

The right of self-determination of the people includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people.

Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm. It is not controlled by a state. At the same time, democratic confederalism is the organisation of democracy and culture.

Democratic confederalism is based on grassroots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For one year they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic decision-making power rests with the local grassroots institutions.

In the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by external powers

## Democratic Confederalism

Abdullah Öcalan

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Abdullah Öcalan



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## I. Introduction

For more than 30 years the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been struggling for the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people. Our struggle, our fight for liberation turned the Kurdish question into an international issue which affected the entire Middle East and brought a solution to the Kurdish question within reach.

When the PKK was formed in the 1970s the international ideological and political climate was characterised by the bipolar world of the Cold War and the conflict between the socialist and the capitalist camps. The PKK was inspired at that time by the rise of decolonialisation movements all over the world. In this context we tried to find our own way in agreement with the particular situation in our homeland. The PKK never regarded the Kurdish question as a mere problem of ethnicity or nationhood. Rather, we believed, it was a question of democracy and revolution. These aims have increasingly determined our actions since the 1990s.

We also recognised a causal link between the Kurdish question and the global domination of the modern capitalist system. Without questioning and challenging this link a solution would not be possible. Otherwise we would only become involved in new dependencies. With a view to issues of ethnicity and nationhood like the Kurdish question, which have their roots deep in history and at the foundations of society, there

seemed to be only one viable solution: the creation of a nation-state, which was the paradigm of the capitalist modernity at that time.

We did not believe, however, that any ready-made political blueprints would be able to improve the situation of the people in the Middle East in a way that was sustainable. Had it not been nationalism and nation-states that had created so many of the problems in the Middle East?

Let us therefore take a closer look at the historical background of this paradigm and see whether we can map a solution that avoids the trap of nationalism and fits the situation of the Middle East better.

## **II. The Nation-State**

### **A. Basics**

With the sedentarisation of people they began to form an idea of the area that they lived in, its extension and its boundaries, which were mostly determined by nature and the features of the landscape. Clans and tribes that had settled in a certain area and lived there for a long period of time developed the notions of a common identity and of a homeland. The boundaries between what the tribes saw as their homelands were not yet borders. Commerce, culture or language were not restricted by boundaries. Territorial borders remained flexible for a long time. Feudal structures prevailed almost everywhere, and now and then dynastic monarchies or great multiethnic empires rose with continuously changing borders and many different languages and religious communities, such as the Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire or the British Empire. They survived for long periods of time and endured many political changes because their feudal basis enabled them to distribute power flexibly over a wide range of smaller, secondary power centres.

### **I. Nation-State and Power**

With the appearance of the nation-state, trade, commerce and finance pushed for political participation and subsequently added their power to traditional state structures. The development of the nation-state at the beginning of the Industrial

Revolution more than 200 years ago went hand in hand with the unregulated accumulation of capital on the one hand and the unhindered exploitation of a fast-growing population on the other hand. The new bourgeoisie which rose from this revolution wanted to take part in political decisions and state structures. Capitalism, their new economic system, thus became an inherent component of the new nation-state. The nation-state needed the bourgeoisie and the power of capital in order to replace the old feudal order and its ideology, which rested on tribal structures and inherited rights, with a new national ideology that united all tribes and clans under the roof of the nation. In this way, capitalism and nation-state became so closely linked to each other that neither could be imagined as existing without the other. As a consequence, exploitation was not only sanctioned by the state but even encouraged and facilitated.

But above all the nation-state must be thought as the maximum form of power. None of the other types of state have such a capacity for power. One of the main reasons for this is that the upper part of the middle class has been linked to the process of monopolisation in an ever-increasing manner. The nation-state itself is the most developed and complete monopoly. It is the most advanced unity of monopolies such as trade, industry, finance and power. One should also think of ideological monopoly as an indivisible part of the power monopoly.

## **2. The State and its Religious Roots**

The religious roots of the state have already been discussed in detail. Many contemporary political concepts and notions have their origin in religious or theological concepts or structures. In fact, a closer look reveals that religion and divine imagination brought about the first social identities in history. They formed the ideological glue of many tribes and

other pre-state communities and defined their existence as communities.

Later, after state structures had already developed, the traditional links between state, power and society began to weaken. The sacred and divine ideas and practices which had been present when the community began increasingly lost their meaning in relation to a common identity and were, instead, transferred to the power structures of monarchs or dictators. The state and its power were derived from divine will and law and its ruler became king by the grace of God. They represented divine power on earth.

Today, most modern states call themselves secular, claiming that the old bonds between religion and state have been severed and that religion is no longer a part of the state. This is arguably only a half truth. Even if religious institutions or representatives of the clergy no longer participate in political and social decision-making they still influence these decisions to an extent, just as they are influenced themselves by political or social ideas and developments. Therefore, secularism, or laicism as it is called in Turkey, still contains religious elements. The separation of state and religion is the result of a political decision. It did not come naturally. This is why even today power and state seem to be given, God-given we might even say. Notions like secular state or secular power remain ambiguous.

The nation-state has also allocated a number of attributes which serve to replace older, religiously rooted attributes like nation, fatherland, national flag, national anthem and many others. Particularly notions like the unity of state and nation serve to transcend the material political structures and are, as such, reminiscent of the pre-state unity with God. They have replaced the divine.

When in former times a tribe subjugated another tribe its members had to worship the gods of the victors. We may argu-

ably call this process a process of colonisation, even assimilation. The nation-state is a centralised state with quasi-divine attributes that has completely disarmed society and monopolises the use of force.

