

# Unpacking the ‘Democratic Confederalism’ and ‘Democratic Autonomy’: Proposals of Turkey’s Kurdish Movement

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## I Introduction

The political settlement in the Middle East following the demise of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the division of Kurdistan – the historic homeland of the Kurdish people – among the states of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, and the Kurdish question has been an important political and security concern in the region ever since. The Kurds resisted the new states that came into being in a series of revolts but their attempts have ultimately failed. In Turkey, the category of universal national rights was assigned only to the Turkish nation, and the Kurds’ subsequent articulations of their group-specific demands were considered illegitimate.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Kurdish political activists determinedly continued their advocacy of Kurdish rights and their nascent movement began to attract the attention of the Kurdish public from the late 1960s onwards. The subsequent repression that the Kurdish political activists experienced, especially during the military regime between 1971 and 1974, led to their radicalisation and their efforts led to the establishment of Kurdish left-wing groups or clandestine political parties in the mid-1970s.<sup>2</sup> However, except the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which was one of these parties that was established in this period, the Kurdish political parties and groups were crushed by the repression by the military that the coup of 12 September 1980 unleashed.

The PKK’s initial political programme was structured around the objective of unifying the Kurds in an independent and socialist republic and from 1984 onwards, it began its guerrilla campaign.<sup>3</sup> However, the revolutionary

1 Derya Bayır, *Minorities and Nationalism in Turkish Law* (Ashgate 2013) 145–154.

2 For a detailed discussion see Cengiz Gunes, *Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (Routledge 2012) 65–80.

3 For a detailed discussion see: Cengiz Gunes, ‘Explaining the PKK’s Mobilization of Kurds in Turkey: Hegemony, Myth and Violence’, (2013) 12(3) *Ethnopolitics* 247; Cengiz Gunes, ‘Kurdish Mobilisation in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s’ in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Hurst and Co. 2017).

overthrow of the Turkish state that the PKK's insurgency sought to achieve began to seem unlikely from the mid-1990s onwards and as a result the PKK began to emphasise the need for a political solution to the conflict and the Kurdish question. In order to facilitate a political solution to the conflict, it declared three ceasefires during the 1990s. In 1999, after its leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured by Turkey, the PKK began to undergo a more radical ideological transformation that has significantly altered the movement's long-term objectives and the demands for the Kurds.<sup>4</sup> In this period, Öcalan was able to direct the PKK's ideological transformation through the texts he produced as part of his legal defence submitted to the Turkish and European courts that heard his case and through his instructions via his lawyers.

The democratic solution that Öcalan's defences seek to develop aims at a radical transformation of the whole of the Middle East through the development and deepening of democracy. In formulating his new proposals, Öcalan draw upon a diverse number of radical intellectual traditions including 'the libertarian social ecologist Murray Bookchin, feminist political theorists, such as Judith Butler, and leftist Foucauldians and critical Marxists'.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the PKK's democratic solution is conceptualised around the interlinked proposals of 'democratic confederalism' and 'democratic autonomy'. Democratic confederalism is developed as a project of national self-determination for the Kurds but does not involve the creation of a separate Kurdish state. Democratic autonomy aims at realising Kurdish self-governments in the existing states with a Kurdish population.

The other major political movement that represent the Kurds in Turkey is the pro-Kurdish democratic movement, which came into being when the People's Labour Party (HEP) was established on 7 June 1990, and has been represented by various political parties since then. Due to the nature of the political demands it has been raising, such as the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity, it has been facing severe repression and is considered as a political outsider. The pro-Kurdish parties were represented in the Turkish parliament during the early 1990s and from 2007 onward but the state repression resulted in the closures of several of the pro-Kurdish political parties during 1990s and 2000s. The current representative of the pro-Kurdish political movement at the national level is the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which

4 Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, 'Confederalism and Autonomy in Turkey: The Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Reinvention of Democracy' in Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu (eds), *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and Reconciliation* (Routledge 2014) 186.

5 Klaus Happel, 'Introduction' in Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation*, Klaus Happel (transl.) (Pluto Press 2006) xv.

was founded in October 2012. In the general election held on 7 June 2015, the HDP managed to win 13.1 per cent of the popular vote and secure 80 seats in the parliament in Ankara. However, in the repeated election on 1 November 2015 there was a reduction in the HDP's vote but despite that it still managed to obtain 10.75 per cent of the popular vote and 59 seats in the parliament.<sup>6</sup> It won 11.7 per cent of the popular vote and 67 seats at the most recent general election held on 24 June 2018. There are several smaller political parties, such as the leftist Hak-Par (Rights and Freedoms Party) and the Islamist Huda-Par (Free Cause Party), that aspire to represent the Kurds in Turkey but so far, they have not managed to win sufficient votes in either the parliamentary or the local elections.

This chapter seeks to unpack the democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy proposals that the Kurdish movement in Turkey has been developing during the 2000s. It examines the key texts through which these proposals have been articulated and aims to reflect the Kurdish movement's understanding and interpretation of these concepts. It first charts the development of Öcalan's democratic solution to the Kurdish question before moving on to a discussion on the PKK's ideological transformation and the emergence of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy as its principal political demands for the Kurds in Turkey. Öcalan's and PKK's approach has had an impact on the wider Kurdish movement in Turkey and for this reason the final section of the chapter offers an examination of the democratic autonomy proposals developed by the pro-Kurdish democratic movement and other Kurdish representative organisations, such as the Democratic Society Congress (DTK).

