8 The PKK in the 2000s

Continuity through breaks?

Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya
and Joost Jongerden

Introduction

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been, and is, one of the most important secular political movement in the Middle East. The party's radical political outlook (with its view of Kurdistan as an international colony and its objective of unification, both of Kurdistan and the revolutionary forces in Turkey) and strategy (the determination that liberation can be accomplished only by a means of a people's war, and its lack of hesitation in adopting violence as a tactic, not only against the state but also against powerful Kurdish tribal leaders and those considered to be collaborators) have been at the heart of controversy (Van Bruinessen 1988; Kutschera 1994; McDowall 2007). Yet since the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, the focus of discussion has shifted towards an alleged radical break in the PKK's political outlook and its capacities to act.[1] Did the organization in the Imralı period throw off its PKK heritage, and give up the ideal of a united Kurdistan (Özcan 2006)? Or was the PKK undergoing a similar fate as Shining Path in Peru, an organization losing its way after the capture of its leader (Hoffman and Cragin 2002)?[2] In this contribution, we argue that the PKK experienced severe difficulties in the period following the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, but has managed to reinvent itself through a series of transformations. We discuss some of the changes that the PKK has experienced in the 2000s, considering its ideology, politics and organization. And we argue that the PKK has neither abandoned the idea of a united Kurdistan nor its efforts to accomplish radical political change in Turkey, but is trying to accomplish these in new ways. Furthermore, the PKK has not been pushed into marginality, but rather has remained both a strong pan-Kurdish political actor and an important actor in Turkish politics.

In this chapter we try to understand changes in the PKK from the party's own perspective. Data has been collected through the study of Abdullah Öcalan's defence texts and the 'prison notes', along with key PKK documents, such as congress reports and formal decisions. This chapter is composed of three parts. In the first, we discuss the developments between the autumn of 1998 and August 1999, during which Abdullah Öcalan was forced to leave Syria where he had lived for almost 20 years and was finally captured in Kenya and brought to Turkey. In the second part, we take a closer look at the changes the PKK underwent after the arrest of Öcalan. We consider the organizational structure of the PKK (the transformation

from a classical political party to a party complex); its ideology (the transformation of a statist approach to one centred on a democratic republic, envisioning radical change in Turkey, and democratic confederalism, through which society-building in Kurdistan is sought); and the political-military struggle (the transformation from a classical people's war aimed at a military defeat or retreat of the state army from Turkish Kurdistan, towards an approach aimed at political settlement).[3]

Shock and retreat

On 16 February 1999, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit made a statement in an extraordinary press conference that hit the headlines and shocked Kurdish communities all over the world: PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan had been captured in Kenya and brought to Turkey: 'He [Abdullah Öcalan] arrived in Turkey at 3 a.m. this morning. The operation has been accomplished due to a complete harmonious cooperation between our Intelligence Organization and General Staff of Armed Forces' (Yetkin 2004: 177, authors' translation).

The news was too good to be true for the Turkish state, which had been looking for Öcalan for 20 years, ever since he had left Turkey for Syria in July 1979. Pursuit had begun in earnest after Öcalan was forced to leave Syria on 9 October 1998, following mounting pressure on the Syrian regime from Ankara. From the summer of that year, first Turkey's army commanders and then its politicians, including the president, had openly threatened Syria with war over its support for the PKK. How real that threat was is questionable, but Syria took it seriously (Bila 2004: 76–8). The message to leave was conveyed to Öcalan by Syrian vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam (*Sabah* 2006).

Öcalan's ejection from Syria became a final countdown for the Kurdish leader, who turned into the 'Flying Dutchman' (Gunter 2008: 60),[4] seeking political asylum in different European countries. This odyssey saw Öcalan pass through Russia, Italy and Greece before landing up in Nairobi, Kenya, where he found shelter in the Greek embassy. Then, on his way from the embassy to the airport under the impression that he was being transported to a safe haven, he was captured and delivered to Turkish intelligence officers. Contrary to Ecevit's remarks quoted above, which gave all the credit to the Turkish authorities, it is widely believed that the USA played a significant role in this clandestine operation (*New York Times*, 20 February 1999).

