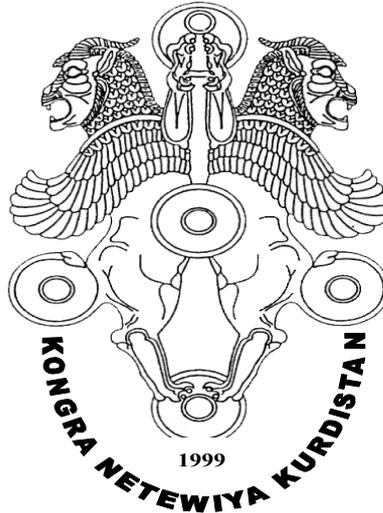


# Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê - Kurdistan National Congress

# KNK



## **Hunger Strikes: Life as a means of pressure**

**-Information File about the Political Background of the Hunger Strikes-**

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## **Hunger Strikes: Life as a means of pressure**

By definition, the hunger strike is a form of passive resistance by an individual or a whole group. By deliberately refusing to eat, the risk of personal injury or death is consciously accepted.

Within prisons, self-sacrificing resistance practices are mostly adopted by political prisoners. The transformation of the body into a resistance method, used by the insurgent against the state's authority, is one of the most important aspects of these practices.

Mahatma Ghandi was one of the best-known politicians to use this strategy in his fight against racism and for equal rights for the Indians. As the leader of the independence movement in India, he contributed significantly to the peaceful end of British colonial rule in India with non-violent resistance and hunger strikes.

### **November 2018 A Quiet Revolution in Kurdistan and Turkey starts: the Hunger Strikes**

Despite little attention so far from the international press, a quiet struggle is developing in Turkey where in November 2018 hundreds of political prisoners started hunger strikes. As of February 2019 331 prisoners are on hunger strike in 67 prisons. On 1st of March 2019, a mass movement in the prisons will start as thousands of political prisoners have announced they will begin an indefinite hunger strike.

### **Leyla Güven: the leading Kurdish women of the resistance**

Leyla Güven, a prominent Kurdish activist and democratically-elected member of the parliament of Turkey (HDP), was arrested and detained on 22 January 2018 for her criticism of the Turkish army's invasion of Afrin in Northern Syria and for other statements she had made as a Kurdish politician in Turkey. Leyla Güven began a hunger strike on 8 November 2018.

Since then, the hunger strikes have spread in prisons across Turkey, Kurdistan, as well as to France, Canada, Wales, South Kurdistan (Erbil, Maxmur), Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. Solidarity demonstrations and actions all around the world are growing by the day.

Because of this resistance, on 12 January 2019, Abdullah Öcalan received a short visit from his brother at the Imrali island prison for the first time in more than two years. The meeting happened under extraordinary circumstances and outside of regular visiting procedures. The Turkish government played a card to try to break the resistance and, in particular, Leyla Güven's resistance. However, this short visit in no way signifies a breakthrough in total isolation. Leyla Güven and all other hunger strikers have unveiled and defeated the plans of the Turkish government, and the resistance has spread even further.

### **The demand:**

Breaking the isolation imposed upon the Kurdish People's Leader Abdullah Öcalan and a guarantee for his free life and working conditions.

### **Öcalan's Importance for Peace and Democracy in Turkey**

The Kurdish people's leader Abdullah Öcalan has gained significant trust within Turkish civil society, because of his sincerity and vision for all its people and for his initiatives during the peace process of 2013-2015 together with pragmatic and reasonable solutions to intractable problems. The meetings between Öcalan and the Turkish State's delegation led to a period of ceasefire, the creation of a political opening for the discussion of a solution, and a pluralist and tolerant socio-political platform. All of these are urgently needed in Turkey. Regrettably these opportunities were squandered because of political opportunism and nationalistic chauvinism. Today, it becomes important to revive the vision and ideas of Öcalan so that they are not forgotten. The responsibility falls on public intellectuals, democratic political activists, journalists, civil society leaders to remind the people of Turkey and the world that another societal and political framework is possible in Turkey.