## II Öcalan's Democratic Solution to the Kurdish Question

Abdullah Öcalan has been the main figure in the PKK from the early days of the movement and has been involved in drafting its key texts. He was born in the Şanlıurfa province in 1948 and was a student at Ankara University's Faculty of Political Science during the early 1970s when he led the formation of the group that later established the PKK. In July 1979, Öcalan moved to Syria and then to Lebanon where efforts to transform the PKK into a guerrilla movement were intensified. He was based in Syria until 9 October 1998 when he was forced out by Turkish military pressure and threat of attacking Syria if it continued to host him. His attempts to find shelter in Greece, Russia and Italy

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion see: Gunes, *Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, 152–175; Cengiz Gunes, 'Turkey's New Left' (2017) 107 *New Left Review* 9.

were unsuccessful and he was captured in Nairobi, Kenya by Turkish intelligence agents, with support from the CIA and Israel's Mossad, on 15 February 1999. Öcalan's first articulation of the democratic solution was during his court trial that started on 31 May 1999 and ended on 29 June 1999. He was found guilty of 'founding and leading a terror organisation' and sentenced to death but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and he has been held at a high-security prison on the island of İmralı in the Marmara Sea ever since.<sup>7</sup> He was kept in solitary confinement until 2009 and his communication with the external world was severely restricted. During the 2000s, his lawyers were able to visit him most weeks. However, in the past decade, for long periods of time, his lawyers were prevented from visiting him and their last visit took place on 27 July 2011. During the dialogue process between the state and the PKK and Öcalan that began in January 2013, a delegation comprised of three HDP MPs was able to regularly visit him and their last visit was on 5 April 2015. Since then his brother, Mehmet Öcalan was able to visit him twice, on 11 September 2016 and on 12 January 2019.

Rather than being a legal response to the charges listed on the public prosecutor's indictment, the defence Öcalan presented centred on ending the violent conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state.<sup>8</sup> There were previous occasions during the 1990s when Öcalan and the PKK stressed the suitability and acceptability of a framework whereby Kurds obtained their group rights within Turkey. These were often expressed as part of moves to facilitate the development of a political solution to the conflict and the clearest indication came on 17 March 1993 when, in a press conference to announce the PKK's unilateral ceasefire, Öcalan stated that a solution based on the recognition of Kurds' democratic rights and identity within Turkey could be acceptable.<sup>9</sup> Similar calls were made during the declaration of subsequent ceasefires in August 1995 and September 1998.

During his trial, Öcalan called for the re-organisation of the relations between Kurds and the state in Turkey on the basis of equality and freedom and rejected the separatist approach his movement had previously taken. He re-interpreted the solution to the Kurdish question on the basis of deepening of democracy and called for measures to address the Kurdish demands within a

7 In 2002, the democratisation reforms carried out for increasing harmony with the EU law (Law no. 4771) Turkey abolished the death penalty for peace time offences. In 2004 it was removed for war time offences as well (Law no. 5218). The last time death penalty was carried out was in 1984.

8 Abdullah Öcalan, *Savunma: Kürt Sorununda Demokratik Çözüm Bildirgesi* (Mem Yayınları 1999), 16.

9 A. Kadir Konuk, *PKK'nin Tek Taraflı İlan Ettiği Ateşkes ve Yankıları* (Ağrı Yayınları 1993) 34.

democratic Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Öcalan also made frequent references to the historical periods in which Kurds and Turks cooperated and argued that this common history offered an example of partnership that can be emulated in the modern period and be the basis of future coexistence and cooperation of Kurds and Turks within a democratic republic. The option of establishing a separate Kurdish state in the region, Öcalan argued, did not have a material basis and faced multiple difficulties. He also stressed that the accommodation of Kurdish rights through territorial autonomy and federation offer only a partial solution as Kurdish population is dispersed in Turkey. Thus, citing the peculiarity and the deep-rooted nature of the relations between the Kurds and Turks, including their historical alliance that resulted in the establishment of the republic, Öcalan argued that a solution within the democratic system is the only viable option:

The democratic solution option, in generally as well as in the case of the Kurdish question, is the only option. Separation is neither possible nor required. The interests of the Kurds definitely lie in a democratic union with Turkey. If the democratic solution is duly implemented, it would be a more successful and realistic model than autonomy and federation.<sup>11</sup>

This initial articulation of the democratic solution to the Kurdish question conceived of it in the following terms: respecting Turkey's territorial integrity, democratisation of the republic, the removal of the prohibitions in front of Kurdish language and culture, abandoning the military approach to the management of the Kurdish question and paving the way for the participation of illegal political organisations, such as the PKK, in formal politics. Öcalan expanded on his democratic solution proposals through the defences he submitted to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in 2001 that considered his appeal. His defence was published as a two-volume book in the end of 2001.<sup>12</sup>

The first volume offered an analysis of global historical developments and focuses on the emergence and evolution of class-based societies, which he traced back to the Sumerian civilisation in Ancient Mesopotamia. The second volume focussed more specifically on the solution of the Kurdish question and Öcalan called for a comprehensive democratisation of the republic and to end of state's approach of denying the existence of the Kurdish national identity in

<sup>10</sup> Öcalan, *Savunma*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. All the quotes from Turkish language texts are author's own translation.