### **3. Bureaucracy and the Nation-State**

Since the nation-state transcends its material basis – the citizens – it assumes an existence beyond its political institutions. It needs additional institutions of its own to protect its ideological basis as well as legal, economic and religious structures. The resulting ever-expanding civil and military bureaucracy is expensive and serves only the preservation of the transcendent state itself, which in turn elevates the bureaucracy above the people.

During European modernity, the state had the means necessary to expand its bureaucracy into all strata of society. There it grew like a cancer, infecting all societal lifelines.

Bureaucracy and the nation-state cannot exist without each other. If the nation-state is the backbone of capitalist modernity it is certainly the cage of natural society. Its bureaucracy secures the smooth functioning of the system, secures the basis of the production of goods, and secures profits for the relevant economic actors in both the real socialist and business-friendly nation-state. The nation-state domesticates society in the name of capitalism and alienates the community from its natural foundations. Any analysis meant to localise and solve social problems needs to take a close look at these links.

### **4. Nation-State and Homogeneity**

The nation-state in its original form aimed at the monopolisation of all social processes. Diversity and plurality had to be fought, an approach that led to assimilation and genocide. It not only exploits the ideas and the labour potential of society,

and colonises people's heads in the name of capitalism. It also assimilates all kinds of spiritual and intellectual ideas and cultures in order to preserve its own existence. It aims at creating a single national culture, a single national identity and a single unified religious community. Thus it also enforces a homogeneous citizenship. The notion of citizen has been created as a result of the quest for such a homogeneity. The citizenship of modernity defines nothing but the transition made from private slavery to state slavery. Capitalism cannot attain profit in the absence of such modern slave armies. The homogenic national society is the most artificial society to have ever been created and is the result of a 'social engineering project'.

These goals are generally accomplished by the use of force or by financial incentives, and have often resulted in the physical annihilation of minorities, cultures or languages, or in forced assimilation. The history of the last two centuries is full of examples illustrating the violent attempts at creating a nation that corresponds to the imaginary reality of a true nation-state.

## **5. Nation-State and Society**

It is often said that the nation-state is concerned with the fate of the common people. This is not true. Rather, it is the national governor of the worldwide capitalist system, a vassal of capitalist modernity which is more deeply entangled in the dominant structures of capital than we tend to assume: it is a colony for capital. Regardless of how nationalist the nation-state may present itself, to the same extent it serves the capitalist processes of exploitation. There is no other explanation for the horrible redistribution wars of capitalist modernity. Thus the nation-state is not with the common people – it is an enemy of the people.

Relations between other nation-states and international monopolies are coordinated by the diplomats of the nation-state.

Without the recognition of other nation-states none of them could survive. The reason can be found in the logic of the worldwide capitalist system. Nation-states which leave the phalanx of the capitalist system are overtaken by the same fate that the Saddam regime in Iraq experienced, or it will be brought to its knees by means of economic embargoes.

Let us now derive some characteristics of the nation-state from the example of the Republic of Turkey.

## **B. Ideological Foundations of the Nation-State**

In the past, the history of states was often equated with the history of their rulers, which lent them almost divine qualities. This practice changed with the rise of the nation-state. Now the entire state became idealised and elevated to a divine level.

### **I. Nationalism**

Assuming that we would compare the nation-state to a living god, then nationalism would be the correspondent religion. In spite of some seemingly positive elements, nation-state and nationalism show metaphysical characteristics. In this context, capitalist profit and the accumulation of capital appear as categories shrouded in mystery. There is a network of contradictory relations behind these terms that is based on force and exploitation. Their hegemonic striving for power serves the maximisation of profits. In this sense, nationalism appears as a quasi-religious justification. Its true mission, however, is its service to the virtually divine nation-state and its ideological vision which pervades all areas of the society. Arts, science and social awareness: none of them is independent. A true intellectual enlightenment therefore needs a fundamental analysis of these elements of modernity.



## **2. Positivist Science**

The paradigm of a positivist or descriptive science forms another ideological pillar of the nation-state. It fuels nationalist ideology but also laicism, which has taken the form of a new religion. On the other hand, it is one of the ideological foundations of modernity and its dogmata have had a pervasive influence on the social sciences.

Positivism can be circumscribed as a philosophical approach that is strictly confined to the appearance of things, which it equates with reality itself. Since in positivism appearance is reality, anything that doesn't have an appearance cannot be part of reality.

We know from quantum physics, astronomy, some fields of biology and even the gist of thought itself that reality occurs in worlds that are beyond observable events. The truth, in the relationship between the observed and the observer, has mystified itself to the extent that it no longer fits any physical scale or definition. Positivism denies this, and therefore to an extent resembles the idol-worshipping of ancient times, where the idol constitutes the image of reality.

## **3. Sexism**

Another ideological pillar of the nation-state is the sexism that pervades entire societies. Many civilised systems have employed sexism in order to preserve their own power. They enforced women's exploitation and used them as a valuable reservoir of cheap labour. Women are also regarded as a valuable resource in so far as they produce offspring and allow the reproduction of men. Thus, a woman is both a sexual object and a commodity. She is a tool for the preservation of male power and can at best advance to become an accessory of the patriarchal male society.

On the one hand, the sexism of the society of the nation-state strengthens the power of men; on the other hand,

the nation-state turns its society into a colony through the exploitation of women. In this respect women can also be regarded as an exploited nation.