The peace process that took place on Imrali Island until April 2015 has been replaced by a bloody war ongoing since July 2015. Since this date, dialogue, political discussion, pluralism, fundamental rights have all taken a severe hit.

Some may ask: Why Ocalan, why not somebody else? In politics the development and maturing of leaders happens over a historical period when those who emerge establish respect and reputation through their actions and ideas. Those who are attempting to create an alternative to such leadership are embarking on a futile task. Mr. Ocalan has amassed a wealth of political experience and embarked on a genuine search for peace since 1993. Through his writings, he has shown himself to be a public intellectual with both the vision and policies that could shape the future of Turkey and all its people.

Many political and social organizations, can play a role in the construction of peace but being the founding leader of peace is something else. The fundamental problems in Turkey will not be solved as long as his isolation in Imrali continues.

The escalation of conflict has coincided with the total isolation of the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, Abdullah Öcalan, who from his lonely prison cell on the island of Imrali has been a crucial role-player and a consistent voice calling for peace.

## **Political Background of the hunger strikes**

### **The Kurdish question in the Middle East**

Today, since the founding of the PKK in 1978 under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan, Kurds have been transformed from victims to proactive players and catalysts for change in the region. Moreover, the Kurds have now achieved the internationalization of their cause. This new dynamic is challenging the Turkish state to make a democratic transformation.

Currently the Middle East is a region in which the world's new political balance is being built. The new wave of war may result in the formation of a new world balance after the fall of the old order. International powers that want to have influence in the region, the status-quoist and regressive forces of the region, those who seek to keep their former positions and peoples, and those who are not happy with their current position; all of them take part in this war. As Kurds are the worst affected by the old political balance and status-quo, they want to take their place in the political balance to be formed anew and achieve their democratic and free life, with the organizations and the political struggle they have created over decades.

In the current war in Middle East where the old balances are dismantled and new balances and status-quoos are created within the multidimensional war, everybody wants to strengthen their position and take part in the new political balances being built. To this end, a violent war continues in which alliances fall and new alliances rise every day. This situation expresses a reality that the Kurds, who were subjected to genocides in the 20th century, should assess with the utmost urgency.

### **Turkey – a force of aggression and destabilization**

A century after the outbreak of World War I, which ultimately determined the framework for the re-division of the Middle East into the states that currently exist in the region, a new regional and global struggle for power has begun. For nearly a century, the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have enforced a process of homogenization that included various forms of assimilation as well as brutal campaigns of ethnic cleansing. Today, these states are finally falling apart.

The Turkish project of nation building, which sought to establish a monolithic Turkish nation-state on land occupied by many different indigenous peoples, was confronted time and time again by resolute resistance from Kurdish people. As the largest non-Turkish ethnic group living within the borders of the

Republic of Turkey, the Kurds were the main targets of the Turkish state's extensive assimilation and ethnic cleansing policies. As a consequence, in the decades that followed and up to the present day, many Kurds have risen up against the state in a series of revolts.

### **The new international and regional power balance and the Kurds**

The most important shift in the balance of power in Middle East began in the 90s, when the Soviet Union lost control over its territories. A radical transformation from nationalist nation-states to democracy emerged.

The first turning point for the Kurds in Middle East came in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, when, following the anti-Saddam Hussein uprisings, the imposition of an international "no-fly" zone over northern Iraq created a de facto autonomous Kurdish zone in 1992.

The second turning point starts with the turmoil in Syria in 2011 and has raised the possibility that North and East Syria can gain democratic status. These two developments are now challenging the political dynamic and having a major effect on the politics of the Middle East as a whole. In this frame Turkey is the most challenged nation-state, at a very critical stage.

### **The Kurdish question of Turkey**

In its origins, the Kurdish question in Turkey suggested that a lack of democracy could fuel existing ethnic divisions in society. Turkish nationalism intensified after the 1980 military coup. This authoritarian nationalism failed to recognize any alternative national or ethnic identities and was the reason for the Kurdish uprisings, led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in the 1980s. The state organs systematically rejected, denied and suppressed Kurdish claims for liberty.