<sup>12</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *AİHM Savunmaları: Sümer Rahip Devletinden Demokratik Cumhuriyete* (Mezopotamya Yayınları 2001).

Turkey, which he argued would be the best course of action to prevent Kurdish separatism.<sup>13</sup> He proposed a 'nation of Turkey' as an inclusive identity for all citizens and argued that such a framework would be a major step on the direction of the democratic solution: 'All that is necessary is loyalty to the democratic system, to renounce the chauvinist fascist claims and for each group [in Turkey] to experience its cultural identity and education without denying the formal system'.<sup>14</sup>

In 2004, Öcalan submitted another defence text to the ECtHR that expanded on his democratic solution and was published as a book in the same year titled *Bir Halkı Savunmak* (Defending a Nation).<sup>15</sup> In this new text, the issue of the formal legal status of the Kurds and Kurdistan within the existing states gained more emphasis. Here, Öcalan proposed a framework whereby the 'people's own democratic administration in Kurdistan' will co-exist with the 'state as the general public authority'.<sup>16</sup> This framework required a significant roll-back in the power and authority of the state in Turkey to enable the development of people's democratic rule. Öcalan proposed a model inspired by delegative democracy where Kurds would choose delegates as their representatives:

As the national state cannot be a solution to the national problem in Kurdistan, the congressional regime remains the most appropriate solution. Since the people [of Kurdistan] will not accept the old slave life under any circumstance and it is clear that the search for the national state carries the danger of deepening the existing deadlock, the most appropriate instrument of the democratic solution is the People's Congress.<sup>17</sup>

Kurdish people would be involved in the overall management of their democratic rule and be responsible for holding their representatives to account. For Öcalan, the democratic solution is not only about obtaining Kurdish rights within the existing states but also seen as a project to democratize the Kurdish society:

The democratization of Kurdistan is beyond a legal problem and a comprehensive societal project. It involves the excluded segments forming, institutionalizing, managing and overseeing their economic, social and political will against the segments that deny the determination of the

13 *Ibid.*, 171.

14 *Ibid.*, 172–173.

15 Abdullah Öcalan, *Bir Halkı Savunmak* (Weşanên Serxwebûn 2004).

16 *Ibid.*, 402–403.

17 *Ibid.*, 420–421.

people's identity and destiny. It is a continuous process. Elections are only one of the vehicles used for determining people's will. The democratization of Kurdistan essentially requires the functional organization of and action by the people. It is a democratic process extending from the local village and city communes, to the city councils, to the municipalities and up to the people's congress. It expresses a dynamic political life.<sup>18</sup>

Öcalan continued to elaborate on his democratic solution during the second half of the 2000s and the early years of the 2010s. From March 2005 onwards, Öcalan began to describe the solution to the Kurdish question in terms of democratic confederalism and in subsequent years expanded on his ideas in his five-volume book titled *Demokratik Uygarlık Çözümü* (The Democratic Civilisation Solution).<sup>19</sup> In Öcalan's analysis, the nation-state is described as an institutional framework of capitalist modernity and 'democratic nation' is offered as an alternative. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community, Öcalan defined a nation as 'a community of people who share a common mindset' and the democratic nation model as 'the model of nation that curbs and excludes exploitation and oppression'.<sup>20</sup> This description is based on a pluralist understanding of national community and sees the democratic nation as being capable of representing different collective identities and groups.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Öcalan links the drive to establish a nation-state to capitalism and sees it intimately connected to the extraction of profit. He argues that for socialists the main solution for national questions must be a democratic nation, which is 'a common society created by individuals and communities with their own free will'.<sup>22</sup> Thus for Öcalan, the democratic solution to national questions essentially involve:

...being a democratic nation and the community constructing itself as a democratic national community. It is neither becoming a nation through the state nor abandoning the right to be a nation; it is the community exercising its right to build itself as a democratic nation.<sup>23</sup>

18 *Ibid.*, 403.

19 The first three volumes were first published in July 2009, the fourth volume was published in July 2010 and the final volume was published in December 2012. They were republished as a set in June 2015 (Abdullah Öcalan, *Demokratik Uygarlık Çözümü*, Amara Yayıncılık 2015).

20 Abdullah Öcalan, *Demokratik Uygarlık Çözümü (Fifth Volume)*, 52.

21 *Ibid.*, 53.

22 *Ibid.*, 427, 461, 469–470.

23 *Ibid.*, 469.

In addition, the democratic modernity project that Öcalan espouses is motivated by the realisation of a wider notion of emancipation, including eliminating economic inequality and achieving gender equality. Both democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy are seen vital parts of developing a social economy, increasing gender equality and ecological sustainability in the region. Öcalan often described his theorisation as a paradigm shift and argues his 'democratic, ecological and gender liberationist' political project will achieve the peaceful coexistence of all of the social and cultural groups in the Middle East.