In the course of the history of civilisation the patriarchy consolidated the traditional framework of hierarchies, which in the nation-state is fuelled by sexism. Socially rooted sexism is just like nationalism: an ideological product of the nation-state and of power. Socially rooted sexism is not less dangerous than capitalism. The patriarchy, however, tries to hide these facts. This is understandable given the fact that all power relations and state ideologies are fuelled by sexist concepts and behaviour. Without the repression of women the repression of an entire society is inconceivable. Sexism within the nation-state on the one hand gives men maximum power, while on the other hand turns society, through women, into the worst colony of all. Hence woman is the historical society's colony nation which has reached its worst position within the nation-state. All the power and state ideologies stem from sexist attitudes and behaviour. Woman's slavery is the most profound and disguised social area where all types of slavery, oppression and colonisation are realised. Capitalism and nation-state act in full awareness of this. Without woman's slavery none of the other types of slavery can exist, let alone develop.

Capitalism and nation-state denote the most institutionalised dominant male. More boldly and openly spoken: capitalism and nation-state are the monopolism of the despotic and exploitative male.

#### **4. Religiousness**

Even if it acts seemingly like a secular state, the nation-state does not shy away from using a *mélange* of nationalism and religion for its purposes. The reason is simple: religion still

plays an important part in some societies or parts of them. Islam is particularly agile in this respect.

However, religion in the age of modernity no longer plays its traditional role. Whether it is radical or moderate belief, religion in the nation-state no longer has a mission in society. It can only do what it is permitted by the nation-state. Its still existing influence and its functionality, which can be misused for the promotion of nationalism, are interesting aspects for the nation-state. In some cases religion even takes on the part of nationalism. The Shi'ah of Iran is one of the most powerful ideological weapons of the Iranian state. In Turkey the Sunni ideology plays a similar but more limited role.

### **C. The Kurds and the Nation-State**

After the preceding short introduction to the nation-state and its basic ideology, we will now see why the foundation of a separate Kurdish nation-state does not make sense for the Kurds.

Over the last decades the Kurds have not only struggled against repression by the dominant powers and for the recognition of their existence, but also for the liberation of their society from the grip of feudalism. Hence it does not make sense to replace the old chains with new ones or even enhance the repression. This is what the foundation of a nation-state would mean in the context of capitalist modernity. Without opposition against capitalist modernity there will be no place for the liberation of peoples. This is why the founding of a Kurdish nation-state is not an option for me.

The call for a separate nation-state results from the interests of the ruling class or the interests of the bourgeoisie, but does not reflect the interests of the people since another state would only be the creation of additional injustice and would curtail the right to freedom even more.

The solution to the Kurdish question, therefore, needs to be found in an approach that weakens capitalist modernity or pushes it back. There are historical reasons, social peculiarities and actual developments, as well as the fact that the settlement area of the Kurds extends over the territories of four different countries, which make a democratic solution indispensable. Furthermore, there is also the important fact that the entire Middle East suffers from a democracy deficit. Thanks to the geostrategic situation of the Kurdish settlement area, successful Kurdish democratic projects promise to advance the democratisation of the Middle East in general. Let us call this democratic project democratic confederalism.

### **III. Democratic Confederalism**

This kind of rule or administration can be called a non-state political administration, or democracy without a state. Democratic decision-making processes must not be confused with the processes known from public administration. States only administrate, while democracies govern. States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus. Office in the state is determined by decree, even though it may in part be legitimised by elections. Democracies use direct elections. The state uses coercion as a legitimate means. Democracies rest on voluntary participation.

Democratic confederalism is open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multicultural, anti-monopolistic and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars. In the frame of this kind of self-administration an alternative economy will become necessary, which increases the resources of the society instead of exploiting them and thus does justice to the manifold needs of the society.

#### **A. Participation and the Diversity of the Political Landscape**

The contradictory composition of society necessitates political groups with both vertical and horizontal formations. Central, regional and local groups need to be balanced in this way. Only they, each representing itself, are able to deal with their special concrete situations and develop appropriate solutions for far-

reaching social problems. It is a natural right to express one's cultural, ethnic or national identity with the help of political associations. However, this right needs a moral and political society. Whether nation-state, republic or democracy – democratic confederalism is open to compromises concerning state or governmental traditions. It allows for equal coexistence.

## **B. The Heritage of Society and the Accumulation of Historical Knowledge**

Then again, democratic confederalism rests on the historical experience of society and its collective heritage. It is not an arbitrary modern political system but, rather, accumulates history and experience. It is the offspring of the life of the society.

The state continuously orientates itself towards centralism in order to pursue the interests of power monopolies. The opposite is true for confederalism. Not monopolies but society is at the centre of political focus. The heterogeneous structure of society is in contradiction to all forms of centralism. Distinct centralism only results in social eruptions.

Within living memory, people have always formed loose groups of clans, tribes or other communities with federal qualities. In this way they were able to preserve their internal autonomy. Even the internal government of empires employed diverse methods of self-administration for their different parts, which included religious authorities, tribal councils, kingdoms and even republics. Hence it is important to understand that even empires which appear centralist follow a confederate organisational structure. The centralist model is not an administrative system wanted by society. Instead, it is an administrative model required by the monopolies.

## **C. Moral and Political Society**

The classification of society into categories and terms follow-

ing a certain pattern is produced artificially by capitalist monopolies. Such societies do not exist. Their propaganda does. However, societies are essentially political and moral. Economic, political, ideological and military monopolies are constructions which contradict the nature of society by merely striving for the accumulation of surplus. They do not create values. Nor can a revolution create a new society. It can only play a positive role in restoring the moral and political fabric of the society that has been eroded. The rest is determined by the free will of moral and political society.

