

ABDULLAH ÖCALAN: THE HUMBLE LEADER OF THE DOWNTRODDEN KURDISH PEOPLE

– THE OTHER NELSON MANDELA IN PRISON –

"I'm enough of an artist to draw freely on my imagination, which I think is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

Albert Einstein Berlin, 1929

What we know and what we dream. Our imagination is a recombination of past experiences – but not only. This perhaps is what allows us to have intuition, anticipate arising problems and conceive alternatives to them. *"Humanity in its quest to understand and live a meaningful life has tried to obtain and interpret knowledge or the 'truth'"* says Öcalan and always aspired to be free. This is unique to human beings: the ability to imagine. Imagine: Another world is possible.

This is exactly what Abdullah Öcalan and his close circle of friends such as Haki Karer, Kemal Pir, M. Hayri Durmus, Mazlum Dogan, Sakine Cansiz, Mahsum Korkmaz who are no longer alive and others such as Cemil Bayik, Duran Kalkan, Mustafa Karasu, A. Haydar Kaytan who are still beside him, began doing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Imagining and expanding their knowledge. No one could escape the revolutionary power and the after effects of 1968. It just completely transformed how people, including these people, viewed the world. And those that continued to pour in contributed to the dream that another world was and is possible.

Öcalan is not only the founder of the PKK but also the person responsible for ideological and organizational transformation since 1973. The background to these transformations is remarkable and diverse. During the life-span of the PKK not only did real socialism collapse, national liberation movements became state actors and failed miserably to alleviate the problems complained about previously, feminism made the exploitation of women visible but came to a standstill, there was a rise of ecological awareness, and the world entered a structural crisis and a chaotic situation.

The Kurdish question, however, had several peculiarities: The Kurdish nation and the land they traditionally lived on were physically divided into four. None of the states occupying Kurdistan officially accepted their existence and none allowed for Kurdish language education. Turkey went the farthest and completely prohibited the Kurdish language and denied there ever were such a people. In return these colonial states, too, were trapped. The world powers, on the other hand, were consenting. The great tragedy of Anatolian Greeks, the Armenians of Eastern Anatolia and Cilicia, the Syriacs of Mesopotamia, the Caucasian peoples, and most vividly the Israeli and Palestinian conflict as well as the situation of women and religion prompted Öcalan to search deeper than to just pursue a national uprising. There was no easy way out for the Kurdish question if true freedom was sought. The Kurdish question and women's enslavement were indeed a Gordian knot.

From the depths of his quest and Kurdish heritage, the turbulent history of Kurdistan and the Middle East, as well as thirty years of his own experiences as the leader of one of the most

difficult struggles and finally from the serenity of the enforced isolation of Imrali Island, Öcalan emerged a man with a new and complete vision. Instead of coming out with anger and violence because of the way he was abducted Öcalan rose above his own imprisonment.

Who is Abdullah Öcalan?

Abdullah Öcalan was born to a poor family in 1949 in the village of Amara (Turkish name: Ömerli) in the province of Urfa in North Kurdistan (the Kurdish region of Turkey). Upon finishing secondary school, he found employment as a civil servant in the city of Amed (Diyarbakır). He later sat for university examinations and registered as a student in the Istanbul University Law Faculty. He transferred the next year, in 1971, to the prestigious faculty of political science at the University of Ankara.

After the 1971 military coup, he observed the further denial and suppression of Kurdish identity and culture by the Turkish government. Affected by this problem, and moved by the Kurds' impoverished social and economic conditions, he and several friends decided to investigate the Kurdish situation further.

Partition of Kurdish Homeland and Oppression of Kurds

Ever since ancient times, the Kurds and their homeland have experienced all kinds of military aggression, occupation, and conquest - by Sumerians, Babylonians, Arabs, Mongols, and eventually Turks. For many centuries, the Kurds were under the domain of the two most powerful empires of the Near East and staunch arch rivals; the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the various Shia Persian Empires.

