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The PKK and Revolutionary Nonviolence: Transforming Struggle for Kurdish Freedom in Turkey *

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During a meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan in November 2007, U.S. President George W. Bush publicly labeled the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, a terrorist organization and branded them as an enemy of America and the free world. He then went on to essentially issue a public death warrant for the PKK by promising U.S. military assistance to help Turkey find and eradicate the Kurdish guerilla force in the mountains of Kurdistan-Iraq.

In some ways this was a blessing for Kurdish people still hoping and struggling for freedom in Iran, Syria, and especially Turkey. President Bush unwittingly reminded the global community that there is a significant and oppressed ethnic group in the Middle East known as the Kurds. His announcement and actions has also given the Kurdish problem in Turkey a global visibility that had been suppressed for years by the American government and relatively ignored by the Western media. Since President Bush branded the PKK as a terrorist organization and a “common enemy,” writers and journalists from all over the West have been scrambling to understand the organization—albeit in a mostly superficial way¹—in newspaper editorials, magazine articles, and books, and they are consequently heightening awareness in regards to the larger problems the Kurdish people have faced, historically and today.

Before this, the Kurds, particularly the Kurds in Turkey, were intentionally pushed aside in America’s strategic and obsessive alliance with Ankara, and Kurdish oppression at the hands of the Turkish military and government was for years hidden from the global community behind the veil of American-Turkish power politics. Much of the international community seemed to care little for the plight of the Kurds. But now the Kurdish struggle for independence, or aspirations for political and civil rights in Turkey, along with eighty years of Kurdish suffering and repression, is beginning to receive more recognition in the Middle East and international community. While it is yet to be seen how this will

unfold, it is unlikely that the Kurds in Turkey and elsewhere will be silenced for much longer.

In a negative sense, however, by labeling the PKK a terrorist organization, President Bush has exploited the fears of many people in the West, particularly Americans who still see terrorism as a major threat in the post 9-11 world. If a group or organization can be dehumanized as dangerous, bloodthirsty terrorists, the U.S. government is given a freehand by its populace in dealing with them. And that is what is happening as the most recent American-Turkish military alliance works to obliterate the PKK with the most sophisticated weapons technology and lethal firepower on the planet, including being so brazen as to violate the sovereignty of Kurdistan-Iraq with reckless military force to get at the PKK.

We know that children, women, and men have been killed, villages destroyed, and people displaced by Turkish invasions inside Kurdistan-Iraq since at least 1986. And of course some of the most egregious Turkish attacks occurred last December, which killed and wounded civilians and destroyed parts of several villages and life support systems. These were some of the most egregious since they were clearly done with U.S. assistance, including American-made fighter-bombers and direct U.S. intelligence, the latter helping to pinpoint PKK bases for Turkish bombing raids from a central headquarters in Ankara manned by American military personnel. In addition, the U.S. enabled these mass bombings by opening up Iraqi airspace for the Turkish military. These recent attacks with U.S. support has led the fiery journalist Gomer Chia to proclaim the bombings as the "United States' undeclared war against the Kurds."²

While this could very well backfire on the U.S. and Turkey—writer Aliza Marcus had earlier predicted that if the U.S. ever launched a military attack against the PKK, Kurds in Turkey and Iraq "will see this as an unjust war fought on behalf of a repressive regime, and they will turn against the messenger"³—it could also have terrible consequences for the PKK, as they endure systematic bombings and relentless attacks like nothing they have ever experienced. And this will most certainly spill over into more violence and repression of Kurdish people and communities living inside Turkey and continue to endanger the lives of those living in Kurdistan-Iraq who are unfortunate enough to be caught in the Turkish bombing raids. With the U.S. assisting and shielding the Turkish government—indeed, the U.S. has gone from enabling the Turkish oppression of the Kurds by providing diplomacy and military exports over the last several decades, not to mention turning a blind eye to the Turkish campaign of genocide against the Kurds, to now assisting Turkey with active U.S. military support—that the Turkish government will be able to exert even more control

over the southeast region of Turkey, denying not only Kurdish aspirations for freedom as they have done for eighty years, but also stepping up its efforts to actively repress the Kurdish people.

