the Kurdish question in Turkey is part of the democracy problem in Turkey. And by implementing the isolation in İmralı, it is actually suppressing all of the demands for democracy in the country ...”*** Likewise, as a spokesperson for the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) would insist: ***“When the regime of isolation gets aggravated, there is more death, the intensity of the war increases. Conversely, when isolation goes down, violence goes down.”***

Along similar lines, a spokesperson for the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) would contend: ***“The Turkish state is also very aware of the impact of Öcalan’s ideas on the Kurdish people. They want to isolate his ideas. Today the Erdoğan regime in Turkey is using the isolation systematically.”*** And as a spokesperson for the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) further emphasized: ***“Today the isolation is going beyond Öcalan. The Turkish republic, with its isolation of Öcalan, is aiming at preventing a democratic resolution. We saw in the past, when Öcalan has the chance to express himself, this opens opportunities. He is not an ordinary person. The Kurdish people cannot be free unless Öcalan is free. They are trying to mute him. Isolation is a method. But in the face of this, the Kurdish people never stay calm.”***

Silence and Complicity of the International Community

Meanwhile, the international community stands by, for the most part, silently. And silence is complicity. The Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) visited İmralı Island in May 2019, and published a report in August 2020, in which it called upon Turkish authorities, in no uncertain terms, ***“without further delay”*** to ***“carry out a complete overhaul of the detention regime applied to prisoners sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment in Turkish prisons ...”*** Not only have the Turkish authorities not been responsive to the CPT’s demand; they have, in fact, subsequently intensified the regime of isolation, introducing further restrictions on Mr. Öcalan’s contact with the outside world. ***Since April 27th, 2020, there has been no contact whatsoever with Abdullah Öcalan.*** And yet, quite inexplicably, on its most recent visit to Turkey in January 2021, the CPT did not insist upon another visit to İmralı Island nor show any signs of indignation about its recommendations being so contemptuously ignored.

The silence and complicity of the European institutions with the Erdogan regime was further highlighted by the recent visit of the President of the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg to Turkey in September 2020, where he received an honorary medal in Istanbul University, the very place where

purges of academics have been greatest. He then visited Mardin and had meetings there with “trustees” who the government had appointed after having sacked the city’s democratically-elected co-mayors.

The head of the Court of Human Rights visits the country, and acts as if everything is normal. The CPT’s report goes unheeded. It comes again to the country, but doesn’t bother to follow up. We call for an end to such silence and complicity, such cowardice, and, indeed, for an overhaul of economic, trade, military and diplomatic relations with Turkey.

What is needed, a representative of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) told us, is a combination of the resistance of the Kurdish people with a firm stance by the international community—the same combination that the world witnessed in Kobane, when Kurdish-led forces beat back the brutal surge of ISIS, with whose fascism the Turkish state was complicit. But inside of Turkey, as a spokesperson for the Free Women’s Movement (TJA) lamented, the Kurds ***“have been completely abandoned by the international community.”***

Moreover, as a representative of the Confederation of Public Employees Trade Unions (KESK), denounced: ***“International organizations such as the CPT have not done enough against the human rights violations in Turkey, they haven’t taken a sufficient stance against all these things, that’s what we unfortunately have to say. Especially in the European Union, Germany has taken a pro-Erdoğan stance, all the time, also in the Council of Europe, they have taken a pro-Turkey stance, and this prevents decisions from being taken. We have to mention this as well. The international dimension of the Kurdish issue, that it is not resolved in a democratic way, in the US, the UK, and Germany, the developed capitalist countries, that they take a pro-Turkey stance and balance reveals the fact that more than human rights, economic interests prevail.”***

Likewise, as a spokesperson for the Democratic Regions’ Party, implored: ***“We need a systematic resistance. Diplomacy among states can play a role. But they have to take steps beyond simply showing concern. They have to support the opposition. For example, they have to put pressure on the Turkish authorities to implement the EHRC decision about the release of Demirtaş. They have to pressure Turkey to stop its military targeting of Kurdish organizations both inside the country and beyond.”***

The Kurdish Will to Resist

The resistance of the Kurdish people, their resilience in the face of such terrible rights violations, their determination, their will to struggle, remains unbroken. Two years ago, a wave of hunger strikes broke out in the prisons, with the specific demand for an end to Mr. Öcalan’s isolation. Nine lives were lost in that wave of hunger strikes, which did achieve a partial relaxation of the regime of total isolation, albeit for a very limited time, and also put pressure on the CPT to visit Mr. Öcalan in İmralı in May 2019. Another wave of hunger strikes is now over 80 days in, which includes the same demand, though for the time being it remains a rotating and not indefinite strike. However, it could well turn permanent and deadly, in which case many prisoners’ lives may be lost. Such is the intensity of their conviction that Mr. Öcalan should be able to meet with his lawyers and his family, which after all, is what the law requires.