Kurdish sympathizers and PKK militants across the world reacted furiously, with demonstrations, riots and occupations of Greek embassies.[5] Some 75 people set fire to themselves between October 1998 and February 1999 in protest at the hunting down of the PKK leader (Özcan 2006: 278–9). The Kurdish response to Öcalan's capture showed the extent to which the Kurdish national movement had become a transnational phenomenon, as well as its unity in the sense that Kurds everywhere closed ranks (Van Bruinessen 2000).[6] Uproar and violence ended with the first statements of Öcalan, who called for calm.

Regional and international politics concerning the Kurds had proved decisive in the denouement of the Öcalan saga. With the Washington Agreement between the

two, hitherto battling, Iraqi Kurdish parties (the Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP] and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [PUK]) in September 1998, the US administration had designated a new project for Kurds in which there was no place for the PKK (or its leader), which had been included in the US Department of State list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations since 1996. The fourth of the seven articles of the Agreement, had explicitly stated that 'no concessions would be granted to the PKK, and they should not be allowed to be based in Iraqi Kurdistan' (Stansfield 2003: 102). The US government was actively involved in the fight against PKK thereafter. Although Prime Minister Ecevit stated that he did not understand why the US had helped in capture of Öcalan (Yetkin 2004: 148), the Deputy Undersecretary of the Turkish National Intelligence Service (MIT), in direct communication with the CIA during the pursuit, admitted that Öcalan had represented an impediment to American policies toward northern (Kurdish) Iraq when he was handed to Turkey (*Vatan* 2008). At the level of international politics, a favourable bipolarity that created room for manoeuvre for liberation movements all over the world came to end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Syria, without the indirect protection of the Soviet Union, had become vulnerable to intervention by Turkey (backed by the United States). Developments both at the regional level and in world politics thus made the PKK vulnerable.

The PKK and Abdullah Öcalan thought they could make a virtue of necessity. Öcalan announced that with his move to Europe, the PKK were making a decisive step forwards: 'By moving out off Ankara we established a Party; by moving to the Middle East we formed an army; and now by moving to Europe we will become a state' (Öcalan 2000: 82). Yet since his departure from Syria, Öcalan had been under heavy pressure. He felt obliged to leave the Russian Federation, Italy and Greece, and was denied access to the Netherlands. It was clear, nevertheless, that the PKK and its leader were not prepared for the dramatic changes they faced. This is demonstrated in Öcalan's odyssey and the fact that his move to Europe was enforced and unsuccessful, just as was his move out again, to Africa – and, in less than six months (from October 1998 to February 1999), the PKK faced the most dramatic event of its existence: its leader landing in the hands of their number one enemy.

Under arrest and facing charges of treason, Öcalan started to study and work on his defence, which also resulted in the development of a new political project. This was centred on the concepts of the democratic republic and, later, democratic confederalism, both of which are based on a radical rethinking of the concept of democracy. During this period, through a combination of important practical steps, including the declaration of a unilateral ceasefire which anticipated the withdrawal of the majority of the guerilla forces from Turkey into the mountainous areas of northern Iraq, and political gestures such as the surrender of two small groups of militants (eight from the guerilla forces and eight from the political wing in Europe), Öcalan attempted to show his 'good will' and open up a space for dialogue. It seemed as if he were levering his demands concerning the Kurdish question to a minimum, confining them to the 'recognition of the Kurdish people's rights to [unrestricted use of their] language and free cultural expression' along with the

abandonment of the military approach by both sides, the state and the militants (Öcalan 1999: 93–5).