With that in mind, this paper is presented in hopes of inspiring the PKK to take advantage of the recent momentum and turn of events to transform their struggle into a strategic nonviolent campaign to achieve Kurdish freedom and empowerment in Turkey. Nonviolence has the potential to gain for the PKK active support among the larger Kurdish community and sympathy and help from the international community. I understand that this contradicts the PKK's longstanding commitment to armed struggle, but as this paper will hopefully demonstrate, nonviolence is not only consistent with the courage, fortitude, self-sacrifice, and honorable goals of the PKK, but also it has the potential to take the struggle to a new and more intense level like never before.

Before we continue, let me make it clear here what I mean and do not mean by nonviolence. It appears that the use of the word "nonviolence" within the historical context of Kurdish efforts for self-determination and ethnic-based rights has usually meant working within the Turkish political system to peacefully achieve Kurdish objectives through elections, laws, and so on. This is a political approach to the Kurdish problem, and it has miserably failed. The Turkish government has proven over and over that it is not willing to accommodate Kurdish aspirations or even listen to their grievances. Nonviolence, by contrast, often works outside of the political system, unhindered by rules and formalities—indeed, nonviolent soldiers redefine and create the rules of engagement, and they powerfully press in on an entrenched power structure to creatively bring about change. This approach has worked for billions of people worldwide who, after years of trying to use futile violence, amazingly achieved their objectives through nonviolence, as we will see in this paper.

Without a doubt, since its inception in the late-1970s, the PKK has achieved much success in breathing new life into the Kurdish dream for freedom, independence, and ethnic-based rights. They have courageously opposed the tyrannical government in Turkey and have brought attention to the plight of Kurds living as repressed minorities in Syria, Iran, and, until the establishment of independent Kurdistan, Iraq. Without the PKK, it is almost certain that the Kurdish problem would not be making its way in front of the world today. While the PKK has never been able to boast of a large membership, they have gained the sympathy and respect of perhaps millions of Kurdish people living under harsh political and social conditions, exhausted from years of being forced to endure dire poverty with little opportunity to create a better life. This is a tragic mockery since their Kurdish homeland, divided between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria,

includes some of the richest oil and mineral deposits in the world. The PKK has actively and relentlessly opposed this ongoing exploitation of the people and their resources, and, as one observer explains, their uncompromising campaign to take action, especially armed struggle against Turkey, has given many downtrodden Kurds “a sense of honor.”⁴

In spite of these successes, the PKK’s commitment to armed struggle over the last three decades has not obtained Kurdish self-determination in Turkey or made any significant inroads to achieving ethnic-based rights. It has given the plight of the Kurds visibility and has helped create a distinctive Kurdish identity, but it has also resulted in one failure after another as the Turkish government has worked to crush the rebellion with its military might, repressive tactics, and now direct U.S. superpower assistance. The PKK also has been hindered by the divisive on-again-off-again infighting within the ranks of the organization itself, and its lack of tolerance for other Kurdish groups working for similar objectives has prevented any serious efforts of Kurds in Turkey to unite. These actions, unfortunately, have only served to weaken Kurdish resistance while strengthening the heavy-hand of the Turkish government, which has certainly not been disappointed to see the Kurds divided and fighting each other.⁵

With all considered, I believe that the viability of armed struggle for achieving Kurdish self-determination in Turkey has reached its limits. I want to respectfully encourage the PKK to understand that they are at a crossroads and that what they do from here on can make the greatest difference in their struggle to date.