The tactic of the hunger strike, it must be noted, was not endorsed with enthusiasm among all with whom we spoke. Far from it. A representative of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), for example,

admitted that ***“we do not prefer such a method,”*** though he was quick to add, ***“but if conditions are so, then we respect it, and try to help to make their demands heard.”***

Nor are the prisoners alone in their will to resist. The representatives with whom we spoke, from the women’s movement, the trade unions, human rights’ organizations, and political parties, across the board displayed a most impressive and admirable degree of courage, even up against the immense brutality, the thuggish authoritarianism, the increasingly consolidated, full-fledged fascism of the Turkish state. In the words of a representative from the Free Women’s Movement (TJA): ***“Everybody who says, ‘I live, I’m here’, they all get arrested, and Erdogan’s system hopes to wear us all down; but we have been arrested many, many times, we have been subjected to all kinds of violence. Even so, we didn’t leave the struggle, we continued from where we are. We cling more and more to the struggle, for thirty years now.”***

A spokesperson for the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) would likewise insist: ***“The struggle that the Kurds are waging, of a people whose language has been banned, whose organizations have been criminalized, every statement somebody makes is met with decades of prison. We are now talking to you. We are people who are doing democratic politics here. But each of us has been in prison or has received prison sentences for ten years, fifteen years, because of the statements we make, because of our ideas and thoughts.”*** To this, he would add a plea for our delegation to convey the conditions of their struggle to the outside world. He would, in such a vein, eloquently put the point: ***“All these things we are saying here, we are trying to convey to the international public, via you. So each of us has a responsibility. Your efforts with us, or with other democratic institutions like us, are very, very meaningful and important to us. It gives us morale, and raises our strength to continue the struggle.”***

The Women’s Struggle

The struggle of the women’s movement merits particular attention. As the Free Women’s Movement (TJA) denounce in their recent ***Report on Male/State Violence against Women in Kurdistan in 2020***: “We are currently going through a period when a multi-layered and multidimensional vicious circle of violence is imposed on us, as Kurdish women waging both a gender struggle and a struggle for our identity as Kurds ... With the consolidation of the conditions of fascism after 2015, all kinds of rights and social change-transformation achievements gained through the women’s struggle have been targeted by the state” (pp. 3–4).

There is talk that the Erdogan government intends to withdraw from the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the so-called Istanbul Convention (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-women-idUSKCN2511QX>). This against the backdrop that, as the TJA report documents, the “current government in Turkey has caused an increase in the cases and incidents of male violence against women with its policies such as closing down of women’s institutions/organizations, the arrest and detention of activists who fight for the freedom of women, implementation of special warfare policies, and has aimed at eliminating the mechanisms and individuals who fight against violence through the liquidation of institutions and activists.” The TJA report draws attention in particular to the fact that “the targeting out of women’s organizations has ... had a profound impact on women’s struggle.” It furthermore stresses: “The shutdown, ban, illegalization of mechanisms that women could turn to in the event of violence, where they would be empowered has left women vulnerable to various types of violence,

and to domestic violence in particular. In this process, the efforts to keep women at a distance from those mechanisms by means of which women could socially, culturally, economically have prevented the visibility of female identity and its recognition as an entity with a willpower of its own. These policies continue in Kurdistan in the framework of **detentions and arrests, appointment of government-trustees to municipalities and policies of special warfare**" (p.10). Among the latter stand out the use of rape as a combat tool, as well as many cases of uniformed violence. While in relation to detentions and arrests, in 2020, "at least 244 TJA activists were detained and 81 of them were imprisoned pending trial" (p. 10-11).