During the nineteenth century, Kurdistan was shaken by numerous rebellions, which were usually bloodily crushed. After World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire, the imperialist powers Britain and France redrew national boundaries in the Middle East and divided Kurdistan, placing it under the rule of the Turkish republic, the Iranian peacock throne, the Iraqi monarchy, and the Syrian-French regime. Although the Kurdish people had actively participated in the liberation war against the occupation of Anatolia and the founding of the republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the new republic destroyed their tribal scheme, the Kurdish principalities and banned their identity.

So the Kurds undertook new rebellions and revolts, with devastating consequences for themselves. Turkey adopted a strict policy of assimilation in order to enforce the unity of the remaining parts of the former empire and to create a Turkish nation-state. All indications of the existence of a culture other than the Turkish were to be exterminated. The republic banned the use of the Kurdish language and even the words *Kurds* and *Kurdistan*.

At the same time in the aftermath of World War I, Iraq and Iran were undergoing centralization and growing nationalism; the Shah of Iran established a terror regime in the spirit of the nationalist-fascist epoch. The repression of Kurds living within their boundaries intensified. In the Iraqi and Syrian parts of Kurdistan, Britain and France suppressed the Kurdish emancipation efforts with the help of their Arab proxies, establishing bloody colonial regimes.

The crushing of Kurdish revolts initiated a general phase of assimilation. No one questioned or followed up on the treatment of the Kurds including non-state actors like the UN, and the

Kurds indeed had nowhere to turn to. Their nonexistence had been sealed internationally. The new state policies were bearing fruit. The policy of denial resulted in Kurdish self-denial; the policy of assimilation led to Kurdish self-assimilation.

The result has been that for almost a century now, the Kurdish people have been subjected to systemic genocides and massacres physically and culturally as well as forced displacement by the Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian states.

Founding the PKK

In April 1973 a group of six revolutionary university students (two non-Kurds and a woman) came together in order to form an independent Kurdish political organization. They viewed Kurdistan as a classic colony, in which the population had been forcibly denied its right to self-determination. The group's prime goal was to change this situation. The young movement gained momentum and found new followers. But as it did, the Kurdish aristocracy, rival political groups, and Turkish security forces became interested and violently attacked its adherents.

On November 27, 1978, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was founded in a small village near Amed (Diyarbakır). Twenty-two leading members of the movement took part in the founding congress of the PKK, of which two were women (one of whom was Sakine Cansız, murdered in Paris in 2013). A modern national liberation movement was born with Abdullah Öcalan clearly emerging as its ideological and political leader.

The Turkish authorities reacted harshly to PKK propaganda efforts, tolerating none of its peaceful political activity. Detentions and armed clashes followed. In 1979, observing signs of an imminent military coup, Öcalan and some other members left Turkey. His foresight secured the survival of the PKK. On September 12, 1980, the Turkish military seized power, resulting in thousands of detentions and widespread torture.

Under the military regime, struggling for Kurdish people's fundamental rights through political means became extremely difficult. From abroad Öcalan continued to lead the PKK's political activities and began preparations for the armed resistance that began in 1984.

But Öcalan soon realized that armed struggle could not bring a final resolution to the conflict. In the early 1990s he tried to shift the focus to a political solution. In 1993 he voiced the possibility that Kurds could live peaceably within Turkey instead of seeking a separate state. He held indirect talks with President Turgut Özal, but the result was his mysterious death and horrific and bloody times for the Kurds.

Revival of the Kurdish People

Until the Öcalan-led movement appeared in the 1980s, the Kurds had nowhere to turn and were gradually losing their identity and dignity as a people. One of Öcalan's earliest discussions of the Kurdish question was with an elderly man under a mosque's shade. Öcalan spoke passionately about the Kurds, after which the elderly man responded: *"My son, we are like dead wood. Will you really be able to make us grow leaves?"*

The true test of a leader is the ability to gain acceptance for unpopular and surprising steps. Öcalan has done this over and over again during the thirty-six years that he has led the PKK.

First, as leader, Öcalan proceeded to make the Kurdish people aware of their identity. He encouraged them to affirm their culture and identity proudly. The effect of his influence was to prevent the loss of the Kurdish culture and language.