To sum up the situation, Turkey has been given an enormous material advantage in the form of direct U.S. military and technological power, including satellite intelligence, and they are utterly bent on eradicating the PKK once and for all, a goal that Washington admittedly shares. Moreover, with the American media-propaganda machine in full swing—perhaps the greatest weapon in the U.S. arsenal—the American government is making sure that the PKK is perceived as a terrorist organization and that they are to blame for the instability and violence in Turkey and now in Kurdistan-Iraq. Such fear tactics, as mentioned earlier, not only gives the U.S. a freehand in assisting Ankara in its efforts to crush the PKK, but also threatens to further suppress the much needed public debate regarding the underlying and important issue of the Kurds legitimate quest for self-determination in Turkey, and it continues to conceal Turkey’s historic and contemporary repression of the Kurds.

The crossroads that the PKK faces, then, is to continue using violence and risk being annihilated by an ever more powerful enemy and its superpower sponsor, thereby jeopardizing Kurdish dreams for freedom in Turkey, or to transform their struggle into a strategic nonviolent struggle and open up the possibility to

achieve Kurdish objectives in Turkey, including self-determination. Armed struggle by the PKK, as just mentioned, has already achieved two important goals for the Kurds: it has given the plight of the Kurds visibility and has helped create a Kurdish identity. Now, at this juncture in history, something more is needed—a far more radical approach that can take the Kurdish struggle in Turkey to the next level. As one nonviolent scholar has put it, “Violence is not radical enough, since it generally only changes the rulers but not the rules.”⁶ A massive strategic campaign of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience, which utterly changes the rules of conflict—such as bold protest marches, disruptive sit-ins, and brave unarmed mass confrontations with Turkish military forces in Ankara and other major cities—may be able to bring the PKK to that next level, enabling them to transform their world.

Nonviolence is certainly not a method of confrontation and engagement for the weak and timid. It is “the summit of bravery,” believed Mahatma Gandhi—a method of action for the most courageous in spirit who believe deeply in the righteousness of their cause, ready to redefine power on their own terms and give the oppressor no choice but to surrender to their demands. “I can no more preach Non-violence to a coward,” wrote Gandhi, “than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scenes.”⁷ Although some have portrayed nonviolence as a tool of the bourgeoisie, nothing—nothing—could be further from the truth. Of course, the bourgeoisie or any repressive regime would like nothing better than to see the oppressed and colonized pacified, but nonviolence in action does just the opposite. It has empowered the oppressed with such a forceful weapon that the greatest armies the world has ever seen have disbanded in the face of its power and despotic regimes were made utterly impotent as their lifeblood of political, economic, and social exploitation ceased to exist.

**Nonviolent Struggle in History:
“No power on earth can stand against it”**

Examples of nonviolence in action can be found almost everywhere. Mahatma Gandhi and millions of Indians used the weapon of nonviolence to overthrow an imperial British superpower, shattering conceptions of power based on physical force and weaponry. Albert Luthuli, a Zulu tribal chief, led his nonviolent army of black South Africans into battle against the extremely well-armed and oppressive white government, laying the groundwork for the end of the terribly unjust and deadly system of apartheid, including the exploitation of African land and resources by the ruling white elite. This is not unlike what many Kurds today still endure in their own land as their wealth and resources are exploited for the benefit of other countries.⁸

In the Philippines, a nonviolent revolution led by Corazon Aquino confronted the tyranny of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, even turning back the advances of tanks and fighter-bombers, until the power of the people—courageously swarming around government forces with the intense power of their hearts—finally swept Marcos from power.⁹ In the United States, Martin Luther King, Jr. and civil rights activists, irrepressibly committed to nonviolence, vigorously engaged a system of racial injustice that had been entrenched for a hundred years until it crumbled into the dust, breaking in the process the chains of black political, economic, and social enslavement. And Muslim peoples and countries have historically engaged in nonviolent struggle as well—including Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Sudan.¹⁰