I mentioned already that capitalist modernity enforces the centralisation of the state. The political and military power-centres within society have been deprived of their influence. The nation-state as a modern substitute for monarchy left a weakened and defenceless society behind. In this respect, legal order and public peace only imply the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Power constitutes itself in the central state and becomes one of the fundamental administrative paradigms of modernity. This means the nation-state exists in contrast to democracy and republicanism.

Our project of 'democratic modernity' is meant as an alternative draft to modernity as we know it. It builds on democratic confederalism as a fundamental political paradigm. Democratic modernity is the roof of a moral and political society. As long as we make the mistake of believing that societies need to be homogeneous monolithic entities it will be difficult to understand democratic confederalism. Modernity's history is also a history of four centuries of cultural and physical genocide in the name of an imaginary unitary society. Democratic confederalism, on the other hand, is self-defence against this history and the history of insisting on multi-ethnic, multicultural and different political formations.

The crisis of the financial system is an inherent consequence

of the capitalist nation-state. However, all efforts of the neo-liberals to change the nation-state have remained unsuccessful. The Middle East provides instructive examples.

## **D. Democratic Confederalism and Democratic Politics**

In contrast to the nation-state's centralist, linear and bureaucratic understanding of administration and the exercise of power, democratic confederalism poses a type of political formation where society governs itself and where all societal groups and cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils.

What is important is the ability to take decisions through councils and discussions. Administration that is elite and not grounded in these are deemed invalid. Democratic governance and supervision of societal work is done through clusters of councils that are multi-structured and strive for unity in diversity, whether they be the general central coordination councils (like assemblies, commissions or congresses) or local councils.

Democratic society is the way to build democratic confederalism. This is where its democraticness stems from. Capitalist modernity destroys political space, as it attempts to maintain itself through power and state apparatuses that become ever-more centralized and spread into the fabric of society. Therefore democratic politics, by giving different sections and identities within society the opportunity to express themselves and become political forces, reforms political society at the same time. Politics becomes a part of social life once again. Without politics, the crisis of the state cannot be solved, since it is fuelled by the denial of political society.

Democratic confederalism not only has the potential to overcome the problems originating from the nation-state systematic, it is also the most appropriate tool with which to



politicise society. It is simple and implementable. Each community, ethnicity, culture, religious community, intellectual movement, economic unit, etc., can autonomously configure and express themselves as a political unit.

Whether federate or autonomous, the concept of the self should be seen in this framework and scope. Each self has the chance to form a confederation from the local to the global. The most fundamental factor of the local is the right to free discussion and the right to make decisions. Each self or federate unit is unique because it has the chance to implement direct democracy, which can also be called participative democracy. Its strength is drawn from the feasibility of direct democracy. This is another reason why it has a fundamental role. While the nation-state is in contrast with, and even in denial of, direct democracy, democratic confederalism is the form where direct democracy is constituted and becomes functional.

Thus, just as the nation-state oppresses, homogenizes and distances society from democracy, the democratic confederalist model liberates, diversifies and democratizes.

The federate units, which are stem cells of direct and participative democracy, are also unique and ideal because they have the flexibility to transform into confederate units if required. Any political unit, if based on units that rest on direct and participative democracy, is democratic. It is thus possible to call this political functionality, developed in a local unit or as a global formation, democratic politics. A true democratic system is the formulation of experiencing all these processes. It is thus important to understand that confederate units are needed even in a village, or on a street in any city. For example, direct democracy units such as the ecologic unit or federate of the village, together with the free women's unit, self-defence, youth, education, arts, health, solidarity and economic units,

should unite. This new unit can easily be called a confederate unit or union. As this system is applied at a local, regional, national and global level it can easily be seen what an inclusive system democratic confederalism is.

## **E. Democratic Confederalism and Self-Defence**

Essentially, the nation-state is a militarily structured entity. Nation-states are eventually the products of all kinds of internal and external warfare. None of the existing nation-states has come into existence all by itself. Invariably, they have a record of wars. This process is not limited to their founding phase but, rather, it builds on the militarisation of an entire society. The civil leadership of the state is only an accessory of the military apparatus. Liberal democracies even outdo this by painting their militaristic structures in democratic and liberal colours. However, this doesn't keep them from seeking authoritarian solutions at the highpoint of a crisis caused by the system itself. The fascist exercise of power is the nature of the nation-state. Fascism is the purest form of the nation-state.

This militarisation can only be pushed back with the help of self-defence. Societies without any mechanism for self-defence lose their identities, their capability of democratic decision-making, and their political nature. Therefore, the self-defence of a society is not limited to the military dimension alone. It also presupposes the preservation of its identity, its own political awareness, and a process of democratisation. Only then can we talk about self-defence.

Against this background, democratic confederalism can be called a system of self-defence of society. Self-defence can only respond to hegemony if it is based on democratic politics and its own system is based on confederal networks. Just as there are many hegemonic networks and gangs (commercial, financial, industrial, power, nation-state and ideological mo-

nopolies) there should be as many confederal, self-defence and democratic politics networks developed.