In spite of his arrest, conviction and incarceration on the now high security Marmara island prison of Imralı, Abdullah Öcalan was able to continue to guide the PKK. That he was able to maintain his leadership position as a prisoner is remarkable; it was facilitated by the loyalty of a significant number of party members and militants. The way he has led the organization, however, has changed over time. In the first years, until 2005, Öcalan was concerned with the nitty-gritty of daily affairs and intervened in the practical issues of the organization. Since 2005 though, he has been more concerned with general issues of strategy, mainly contemporary world and regional politics and the challenges the PKK faces. Instead of both tactical and strategically leadership, he now primarily exercises strategic leadership.

Öcalan's main channel of communication with the party and the outside world is through his regular meetings with lawyers and immediate family members. He is permitted to see his Turkish lawyers for one hour once a week (in the first years, it was twice a week), and his immediate relatives for an hour a month. In addition, he occasionally meets with his European lawyers and the delegation of European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT, of the Council of Europe). Naturally, all meetings are made under strict surveillance, and visits have also frequently been prevented.[7] Öcalan has no TV, and books and papers are supplied by the lawyers but are not always passed through. His main source of information is a radio that cannot receive anything but the state channel broadcasting.

Through these weekly meetings with his lawyers, Öcalan produced two groups of texts which served his work as the leading ideologue of the party. One is his defence texts, delivered in handwritten pages to the lawyers and which became the main ideological reference for the party. The second is the notes of the lawyers taken during the meetings. As one of Öcalan's lawyers narrated:

> At the beginning, all meetings were recorded separately by the four lawyers participating. Returning from the island, we would combine our notes and making one general record. Since 2005, all of our notes have been taken from us and not returned. After that we started to record the meetings afterwards, from memory. (Şakar 2008, authors' translation)

The notes taken down and records compiled of these meetings have been made public by Kurdish TV channels, news agencies and newspapers. They have been mainly oriented towards actual political matters. The meetings in effect served to communicate a series of weekly messages to PKK followers, in which Öcalan commented on regional and world politics and on the challenges faced by the PKK. Among other things, he explained, in the light of contemporary political developments, his political project of democratic republic and democratic confederalism.[8]

Transformation of the organizational structure of the PKK

When the PKK was established as a political party in 1978, it had the classical organizational structure of communist parties, with a General Secretary as the leading party official and an Executive Committee responsible for direct operations. The highest executive institution was the Central Committee, and the Party Congress was the highest decision-making body of the party. Over the years, however, the PKK grew more complex. In 1995, for example, Ismet Imset commented thus on the organization of the party:

> Currently, the PKK consists of a main political body which is the Party itself. In effect, this body functions as the legislative while the Kurdistan National Liberation Front (ERNK) and the Kurdistan National Liberation Army (ARGK) are executive bodies. The overall political, social and military apparatus of the organization is highly complicated. It does not function in the form of a secretive small group, as would be the case in a terrorist organization, but as a well organized, massive and complicated machine. Each function or activity is carried out by separate committees. (Imset 1995).

Today, the organization has grown even more complex, and what we refer to as the PKK is actually a party complex, a complex of parties and organizations comprising several parties (including the PKK as a party) and sister parties in Iraq, Syria and Iran,[9] the co-party which separately organizes women,[10] the armed organizations and the popular front Kongra-Gel. It is difficult to represent the organization with a traditional organizational flowchart. As the members and sympathizers of the PKK refer to Abdullah Öcalan, as a sun (*güneş*), we may develop this analogy and compare the organization of the party-complex as a planetary system: The planets (PKK, KONGRA-GEL,[11] KKK/KCK[12] KNK,[13] and guerilla forces[14]) are in orbit around a sun (Abdullah Öcalan), and various moons (institutions, committees) are in orbit around these.

In order to understand this complex system, it can be helpful to trace the history of developments in the organizational structure since the capture of Öcalan. During the period between 1999 and 2005, the PKK movement held many congresses on organizational reconstruction. When Öcalan was captured in 1999, the PKK was in fact holding its sixth congress, in northern Iraq. The congress ended abruptly, authorizing its military arm to fight against the capture as well as electing party bodies, including a Presidential Council of the PKK composed of seven members. Due to the extraordinary situation, the organizational structure of the PKK remained mostly unchanged, the aim being to protect the unity of organization and to fulfil the leadership functions in the absence of Öcalan.