By the 1980s, to most Kurds Öcalan had become a symbolic figure for Kurdish resistance against oppression of dictatorships and military regimes, against denial, annihilation, and genocide. The success of the Öcalan-led resistance restored confidence and dignity to the people.

At his urging, women's freedom has become a major issue not only within the organization but also within Kurdish society. Öcalan helped to push back male dominance and create space for women to organize and to participate in all areas of life and within the movement. Despite occasional backlashes of this, this policy allowed for an immense development not only for Kurdish women but for the whole society. By the 1990s the Kurdish people's movement was focused not only on Kurdish identity but on gender equality and women's freedom. This in itself was a revolution on its own considering the position of women in such movements not only amongst Kurds, but also in Turkey or within the Middle East in general.

The 1990s saw the killing of more than 30,000 people, most of them Kurds. Thousands became victims of state-controlled death squads. More than 4,000 Kurdish villages were destroyed. Kurds in their millions became refugees internally and internationally. Torture was widespread, and an immense number of human rights violations of every kind were committed.

In 1993, as indirect talks with President Özal began, Öcalan declared a cease-fire for the first time and announced that Kurds could live within the borders of Turkey. He did so not at a moment of weakness but at the peak of PKK's strength. In 1995 and 1998 he initiated two more unilateral cease-fires. While these cease-fires met with no response from the state, within the PKK, Öcalan faced resistance for his line to press for a political solution.

With the onset of the new millennium, Öcalan was able to develop his new paradigm further and steer the Kurdish freedom movement and the Kurdish society towards a non-state solution to the Kurdish question and formulate a resolution suitable for all peoples in the Middle East. He in the 2000s thus became a symbolic figure for Kurdish people's freedom.

Abduction and Imprisonment

In 1998, during one of the unilateral cease-fires, Turkey was threatening Syria with war. Öcalan, driven out of Syria, chose to go to Europe in order to promote a political solution. But he was pushed out of Europe, too, and finally found himself in Kenya. A clandestine operation, backed by an alliance of secret services, abducted him and handed him over to the Turkish state.

His abduction sparked outrage and major protests from Kurds all over the world. An unprecedented rise of anti-Kurdish nationalism in Turkey brought the country to the brink of civil war. Indeed, many people around the world expected an all-out war.

A prison island in the Sea of Marmara, İmralı, was evacuated and prepared solely for Öcalan. There he was detained. After a short show trial in 1999, which the European Court of Human

Rights (ECtHR) deemed “unfair”¹, he was sentenced to death. After the death penalty was abolished, his sentence was commuted to aggravated life imprisonment, which means he has no possibility for parole. This is actually no different from the death penalty, which is why the ECtHR has ruled against this kind of punishment several times². From 1999 to 2009 he was the sole inmate of the prison, living in complete sensory and social isolation and was and still guarded by more than one thousand soldiers.

Ideological Transformations

Instead of calling for renewed war, as most people expected, the imprisoned Öcalan deepened his search for a resolution. He achieved a major ideological shift and formulated what became the Kurdish freedom movement’s new paradigm. Against great obstacles, he managed to persuade his movement and the Kurdish people that a peaceful solution was necessary.

As a result, in 1999 the PKK withdrew all armed forces outside the borders of Turkey. This marked the beginning of a five-year cease-fire, the longest in the history of the conflict. In another surprising move in the same year he suggested that two “peace groups” consisting of PKK members should return to Turkey, as a sign of readiness for a peaceful solution. The two groups did indeed arrive in Turkey. But there they were arrested and their members served long prison terms.

Ten years later, in 2009, Öcalan called for another peace group to enter Turkey. So a group of unarmed guerrillas and a group of refugees from the Mexmûr camp crossed the border from South Kurdistan (Iraq) into Turkey. They were not arrested immediately but were welcomed ecstatically by Kurds who hoped that “the war had finally ended” (as some newspapers headlined it). Later, however, many members of the peace groups were arrested and imprisoned.

