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“DEMOCRACY IS GOVERNANCE  
THAT IS NOT STATE;  
IT IS THE POWER OF COMMUNITIES  
TO GOVERN THEMSELVES  
WITHOUT THE STATE.”

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The Political  
Thought of

# Abdullah Öcalan

Kurdistan,  
Woman's  
Revolution

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AND

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Democratic  
Confederalism

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“THERE IS A NEED FOR A NON-STATE  
ORIENTATED DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST  
THEORY, PROGRAMME, STRATEGY  
AND TACTICS.”

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# The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan

Kurdistan, Woman's Revolution  
and Democratic Confederalism



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# I

## *War and Peace in Kurdistan: Perspectives on a Political Solution to the Kurdish Question*

### INTRODUCTION

Everyday life in the Middle East is dominated by numerous conflicts, which often appear strange to Western eyes as they seem to elude the Western understanding of reason and meaning. This is also true for the Kurdish question, one of the most complex and bloody fields of conflict in the Middle East still awaiting a solution. However, as long as we refrain from discussing all the dimensions of this conflict equally, it will continue and even be aggravated further, thus creating new and far-reaching problems. The historical, economic and political dimensions of the Kurdish question exceed by far the Arab-Israeli conflict, which, in contrast to the Kurdish question, enjoys the attention of the international public. Knowledge about this conflict is limited, and because it is taking place in one of the most central regions of the Middle East, both with respect to demography and to geostrategic importance, this deficit often results in one-sided and superficial analysis of this complex problem.

Since the settlement area of the Kurds spans the present territories of Arabs, Persians and Turks, the Kurdish question necessarily concerns most of the region. A solution in one part of Kurdistan also affects other parts of Kurdistan and neighbouring countries. Conversely, the destructive approach of actors in one country may have negative effects on potential solutions to the Kurdish question in other countries. The rugged Kurdish landscape is practically made

for armed struggle, and the Kurds have been fighting colonisation or conquest by foreign powers since time immemorial. Resistance has become part of their life and culture.

At the beginning of every solution process the conflict needs to be recognised and defined. With a view to the Kurdish question, a realistic definition of the Kurdish *phenomenon* is therefore important. However, it is here that much of the disagreement begins. While the Arabs call the Kurds 'Arabs from Yemen', the Turks call them 'mountain Turks' and the Persians regard them as their ethnic counterparts. It is not astonishing, therefore, that their political stances on the Kurdish question are marked by arguments over definitions.

The Kurdish question has not been created out of the blue. It is the product of a long historical process and does not have much in common with similar issues in other parts of the world. In fact, there are a number of fundamental peculiarities and differences. Both of them need to be defined in a solution process. Any policy building merely on apparent common ground leads to irresolvable problems. A policy aiming at a solution needs to analyse realistically the phenomenon and include both the national, political and social background, and also all parties involved in the conflict. It is indispensable, therefore, to recognise the existence of the Kurdish phenomenon. This, however, is not possible without information about the historical background.

## ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORDS *KURD AND KURDISTAN*

The name Kurdistan goes back to the Sumerian word *kur*, which more than 5,000 years ago meant something like 'mountain'. The suffix *ti* stood for affiliation. The word *kurti* then had the meaning of *mountain tribe* or *mountain people*. The Luwians, who settled in western Anatolia about 3,000 years ago, called Kurdistan *Gondwana*, which in their language meant *land of the villages*. In Kurdish, *gond* is still the word for village. During the reign of Assure (from the early

to mid Bronze Age through to the late Iron Age) the Kurds were called *Nairi*, which translates as 'people by the river'.

In the Middle Ages, under the reign of the Arab sultanates the Kurdish areas were referred to as *beled ekrad*. The Seljuk sultans who spoke Persian were the first to use the word *Kurdistan*, land of the Kurds, in their official communiqués. The Ottoman sultans also called the area settled by the Kurds Kurdistan. Until the 1920s, this name was generally used. After 1925 the existence of the Kurds was denied, particularly in Turkey.