### III The PKK's Ideological and Organisational Transformation

During the first half of the 2000s, Öcalan – through his lawyers – was able to send detailed instructions to the PKK and guide the process of organisational change and renewal of the movement, which he argued was necessary for the development and implementation of the democratic solution to the Kurdish question. In addition, the texts Öcalan produced throughout the 2000s have been used by the PKK and the other representative organisations it established to develop new proposals for the resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey. This began during the PKK's Seventh Congress held in January 2000, where, in tandem with Öcalan's calls for a democratic solution, the decision to transform itself into a movement that used democratic means was taken. The Central Committee report submitted to the congress stressed that in the democratic era, class struggles, national conflicts and various other societal problems, finds their solution without the need or use of violence:

...without any doubt this era is one of democracy and freedom. The stage that awaits us will be filled with struggles emerging from contradictions based on differences pertaining to class, gender, environment and development, and with the aim of furthering democracy and freedom.<sup>24</sup>

The PKK's ideological and strategic transformation involved the establishment of new representative political organisations whose objective was to develop the democratic solution to the Kurdish question. As part of its new strategy, in May 2000, the PKK reorganised its guerrilla forces into a defence force, the People's Defence Forces (HPG). While it stated that the use of violence in the

<sup>24</sup> PKK, *Dönüşüm Süreci ve Görevlerimiz* (Weşanên Serxwebûn 2000) 21–22.



past was necessary to break the hegemony of Turkish nationalism and the traditional Kurdish classes over the masses, in the current era, political means were the fundamental form of struggle. The concept of 'legitimate defence' was introduced to characterise the new military strategy, which enabled the PKK's capacity to carry out an armed campaign should the democratic political solution fail or the movement come under attack. Furthermore, keeping the military capacity was seen as necessary for self-defence and to ensure the long-term safety and existence of the movement because the region continues to remain unstable and that the possibility of attacks against the PKK were highly likely.<sup>25</sup> In April 2002, during its Eighth Congress, the PKK declared that it ceased all political activity and the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) was established as its successor.

The KADEK's programme conceptualised the solution to the Kurdish question within the development of democracy and as the equal and free development of the Kurdish people in the region: 'The solution to the Kurdish question, before anything else, involves making the Kurdish society democratic and free and progressing on such a basis to reach the era of democratic civilisation.'<sup>26</sup> The solution to the Kurdish question was envisaged through systemic change across the states in the Middle East with a Kurdish population and without the need to alter the existing state boundaries:

The KADEK's solution to the Kurdish question is based on the democratic transformation of the existing states in their present boundaries and without aiming at their overthrow. In line with this view, it calls upon, firstly the Republic of Turkey, and all the other concerned states, which have left the Kurdish question without a solution and envisage denial and destruction, to overcome such outworn policies and accept the rights of the Kurdish people that have been recognised by the international norms.<sup>27</sup>

Kurdish national unity was conceived within the Democratic Middle Eastern Union and was seen as a natural result of the democratisation process the KADEK sought to bring about. It was argued that the democratisation of the existing state system would enable the Kurds to express their identity and culture and cultivate the conditions for Kurds to realise their national unity

25 PKK, *PKK VI. Ulusal Konferansına Sunulan Politik-Örgütsel Rapor* (Weşanên Serxwebûn 2001) 33–34.

26 Mahsum Şafak, *KADEK Kuruluş Kongresi (PKK VIII Kongresi Belgeleri)* (Mem Yayınları 2002) 208.

27 *Ibid.*, 179.

through developing closer ties and relations between Kurdish communities in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria and without the need of establishing a Kurdish state. The widespread democratisation was needed in Kurdish society and seen as a precursor to solving the Kurdish question and the democratisation of the states:

Developing democracy and liberty within the internal structure of the Kurdish society will accomplish an important part of the democratic solution to the Kurdish question and create an environment and force for its full resolution. The rest will be resolved with the democratisation of the states and societies in which parts of Kurdistan are located in.<sup>28</sup>

The KADEK's existence was relatively short lived as it was abolished to make way for the Kurdistan People's Congress (Kongra-Gel) in November 2003. The establishment of Kongra-Gel was needed because the KADEK continued to be strongly associated with and was seen as an extension of the PKK, which made it difficult to fulfil its role in developing the democratic solution to the Kurdish question and extend its appeal.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the political programme, objectives and discourse, there were remarkable similarities between the KADEK and the Kongra-Gel, with the realisation of the democratic solution to the Kurdish question being the Kongra-Gel's primary objective. It perceived the democratisation of the region and the solution to the Kurdish question to be intertwined and argued that one cannot develop without the other:

The democratic restructuring of the Middle East cannot be realised without the solution of the Kurdish question on the basis of democratic unity and freedom. Also, without creating a democratic Middle East, we cannot talk about the success and assurance of a resolution.<sup>30</sup>

A notion of democracy that recognises and promotes the rights and demands of all of the groups within the society is demanded by the Kongra-Gel: 'Democracy cannot be seen as a tool to further the interest or domination of a class, nation, ethnic or religious group. It is a political regime in which every group has the right to self-expression regardless of their power'.<sup>31</sup> It argued that the

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>29</sup> Kongra Gele Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel), *Program, Tüzük ve Kararları* (Weşanên Serxwebûn 2004) 25.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

democratic solution of the Kurdish question required the recognition of Kurdish identity and all of the associated national rights at the state level:

The democratic solution will be achieved within the framework of constitutional citizenship of Turkey, by realising full democracy in the areas of governance and life, obtaining constitutional assurances to protect Kurdish identity, through the recognition of all of the rights that are accepted for Turkish identity, language and culture for Kurdish identity, language and culture, and by creating freedom in every domain.<sup>32</sup>

The Kongra-Gel also conceives of Kurdish unity within the democratic unity of the Middle East. Such a unity will allow amicable relations between Kurds and neighbouring nations to develop and strengthen the ties and solidarity between Kurdish communities from different parts of Kurdistan.<sup>33</sup> The KADEK was made up of exclusively the PKK members but the Kongra-Gel includes more Kurdish political actors. For example, the former Democracy Party (DEP) MP and the member of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), Zübeyir Aydar, was elected as Kongra-Gel's leader. This was seen as a necessary step to internalise democracy within the organisation and de-centralise the movement.