The wave of reaction, the ruthless repression of the women, comes in the aftermath of the breakdown of the peace process, in which the women's movement played a very significant role, and during which time, the movement had made considerable advances towards the realization of its "democratic confederal" model. As a spokesperson for the TJA explained: **"During the peace process, the women's movement were leading this. We have all the time been defending peace, while the male mentality shows itself in times of war. Peace councils were formed, women's councils were formed, during the process. The co-president system was a significant achievement. This was something the Kurdish movement had theorized for a long time. It was Öcalan who did this. The Kurdish movement, the women's movement, was able to develop this idea, a concrete step."**

The co-president system guaranteed equal participation of women in leadership posts; and so, with the removal of democratically-elected mayors across the Kurdish region, their replacement by government-appointed trustees, this backlash affects the women the most. **"Everything that happened positive for women was turned into negative,"** the TJA spokesperson told us. **"Women's institutions were targeted. Peace academics were targeted. The system of isolation started in İmralı has come to engulf the whole country,"** she claimed.

Like others with whom we spoke, the women's movement is quick to make a clear connection between the isolation of Mr. Öcalan and the repression which they face. As the TJA argues in its report: "The imposition of conditions of total isolation on an entire society and firstly in the İmralı Island Prison System, and the daily aggravation of the isolation system exists as the basic means of legitimizing violence, lawlessness and all sorts of dirty state policies. The social projection of the İmralı Island System which was constructed as a concept is the targeting of all rights and social values. Isolation of the Kurdish People's Leader Abdullah Öcalan purposefully stalls any solution to the Kurdish issue and further prolongs the war" (p. 4).

The Spill-Over of the İmralı Isolation System

In the wake of the failed 2016 coup, the regime of isolation spread from İmralı to affect with particular intensity the mushrooming numbers of political prisoners across the country. **"The prisons are overflowing with people who want democracy,"** a representative of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) told us. Since the start of the pandemic, the isolation of political prisoners has been exacerbated even further. Many of the "regular" prisoners have had their sentences delayed or otherwise commuted in the wake of the pandemic, including even mafia leaders, but the tens of thousands of political prisoners have been granted no such mercy. Sick prisoners have been deprived of any health care, and even personal hygiene. Meanwhile, the prisons are hot spots for contagion. In one prison, for example, all prisoners in two wards tested positive for the coronavirus.

While the trend is to keep especially Kurdish prisoners in prison for as long as possible, among other means, by issuing arbitrary disciplinary actions, and by denying parole for those who refuse to express regret. Even political prisoners who are gravely ill are most frequently denied clemency. ***“If you can move your head, they say, you are fit to stay in prison,”*** a spokesperson for the Free Lawyers’ Association (ÖHD) told us.

The rights of prisoners are routinely violated, they are subjected to invasive surveillance and naked body searches, dispersed across the country, far from their families, and tortured and further punished whenever they object or resist. The government is showing off its power in the prisons, and the abuses are getting all the time worse. As the Free Lawyers Association summarizes it in a 2020 report: “The system pushes all conditions so that the imprisoned person also has problems to survive in prison” (p. 1).

This dire situation sparked, at the end of November 2020, the onset of a second wave of hunger strikes, similar to the one that spread across the country two years ago. The prisoners are demanding an end to human rights violations in Turkish prisons and improvement of “aggravated enforcement” conditions, in addition to family visitations and meetings with lawyers in İmralı Prison. They have written to international organizations, to complain about their plight and make their demands known, but the wardens have not allowed for their message to reach the outside world. ***“We are hoping that your report can highlight this situation,”*** implored a spokesperson for the Federation of Associations in Solidarity with Prisoners’ Families (TUHAD), in our meeting with them.

Perhaps even more disturbingly, moreover, as the women’s movement stressed, the regime of isolation has spilled out beyond the prisons, to affect the entire society. In the words of a representative from the Democratic Regions Party (DBP): ***“The isolation policy has become a pillar of the new system in Turkey.”*** Or as a spokesperson for the Peoples’ Democratic Society (HDK) expressed it: ***“The aggravated isolation of Öcalan has spilled over to other prisons, and spilled over to the rest of society. Legal norms and international law are all violated by this. To lift this aggravated isolation would serve the cause of peace.”*** Even more pointedly, as another representative of the DBP further explained: ***“The situation we find ourselves in is that fascism is trying to institutionalize itself. This started with the isolation, the İmralı process, a process outside of the Turkish constitution, a process outside of the law. Today there is an aggravated isolation of Kurdish society in general, and repression is on the agenda throughout all of Turkey ... The Constitution is not applied. Decisions of the European Court of Human Rights are not applied. There has been a 2014 decision about the need for a retrial for Öcalan, it is not applied. Nor is the decision in favor of Demirtaş applied. Meanwhile, the torture system started in İmralı has spread like a cancer throughout all of society.”***