### KURDISH SETTLEMENT AREA AND KURDISH LANGUAGE

They do exist, though. Kurdistan comprises an area of 450,000 square kilometres, which is surrounded by the settlement areas of the Persians, Azeris, Arabs and Anatolian Turks. It is one of the most mountainous, forested and water-rich areas in the Middle East and is pervaded by numerous fertile plains. Agriculture has been practised here for thousands of years. It was here that the Neolithic revolution began, when hunter-gatherers settled down and began farming the fields. The region is also called the *cradle of civilisation*. Thanks to its geographical position the Kurds have been able to protect their existence as an ethnic community until today. On the other hand, it was the exposed position of the Kurdish settlement area which often whetted the appetite of external powers and enticed them to embark on raids and conquest. The Kurdish language reflects the influence of the Neolithic revolution, which is believed to have begun in the region of the Zagros and Taurus mountains. Kurdish belongs to the Indo-European family of languages.

### A SHORT OUTLINE OF KURDISH HISTORY

It is highly probable that Kurdish language and culture began to develop during the fourth ice age (20,000–15,000 BC). The Kurds are one of the oldest indigenous populations in the Middle Eastern

region. About 6,000 BC they became distinct from other cultures. Historiography first mentions the Kurds as an ethnic group related to the *Hurrians* (3,000–2,000 BC). So it is assumed that the predecessors of the Kurds, the Hurrians and the descendants of the Hurrians – the *Mittani*, the *Nairi*, the *Urartians* and the *Medes* – all lived in tribal confederations and kingdoms at the time. Kurdish society at the time was transitioning towards hierarchy and state structures, and can be seen as developing a strong patriarchy. Because during the Neolithic agricultural era women undertook more important functions within society, this led to women having more prominence within Kurdish society. It is highly likely that women relied on such strength for a long time and that this strength was drawn from the agricultural revolution.

It was Zoroastrianism which had a lasting impact on the Kurdish way of thinking, between 700 and 550 BC. Zoroastrianism cultivated a way of life that was marked by work in the fields, where men and women were equal to each other. Love of animals played an important role, and freedom was a high moral good. Zoroastrian culture influenced Eastern and Western civilisation equally, since both Persians and Hellenes adopted many of its cultural influences. The Persian civilisation, however, was founded by the Medes, believed to be the predecessors of the Kurds. In Herodotus' histories there is much evidence for a division of power among both Medes and Persian ethnic groups in the Persian Empire. This is also true for the subsequent Sassanid Empire.

The Hellenic era of classic antiquity left deep traces in the eastern hemisphere. The principalities Abgar in Urfa and Komagene, the centre of which was near Adiyaman-Samsat, and the kingdom of Palmyra in Syria were deeply influenced by the Greeks. One might say that it is there that we can find the first synthesis of oriental and occidental cultural influences. This special cultural encounter lasted until Palmyra was conquered by the Roman Empire in 269 AD, which brought about long-term negative consequences for the development of the entire region. The appearance of the Sassanid Empire did not end the Kurdish influence either. We

may assume that during this time (216–652 AD) feudal structures were formed in Kurdistan. The development of feudalism reflects the divergence within ethnic structures. Kurdish society developed bonds of an increasingly feudal structure. At this developmental stage of feudalism the Islamic revolution occurred. Islam essentially transformed the strict relationships of slavery and ethnic bonds – which obstructed development – on the basis of urbanisation. At the same time a mental revolution regarding the ideological basis of feudal society began to develop.

The decline of the Sassanid Empire (650 AD) helped Islam create a feudal Kurdish aristocracy, which was strongly influenced by Arabisation. It became one of the strongest social and political formations of its time. The Kurdish dynasty of the *Ayyubids* (1175–1250 AD) evolved into one of the most potent dynasties in the Middle East, exercising great influence on the Kurds.

On the other hand, the Kurds maintained close relations to the Seljuk sultanate, which took over the rule from the Abbasids in 1055. Dynasties of Kurdish descent like the *Sheddadis*, *Buyidis* and *Marwanides* (990–1090) developed into feudal petty states. Other principalities followed. The ruling class of the Kurds enjoyed significant autonomy in the Ottoman Empire.

With the onset of the nineteenth century Kurdish history and society entered a new phase. In the course of deteriorating relations with the Ottomans several Kurdish uprisings occurred. English and French missionaries brought the idea of separatism into the Armenian and Aramaic churches, contributing to a chaotic situation. Furthermore, the relations between Armenians (Assyrians) and Kurds became notably worse. This fatal process ended in 1918 after World War I, with the almost complete physical and cultural annihilation of the Armenians and Aramaeans, who were the bearers of a culture several thousand years old.