In 2005, the PKK was re-established and its new party programme described the 'democratic solution' to the Kurdish question as its main political objective, the central tenet of which was described as the 'democratic transformation' of the current state system in the Middle East into federal and confederal entities. In the PKK's programme, the Kurds are described as one of the main actors of democratisation in the region:

As Kurdish democracy develops and resolves the Kurdish question, the democratic transformation of the society in the Middle East will be ensured. The progress of Kurdistan towards a democratic confederation will lead to the democratization of the Middle East and its democratic confederal unity.<sup>34</sup>

The PKK maintained its objective of reconstituting the Kurds as a nation but emphasised that this did not involve the creation of a Kurdish nation-state.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it argued that the proposed Kurdish confederal entity would neither challenge the established and internationally recognised borders nor

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 103–104.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>34</sup> PKK, *Program ve Tüzüğü* (Weşanên Serxwebûn 2005) 68.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

resort to nationalism or establishing a nation-state. While the construction of a Kurdish nation-state is seen by the PKK as unnecessary, the central focus for its political activities has been on developing democratic confederalism as an administrative framework for Kurdish self-rule in the Middle East.

#### IV Kurdish Unity through Democratic Confederalism

The proposal for democratic confederalism was first introduced by Öcalan in March 2005 and was proposed as an alternative to a Kurdish nation-state. It seeks to organise Kurdish communities across the Middle East and to unite Kurds without creating a Kurdish nation-state. Although it has similarities to a number of existing autonomy proposals, such as cultural autonomy, it has aspects that differ significantly and as a result much effort has gone into providing clear descriptions of it in the PKK's political discourse. One of the earliest descriptions of democratic confederalism provided by the PKK conceived of it in terms of deepening democracy and described it as a system to spread democracy to the grassroots levels. It was seen as a unifying framework for the different social and political organisations that represent the different segments of Kurdish society:

The democratic confederal organization allows the Kurdish people to undertake many activities in the social, economic and cultural fields by themselves. With this structure, the potentials of the Kurdish people in these fields are uncovered and vitalized. This level of democratization of the Kurdish people and the energy it emits plays a major role in bringing about the solution of the Kurdish question.<sup>36</sup>

An article published in the PKK's monthly magazine *Serxwebûn* provided the following definition:

Democratic confederalism is a system based on democratic institutionalization starting from the grassroots. To bring democratic confederalism into existence is to organize the society from the level of the neighbourhood and village communes to neighbourhood and provincial councils and to establish a people's congress to represent their common will.<sup>37</sup>

36 PKK, 'Demokratik Konfederalizm Devletsiz Özgürlükçü ve Demokratik Yaşamdır' [2005] 280 *Serxwebûn* 20.

37 PKK, 'Demokratik Özerklik ve Özerk Demokratik Kürdistan' [2007] 312 *Serxwebûn* 26.

Hence, democratic confederalism seeks to organise the Kurds as a nation and obtain their national rights within the existing states in the Middle East within a democratic confederal structure to bring together all of the local and regional level Kurdish self-governing communities. It adopts an inclusive approach towards the ethnic and cultural groups in Kurdistan and seeks to also be their representative body: 'The Confederation is the general name of the political, social organization in Kurdistan. It is not only solely for the Kurds but includes everyone living in Kurdistan.'<sup>38</sup> Democratic confederalism is proposed as an alternative to the nationalist and statist solutions and is based on the promotion of fraternity and democratic unity of the nations and furthering democracy in society. The proposed Kurdish confederate entity is seen as necessary for organising the Kurdish communities across the Middle East within a non-state democracy and is seen as capable of providing Kurds political representation at the international level. As an entity, it will exist and operate across the states that have a Kurdish population but crucially without attempting to change the established and internationally recognised borders.

During the Kongra-Gel's third general assembly meeting in May 2005, the KCK (Koma Civakan Kurdistan – the Union of Kurdistan Communities) was established and it is designed as a pan-Kurdish entity to put into practice the democratic confederalism proposals that Öcalan formulated. Initially it was known under the name *Koma Komalan Kurdistan* (The Council of Associations of Kurdistan, KKK) but in May 2007 it took the name KCK and has been known as such since then. In the Preface to the KCK constitutive document, the KCK Contract, Öcalan described it as 'the people's non-state based democratic system':

Democratic Confederalism is based on recognition, protection and the freedom of expression of all cultural beings. It takes its basic principle to be the democratic solution of the Kurdish question, the recognition of Kurdish identity on all levels and the development of Kurdish language and culture.<sup>39</sup>

Öcalan describes this model as a framework to obtain Kurdish self-determination but interprets the principle of national self-determination to mean