### **Turkey challenged by Öcalan led Kurdish democracy**

The Turkish Republic now faces Kurdistan on three fronts—internally, where there is a growing and increasingly more progressive Kurdish population; in autonomous North-East Syrian or Rojava; and in northeastern Iraq.

If Turkey succeeds in coping with the Kurdish demands for democracy, Turkey could acquire a level of security and strength that has eluded it since its creation in 1923. If Ankara cannot cope, however, Turkey will remain a middling country with glaring structural vulnerabilities, or worse, it could be plunged into inter-ethnic conflict.

Indeed, since its creation in 1923, the Turkish Republic has effectively been at war with the Kurds. All of the Turkish army's deployments have been in Kurdistan.

Abdullah Öcalan's concept of and struggle for democratic autonomy in Turkey can promote this much needed democratic transformation, to the benefit of all the peoples of Turkey. This means decentralisation, which can embrace cultural diversity, gender equality, co-existence of ethnic and religious components and anti-statism, such as the model of Democratic Confederalism (proposed by Öcalan and being put into practice in Northern Syria/Rojava).

The Kurds constitute a significant proportion of the population of Turkey. Democratic transformation of Turkey means overcoming the nationalistic, racist and patriarchal doctrine of the nation-state. An awareness of the need for constitutional recognition and resolution of the legitimate demands of the Kurdish people, and all oppressed people including women across all ethnic and religious groups, is emerging. This is the main reason for the Turkish state's insistence on maintaining the status quo, which is manifested in the increasing aggression and brutality of the state itself.

### **The rising star of regional and global politics: the Kurds**

The Kurdish resistance and victories in Kobane, Sinjar, Maxmur, Raqqa, Rojava against ISIS created new circumstances. The international community and public opinion created pressure on the U.S. and other international powers to interfere in the situation. The resistance mounted in Shengal, and after that in Kobane, moved the conscience of international community.

### **The Operation Cizre Storm a Game over for ISIS in Syria**

The Jazeera Storm' Battle by the Kurdish lead SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) defeated the Islamic State in the region of Deir ez-Zor in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. In a few days the announcement of the liberation of the province will be declared.

If ISIS had not been stopped by the armed and Öcalan's ideological leadership the struggle throughout Kurdistan, Kobane, Shengal and Syria, it would have spread to the whole world. The Operation Cizire Storm Battle to end ISIS terror launched on September 11, 2018 achieved a historical stage. The destruction of the physical existence of the ISIS in Deir ez-Zor region and its brutal regime represents a historical phase of the struggle. Now a democratic transition process will be launched very soon. The fighters of SDF forces are now completing the preparations for the final operation to end the ISIS occupation in Deir ez-Zor. With liberation of the Deir ez-Zor region nearly one third of Syria will become under the control of SDF.

### **Turkey under Erdoğan – the main threat to democratisation**

The dramatic spread of ISIS throughout Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014 was another step accelerating the collapse of power balances in the Middle East. With the beginning of the war in Syria, Turkey established direct relations with ISIS to fulfil its dream of neo-Ottomanism by occupying weakened neighbouring states including Iraq and Syria. The Turkish state's main target is currently North-East Syria, which is predominantly inhabited by the Kurdish people. The resistance of the Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and Armenians in North-East Syria has prevented a Turkish invasion. In 2018, the Turkish armed forces, working together with various jihadist groups, brutally attacked and eventually occupied the Kurdish city of Afrin in Northern Syria. Erdoğan's campaign to expand Turkey's occupation of North-East Syria is continuing. This is one of the main reasons why a political solution to the conflict in Syria has proven elusive. In many speeches, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has threatened to launch a major military operation "east of the Euphrates" to eliminate Kurdish forces from this territory, and there are now real fears that this invasion is imminent.