Although the relations between Kurds and Turks had been seriously damaged, it did not result in a complete rupture like the Armenians and Arameans. This allowed for the continued physical existence of the Kurds.

## STRUGGLES FOR RESOURCES, WAR AND STATE TERROR IN KURDISTAN

In the past, its geostrategic position has made the country a pawn in struggles over the distribution of resources, and invited wars and state terror. This is still true today, and dates back into early history, as Kurdistan has been exposed to attacks and raids by external powers for its entire history. The terror regimes of the Assyrian and Scythian Empires between 1000 and 1300 BC, and the campaign of conquest by Alexander the Great, are the best-known examples. The Arab conquest after the onset of Islam triggered the Islamisation process of Kurdistan. Much as Islam as a word evokes peace it is an effective Arabic national war ideology and was able to spread quickly in Kurdistan. Islam proceeded into the foothills of the Taurus and Zagros mountains. Tribes that put up resistance were exterminated. In 1000 AD Islam had reached its peak in Kurdistan. Then in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Mongols invaded Kurdistan. Flight and displacement followed. After the battle of Chaldiran in 1514, which saw the Ottomans victorious, the natural eastern border of the empire was shifted further eastward. The treaty of Qasr-e Shirin officially established the Iranian and Turkish borders and concluded the partition of Kurdistan, which has continued into the present. Mesopotamia and the Kurds found themselves for the most part within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Until 1800 a relative peace had prevailed between the Ottomans and the Kurdish principalities, which was based on the Sunni denomination of Islam that they had in common. Alevitic and Zoroastrian Kurds, however, were defiant and took to resistance in the mountains.

After 1800, until the decline of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan was shaken by numerous rebellions, which were usually bloodily crushed. After the end of the Ottoman Empire the Kurdish partition deepened even further, exacerbating the atmosphere of violence. The rising imperialist powers of Britain and France redrew the boundaries in the Middle East and left Kurdistan under the

rule of the Turkish republic, the Iranian peacock throne, the Iraqi monarchy and the Syrian-French regime.

Influenced by the loss of a large part of its former territories, Turkey switched to a strict policy of assimilation in order to enforce the unity of the remaining parts of its former empire. All indications of the existence of a culture other than Turkish were to be exterminated. They even banned the use of the Kurdish language.

The aspiring Pahlavi dynasty in Iran proceeded in the same way. The rebellion of the Kurdish tribal leader Simko Shikak from Urmiye and the emancipation struggle of the Kurdish republic of Mahabad were crushed in blood. The shah established a terror regime in the spirit of the nationalist-fascist epoch that rose at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Iraqi and Syrian parts of Kurdistan, Britain and France suppressed the Kurdish emancipation efforts with the help of their Arab proxies. Here, too, a bloody colonial regime was established.

## EUROPEAN COLONIALISM AND THE KURDISH DILEMMA

Driven by ambitions for geostrategic supremacy and boundless greed, the European intervention policy in the Middle East became increasingly colonialist at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its primary goal became the submission and control of the Middle East. This added a new form of colonisation to what the Kurds had already experienced over a history dating back into Sumerian times. However, Western capitalism changed it in unimagined ways. For the Kurds, this meant that they were again confronted with new colonialist actors and that the solution to the Kurdish question had become even more difficult.

With a view to their interests, the new imperialist powers deemed it more advantageous to seek cooperation with the sultan and the empire's administrative rulers in order to win allies, instead of breaking up the Ottoman Empire with unforeseeable consequences. This approach was meant to facilitate direct control over the

region and to tame its rebellious peoples. This method, which was widespread throughout the British Empire, found its way into the history books as the 'divide and rule' strategy. In this way Ottoman rule was extended for another hundred years. France and Germany had similar strategies. The frictions between them did not influence the balance of power in the Middle East.