Öcalan is now sixty-five and has been incarcerated at Imrali for fifteen years. During eleven of those years, he was the only inmate on the island prison. During that time he was not allowed to touch anyone – even handshakes were forbidden. Nonetheless he continued to insist on a peaceful and political solution, and he continued to hold the greatest influence over the PKK and the Kurdish people. He also inspired and continues to inspire pro-Kurdish political parties such as The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and now the newly formed Peoples’ Democratic Party HDP in Turkey.

Öcalan has discussed in depth the problems that arise with nation states. Early on, there seemed to be only one viable solution to the Kurdish question: the creation of a Kurdish nation state. But Öcalan realized that nationalism and nation states had created many problems not only for the Kurdish people and the Middle East but also for the whole world. He thus tried to formulate a solution that would avoid the trap of nationalism and better fit the situation of the Middle East.

While in prison, Öcalan has written defenses and submissions for domestic and European court cases, in which he has continued to search for answers. Despite the harsh prison conditions and his total and severe isolation, he was able to formulate an alternative that he terms the “democratic nation” and “democratic confederalism”, which look for ways not to

¹ [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-69022#{"itemid":\["001-69022"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-69022#{)

² [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-14208086#{"itemid":\["001-14208086"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-14208086#{)

create new borders but to liberate life and have a plurality of identities. Some of these defenses have been translated to several languages and published under the title *Prison Writings*. Öcalan is the author of more than sixty books on a wide range of topics, from religion, philosophy, and gender liberation to arts, politics, and the issue of national liberation.

Thus Gerry Adams was certainly precise in his statement on Öcalan for the 2013 *Time 100* when he said: “Persuading enemies that there are alternative ways to resolve long-standing differences takes patience and a willingness to engage in dialogue, but most important, it requires leadership. Öcalan has demonstrated that leadership. Despite incarceration, he has forged a road map to peace that commits the Kurdish people to democracy, freedom and tolerance.”³

Öcalan’s Solution

Öcalan’s peace efforts

Öcalan has initiated numerous peace efforts and for more than 20 years has been struggling to transform the armed conflict in Kurdistan into merely a political one. With his consistent argumentation for a peaceful solution he has become the most important voice for peace in the Kurdish liberation movement. This is implicitly recognized by the Turkish state who sees him the “key figure” for a solution process.

From the late 1980s Öcalan stated in interviews with Turkish journalists that he would prefer a peaceful settlement with the Turkish state. The first major cease-fire, declared by Öcalan in 1993 with the aim of facilitating talks, was not unanimously popular in the PKK either.

During his trial in which he was eventually sentenced to death, Öcalan used the only opportunity he had to address the Turkish people to deepen his commitment to a political solution. His ground-breaking defense speech and subsequent steps like the withdrawal of the guerrillas from Turkey and the call for “peace groups”, Öcalan worked against efforts to deepen mistrust between Turks and Kurds and incite racial hatred.

In his prison writings he elaborated on a defense strategy for all parts of Kurdistan, preparing his movement and its armed forces for eventual peace negotiations and ultimately disarmament. In doing this, Öcalan has published a broad self-criticism regarding his earlier convictions on the role of violence. By doing this he has initiated a wider discussion about how to finally end the vicious circle of violence that has left its mark on the history of the Middle East but also that of the world. In the inner-Kurdish discourse on war and peace this makes him the most important voice for peace.

In his *Road Map to Negotiations*⁴ he lays out a comprehensive plan for a negotiated solution for the conflict. He is the only one to do so, and all sides until now have taken his “Road Map” into consideration.

The fact that he uses his popularity and influence in the Kurdish liberation movement and Kurdish community at large to foster peace over war makes him the most important actor for peace in the region.

³ <http://time100.time.com/2013/04/18/time-100/slide/abdullah-ocalan/>

In the conflict in Syria, Öcalan is largely responsible for the “third way” strategy of the Kurdish self-defense forces that tried to first keep the predominantly Kurdish areas out of the zone of clashes and later tried to establish a self-administration model that defends all ethnic and religious communities. With this strategy, Öcalan has not only prevented much bloodshed and destruction but also champions the currently only model for a peaceful future of Syria.