38 PKK 'Demokratik Konfederalizm Bir Toplumsal Organizasyondur' [2005] 283 Serxwebûn 14.

39 KCK, *KCK Sözleşmesi*, <<https://code.google.com/p/bookstorer/downloads/detail?name=KCK%20S%C3%B6zle%C5%9Fmesi.pdf>> 2.

building national representative institutions rather than strictly establishing a nation state for the Kurds:

I understand the right to self determination of nations in the following way: it is the right to build its democracy and non-state self-government. It is the right of the non-state groups/communities to create their model to discuss and solve their own problems at the level of villages, neighbourhoods and cities...Our goal is not to establish a state but a democracy.<sup>40</sup>

The KCK Contract resembles a constitution and provides detailed description of the democratic confederal system in Kurdistan, the principles upon which it is built and the rights of its members or citizens, including the freedom of belief, speech, assembly and the right to participate in the political life of their communities. It also recognises group identities and their collective rights such as the citizens' right to receive education in their mother tongue.

Subsequently, in the fifth volume of *The Democratic Civilisation Solution*, Öcalan describes the KCK as the medium for the *democratic solution* of the Kurdish question and argues that it would overcome the pitfalls of the state-oriented approach:

The KCK is a concrete expression of democratic solution of the Kurdish Question and is different from traditional approaches. It does not see the solution from obtaining a share of the state. Even in the sense of autonomy, it is not in pursuit of a state for the Kurds. It does not aim at a federal or confederal state and does not see that as its own solution. Its basic demand from the state is to recognise that the Kurds have a right to self-government by their free will, and that they do not hinder Kurds from becoming a democratic national community.<sup>41</sup>

As an entity, it is a bottom-up structure seeking to organise Kurds in self-governing communities at the local level (neighbourhood or village) which will be connected upward to higher self-governing entities at the city, region and national levels. Öcalan perceives that the Kurdish self-governments in the existing states would come into being through a political struggle and via a constitutional framework. He believes that the KCK's existence and long-term viability requires recognition by the existing states and their consent for their Kurdish populations to organise in self-governing communities. However,

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Öcalan, *Demokratik Uygurluk Çözümü*, 469.

given the current difficulties that the Kurds face in obtaining the recognition of their identity and national rights, Öcalan argues that the Kurdish communities should have the determination to create and defend their democratic autonomous authorities.<sup>42</sup> In order to further elaborate the relations between the Kurds and the existing states, the democratic autonomy proposal is developed, which I discuss below.

## v Democratic Autonomy

In 2005, democratic autonomy also entered the lexicon of Kurdish movement and it is a part of Öcalan's overall democratic solution to the Kurdish question. When described in general terms, it refers to the autonomy of national and religious identities, their right to preserve their differences and originality and obtain their freedom.<sup>43</sup> More specifically in the Kurdish context in Turkey, it concerns the nature of the relationship between the Kurds and the Turkish state and seeks to accommodate Kurdish rights and demands within Turkey's territorial integrity: 'Democratic autonomy is about the Turkish state and the Kurds agreeing a new contract for their unity. It is the establishment of a democratic political union instead of a union based on force and assimilation'.<sup>44</sup> It is seen as a way of limiting the power and authority of the central state. An important step in this direction involves the recognition of Kurdish identity and cultural rights:

A fundamental characteristic of democratic autonomy is that the Turkish state accepts the constitutional recognition of the national identity of the Kurdish people. Together with the recognition of national identity, it is necessary to remove all obstacles in front of the Kurdish language and cultural development and to enable Kurdish to become a language of education.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, empowerment of local government is demanded as part of a general decentralisation and democratisation of state structures. As part of this decentralisation, the right of the Kurdish communities to create their self-governments and organise themselves through a network of local and regional

42 *Ibid.*, 466.

43 PKK, 'Demokratik Konfederalizm', 22.

44 PKK, 'Demokratik Özerklik', (2007) 301 *Serxwebûn* 57.

45 *Ibid.*

councils is demanded. These representative councils will have responsibility on solving societal problems in areas that does not directly concern the state.<sup>46</sup> The state's recognition of Kurdish rights should include the freedom of assembly to allow Kurds to freely express their collective identity and establish political parties. However, Kurdish democratic autonomy should not be restricted to the areas in which the Kurds constitute the majority of the population and have a historic presence but to the Turkish majority areas too in order for the Kurds who have migrated to these regions to enjoy and benefit from it.<sup>47</sup>

The Diyarbakır based Democratic Society Congress (DTK) is another Kurdish representative organisation that is associated with the development of democratic autonomy proposals and it is an important political actor in the majority Kurdish populated areas that campaigns for realising democratic autonomy. The DTK was formally established in October 2007 to politically organise Kurds and develop and implement the democratic autonomy proposals that Öcalan has been developing. The DTK is an umbrella organisation that brings together civil society groups, trade unions, political parties and many local Kurdish political actors based in the Kurdish-majority regions. During 2010 and 2011, it held many meetings where Öcalan's ideas were discussed in detail and a more detailed democratic autonomy framework was developed.<sup>48</sup> The DTK's democratic autonomy framework embodies the principle of decentralisation, grassroots democracy and people organising themselves in local councils and actively taking part in debating issues and decision-making at the local level and electing delegates to represent the local council in higher representative bodies such as the district, province and regional levels. It 'aims to organize Kurdistan society in eight dimensions: Political, Legal, Self-Defense, Social, Economic, Cultural, Ecology and Diplomacy, and to build political autonomy and to build Democratic Autonomous Kurdistan'.<sup>49</sup>

The DTK sees itself as the representative body for the Kurds in Turkey and the main vehicle for the implementation of Kurdish democratic autonomy in Turkey.<sup>50</sup> It seeks to organise Kurdish society within a democratic and autonomous administrative body. The lowest level administrative body is the

46 *Ibid.*

47 Cengiz Gunes and Çetin Güreş, 'Kurdish Movement's Democratic Autonomy Proposals in Turkey' in Ephraim Nimni and Elçin Aktoprak (eds) *Democratic Representation in Plurinational States: The Case of Kurds in Turkey* (Palgrave MacMillan 2018) 168.