This means in particular that the social paradigm of confederalism does not involve a military monopoly for the armed forces, which have the sole task of ensuring internal and external security. They are under direct control of democratic institutions. Society itself must be able to determine their duties. One of their tasks will be the defence of the free will of society from internal and external interventions. The commanding structures of the units should be under the double supervision of both the organs of democratic politics and the members of each unit themselves. If the need arises to make and accept proposals, changes can easily be made.

## **F. Democratic Confederalism versus Striving for Hegemony**

In democratic confederalism there is no room for any kind of hegemony striving. This is particularly true in the field of ideology. Hegemony is a principle that is usually followed by the classic type of civilisation. Democratic civilisations reject hegemonic powers and ideologies. Any ways of expression which cut across the boundaries of democratic self-governance would carry self-governance and freedom of expression ad absurdum. The collective handling of societal matters requires understanding, respect for dissenting opinions and democratic decision-making mechanisms. This is in contrast to the understanding of governance in capitalist modernity, where the arbitrary bureaucratic decisions that characterise the nation-state are diametrically opposed to democratic civilization and modernity's understanding of governance that act in line with moral foundations. In democratic confederalism, leadership institutions do not need ideological legitimisation. Hence, they need not strive for hegemony.

## **G. World Democratic Confederal Union**

Although in democratic confederalism the focus is on the local level, organising confederalism globally is not excluded. Contrariwise, we need to put up a platform of national civil societies in terms of a World Democratic Confederal Union to oppose the United Nations as an association of nation-states under the leadership of the superpowers. It is necessary to bring together wide-ranging communities within a World Democratic Confederation if we want a more secure, peaceful, ecologic, just and productive world.

## **H. Conclusion**

Democratic confederalism can be described as a kind of self-governance in contrast to administration by the nation-state. The relationship between a democratic confederation and nation-states should neither be continuous warfare nor assimilation of the former into the latter. It is a relationship of principles that rests on the acceptance of two separate entities that accept coexistence. In the case of interventions and attacks, not only by nation-states but in general from capitalist modernity, democratic confederations should always have self-defence forces.

Democratic confederalism is not at war with any nation-state but it will not stand idly by while assimilation efforts take place. Revolutionary overthrow or the foundation of a new state does not create sustainable change. In the long run, freedom and justice can only be accomplished within a democratic-confederate dynamic process.

Neither total rejection nor complete recognition of the state is useful for the democratic efforts of civil society. The overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process.

The state will be overcome when democratic confederalism

has proved its problem-solving capacities with a view to social issues. This does not mean, though, that attacks by nation-states have to be accepted. Democratic confederations will sustain self-defence forces at all times. Democratic confederations will not be limited to organising themselves within a single particular territory. They will become cross-border confederations when the societies concerned so desire.

## IV. Principles of Democratic Confederalism

1. The right of self-determination of the people includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people.
2. Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm. It is not controlled by a state. At the same time, democratic confederalism is the organisation of democracy and culture.
3. Democratic confederalism is based on grassroots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For one year they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic decision-making power rests with the local grassroots institutions.
4. In the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by the capitalist system and its imperial powers, which only damage democracy. The propagation of grassroots democracy is elementary. It is the only approach that can cope with diverse ethnic groups, religions and class differences. It also

goes together well with the traditional confederal structure of the society.

5. Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is also an anti-nationalist movement. It aims at realising the right of self-defence of peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation-state. The movement intends to establish federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq that are open to all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan.

## **V. Problems of the Peoples in the Middle East and Possible Ways to a Solution**

The national question is not a phantasm of capitalist modernity. Nevertheless it was capitalist modernity which imposed the national question on society. The national society replaced religious community. However, the transition to a national society needs to overcome capitalist modernity if the nation is not to remain a disguise for repressive monopolies. Despite the overemphasis of the nation in the Middle East having a negative effect, ignoring the national aspect of society would also aggravate the problem. Hence the method in handling the issue should not be ideological but scientific, and not nation-statist but based on the concept of the democratic nation and democratic communalism. The contents of such an approach are the fundamental elements of democratic entities.

Over the past two centuries, nationalism and the tendency towards nation-states have been fuelled in the societies of the Middle East. National issues have not been solved but rather have been aggravated in all areas of society. Instead of cultivating productive competition, capital enforces internal and external wars in the name of the nation-state.

The theory of socialist communalism would be an alternative to capitalism. In the framework of the democratic nation, which does not strive for power monopolies, it may lead to peace in a region which has only been the setting for gory wars and genocides.



In this context we can speak of four majority nations: Arabs, Persians, Turks and Kurds. I do not wish to divide nations into majority or minority as I do not find this to be appropriate. But due to demographic considerations I shall speak of majority nations. In the same context we may also use the term minority nations.

1. There are more than 20 Arab nation-states which divide the Arab community and damage their societies by wars. This is one of the main factors responsible for the alienation of cultural values and the apparent hopelessness of the Arab national question, which continuously shatter the Arab community, alienate them from their own values, exhaust them through wars and consume their material wealth. These nation-states have not even been able to form a confederalism between themselves. They are the main reason of the problematic situation of the Arab nation. A religiously motivated tribal nationalism together with a sexist patriarchal society pervades all areas of society, resulting in distinct conservatism and slavish obedience. This situation does not give the opportunity to pose any questions – whether domestic or international – to be resolved in the name of the Arabs. However, a model based on the democratic nation and socialist communality might provide such a solution. The strength of Israel, which the Arab nation-states regard as a competitor, is not only the result of international support by the hegemonic powers. The strong internal democratic and communal institutions within Israel have an important role to play in this. Over the last century, the society of the Arab nation has been weakened by radical nationalism and Islamism. Yet, if they are able to unite communal socialism (which they are not a stranger to) with that of the understanding of a democratic nation, then they may be able to find themselves a secure, long-term solution.