Thus, Öcalan favors a political solution within all the four states that have colonized Kurdistan; gender-liberated, ecological and democratic autonomy where Kurdish people will have the autonomy to determine their own future within the borders of that particular country.

Women’s Freedom

The situation of the women throughout the world is bad but the situation of the Kurdish women has been and still to a large extent nothing but terrible slavery and has its uniqueness in many aspects. The crushing effects of colonialism coupled with already existing feudalism resulted in total lack of freedom, economic inability, and lack of education and health problems for the whole society but especially women and children. Woman is thus made to pay for the obliteration of the society. Men revenged and continue to revenge the loss of their masculinity from women in the form of the so called honor-killings. The Kurdish male – having lost both moral and political strength – is trying to prove his power or powerlessness on women.

The women thus did not only come to the Kurdish freedom movement in order to fight against the crippling effects of colonialism but also that of feudalism; they came for their own and the society’s freedom.

Öcalan’s role here was of high importance. As the leader of the organization he did not turn a blind eye to the demands of the women joining the ranks and the women in the society. Despite at times severe reaction against him he continued to push for greater women’s freedom and autonomy both in the organization and within the society.

This is another thing that sets Öcalan apart; yet again he has not gone with the current but has despite resistance both within the organization and within the society pushed aside male dominance within the organization and society in order to create room for woman as an individual and women’s organized action and organizations. The result has been the establishment of a huge democratization force; organized women who demand their freedom and more democracy for all.

The important role that women play in the democratization of the Kurdish society and the Middle Eastern society as well as change the perception of Kurdish and Middle Eastern women by the rest of the world was seen in the defense fight against ISIS in Kobani/Rojava. These women not only made ISIS be afraid of them but they made the whole world envy their courage and especially their thirst for freedom.

The People’s Choice

Over the fifteen years of Öcalan’s incarceration, Kurdish people in all four parts of Kurdistan and around the world have shown their support for him and his policies. They have protested his abduction, the death penalty, his continuing incarceration, and the isolation regime at İmralı. They demonstrate out of concern for his health. They demonstrate in support of his

leadership role in negotiations with the Turkish state to resolve the conflict. More than one hundred people have even died in acts of self-immolation – acts Öcalan has strongly discouraged and asked not to be repeated.

Every year on February 15, the anniversary of Öcalan's abduction from Kenya, Kurds all over the world demonstrate in protest. On October 9 demonstrations are conducted in Gemlik, the town opposite Imrali Island, to mark the anniversary of his forced departure from Syria in 1998. Every year on April 4, Öcalan's birthday, Kurds travel to Amara, the village where he was born, and celebrate his birth by planting trees.

In a signature campaign conducted in 2005-2006, around 3.5 million people from all parts of Kurdistan signed a statement affirming that they regard Öcalan as their political leader. The number of signatures was remarkable considering that the campaign was conducted under immense restrictions—Turkey, Syria, and Iran declared it illegal. Several people were convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison.

In 2007 a hunger strike began in Strasbourg, France, to protest Öcalan being poisoned. A wave of protests quickly spread across Kurdistan, Turkey, and Europe. In a second hunger strike, which began in Strasbourg and Turkey in 2011, more than 700 Kurdish prisoners and many ordinary Kurds all over the world demanded the right to speak their mother tongue and insisted that the Turkish state negotiate with Öcalan.

On June 25, 2012, Kurds began holding a daily vigil in front of the Council of Europe building in Strasbourg. They are calling for Öcalan to be freed and are determined to continue the vigil until this goal is achieved.

On September 6, 2012, a signature campaign began, demanding “Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan and the political prisoners in Turkey.” The signatories state that “*Öcalan's freedom will mark a breakthrough for the democratization of Turkey and peace in Kurdistan.*” The campaign began in Brussels, and so far more than 5 million signatures have been gathered.