Interestingly, in the early days of the first Intifada, Palestinians relied on many types of strategic nonviolent actions, including strikes, protest marches, demonstrations, boycotts, direct confrontation, and many other forms of nonviolent resistance and engagement.¹¹ Who knows what they would have achieved by now if they had continued to use nonviolence on a mass scale—particularly with the eyes of the world focused upon the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. One thing, however, is for certain: armed struggle has unquestionably failed the Palestinians up until this point.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of a people transforming their struggle from a violent guerilla-like war to a collective nonviolent crusade—a particularly powerful precedent for the PKK—can be found in the Muslim Pathans' nonviolent movement to end British repression in what was then, during the first half of the twentieth century, the North West Frontier Province of India, which today makes up Pakistan and part of Afghanistan. Notorious for being some of the most violent people in the world, the Pathans not only used guerilla tactics against their British occupiers, but they also feuded with each other over almost any perceived wrong or humiliation, a divide-and-conquer strategy encouraged by the British.¹²

But all that came to a grinding halt in the early 1930s as the Pathans were literally and by some accounts miraculously transformed into a cohesive and powerful nonviolent army. Under the charismatic hands-on leadership of Abdul Gaffar Khan, the Pathan tribes were united as one people. Their humble leader, affectionately called Badshah Khan or Emperor of Emperors by his people, convinced the Pathans to lay down their rifles, abandon their guerilla tactics and law of revenge, and confront the British through the weapon of nonviolent civil disobedience. He raised an army of over 100,000 nonviolent soldiers called the Servants of God, who received nonviolent training and discipline in military-style camps located all over the Frontier Province. Once priding themselves on their skillful ability to manipulate a dagger in combat, the courageous fighters

now faced off with the British using nothing but the weapon of nonviolence and the deep conviction of the righteousness of their struggle. After more than two centuries of military control and years of violent confrontation between the British soldiers and the Pathan tribesmen, a nonviolent revolution by the Pathans in the north and the Indians in the interior had done the unthinkable by overthrowing an imperial superpower.¹³

Prior to victory over British tyranny, Badshah Khan had told his people that “no power on earth could stand against” the power of nonviolence.¹⁴ And as the proceeding events would demonstrate, he was right. Indeed, the British military force, quickly losing its power over the heroic nonviolent Pathans, resorted to dropping 500 tons of bombs on them—one of the first overlooked mass aerial bombing campaigns in history that targeted unarmed civilians¹⁵—in hopes of breaking their resolve. They miserably failed, as the Pathans remained united and committed to their nonviolent struggle. After centuries of occupation, the defeated British left the North West Frontier Province for good.

Mirroring the Pathans of 70 years ago, the PKK is caught in a violent struggle with a force that is militarily far superior—although, it must be pointed out, Turkey’s large army has been unable to totally suppress the PKK’s guerilla war. And while they have achieved some success, they now face overwhelming military and technological force by Turkey and its U.S. sponsor, not to mention the potential cooperation, unstable as it may be at times, of other countries in the region such as Iran. It is imperative that the PKK’s strategy changes. They are in a unique position at this juncture in history to not only regain the momentum of their struggle, but to achieve empowerment in Turkey by switching from armed to nonviolent struggle. The PKK is the ablest group to actively unite and lead the Kurds in Turkey today, having demonstrated for well over three decades a remarkable ability to organize, recruit, survive, and pursue its goals amidst almost insurmountable odds.

Badshah Khan and his followers traveled to villages, often by foot, to spread the gospel of nonviolence and recruit members for the nonviolent army. This grassroots approach was crucial to uniting the divided Pathans in the occupied North West Frontier Province, creating a sense of Pathan identity, thus enabling them to build a cohesive organization capable of confronting the British.¹⁶ Similarly, since its inception, the PKK has often relied on a grassroots movement to gain support and recruit members in the southeast part of Turkey, often slipping past the watchful eyes of the Turkish military and village guards. Rather than spending time and money to set up offices or printing up newspapers and magazines in which the “poor could not afford and the illiterate could not understand”—conventional efforts of other Kurdish groups—the PKK took their cause directly to the people, traveling to villages and towns, meeting one-on-one

with Kurds.¹⁷ With such invaluable experience, the PKK is the most capable organization today to take nonviolence to the people in the same way that they have taken them armed struggle. Only this time, like Badshah Khan and the Pathans, they may be able to build a large and committed active support base that will present a formidable opposition to Turkish oppression and violence.