2. The Turks and Turkmen form another majority nation. They share an understanding of power and ideology with the Arabs. They are strict nation-statists and have a profound religious and racial nationalism engraved in them. From a sociological point of view, the Turks and Turkmen are quite different. The relations between Turkmen and Turkish aristocracy resemble the tensed relations between Bedouins and Arab aristocracy. They form a stratum whose interests are compatible with democracy and communalism. The Turkish national problems are quite complex. The striving for power of the nation-state, excessively religious and ethnic nationalism and a sexist patriarchal society prevail and create a very conservative society. It is as if society, democracy and communal tendencies are disintegrated within extreme statist and hegemonic ideological monopolies. The family is regarded as the smallest cell of the state, not that of society. Both individuals and institutions imitate the state. These historical tendencies lead to a harsh struggle for power between the Turks and Turkmen communities. Similar power struggles are also experienced within societies due to this politics of conquest. The centralist power structures of the Turkish nation-state and its rigid official ideology have prevented democratic and communal tendencies from developing and resolving the Turkish national question. The message sent to society is that it is not possible to live without the state. There is no balance between society/the individual and the state. Obedience is regarded as the greatest virtue.

In contrast to this, the theory of democratic modernity offers an adequate framework for Turkish national communities. A community-based project of a democratic Turkish confederation would both strengthen its internal unity and create the conditions for a peaceful coexistence with the neighbours that it lives with. Borders have lost their former meaning when it comes to social unity. In spite of geographic boundaries, to-

day's modern communication tools allow for a virtual unity between individuals and communities wherever they are. A democratic confederation of Turkish national communities could be a contribution to world peace and the system of democratic modernity.

3. Kurdish national society stems from the rich potential that is newly developing as a result of their struggle. Worldwide, they are the most populous people without a nation-state. They have been living in their present, strategic settlement areas since the Neolithic period. Agriculture and stock breeding, as well as their readiness to defend themselves using the geographic advantages of their mountainous homeland, helped the Kurds to survive as a native people. The Kurdish national question rises from the fact that they have been denied their right to nationhood. Others tried to assimilate them, annihilate them, and in the end flatly denied their existence. Not having a state of their own has advantages and disadvantages. The excrescences of state-based civilisations have only been taken in to a limited extent. This can be a benefit in the realisation of democratic modernity that goes beyond capitalist modernity. Their settlement area is divided by the national borders of four countries and lies in a geostrategically important region, thus providing the Kurds with a strategic advantage. The Kurds do not have the option of forming a national society through the use of state power. The elements of capitalist modernity can not offer much in this sense. Although there is a Kurdish political entity today in Iraqi-Kurdistan, it is not a nation-state but rather a parastatal entity.

Kurdistan has also been home to Armenian and Aramaic minorities as well as other peoples in the recent past. There are also smaller groups of Arab, Persian and Turkic groups that have settled in the area. Even today there are many different

religions and faiths living side by side in this region. There also strong traces of a clan and tribal culture, although urban culture has not developed much.

All these properties are a blessing for new democratic political formations. Communal units in farming but also in the areas of water and energy are not only ideal but necessary. The situation is also favourable for the development of moral and political society. Even the patriarchal ideology is less deeply rooted here than in neighbouring societies. This is beneficial for the establishment of a democratic society where women's freedom and equality are to form one of the main pillars. It also offers the conditions for the creation of a democratic nation and ecologic and economic society in line with the paradigm of democratic modernity. The project of the Kurdistan Democratic Confederation already has an opportunity to be implemented. The construction of a democratic nation based on multinational identities is the ideal solution when faced with the nation-state dead-end street. The emerging entity could become a blueprint for the entire Middle East and expand dynamically into neighbouring countries. Convincing neighbouring nations of this model could change the fate of the Middle East and would reinforce the possibility of democratic modernity creating an alternative. In this sense, therefore, the freedom, equality and democratic development of the Kurds and Kurdistan would be synonymous with the freedom, equality and democracy of the region and its peoples.

4. The reasons for today's problems of the Persian or Iranian nation can be found in the interventions of historical civilisations and capitalist modernity. Although their original identity was a result of the Zoroastrian and Mithraic traditions, these have been annulled by a derivative of Islam. Manichaeism, which emerged as a synthesis of Judaism, Christianity and

Mohammedanism with Greek philosophy, was not able to prevail against the ideology of the official civilisation. Indeed, it went no further than to nurture the tradition of rebellion. It has hence converted the Islamic tradition into Shi'ah denomination and adopted it to be its latest civilisational ideology. Presently, efforts being made to modernise itself by passing the elements of capitalist modernity through its Shi'ah filter.

Iranian society is multi-ethnic and multi-religious and blessed with a rich culture. All the national and religious identities of the Middle East can be found there. This diversity is in contrast to the hegemonic claim of the theocracy, which cultivates a subtle religious and ethnic nationalism; the ruling class does not shrink back from anti-modernist propaganda whenever it serves their interests, although they implement capitalist modernity. Revolutionary and democratic tendencies have been integrated by the traditional civilisation. A despotic regime skilfully governs the country. It heads the list of states and societies that are the most tense and which contain many contradictions. Although the petrol revenues partially soothe the tensions, Iranian nation-statism exists at a point where it is most open to disintegration. The frictions between itself and the US-EU hegemonic powers have had an effect on this.