The Current Situation

From 2009 until mid-2011, secret negotiations, later known as the Oslo Process, were held between Öcalan, a government-appointed delegation of the Turkish state, and senior PKK members. The subject was a political solution to the Kurdish question. Based on the *Road Map to Negotiations*⁴, which Öcalan authored in 2009, the parties agreed on three protocols. They contained a phased plan for an end of the conflict and a political solution to the Kurdish issue. The Turkish government, however, chose not to implement the plan. In fact, in June 2011 it started an even larger wave of arrests than previously and further major military operations.

After more than two years of talks, Öcalan's total isolation was renewed. Between July 27, 2011, and January 3, 2013, he and five other prisoners (who were brought to the island prison in November 2009) were all completely cut off from the outside world. For one and a half years, Öcalan had absolutely no contact with anyone outside.

⁴ <http://ocalan-books.com/english/road-map-to-negotiations.html>

What followed were mass arrests that came in two waves, the first against legal Kurdish politicians and the second against intellectuals. Öcalan's lawyers were all arrested and jailed. In the mean time in 2011 and 2012, recordings and documents in relation to the talks leaked. In 2012 heavy fighting resumed.

In September 2012, in an attempt to break the impasse, more than 700 Kurdish prisoners across Turkey began a hunger strike. They were supported by countless ordinary Kurds in Turkey, in Europe, and around the world. They demanded the right to use the Kurdish language, an end to Öcalan's isolation, and the resumption of negotiations. On the sixty-eighth day of the hunger strike, in November, Öcalan called for it to end, and it did. Despite a year and a half of total isolation, he still had stunning authority over the Kurdish community in and outside of Turkey, something that has made him a key element of any possible negotiation.

The talks with the state delegation resumed, and on January 3, 2013, the very first BDP delegation was able to visit Öcalan at Imrali. Öcalan was quoted as saying "We do not have even a day to lose— we must achieve peace immediately." However since June 27, 2011, Öcalan's lawyers to date have not been allowed consultations with their client.

On January 10, 2013, while talks on the resolution of the Kurdish question were under way, a massacre took place in Paris. Three female political activists, one of them PKK co-founder Sakine Cansız, were killed in cold blood. It is suspected that this massacre was a joint operation of Turkish and European Gladio elements that do not desire an end to the conflict and were attempting to derail the talks. Great anger and frustration erupted among Kurdish communities worldwide, with a potential of heightening the conflict. Öcalan called for these murders to be exposed, but yet again he displayed strong leadership and called on the nation not to seek revenge.

At one p.m. on March 21, 2013, at the celebration of the Kurdish New Year, Newroz, everything came to a standstill in Turkey. More than one million people gathered at Diyarbakır's main square to listen to Öcalan's message of peace. This historic moment was a turning point in Kurdish people's struggle for freedom. The highly philosophical speech underlined a paradigm shift: it declared that Kurds have acquired their identity and have shattered the international policy of denying them. *"Today a new era is beginning,"* Öcalan declared. *"The period of armed struggle is ending, and the door is opening to democratic politics. We are beginning a process focused on political, social, and economic aspects. An understanding based on democratic rights, freedoms, and equality is growing. [...] We have sacrificed much of our lives for the Kurdish people, we paid a high price. None of these sacrifices, none of our struggles, were in vain. For as a consequence of them, the Kurdish people have attained once again their identity and their roots. We have now reached the point of 'silence the weapons and let the ideas and politics speak.'"* On the same day the PKK declared a cease-fire, saying "Öcalan's decision is our decision."

In May 2013, at Öcalan's call, the PKK began withdrawing its guerrillas within the borders of Turkey. But due to the government's inaction in fulfilling its agreements and its failure to take the required steps toward democratization, the PKK ended the withdrawal of its forces that autumn.

Hope for Democracy and Peace in the Middle East

On June 1, 2014, during the eighteenth visit by the newly established HDP (People's Democracy Party) delegation, Öcalan is quoted as saying: "*In order to make a serious beginning for a solution we need to preserve our hopes.*" He has indeed been building the foundations of a peace process since 1993 – that is, for more than twenty years. Despite his harsh prison conditions, he has continued to advance a political solution and to make far-reaching proposals to that end. Despite his abduction and life under terrible conditions, his voice for peace has continued and has become even more profound.