The Excesses of the War against “Terror”

The definition of terror included in the anti-terror legislation is especially expansive, and is being applied quite indiscriminately against all manner of opponents of the Erdogan government. In 2006, a UN Special Rapporteur had “criticized the definition of terrorism as prescribed by Article 1 of the Anti-Terror Code, since the definition was not based on specific criminal acts but on intent or target. According to the Rapporteur, this definition was broad and vague. In such cases people and organizations could be criminalized as terrorists although they did not engage in any violent acts” (“IHD’s Assessment and Recommendations on the Amendments to the Law on the Enforcement of

Sentences,” p. 3). Furthermore, as the Human Rights Association (IHD) insists, the Anti-Terror Code’s exceedingly broad definition of terror is both unconstitutional and “contrary to international conventions,” and “it infringes upon the essence of the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens” (p.4). Indeed, as they go on to contend, “[w]hen one looks at reports issued by human rights and journalists’ organizations, violations brought about by the broad definition of terrorism can be seen in a crystal clear manner” (p. 3).

In such a vein, Human Rights Watch has observed that “[t]he Erdogan government refuses to distinguish between the PKK and the democratically elected Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) which won 11.7 percent of the national vote in the 2018 parliamentary elections and 65 local municipalities in the 2019 local elections” (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>). Human Rights Watch neglects to add that, when it comes to the PKK itself, the Belgian Court of Cassation ruled in March 2019 that the Kurdish paramilitary force should not be classified as a terrorist organization, but rather, as a combatant in an armed conflict (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/19081-Belgian-court:-PKK-not-a-terrorist-organization>). The silence on the part of the Human Rights Watch on this crucial point is, of course, not surprising, due to the fact that the PKK does remain classified by the European Union and the United States, not only Turkey, as a terrorist organization.

Be that as it may, the Anti-Terror Code is frequently applied to members of all organizations associated with the Kurdish freedom movement, without distinction. And moreover, as a representative of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) pointed out: ***“They have been labelling not only Kurds but also Turkish opposition as terrorists.”***

Then there is the issue of systematic torture. In their 2020 report on “Defending Human Rights during the Pandemic and the State of Emergency Conditions,” the Human Rights Association insists: “Torture has remained the most dominant human rights problem in 2020 in Turkey.” According to the report, “[a]cts of torture at official custodial centers and extra-custodial places, in the streets, in prisons and almost everywhere, along with the ‘extreme and disproportionate interference’ of the law enforcement amounting to the level of ‘torture’ in assemblies and demonstrations have come to bear a novel dimension and intensity.” The report concludes, in no uncertain terms, that “[o]ne can assert that the whole country has virtually become a space of torture today as a result of the political power’s mode of government based on repression and control” (p. 2).

Likewise, the Free Lawyers Association enumerates in its 2020 report: “Raiding someone’s home early in the morning when the person’s statement can be easily taken, mistreating and subjecting not only the person but also all the family members and relatives, being subjected to force and violence under custody, having intentional poor conditions under custody (such as: lack of air, insufficient food and water supplies, etc.) are the most common torture cases” (p. 1).

Human Rights Watch adds that “[p]rosecutors do not conduct meaningful investigations into allegations [of torture] and there is a pervasive culture of impunity for members of the security forces and public officials implicated” (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>). While according to Amnesty International, in May 2020 in Urfa, men and women who had been detained “after an armed clash between security forces and the PKK reported ... [having been] tortured including with electric shocks to the genitals” (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkey/report-turkey/>).

The Human Rights Association's 2020 report also calls attention to a chilling trend of enforced disappearances and abductions, noting that such a trend even induced the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers "to keep Turkey under enhanced supervision about enforced disappearance cases" (p. 2). Human Rights Watch has observed that "[t]here have been no effective investigations into the around two dozen reported cases of enforced disappearance over the past four years" (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>).