Despite strong centralist efforts in Iran, it is as if there is also a federal Iran at the grassroots level. When elements of democratic civilisation and federalist elements including Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs and Turkmens intersect, the project of a 'Democratic Confederation of Iran' can emerge and become attractive.

Women's movement and communal traditions will play a special role here.

5. The Armenian national question is a leading tragedy that has been caused by the entrance of capitalist modernity into

the Middle East. The Armenians are one of the most ancient peoples in the region. They shared much of their settlement area with the Kurds. While the Kurds lived primarily on agriculture and animal husbandry, the Armenians nurtured and were nurtured by this economy through arts and crafts in the towns.

Although they have a resistance similar to that of the Kurds, they never had permanent state institutions. The Armenians were the first people to adopt Christianity. Identity and belief in redemption play an important role in this. The instrumentalisation of the Armenians by capitalist modernity in their desire to enter the Middle East was a strategic mistake. Their entrapment under the Muslim majority because of their Christianity eventually turned into a tragedy due to nation-state nationalism. Armenians who made huge contributions to Middle Eastern culture became the victim of a terrible catastrophe as a result of the plots staged by capitalist modernity.

Apart from the Jews, the Armenians are the second-largest people to live primarily in the diaspora. The foundation of an Armenian state to the west of Azerbaijan, however, does not mean that the Armenian national question is resolved. The consequences of the genocide can hardly be remedied. They shall always continue to search for the homeland that they have lost. Therefore the present-day Armenian question is defined by trying to find the homeland that they have lost. There are other peoples living in the homeland that they search for. Any concepts based on a nation-state cannot offer a solution. There is neither a homogenous population structure there nor any clear borders, as is required by capitalist modernity. The thinking of their opponents may be fascist; however, it is not enough to only explore the reasons that are related to them, it is also vital that they focus on new ways out of the situ-

ation. Confederate structures could be an alternative for the Armenians. In the event that they renew themselves under the Armenian democratic nation, not only shall they continue to play their historical role within Middle Eastern culture, but they shall find the right path to liberation.

6. In modern times the Christian Arameans (Assyrians) also suffered the fate of the Armenians. It is a huge loss for Middle Eastern culture. They too are one of the oldest peoples in the Middle East. They were not only the initial creators of Christianity but also of the trade monopoly within Middle Eastern civilization. Their instrumentalisation by capitalist modernity would lead to a similar fate to that of the Armenians. They shared a settlement area with the Kurds but also with other people. Their sad ending was prepared by the deepening of their isolation due to Christianity with that of capitalist modernity.

The catastrophe that befell both peoples was not only due to the fascist, genocidal actions of the Turkish Committee of Unity and Progress – the collaborationist Kurds also played an important role in this. The question of Aramean national society has its roots in patriarchal civilization, but has also developed further with Christianity and ideologies of modernity. In order for there to be a solution, there needs to be a radical transformation of the Arameans. Their real salvation may be to break away from the mentality of classical civilisation and capitalist modernity, and instead embrace democratic civilisation and renew their rich cultural memory as an element of democratic modernity, in order to reconstruct themselves as the ‘Aramean Democratic Nation’.

7. The Jewish question is as much a world question as it is a Middle Eastern societal problem. The history of the Jewish

people also gives expression to the problematic cultural history of the Middle East. The search for the backdrop of expulsion, pogroms and genocide amounts to sitting in judgement on civilisations. The Jewish community has taken up the influences of the old Sumerian and Egyptian cultures, as well as those of regional tribal cultures. They have skilfully reformed these cultural resources to transform them into their Jewish tribal culture. It has contributed a lot to the culture of the Middle East. Like the Arameans, they fell victim to the traditions of civilisation and capitalist modernity that they helped create. They too should try and find a solution for themselves in the elements of democratic modernity that I have tried to develop. No doubt intellectuals of Jewish descent have progressive views in this direction. However, this is nowhere near enough. For a solution of the problems as they exist today, a renewed appropriation of the history of the

Middle East is needed on a democratic basis. In a nation-statist Middle East, Israel will necessarily be continuously at war. The slogan is: 'an eye for an eye'. Fire can not be put out by fire. Although it may bolster Israel's confidence to find the hegemonic power of capitalist modernity behind it, this is not enough for a deep-rooted solution.

The Israel-Palestine conflict makes it clear that the nation-state paradigm is not helpful in providing a solution, but aggravates the problem. There has been much bloodshed and money spent; what remains is the difficult legacy of seemingly irresolvable problems. The Israel-Palestine example shows the complete failure of capitalist modernity and the nation-state.

The Jews belong to the culture bearers of the Middle East. Their denial and genocides is a loss for everyone. Their transformation into a democratic nation, just as for Armenians and Arameans, would make their participation in a democratic confederation of the Middle East easier. The project of



an 'East-Aegean Democratic Confederation' would be a positive start. Strict and exclusive national and religious identities may evolve into flexible and open identities under this project. Israel may also evolve into a more acceptable, open democratic nation. Undoubtedly though, its neighbours must also go through such a transformation.

Tensions and armed conflicts in the Middle East make a transformation of the paradigm of modernity seem inevitable. Without it a solution to such difficult social problems and national questions is impossible. Democratic modernity offers an alternative to the system that is unable to resolve these problems.