For many, an obvious question arises at this point: will not the unarmed nonviolent crusaders be simply crushed under the heavy weight of the well-armed, massive Turkish military forces? While on the surface it may seem that a nonviolent strategy would be fatal for the Kurds, nonviolent campaigns in real life seldom work out that way. The momentum of a struggle nearly always shifts to the group employing nonviolent tactics. This has been proven all over the world, time and time again. Indeed, nonviolent movements in the twentieth century, worldwide, involved billions of people and creatively employed almost two hundred different types of nonviolent actions, most of which succeeded in accomplishing their objectives. Unfortunately, these remarkable struggles generally do not find their way into history books, which are instead too often engrossed in war and power politics.¹⁸

The PKK and the Kurds in Turkey are also in the unique position today of having more visibility than ever before, particularly since Turkey and the U.S. has embarked on a reckless and noisy campaign to eradicate the PKK. With the world becoming ever more conscious that there is an ethnic group known as the Kurds—albeit a troublesome one as President Bush and much of the Western mass media maintains in demonizing the PKK—the Kurds in Turkey have an opportunity to shift more of the world's attention to their cause. By adopting nonviolence, not only can the PKK and the Kurds defeat the violent and dehumanized stereotype that is being promoted by Turkey and the U.S., but also they can gain more international sympathy and support to help them in their struggle for freedom. It is very unlikely that Turkey will be able to move as freely as they have in the past to violently suppress Kurdish efforts with sympathetic journalists and human rights groups, among others, broadcasting to the world the PKK led nonviolent engagements. The Turkish government will also not be able to so easily conceal or contain masses of trained Kurdish crusaders and sympathizers spilling into the streets for nonviolent change. While there will certainly be unfortunate violence against the nonviolent demonstrators, images of unarmed Kurds being attacked will only increase international sympathy for their cause. A powerful example can be found in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. Televised images of unarmed civil rights activists being beaten by police helped focus national and international attention and sympathy on their regional nonviolent struggle, creating a tidal wave of momentum that helped carry the struggle to victory.

Re-conceptualizing Violence and Love: Transforming Old Conceptions of Power

Of course, in order for the PKK to make the transition from armed to nonviolent struggle, they would have to more or less achieve an individual and collective change at a deep, inward level. But such a possibility should not be seen as utopian naïveté, even for those with a history and commitment to violent guerilla tactics. The Pathans were committed to armed struggle for two centuries, but overnight internalized the precepts of nonviolence. For oppressed peoples of the world who have participated in nonviolent struggle, this transition was accomplished by identifying with the humanity of the oppressor. They began to care about their enemy—or at least pitied them—when they realized that their enemy was caught in a system of domination and violence as well.

The Turks, both in historic and contemporary times, have experienced a distinct culture that has inculcated them with a blinding nationalism, a militaristic mindset, and extreme lack of tolerance—indeed fear—for many peoples within their reach both inside and outside of the country. Moreover, repression and violence against anything that is perceived to threaten Turkish identity is normal behavior, reinforced in Turkish culture by the government, schools, and propaganda. In Turkey, observes Halal Demir, “we can see direct physical, structural, as well as cultural violence nearly everywhere we look and nearly at any moment.”¹⁹ Had a Kurd been born a Turk, they would be caught in the same self-perpetuated system of domination and violence, and chances are that they would think and feel as a Turk does. Indeed, they may very well be shooting at the PKK and repressing other Kurds or at least wholeheartedly supporting such actions, fearful that their way of life is being challenged and their safety in jeopardy.