Meanwhile, freedom of expression remains thoroughly suppressed. The Kurdish question is of course the most sensitive of subjects; and criticisms of the government's policies of all-out war against the Kurdish people are routinely persecuted under the rubric of the Anti-Terror Code. But the government's intolerance of criticism extends beyond the Kurdish question. This past year, investigations and lawsuits have been levied against critics of the government's pandemic policies. Likewise, social media posts are frequently prosecuted. Moreover, most recently, the government has sought to crack down on the wave of protests that broke out in January 2021 at the prestigious Boğaziçi University, in reaction to the state's outside appointment of a new pro-AKP rector, with riot police arresting hundreds, and the President accusing protestors of being "terrorists" and "LGBT youth" seeking to undermine "national and spiritual values" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/04/turkey-student-protests-grow-young-people-vent-frustrations-with-erdogan>).

Relatedly, as the Human Rights Association has denounced, "restrictions on and violations of freedom of assembly have been the rule, while the enjoyment of freedoms has been the exception" (p. 3). In this vein, as Human Rights Watch has reported, provincial governors have selectively used Covid-19 as a pretext to "ban peaceful protests of women's rights activists, healthcare workers, lawyers, and political opposition parties" (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/turkey>). While, according to Amnesty International, Kurds have figured prominently as targets of such bans. Blanket bans have been imposed against "those protesting against the removal of elected mayors from office" as well as against the so-called "Operation Peace Spring," the Turkish state's illegal offensive into the Kurdish-controlled north-east of Syria (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkey/report-turkey/>).

To make matters even worse, as the Confederation of Public Employees Trade Unions (KESK) has surmised, in a recent report on "trade union rights and the freedom situation in Turkey": "Trade union members and human rights defenders face serious problems in Turkey. These problems include judicial harassment as in the case of arrest and detention as well as court cases. Moreover, administrative investigations and dislocations are used to put pressure on trade union members. Public authorities do not hesitate to criminalise and defame trade union activists and leaders though these rights are under the protection of national and international laws" (p.5).

Abdullah Öcalan and the Prospects for a Democratic Peace

However, the ideas, the demonstrations, the organizations most vehemently repressed, are those associated with the figure of Abdullah Öcalan. What is it about Mr. Öcalan that makes him such an anathema among the Turkish authorities? For one thing, he is seen by millions as the embodiment of the Kurdish nation, the incarnation of the Kurdish will to exist, his persecution emblematic of the plight of the Kurds. As one of the members of his legal team, from the Asrın Law Office, put the point: *"Öcalan's existence and that of the Kurdish people has become synonymous."*

But not only that. While chained to the rock of İmralı, Mr. Öcalan has consistently called for the construction of a peaceful and democratic resolution to the Kurdish question. His is decidedly a voice for peace and democracy, but for democracy of a different, radical and participatory kind. Indeed, in the five-volume *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* that he has penned as part of his defence, he has elaborated an impressive re-articulation of the core democratic ideal of self-determination, and sketched a program and model of “democratic confederalism,” that serves as an inspiration to his many followers, and that has transformed the contours and content of the Kurdish struggle. No longer is the struggle framed in the classical terms of national liberation; now it has come to be framed as a struggle to construct nothing less than an alternative to the negative dialectic of tyranny and chaos in which the country, the region, the world is increasingly engulfed.

Mr. Öcalan proposes a radical, direct-democratic alternative, one which centers the struggle for gender emancipation, stresses the need for multi-ethnic and multi-religious accommodation, and emphasizes the urgency of environmental sustainability. These are lofty ideals, but they are not only ideals. They are the vision behind concrete, revolutionary developments in the region, those in the north-east of Syria, in Rojava, to be precise. His are words that move masses. Which helps explain why the Turkish authorities are so concerned to isolate him, to silence him, why they indeed consider him public enemy number one.