In the 2000s he became the symbolic figure for Kurdish people's freedom and coexistence in the Middle East for all peoples. With his new ideological and political vision, Öcalan wishes to break this vicious cycle that the Kurds face, namely rebelling, being crushed, being forced to assimilate, and rebelling again. As Immanuel Wallerstein points out in his foreword to the English edition of Öcalan's *Road Map to Negotiations*, the Kurdish question and its proposed solution by Öcalan "raises issues that are far more general and widespread."

The Kurds are surrounded by a ring of changing countries, offering them an opportunity to solve their problems according to democratic criteria. They are no longer an element of rebellion and separation for their neighbors; rather, they want to contribute democratically to the unity of these states. Adopting Öcalan's new paradigm is what the Kurdish people struggle to implement in Rojava and Syria in general. The time has now come to attempt a solution of the Kurdish question by peaceful and democratic means. For the first time, Kurds have had the chance to do so together with their neighbors. Today the fact that the Kurds live divided across several nations may be an advantage—they have never been poisoned by nationalism and may be better suited than other to build bridges. By democratizing themselves, the Kurdish people impel the countries and nations among which they live to do the same. The Kurdish movement has become a force for peace, liberty, women's freedom, and amity. Öcalan has often stated that the fate of the Kurds will no longer be ignorance, war, rebellion, and destruction but a democratic and developed civil society and unity in freedom.

Over the course of the decade-old Kurdish conflict, the Turkish state has tried all possible means of repression, including special operations, psychological warfare, massacres, and even genocide. Nothing has worked. If the Turkish state wishes to end the conflict, it must finally grasp the nature of the conflict: it is neither a security issue nor an economic matter; it is above all about the Kurds' fundamental rights, both as a people and as individuals.

If the Turkish state wishes to find a solution, then Abdullah Öcalan—the key figure in shaping the struggle of the Kurdish movement as well as shaping principles for its continuation through democratic and peaceful means—is the indispensable person for them to work with. Indeed, there can be no end to the conflict without Öcalan's involvement.

Öcalan's Role in overcoming the Middle East Impasse

President Nelson Mandela, the Nobel Peace laureate, once said: "*Only free men can negotiate, prisoners cannot enter into contracts.*" Thus Öcalan can contribute to a lasting democratic and peaceful solution only if he is free. For the start of real negotiations and for the peace process to be decisive, his freedom is inevitable.

Another Nobel Peace laureate, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, has said: “*Öcalan has been persistent despite being held in solitary confinement for most of the fifteen years that PEACE is possible, having gone as far as producing a Road Map to Peace and convinced Kurdish freedom fighters to a cease-fire.*”

Finally we also have to repeat what Judge Essa Moosa, a lawyer of Nelson Mandela, stated in his capacity as the chairperson of the Kurdistan Human Rights Group (KHRG): “*Besides his influence in the Kurdish issue, Öcalan contributed to the advancement of the world peace; the leader recently proposed a nonviolent resolution in order to find a diplomatic manner to resolve the Kurdish issue. These attempts show that Öcalan is in favor of a peaceful solution, in the light of advancement of the world peace.*”

There is a need to recognize Öcalan’s efforts. Such recognition will not only strengthen and encourage the ongoing peace processes but shall also serve to honor and recognize the Kurdish people’s struggle to exist and the right to flourish. Most importantly though, at a time when Middle East is divided along ethnic, religious-sectarian lines and women’s enslavement is imposed Abdullah Öcalan offers a paradigm that is based on the rule of law, women’s freedom and democracy. This shall above all mean the strengthening and support of this paradigm. It shall thus pave the way for a brighter, better, and democratic future not only for the Kurds but also for Turkey and the whole region, and indeed will contribute to world peace.

This document has been prepared by the International Initiative “Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan–Peace in Kurdistan”.