With this realization comes power and liberation for the disciples of nonviolence even before they obtain physical victory.²⁰ He/she understands that the oppressed and oppressor are both caught in the same vicious system, and it is that system which needs to be eradicated, not human beings who happen to be on whatever side historical circumstances may have placed them. It was with this understanding that Gandhi repeatedly reminded the world that nonviolence “seeks to eradicate antagonisms, but not the antagonists themselves.”²¹ This heightened awareness has released such a creative power in the hearts of nonviolent revolutionaries that exploitation has dissolved in the face of its unshakable resolve without so much as a hand being raised against the oppressor.

I realize that this contradicts an important key aspect of the Marxian revolutionary idea, which seeks to liquidate the bourgeoisie and its supporters,

and achieve communism or the ideal society through violence—a key aspect of the proletarian revolution more or less shared by the PKK. Let me make it clear here that this is not an attempt to discredit Karl Marx or Marxism. Marx was perhaps one of the fiercest defenders of the poor and disenfranchised the world has ever seen. He was deeply concerned, indeed depressed at times as he looked upon the suffering of humanity in the nineteenth century, the majority of whom lived in poverty and were exploited for nothing more than their labor or manipulated for their acquiescence to unjust power. It enraged him that a small minority of men had all of the wealth and power, food and luxury—far more than they would ever need—while the majority of people were miserable, hungry, and powerless. As a result, believed Marx, modern man had lost the ability—indeed his birthright—to fully participate in the human experience due to such “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” by the small ruling class, as he so vividly put it.²²

Marx correctly understood that in most cases, particularly in the most extreme situations of entrenched oppression and exploitation, it would take nothing less than a radical revolution to change things—or to empower man and restore his full humanity. However, where Marx went wrong was in making it an absolute condition of his that this radical revolution be a violent one. His weakness was in his wrath towards the oppressor as much as the vicious cycle of exploitation itself. The bourgeoisie must be wiped from the face of the earth! In believing so, Marx unwittingly adopted the tools and thereby the philosophy of the oppressor—violence. He had a burning passion for freeing man and creating utopia, but by mandating revolutionary violence to achieve his dream, he laid the groundwork for more oppression—more suffering—and more exploitation.

Why? Because violence, as just mentioned, is the tool of the oppressor or bourgeoisie. And it is much more than that. It is their philosophy—their view of how the world works—as much as any political or ideological doctrine that they claim to represent, which is really secondary. Violence enables and perpetuates injustice and the unaccountable use of power. Where organized violence and unbridled power intersect, fear, suspicion, and the crushing domination of others are its lifeblood. When the oppressed in turn decides to use violence to end this abuse of power and achieve justice—indeed, when they make it the cornerstone of their ideological platform, as does revolutionary Marxism—they adopt and internalize the worst aspects of the system of domination in which they are trying to end. The just cause they represent becomes corroded with fear, anger, and hatred. And only more injustice can ultimately be the result since the means, as Gandhi stressed, are really the ends in their earliest stages, “like seeds, of which the ends were a natural flowering”²³ as paraphrased by one Gandhi biographer.

Armed Guerilla war may be effective—it may lead to liberation—but at a tremendous cost not only in lives, but also in the transference of violence to the new order. Thus, when power is achieved and the enemies are wiped out, violence continues as more enemies are created and done away with in a repetitive, vicious cycle. The new order ends up becoming more oppressive than the one before, such as occurred in Stalinist Russia and Pol Pot's Cambodia. "If we resist violence with violence, we simply mirror its evil," explains one nonviolent scholar. "We become what we resist."²⁴ In short, the oppressed becomes the oppressor. And people have violently liberated themselves from one power only to become enslaved to another since the greatest oppressor, fearful violence, is left in tact to work its harm.