As a spokesperson from the Asrın Law Office stressed: ***“İmralı has become a laboratory for democracy. With Mr. Öcalan’s articulation of the democratic nation solution, it is a great solution for the Middle East, not only for Kurds, but for the co-existence of all peoples. This is why the isolation is so fierce.”***

Simply put, the Turkish authorities do not want peace and democracy. To the contrary, as a representative of the Confederation of Public Employees Trade Unions (KESK), contends, they thrive off ***“right wing populism, and open fascism has become ever more widespread. Inside of Turkey and beyond, they pit peoples against each other, with their security politics, their war policies, their New Ottoman politics.”*** When asked to clarify, he further explained: ***“There has been an economic crisis for a very long time, which in the pandemic has only increased in severity. There is a lot of poverty, a lot of unemployment, which, of course, the government covers up with violence, with nationalism, with securitization, with war.”***

Mr. Öcalan’s vision contradicts, threatens to cancel out, such divide and conquer politics, and is thus, understandably, perceived as such, as a threat, to the Turkish authorities. And not only to the Turkish authorities. As a member of Mr. Öcalan’s legal team reminded us: ***“This is not a problem of only the Turkish state. Responsibility also belongs to the Council of Europe. They contribute to the situation, because they either close their eyes or allow it.”***

Allow what, exactly? First and foremost, the legal anomaly that is İmralı, a prison constructed for one man. Indeed, as the spokesperson from the Asrın Law Office further argued: ***“With İmralı, Turkey has created a prison outside of international law.”*** He proceeded to make a rather provocative comparison, by insisting: ***“İmralı is a proto-Guantánamo.”*** This before concluding: ***“İmralı is a black hole in the international law. It is illegal. Turkey does what it wants. There is no other prison like that in the scope of the Council of Europe ... There is no other prison where 8 years go by without a lawyer being able to enter.”***

The isolation on İmralı is most extreme and intense. In its 2020 report, Mr. Öcalan's legal team refers to the situation there as "one of 'Absolute Isolation' which constitutes a form of systematic torture" (p. 1). The CPT, too, has been clear that the conditions are unacceptable. In 2019, a hunger strike that took nine lives, and associated social pressures, had contributed to "a limited breakdown in the isolation in İmralı," and as a result, Mr. Öcalan was allowed 5 lawyer-client consultations and 3 family visitations, before total isolation was resumed in August of that year. Last year witnessed a continuation of near-total isolation, with two exceptions, a family visit in March, after public clamour in relation to rumours that there had been a fire, and a twenty-minute phone call to his lawyers in April, the first call allowed in his 21 years on the island, granted in relation to the pandemic. Yet, since the end of April, all contact with the outside world has been prohibited.

In August, the CPT published the report from its May 2019 visit, in which it called for "a complete overhaul of the detention regime." The response of the Turkish authorities was to introduce new bans, on the right to communication by phone, on lawyer-client consultations, and on family visitations. As the Asrin Law Office reports, "[n]one of the 96 applications for lawyer-client consultations submitted in 2020 were granted," while only one out of fifty family visit requests was granted (pp. 5-6).

The Asrin Law Office concludes its 2020 report by emphasizing: "The İmralı system of isolation and torture is shaped not only by the Turkish legal system but also by the illegal practices of the international legal system. The fact that Turkey is ignoring the decisions and reports of the ECHR and CPT as the legal mechanisms of the Council of Europe to which Turkey is a party based on different treaties, is a matter of responsibility for the Council of Europe too. Installing and developing a system of isolation and torture to such an extent is only possible with the approval or connivance of international institutions" (p. 8).

In the same conclusion, Mr. Öcalan's legal team further contends: "The İmralı System undoubtedly reflects the choice to pursue policies towards the solution of the Kurdish Question or not. Because, as one of the most burning and fundamental problems in the Middle East, the solution of the Kurdish Question on a democratic basis is disturbing all powers that currently benefit from war-based policies" (pp. 8-9).

Moreover, they insist, in no uncertain terms: "[T]he İmralı system of isolation and torture connotes the isolation of the possibility of a democratic solution embodied in the person of Mr. Öcalan. For it cannot be denied that despite the conditions of absolute isolation, Mr. Öcalan is persistently trying to raise the possibility of a solution at every opportunity. Every contact with him has repeatedly confirmed this" (p. 9).

These conclusions are, indeed, quite cogent. Mr. Öcalan is unquestionably a key role player for the construction of a peaceful and democratic resolution to the Kurdish question. He may be a threat to the war-mongering authorities, but he is certainly not a threat to the people of Turkey. For indeed, as another member of Mr. Öcalan's legal team put the point: ***"There have been 100 years of denialism. But denying a problem doesn't help to solve it. Mr. Öcalan presents a chance, a chance in favor of the people living in Turkey, to resolve the Kurdish question in a peaceful and democratic manner."***

Recommendations for Action

(1) It is vital that pressure continues to be put on the Turkish state to end the isolation of Öcalan. Pressure should be applied to international human rights mechanisms, particularly those of the Council of Europe. The Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) should be urged to exercise its investigative capability to the fullest in the case of İmralı. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) should pressure the government of Turkey to implement the recommendations of the CPT, the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and abide by the ECHR, at the risk of sanctions. The Committee for Legal Affairs and Human Rights should also follow up the recommendations of the CPT. International human rights bodies should be urged to declare this isolation a crime against humanity.