Yet another focus of imperial preservation of power was on the Christian ethnic groups. On the one hand, Western colonialism pretended to protect the Anatolian Greeks, Armenians and Aramaeans; on the other hand it incited them to rebel against the central power, which responded with repressive measures. The subsequent annihilation campaign was watched impassively by the Western powers. Eventually, this policy antagonised the nations of the Middle East. Again, the Kurds were only pawns in a game of foreign interests. In the past the Kurdish aristocracy had collaborated with the Arab and Turkish dynasties. Now they allowed foreign powers to use them as part of their colonialist intrigues. By winning the cooperation of the Kurds the British succeeded in tying the anxious Turkish and Arab rulers to their interests. Then again, they were able to further tie the Armenians and Aramaeans to the colonial powers, which in turn were hard-pressed by Kurdish feudal collaborators. However, the Turkish sultan, the Persian shah and the Arab rulers were not merely victims of this policy. They played a similar game in order to preserve their own power and to curb the greediness of the Western powers. It was the people who suffered.

### THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF COLONIAL OPPRESSION AND POWER POLITICS IN KURDISTAN

Both the partition of Kurdistan and ways in which the Arab, Persian and Turkish regimes ruled were social setbacks for the Kurds in each part of Kurdistan. The societal backwardness of today's Kurds, who still retain their feudal structures, is a product of these power relationships. With the coming of capitalist structures, from which



the Kurds were mostly excluded, the development-related divide between them and the Arab, Turkish and Persian hegemonic societies grew larger. The power structures of feudal rule mingled with bourgeois-capitalist power structures, which helped to preserve the dominance of their corresponding nations. Although these structures depended on imperialism, they were able to build up their own national economies, further develop their own cultures, and stabilise their own state structures. In the areas of science and technology a national elite was coming of age. They forced all other ethnic groups in their countries to speak the official language. The media in the official language became a force on its own. With the help of a nationalist domestic and foreign policy they created a national ruling class, which saw itself as a hegemonic power with a view to other ethnic groups. The police and military were expanded and strengthened in order to break the resistance of the people. The Kurds were not able to respond to that. They were still suffering from the impacts of imperialism. They were confronted with an aggressive national chauvinism from the states that had power in Kurdistan, with the legitimacy of their power being explained through imaginative ideological constructions.

### **Denial and Self-Denial**

The hegemonic powers (i.e. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) denied the Kurds their existence as an ethnic group. In such surroundings the Kurds ran a risk when they referred to their Kurdish roots. This is beyond being colonised. If people did so in spite of this, they could not even expect to be supported by members of their own ethnic group. For many Kurds, open commitment to their origin and culture resulted in exclusion from all economic and social relations. Therefore, many Kurds denied their ethnic descent or kept quiet about it – something that the respective regimes systematically encouraged. This denial strategy produced many absurdities. The chain of reasoning was that there was no such thing as the Kurds, if they did exist it was not very important, and if it was important

it was dangerous to reveal them. For the Arab regime, they feel that the Islamic conquests give them the right. Can there be a greater right than to conquer in the name of God? This is the premise and is still strongly put forth.

The Persians went a step further and declared the Kurds to be an ethnic subgroup of the Persians. In this way, the Kurds were granted all their rights in a natural way. Kurds who nonetheless demanded their rights and stuck to their ethnic identity were regarded as people who threw mud at their own nation and who therefore received the appropriate treatment.

The Turkish regime derived its claim to supremacy over the Kurds from alleged campaigns of conquest in Anatolia a thousand years ago. There had not been other peoples there. Therefore, *Kurd* and *Kurdistan* are non-words, non-existent and not allowed to exist according to the official ideology. These words are unimportant and dangerous, and their use can even amount to an act of terrorism and is punished correspondingly.

### Assimilation

Hegemonic powers often use assimilation as a tool when they are confronted with defiant ethnic groups. Language and culture are also carriers of potential resistance, which can be desiccated by assimilation. Banning the native language and enforcing the use of a foreign language are effective tools. People who are no longer able to speak their native language will no longer cherish its characteristics, which are rooted in ethnic, geographic and cultural factors. Without the unifying element of language the uniting quality of collective ideas also disappears. Without this common basis the collective ties within the ethnic group break up and become lost. Consequently, hegemonic language and culture gain ground in the conquered ethnic and language environment. Forced use of the hegemonic language results in a withering of the native language until it becomes irrelevant. This happens even faster when the native language is not a literary language, as is the case with Kurdish. An