Ironically, it is not unusual for heavily armed, repressive regimes to prefer that those rebelling their power adopt violence themselves—if the choice is one between violence and nonviolence. This reveals just how important violence is for oppressive power. They are such experts at using violence, and have such conventional force at their disposal, that they can respond to rebellious violence with greater and better-organized violence, such as the intense, unrelenting Turkish bombing raids of the PKK in the mountains of Kurdistan-Iraq. Violence is their territory. However, nonviolence not only catches them by surprise, but also generally throws off their momentum. And as a nonviolent struggle presses in on them with its irresistible force, never giving up or giving in, the ruling power—with all the weapons, technology, and propaganda at its disposal—gradually wears down, until it finally crumbles under a force greater than anything in its arsenal.

It should be no surprise, then, that oppressive powers have encouraged or desired that nonviolent soldiers go back to using violence. They cannot explain the power of nonviolence. They just know that it exists and that they cannot successfully engage it with age-old conventional methods of war. But they know not what else to do, so they try to provoke nonviolent soldiers to re-establish armed struggle. " 'The British feared a nonviolent Pathan more than a violent one,' " wrote Badshah Khan. " 'All the horrors the British perpetrated on the Pathans has only one purpose: to provoke them to violence.' "²⁵ Eknath Easwaran, who had met and observed both Khan and Gandhi, explained the initial British reaction to the nonviolent Pathans in this way: "Much of the government's extreme behavior during the months that followed can be understood only as attempts to goad the Pathans into breaking their nonviolent vow. If they broke down and retaliated, the British would be back on familiar ground."²⁶ Similar regimes have expressed the same goal or desire for a return to armed conflict in the face of nonviolence, including in Israel, Ghana, Philippines,

and India. Violence is the weapon of oppression, nonviolence the weapon of freedom.

Finally, nonviolence ultimately finds its magic and power in love—a love that is best defined, as Martin Luther King said, by an “understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men.”²⁷ It’s time that we rescue the concept of love from the aggressive and violent power structures that reduce it to a useless folly within a context of narrow power politics. In such a worldview, love is seen as a flaw—particularly universal love—and for many it implies a vulnerability that threatens to leave one exposed to domination or aggression. That is the greatest lie or misunderstanding the world has even known. Submerging love under the dominance of violence, in a philosophical sense, strengthens the oppressor and weakens the oppressed. It makes violence and physical force the power and love as the weakness.

The exact opposite is true. Creative love is the greatest power, the most profound revolutionary force the world has ever known. Violent force is by far the lesser power. Its noisy destruction—its bombs and guns and whatever else it strains to muster—masks its precarious and fragile nature. It cannot permanently organize itself without eventually crashing into the dustbin of history, such as the violent end met by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis or any other regime that depended on fear and destruction to acquire and maintain power. Love is seen, nay, what is more, love has been proven as the most durable and universal force that informs our very existence—a truism not only proven time and again by the success of nonviolent movements worldwide, but also by modern science which, in its experimental research, gives scientific validity to Gandhi’s claim more than a half-century ago that “Love is the strongest force the world possesses and yet it is the humblest imaginable.”²⁸ The controversial Russian-born sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, who stirred up the Western academic world by discussing love within a context of power, wrote that, “without the operation of love energy...universal enmity and disorder would have reigned supreme.”²⁹

Indeed, King Asoka Maurya, who ruled the largest empire India has ever known in the second century BCE, understood this universal mystery when he restructured his country on “the foundations of love and morality” rather than force and coercion. Asoka, in short, re-conceptualized power based on the desire to uplift others—a riskier thing to do in his own times, particularly in an age that vividly remembered the whirlwind of destruction wrought by Alexander of Macedon, than for us to do today. “The need of the age,” says Asoka biographer, B. G. Gokhale in stressing the Indian leader’s desire to transcend power based on force, “was to transform the empire into a human institution answering human needs....”³⁰ And Asoka succeeded!