(2) The international community, institutions, and governments should be encouraged to intervene against Öcalan's isolation and against the isolation system that has spilled over into all of Turkish society, entailing massive human rights abuses on the part of the Turkish government. The European Union has a specific responsibility and must be pressured to be one of the protagonists in taking action. Relevant individuals, such as members of parliament, should be urged to pass motions and raise questions concerning the situation in Turkey, to express their vocal support for ending the isolation, and to lobby their governments to take action. Individuals and groups should also be urged to ask Turkish government officials, such as the Minister of Justice, for a meeting to express their concerns and ask questions, as this delegation did in its letter to the Minister of Justice. Political parties should be urged to link their party to the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and to express solidarity with the imprisoned MPs.

(3) Appeals must be made to international NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, to take immediate action against the isolation of Öcalan and the general situation in Turkey. Those who refuse should be publicly shamed for failing to speak out against human rights atrocities. International NGOs should be urged to form ties with NGOs and human rights organisations in Turkey, and attempt to intervene where possible. Doctors Without Borders and other medical bodies should be urged to reach out to Turkish authorities seeking permission to visit Öcalan to assess his health, and to provide an independent medical service for prisoners in Turkey.

(4) Solidarity among trade unions needs to be extended internationally. Trade unions should be encouraged to express their solidarity officially, and affiliate with trade unions in Turkey, speaking out publicly against the diminishment of workers' rights in Turkey and the state's crackdown on trade unions, and drafting motions in support of Öcalan and the Kurdish movement. Additionally, trade unions should condemn the state-organised unions in Turkey that participate in the marginalisation and criminalisation of workers, and seek their exclusion from international trade union confederations and conferences.

(5) Social movements throughout the world should be encouraged to establish ties of solidarity with the Kurdish freedom movement and other opposition groups in Turkey. International women's movements should be encouraged to express solidarity with the Kurdish women's movement, in the form of written statements, video messages, and visits to Turkey.

(6) International women's organisations should urge the Council of Europe to carefully monitor the situation related to violence against women in Turkey, and to exert pressure on the Turkish government to respect the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and

domestic violence, which was issued by the Council of Europe in May 2011 and signed by Turkey. This is especially necessary given the fact that the Convention is not being implemented in Turkey, and that the Erdoğan government has threatened to withdraw from it altogether.

(7) Lawyers from around the world should be encouraged to file appeals to international bodies about the situation, and condemn the illegality of the isolation policy and the treatment of Kurdish people, as a means of applying pressure to the Turkish state. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to collaborate with lawyers in Turkey, at meetings both in Turkey and abroad, to learn more about the legal specifics of the situation and work together to create legal objections.

(8) Strong efforts should be made to raise global awareness of the situation in Turkey. This can include solidarity campaigns, projects of cultural solidarity such as collaborative documentaries or art pieces with artists in Turkey, and campaigns to boycott Turkey. Efforts should also be made to counter the pro-Turkey narrative in the mainstream media and to accurately portray the authoritarian rule in Turkey which has suppressed political and civil freedom.

(9) Populations around the world should be encouraged to take action. This includes writing letters to elected representatives to put pressure on our own governments and the government of Turkey, writing letters to NGOs urging them to take further action, writing letters of protest to Turkish officials, and writing letters of support to prisoners in Turkey. Individuals should also be encouraged to spread the word about the situation in Turkey, sign petitions, and join campaigns of solidarity.

(10) More delegations should be organised to visit Turkey and the Kurdistan region, consisting of all manner of people including politicians, academics, public figures, and trade union members. These should meet with organisations in Turkey and attempt to meet with Turkish government officials, in order to give the delegates a first-hand experience of the conditions, offer support to those afflicted, and to further spread awareness of the situation.