### **Anti Kurdish Strategy of the Turkish State**

The ambition of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East decreased markedly between 2015 and 2018. From a broad and unthreatening policy of economic cooperation, Turkish foreign policy transformed into a policy of stimulating regime change for a few short years, mostly by supporting Muslim Brotherhood-related and armed groups like IS. Its foreign policy ended up being heavily centred on a single issue, namely containment of the region's Kurds, while domestically power was gradually centralised in the hands of President Erdoğan.

Turkey's increasingly anti-Kurdish foreign policy in Syria achieved the level of occupation of a foreign country. In January 2018, Turkish and proxy forces initiated an offensive that occupied the Kurdish region of Afrin.

However Turkish policy towards Kurds in Northern Iraq is framed by discussion of the presence of the PKK, but in reality Turkey's ambition is to occupy this part of Kurdistan step by step.

Finally, the truth of Turkey's presence in South Kurdistan was revealed, when the KRG went ahead with its 'independence referendum' in September 2017. Ankara considered independence as materially different from autonomy and viewed an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq as a dangerous precedent for Turkey's own Kurds. Turkey has more than 20 military bases in South Kurdistan. Recently Kurdish people in Sheladize region in southern Kurdistan, northern Iraq, stormed a Turkish base in the Sire region on 26 January 2019 and demanded Turkish troops leave their land after a most recent attack by Turkish jets killed 4 civilians on 24 January 2019. Turkish soldiers opened fire on the protesters and killed two people, one of whom was identified as 12 years old Hisen Rekani.

### **The critical turn to an autocratic "one man regime" in Turkey**

Today Turkey under Erdoğan has become increasingly autocratic. The country's state of emergency was formally lifted shortly after the presidential elections last year, but the new system of presidential rule has secured a permanent state of exception. Under the new presidential system, Erdoğan, has consolidated and expanded his administrative powers. Now he has dominance over the judiciary, with

control over the appointment of judges and prosecutors, and the powers of the country's parliament have been significantly weakened. Virtually all opposition press and media has been closed down. What remains of the press practices heavy self-censorship, and has been turned into a chorus to convey and amplify those messages sanctioned by Erdoğan.

### **The Turkish Neo-Colonialism in North Kurdistan (Bakur)**

At present, 9 members of parliament from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), including both of the parties former co-presidents, are currently imprisoned. Many other elected representatives, including numerous mayors from the HDP have been suspended, dismissed or arrested on terror charges. Currently, 94 of 102 municipalities in Kurdish-majority cities and towns are administered by Ankara-appointed trustees as the Erdogan administration moved in late 2016 to depose, arrest, and jail mayors elected in the previous 2014 vote over charges of "terrorism".

Among the municipalities seized are those of the metropolitan areas of Diyarbakir, Mardin and Van, each province with a population of over one million people.

Trustees have dismantled the legacy of their elected predecessors by taking down Kurdish language signboards, shutting down arts centers, theaters, and even kindergartens.

Taking over Kurdish city halls like invaders, the appointed trustees hung huge Turkish flags on the municipal buildings, also removing signs written in Kurdish and Armenian. The police and military officers surrounded and seized public buildings with armed vehicles as if they were invading enemy territories. Consequently, it has become almost impossible for city dwellers even to access the municipalities that are supposed to provide services.

### **Turkey as the "the world's biggest jailer of journalists,"**

In Turkey 123 journalists are behind bars, 36 journalists are accused of "insulting Erdoğan," 233 journalists face 10 aggravated life sentences, one life sentence, 2,522 years, 10 months in prison and 4 million TRY in damages in total and 189 media outlets have been shut down.

### **The coup in 2016**

Following the failed coup of 2016, and in the context of the state of emergency, the Turkish Parliament adopted constitutional amendments which transformed Turkey into a autocratic presidential regime.