I end this paper by again encouraging the PKK to consider transforming their revolutionary struggle for freedom in Turkey to a nonviolent one. As difficult as this is to consider, the Turks and the Kurds are neighbors and both are there to stay. Perhaps the time is ripe to begin working for peace, freedom, and a future in which younger generations in Kurdistan-Turkey—your children and grandchildren—will not have to suffer from so much despair, hopelessness, and violence. A better destiny can be in your hands. I share Gandhi's hopes for the oppressed—in this case the PKK and Kurds in Turkey—when he declared, "I am convinced that, if someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead them in nonviolent action, the winter of their despair can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope."³¹

Writing almost fifty years ago, the Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevara, described the Latin American guerrilla-fighter in way that could just as easily apply to the PKK soldier today when he said, "The guerilla is a crusader for the people's freedom...a social reformer. He takes up arms in response to widespread popular protest against an oppressor, impetuously hurling himself with all his might against anything that symbolizes the established order."³² Imagine for a moment substituting "arms" with radical nonviolence, "impetuously hurling" the collective power of the Kurdish heart "against anything that symbolizes the established order." Do not allow yourselves to be destroyed by clinging to a lesser power. Consider transforming your struggle, and go from being noticed to being great.

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- * Paper presented on the author's behalf at the 2008 Conference on Kurdish Genocide, Erbil, Kurdistan-Iraq, convened by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, January 28, 2008.
- ¹ One of the exceptions to this is Aliza Marcus's original and informative, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
- ² Gomer Chia, "United States' Undeclared War Against the Kurds," *Kurdish Media*, December 25, 2007.
- ³ Marcus, 304.
- ⁴ Marcus, 305.
- ⁵ Marcus, 10–11, 41, 73, 305; David McDowell, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 421.
- ⁶ Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 72.
- ⁷ Louis Fischer, ed., *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work and Ideas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 198.
- ⁸ Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).
- ⁹ Wink, 98–100.
- ¹⁰ Ralph Crow, Phillip Grant, and Saad I. Ibrahim, *Arab Nonviolent Political Struggle in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynn Reinner Publishers, 1990).
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Nicholas Patler, "From Pathan to Palestine," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 15, 4 (December) 2004: 491. I wrote this piece to consider a nonviolent option to Palestinian empowerment and self-determination.
- ¹³ Patler, 491–92; Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition & Memory in the North West Frontier* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 51–53, 56, 67, 75–81, 85–87, 125–32.
- ¹⁴ Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam* (Tomales: Nilgiri Press, 1999), 117.
- ¹⁵ David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 167.
- ¹⁶ Patler, 492; Banerjee, 60–63.
- ¹⁷ Marcus, 29.
- ¹⁸ Wink, 2–3; Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1973), 117–434.
- ¹⁹ Halal Demir, "Nonviolence in Turkey," *War Resisters International* (http://www.wri-irg.org/wiki/index.php/Turkey:_Nonviolence_in_Turkey).
- ²⁰ This is true in a physical-institutional as well as a moral and ethical sense. Nonviolent movements, including the Pathans, established parallel governments and institutions, including courts, police, social services, and so on, while the nonviolent campaigns were being carried out, thus depriving the oppressive regime of its day-to-day power over the lives of the indigenous peoples.
- ²¹ Easwaran, 80.
- ²² Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 475, and *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970).
- ²³ Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54.
- ²⁴ Wink, 78.
- ²⁵ Cited in Easwaran, 125.
- ²⁶ Easwaran, 125.
- ²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Walker and Company, 1984), 77.
- ²⁸ Fischer, ed., 206.

²⁹ Pitirim Sorokin, *The Ways and Power of Love: Types, Factors, and Techniques on Moral Transformation* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), 6.

³⁰ B. G. Gokhale, *Asoka Maurya* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), 83–86.

³¹ Fischer, ed., 329.

³² Che Guevara, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966), 7, 30.