8. The annihilation of Hellenic culture in Anatolia is a loss that cannot be compensated. In the first quarter of the twentieth century the reciprocal forced migrations by the Turkish and Greek nation-states had an impact as painful as the genocides. No state has the right to drive people from their ancestral cultural region. Nevertheless, the nation-states showed their inhuman approach towards such issues again and again. The attacks on the Hellenic, Jewish, Aramean and Armenian cultures were stepped up while Islam spread throughout the Middle East. This, in turn, contributed to the decline of Middle Eastern civilisation. Islamic culture has never been able to fill the emerging void. In the nineteenth century, when capitalist modernity advanced into the Middle East it found a cultural desert created by self-inflicted cultural erosion. Cultural diversity also strengthens the defence mechanism of a society. Monocultures are less robust. Hence, the conquest of the Middle East was not difficult. The project of a homogeneous nation as propagated by the nation-state bears the utmost responsibility for the cultural genocides.

9. Caucasian ethnic groups also have social problems which are not insignificant. Again and again, they have migrated into the Middle East and stimulated its cultures. They have unquestionably contributed to its cultural wealth. The arrival of modernity almost made these minority cultures disappear. They, too, would find an acceptable place in a confederal structure.

Finally, let me state again that the fundamental problems of the Middle East are deeply rooted in classed and state civilisation. These fundamental social problems in the Middle East have become more aggravated together with the structural global crisis. The regional agents of dominant modernity are not even aware of what they are representing, let alone able to define what the questions and their solutions are. The elements of democratic modernity that I have tried to define represent the theoretical and practical forces that can stop the genocides and defend life. When these forces – on the basis of democratic, economic and ecologic society – make the transition to the Age of Democratic Nations, life can return to its former enchantment within the Middle Eastern culture.

## On the Author

Abdullah Öcalan, born in 1949, studied political sciences in Ankara. He actively led the Kurdish liberation struggle as the head of the PKK from its foundation in 1978 until his abduction on 15 February 1999. He is regarded as a leading strategist and one of the most important political representatives of the Kurdish people.

Under isolation conditions at İmralı Island Prison, Öcalan has written more than ten books, which have revolutionised Kurdish politics. Several times he initiated unilateral ceasefires of the guerilla and presented constructive proposals for a political solution to the Kurdish issue. The so-called “peace process” started in 2009 when the Turkish state responded to Öcalan’s call to resolve the Kurdish issue politically. This process broke down in April 2015, when the Turkish state unilaterally terminated the talks and returned to a policy of annihilation and denial.

Since 27 July 2011, Öcalan has been held again in almost total isolation at Imrali Island Prison. Since 5 April 2015, the whole prison has been completely cut off from the rest of the world.

## On the International Initiative

On 15 February 1999, the President of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Öcalan, was handed over to the Republic of Turkey following a clandestine operation backed by an alliance of secret services directed by their corresponding governments. Disgusted by this outrageous violation of international law, several intellectuals and representatives of civil organisations launched an initiative calling for the release of Abdullah Öcalan. With the opening of a central coordination office in March 1999, the International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan" started its work.

The International Initiative regards itself as a multinational peace initiative working for a peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish question. Even after long years of imprisonment, Abdullah Öcalan is still regarded as an undisputed leader by the majority of the Kurdish people. Hence, the solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey will be closely linked to his fate. As the main architect of the peace process, he is viewed by all sides as key to its successful conclusion, which puts Öcalan's freedom increasingly firmly on the agenda.

The International Initiative is committed to play its part to this end. It does this through disseminating objective information, lobbying and public relations work, including running campaigns. By publishing translations of Öcalan's prison writings it hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the origins of the conflicts and the possible solutions.

## Publications by Abdullah Öcalan

### Books

Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question (1999)

Prison Writings I: The Roots of Civilisation (2007)

Prison Writings II: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century (2011)

Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations (2012)

Civilization: The Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings (Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume I) (2015)

Capitalism: The Age of Unmasked Gods and Naked Kings (Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume II) (2017)

### Upcoming and Untranslated

Sociology of Freedom

(Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume III)

*Bir Halkı Savunmak* (Turkish 2004)

*Ortadoğu'da Uygarlık Krizi ve Demokratik Uygarlık Çözümü*

(Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume IV) (Turkish 2010)

*Kürt Sorunu ve Demokratik Ulus Çözümü* (Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume V) (Turkish 2012)

### Brochures

War and Peace in Kurdistan (2008)

Democratic Confederalism (2011)

Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution (2013)

Democratic Nation (2016)

More information and translations in other languages:

[www.ocalan-books.com](http://www.ocalan-books.com)

# Free Öcalan

Ազատություն Ελευθερία Свобода Оджаланы

Öcalan askatu آزادی برای اوچالان Libertà per Öcalan

Öcalan askatu Liberté Öcalan ओजलन के लिये आजादी

厄賈蘭的自由 თავისუფლება ბებიალანს

Frankiz evit Öcalan نازادی بۆ ئۆججه لان

Libertate lui Öcalan Freiheit für Öcalan

לשחרור את אודשל'אן Öcalani oxuşk'vit

Vapautta Öcalanille Öcalan'ın azatlığı

Khululanu u Öcalan Öcalan'ın azatlığı

Vrijheid voor Öcalan Frihet för Öcalan

Libertad para Öcalan Öcalan'a Özgürlük

Scaoileadh saor Öcalan الحرية لاوجلان

Liberdade para Öcalan Libertat per a Öcalan

İkharıychik Öcalanta! ओजलन ला मुक्ती दिया

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