48 DTK, *Kürt Sorununun Çözümü İçin Demokratik Özerklik* (Aram 2012).

49 DTK, 'Demokratik Toplum Kongresi Bileşenlerince Hazırlanmış Olan, Demokratik Özerk Kürdistan Modelinin Taslak Sunumu', <[http://bianet.org/files/doc\\_files/000/000/179/original/demokratiközerklik.htm](http://bianet.org/files/doc_files/000/000/179/original/demokratiközerklik.htm)>.

50 *Ibid.*



commune which is usually comprised of the residents of a village or a street in the urban context. The neighbourhood council is the higher level representative body that offers representation to communes as well as people representing different ethnic and political groups, followed by the district council. It is also a representative body for the local, district and provincial councils and citizens' assemblies that were established in the Kurdish-majority regions since 2005. In addition to aspiring to represent the Kurdish community, it has sought the inclusion of representatives of the different ethnic and religious groups, such as the Syriac community, that are historically based in the Kurdish-majority regions.

The DTK seeks to be a platform where the societal problems are discussed and solutions are developed. In this respect, it seeks to include the different segments of society in the solution of the problems as well as voicing their specific problems and issues that have been pushed aside and marginalised. The DTK has a number of commissions that are tasked with developing solutions in specific areas of social life, such as language and education, gender equality and legal disputes. The DTK has also incorporated a form of customary justice into its practices and seeks to solve the legal disputes and disagreements that individuals face, such as blood feuds and land disputes.<sup>51</sup> The DTK operates a co-chair system and a number of well-known Kurdish political figures, such as Ahmet Türk, Hatip Dicle, Selma Irmak and Aysel Tuğluk, who have been active in the pro-Kurdish political parties in the past three decades have acted as its co-chairs.

During the second half of the 2000s, the pro-Kurdish political parties also began to appropriate the democratic autonomy proposals into its political demands. This started with the DTP during its second party congress in 2007 when it accepted the democratic autonomy as a framework to accommodate Kurdish rights in Turkey. It argued that extensive reform of Turkey's political structure was needed, and its democratic autonomy proposals envisaged decentralisation of power and the establishment of between twenty and twenty-five self-governing regions in Turkey. These regions would bring together two or three existing provinces that have dense social, cultural and economic relations and would have a regional parliament and administration, which will make decisions relating to matters of education, culture, social services, agriculture, environment etc. The decision on matters relating to policing and legal services would be jointly decided by the central government and regional assemblies and those that pertain to foreign affairs, finance and

51 Çetin Güre, *Demokratik Özerklik: Bir Yurttaşlık Heterotopyası* (Notabene 2015) 298.

national security will be conducted by the central government.<sup>52</sup> It argued that such a decentralised framework would enable the participation and representation of citizens in the decision-making processes and greatly contribute to the advancement of democracy in Turkey. In order to enable the participation and representation of all of the ethnic and national groups in Turkey, a more inclusive definition of nationality in Turkey's constitution was needed. Such steps, it argued, would facilitate the development of the democratic solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey.<sup>53</sup>

The DTP was closed-down by Turkey's Constitutional Court in December 2009. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) became the main representative of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey. The BDP also advocated the need for a more inclusive and pluralist notion of national identity and citizenship and demanded that the collective rights of the Kurdish people, including education in the Kurdish language, needed to be recognised and protected by the constitution. Furthermore, the BDP's party programme argued that decentralisation in Turkey's political system was needed to solve the Kurdish question and listed the implementation of the recommendations of the Council of Europe's *European Charter of Local Self-Government* in Turkey among its key political objectives. It argued that such a framework will empower the local communities and administrations and thereby will be a major step towards deepening democracy in Turkey.<sup>54</sup> In September 2011, at its second party congress, the BDP began to use 'Democratic Autonomy' to describe its proposals for reform of Turkey's political system and solution of the Kurdish question. It had significant similarities with the DTP's democratic autonomy proposal and proposed the decentralisation of Turkey's centralist political and administrative structure and creation of twenty to twenty-five self-governing regions that would exercise extensive autonomy. It argued that such a framework was needed to strengthen democracy and pluralism in Turkey.<sup>55</sup>

The current representative of the pro-Kurdish movement, the HDP, also advocates the accommodation of Kurdish rights within a democratic autonomy framework. Similar to its predecessors, the HDP also proposes a decentralised

52 DTP, *Demokratik Toplum Partisi'nin Kürt Sorununa İlişkin Demokratik Çözüm Projesi* (2008) 11.

53 *Ibid.*, 12.