There was a full scale assault on civic society:

- 150,348 dismissed
- 217,971 detained
- 82,142 arrested
- 3,003 schools and universities shut down
- 6,021 academics lost jobs
- 4,463 judges, prosecutors dismissed

### **Turkey a boom of prisons**

According to the Ministry of Justice's General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses, as of 01.08.2018 in Turkey, there are;

- 288 closed prisons,
- 74 private open prisons,
- 5 education houses for children,
- 9 closed prisons for women,
- 6 open prisons for women,
- 7 closed prisons for children

In total, there are 389 prisons and the capacity of these institutions is 213,862 according to the officials.

As of the end of 2018, the number of detainees and convicts reached 258,660. 199,861 prisoners were convicted and 58,799 were in pre-trial detention. The number of female prisoners is 20,208, the number of male prisoners is 245,433 and the number of children is 3,019.

## **For Peace and Democracy in Turkey the Isolation of Abdullah Öcalan Needs to be Ended Urgently**

The Kurdish people's leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is held in the Imrali High Security Prison F-Type since 1999, has not been allowed to meet with his lawyers since July 27, 2011. From 2015 onwards, his family has visited him just once in September 11, 2016.

Since July 21, 2016, the Bursa Executive Court No.1 has cited the State of Emergency declared in the country to completely deny him all his fundamental rights as a political prisoner. All means of communication including letters, fax messages or telephone calls have been banned indefinitely and without exception. The isolationist measures in Imrali were regularly presented to the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT).

Abdullah Öcalan's release, as a vital contribution to the solution of the conflict, is therefore essential. To continue to silence and isolate Öcalan is to continue to ignore the Kurdish question in Turkey, and to fail to take concrete steps towards political reforms and democratization. To fail to address this issue humanely and according to international legal norms and values is to highlight that Turkey has no intention of upholding universal human rights

### **Need for international sanctions against Turkish Government**

The demand of all the hunger strikers is the ending of the isolation policy on Abdullah Öcalan.

They ask that Abdullah Öcalan be treated according to international law. He is the leader of one of the world's ancient civilizations; he is the leader of the Kurds.

The Western states and western institutions foremost the Council of Europe and CPT must leave their policies that support Erdogan's dictatorship in Turkey – they must carry out their responsibilities in order to sponsor peace in Turkey. Violating international law, Erdogan is committing crimes against the Kurds. Heed the demands of the hunger strikers and end the isolation regime that is a crime against humanity while there is still time. Remove the arbitrary obstacles stopping Mr. Abdullah Öcalan and the prisoners in the Imrali Island from having regular visits with their families and lawyers.

Turkey still has strong political, institutional, military and economic ties with Europe. Therefore, Europe still has significant power and influence over Turkey. While European institutions have directed harsh criticisms over Turkey's sharp turn towards authoritarianism, they fell short of taking any meaningful action to pressure the Erdoğan government. This allowed the autocratic government of Turkey to deepen the erosion of human rights and the rule of law in the country.

Turkey is a member state of the Council of Europe (CoE), the UN, the OSCE and a candidate for membership of the European Union (EU). Neither the Council of Europe nor the EU or OSCE have taken serious steps to stop the spread of authoritarianism in Turkey. This is clearly seen in the silence of the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) and CoE concerning the inhumane acts taking place in Turkey's prisons. The European bodies primarily responsible in this situation, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and CPT, have yet to issue any effective rulings on these practices contributing to the deepening of the absolute isolation.

### **Mandela Rules for Abdullah Öcalan!**

The "Mandela Rules" are a revision of the 1955 United Nations Standard Minimum Rules on the Treatment of Prisoners (SMR). The revised rules were adopted by the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Vienna, Austria on 22 May 2015. The revision focussed on nine thematic areas including: Prison health care; Restrictions, discipline and sanctions; Restraints; Cell searches; Contact with the outside world; Prisoner complaints, and; Investigations and inspections. One of the most important revisions was in the area of discipline and the use of solitary confinement. For the first time, solitary confinement is clearly defined and strict limitations are placed on its use.

The UN, Council of Europe, European Commission, CPT should insist that Turkey abide by the Mandela Rules and take urgent action to enforce them.