Further Links

International Initiative “Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan—Peace in Kurdistan”:

<http://www.freeocalan.org/>

Freedom for Öcalan Campaign: <http://www.freedomforocalan.org.uk>

Peace in Kurdistan Campaign: <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/>

Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan: <http://www.sskonline.org.uk/>

Link to Briefing of the 2020 International Peace Delegation to İmralı: <https://www.freeocalan.org/news/english/2020-international-peace-delegation-to-imrali-briefing>

Link to Report of the 2020 International Peace Delegation (PDF): https://freeocalan.org/assets/materials/english/forms/EN-2020-International-Peace-Delegation-to-Imrali-Report_March-2020.pdf

Link to Report of the 2020 International Peace Delegation to İmralı (HTML): <https://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/report-of-2020-international-peace-delegation-to-imral/>

Link to Briefing of the 2019 International Peace Delegation to İmralı: <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2019/02/28/briefing-on-the-international-peace-delegation-to-imrali-11-16-february-2019/>

Link to Report of the 2019 International Peace Delegation to İmralı: <https://freeocalan.org/assets/materials/english/forms/EN-2019-international-peace-delegation-to-imrali-report-booklet.pdf>

Link to Report of the 2017 İmralı Peace Delegation: <https://westminsterjp.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/final-report-of-the-third-imrali-delegation-2017-docx.pdf>

Permanent People's Tribunal ruling – Turkey and the Kurds: http://iadllaw.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/PPT_-edited-_JUDGMENT_TURKEY_KURDS_-EN_Ml.pdf

Venice Commission opinions on Turkey: https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/by_opinion.aspx?country=31

2020 Asrin Law Office Report: <https://anfenglish.com/features/asrin-law-office-imrali-is-a-black-hole-49318>

2020 Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) report on İmralı: <https://rm.coe.int/16809f20a1>

2020 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Monitoring Committee Report on Turkey: <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/28782/html>

2019 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Resolution on Turkey: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=25425&lang=en>

Summary of Öcalan's Roadmap to the Negotiations: https://freeocalan.org/assets/materials/english/forms/EN-ocalan-the-road-map-summary_2011.pdf

People's Democratic Party (HDP): <https://www.hdp.org.tr/en/>

Human Rights Foundation of Turkey: <http://en.tihv.org.tr/>

Human Rights Association: <http://www.ihd.org.tr/en/>

Confederation of Public Employees Trade Union (KESK): <http://en.kesk.org.tr/>

Biographies of the February 2021 İmralı Peace Delegates

Clare Baker is an international officer for Unite, the union in the UK, and is at present the Secretary of the UK Trade Union Campaign, Freedom for Öcalan.

Baroness Christine Blower is the former General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers in Britain and at present co-chair of the UK trade union campaign, Freedom for Öcalan.

Prof. Radha D'Souza is a critical scholar, social justice activist, barrister and writer from India. She has worked in New Zealand and currently teaches law at the University of Westminster in the UK.

Melanie Gingell is a Barrister and a lecturer on International Human Rights Law and Feminist Legal Theory, has served as a member of the executive of the Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales and is a member of the steering committee of *Peace in Kurdistan*.

Rahila Gupta is a freelance journalist, writer and activist. She is a longstanding member of Southall Black Sisters (from 1989), member of Women Defend Rojava UK and patron of Peace in Kurdistan. She writes mostly on race, religion and gender.

Ögmundur Jónasson is former leader of the Public Service Unions in Iceland, was Member of the Icelandic Parliament and served as minister for a number of years, including Minister of Justice. He is Honorary Associate of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley is a prolific writer and scholar of sociology at the University of Cambridge who has participated in a number of delegations to Turkey and Kurdistan, including Rojava. On this he has published extensively, books and articles. He is a member of the executive board of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC).

Laura Quagliuolo is an Italian editor and author of children's schoolbooks, long active in international work, esp. on women's rights. At present, she is active in RETE JIN, an Italian net of women in support of the Kurdish women's movement and is part of the committee *The Time has Come: Freedom for Öcalan*.

Roza Salih is Kurdish, born in South Kurdistan and was a refugee seeking asylum in Scotland in 2001. She has been active in human rights work and is at present a candidate for the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the upcoming elections.

Gianni Tognoni is a medical doctor, has served as the director of research at the Mario Negri institute in Milan and has been the General Secretary of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal since its founding in 1979. He has frequently been called to work together with the World Health Organization.



Video conference with the delegation and lawyers of Asrın Law Office