54 BDP, 'Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi Programı', accessed at: <<https://bdpblog.wordpress.com/parti-programimiz/>>.

55 BDP, 'Democratic Özerklik Projesi', accessed at: <<https://bdpblog.wordpress.com/2011/05/04/demokratik-ozerklik-projesi/>>.

political system for Turkey to break the domination of the centre over the regions and develop models of local self-governance to meet the needs of different minority groups to protect and develop their culture and identity. HDP's democratic autonomy proposal seeks to decentralise power to autonomous and self-governing local and regional administrations, but does not specify how many of such regions would be created in Turkey.<sup>56</sup> Such decentralisation of the state in Turkey is proposed to empower local administrations, ensure citizens' direct participation in the decision-making processes at the local, regional and national levels and to develop socio-economic policies that address the needs of the whole of society in Turkey. Additionally, it purports that such a decentralised and democratic framework can address the demands of the Kurdish minority for autonomy and will pave the way to a peaceful solution for the Kurdish conflict.

Democratic autonomy is not only a proposal that can be used for the accommodation of Kurdish rights in Turkey but an ongoing process of organising the Kurdish society politically and culturally at the grassroots level and mobilising them for political action to realise Kurdish self-rule irrespective of whether the state recognises or not. The state however, has interpreted these developments as a challenge to its authority and took measures to repress it. Starting in April 2009, thousands of Kurdish political activists of the pro-Kurdish democratic movement were arrested on charges of involvement in building Kurdish state-like institutions with the aim of destroying Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity.<sup>57</sup> In the summer 2015, declarations of democratic autonomy in various town and cities of Kurdish-majority region in Turkey were made, including Diyarbakır and Şırnak and the districts of Cizre and Nusaybin, which involved local armed youth groups affiliated with the PKK digging trenches and preventing police access. This brought about a violent reaction from the state and resulted in significant loss of life large material destruction in especially Sur district in Diyarbakır's old city and Şırnak. In addition, through the use of decrees, the government has appointed district and provincial governors as trustees to replace the democratically elected mayors. This process began on 11 September 2016 and so far 94 of the town and city councils that the pro-Kurdish party controls have been taken over by the state and the majority of the mayors have been arrested.

<sup>56</sup> HDP, *Büyük İnsanlık-Bizler Meclise* (Ankara 2015) 10.

<sup>57</sup> Derya Bayır, 'The role of the judicial system in the politicisation of the Kurdish opposition' in Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanhoğlu (eds), *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and Reconciliation* (Routledge 2014) 33.

## VI Conclusions

Democratic solution to the Kurdish question has been a project in development with gradually a more coherent programme emerging. Öcalan has been at the heart of this project and his ideas were originally expressed within the context of transforming Turkey's centralised and nationalist authoritarian political system to become a democratic republic that was more responsive to the rights and demands of all its citizens and recognised the ethno-cultural differences within it. Subsequently, Öcalan has expanded and developed his ideas and introduced the concepts of 'democratic confederalism' and 'democratic autonomy' as proposals to accommodate Kurdish rights in Turkey. He believes the solution of the Kurdish question through the construction of a Kurdish nation-state will deepen the current Kurdish conflicts rather than resolve it and proposes a solution on the basis of the democratisation of society and states. His proposals call for the existing states to recognise Kurdish identity and the rights of the Kurdish people. He proposes the Kurdish communities to establish their self-governments and organise themselves as a national community within the existing state borders.

The PKK and the pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey used Öcalan's ideas to develop their own democratic autonomy proposals. While there are similarities between the PKK's and HDP's proposals, there are also significant differences. For the PKK, the objective is to organise the Kurds as a national community in each of the states the Kurds are based and it envisions a pan-Kurdish non-state entity in the form of the KCK. It conceives of a solution to the Kurdish question in the Middle East in terms of decentralised federal entities. This is proposed as a system that is the most suitable for the overcoming the current stalemate by developing a fairer and freer society in the region in which values of gender equality and environmental sustainability can take root. Moreover, by creating a loosely united confederal entity the new proposed political structure will neither challenge the established and internationally recognised boundaries nor resort to nationalism or establishing a nation-state. For the HDP and the other pro-Kurdish parties before it, the proposals are developed as a framework to decentralise Turkey's political structure, which it sees as necessary to rebuild the existing state-society relations on the basis of democracy pluralism and recognition of group rights of different national, ethnic and religious communities in Turkey.

Overall, Öcalan's democratic solution has triggered a significant transformation in the PKK as well as Turkish politics. Throughout the past decade numerous organisations have been set-up that represent the Kurdish society and seek to institute democratic autonomy in Turkey. The past two decades

also witnessed a significant reduction in the violent incidents between the PKK and the state security forces in Turkey and although the violence returned after 2004, its intensity was far less than the violence of the 1990s. The return of the pro-Kurdish parliamentary opposition in 2007 enabled the Kurds to raise their demands and contribute to the public debate on the Kurdish question. The Kurds used the democratic space to organise and build pressure on the state to carry democratisation reforms. However, the lack of any concrete steps to meet the Kurdish demands together with the AKP's growing authoritarianism has reversed the positive developments since the summer of 2015. In this period, we have witnessed a process of re-securitisation of Turkey's Kurdish question and the government's reliance on the use of the force on a massive scale to dismantle the pro-Kurdish opposition and repress any form of Kurdish dissent.

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