In January 2000 an extraordinary congress was held. This seventh congress sought official acceptance of the new party line based on Öcalan's project for a democratic republic. In addition to the political-ideological change, the Congress decided on important organizational restructuring. The most important change was the abolition of the old army front structure, the ARGK and ERNK, and their

replacement with the new bodies, HPG and YDK. These were not merely technical adjustments, but introduced new ideological and political lines which involved a major strategic shift, from the approach based on armed struggle to one of 'democratic transformation'. On the basis of this congress, the PKK was radically reorganized and a campaign of militants' re-education was launched.

The eighth congress of the PKK was held two years later, in 2002. With this congress, the PKK ceased its activities in all areas and a new organization, Kongreya Azadiya u Demokrasiya Kurdistan (KADEK; the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress) was founded. This was enabled by the completion of the organizational restructuring based on Öcalan's proposal for the process of a 'Peace and Democratic Solution within the line of Democratic Civilization'. Outlined by Öcalan in his defence submitted to the European Court of Human Rights, this process aimed at the creation of a coordinating organization. In the final resolution of the eighth PKK congress, entitled 'PKK becomes KADEK', the change was explained thus:

> It was decided that this would accommodate the various different organizations to be created within parts of Kurdistan and related countries with due attention being given to the new line as well as the objective conditions of the area in question. [15]

Although the transition from PKK to KADEK was not a simply a change of names, the relinquishment of the historical name was obviously likely to affect PKK supporters, all the more coming so soon after the capture of their leader. In official statements, therefore, words like 'abolition' or 'closure' (of the party) were avoided:

> the PKK style struggle is now out of date and that is why all the activities under the name of PKK were ceased as of 4 April 2002. Our Congress which was attended by four living founder members of the PKK as well as many other members who participated in the founding process of the same decided that all activities under the name of PKK are now ceased in all areas and that any activities which may take place under the name of the PKK are illegitimate.[16]

The change presumed that the transformation process which the party complex had been undergoing since the seventh congress had reached a new level. A pioneer party, the PKK, which controlled all fields of activities, was replaced by a congress organization that was to coordinate, not rule, the different parties and organizations in the party complex. Within this framework, the different parties for different parts of Kurdistan were founded. KADEK itself was not able to launch the new beginning, however, since it was designated as a terrorist organization by the EU almost immediately after it was formed. This created great frustration among the supporters of the PKK, and showed the changing atmosphere post 9/11.

Also a part of this changing atmosphere, the US invasion of Iraq and fall of the Baath regime in the spring of 2003 had a deep impact for Kurdish movements,

creating a new power balance in Iraqi Kurdistan. Against the concrete gains of Iraqi Kurds, the PKK and its democratic transformation project seemed somewhat irrelevant and appeared marginalized. The US invasion and change in the status of the Iraqi Kurds also had a direct bearing on the PKK structure and its supporters.

In the midst of all this, Öcalan proposed a new organizational structure on the basis of his new defence, submitted for his case in Greece and concerning his capture. The discussion over the organizational restructuring ended in a new congress in November 2003, where it was declared that Öcalan's proposal for a people's congress would include all parts of Kurdistan but would not involve a state-building project. Öcalan said:

> The People's Congress of Kurdistan can envisage a peaceful solution for the Kurdish question on the basis of a democratic politics within the existing nation-states. If Kurdistan was one part, such an organization [a people's congress] would not be required. The different parts and nation-states are influencing each other strongly, however, so such an organizational structure and politics are needed. (Öcalan 2003: 100–2, authors' translation)

Öcalan tried to assure the existing nation-states that the Kurdish question could be solved without partition – contrary to what seemed to be emerging in the Iraqi case at the time. The invasion and toppling of the regime in Baghdad seemed to allow the Kurdish north even greater independence, guaranteeing it a high level of autonomy and raising existential questions about the long-term integrity of the Iraqi state.[17] Against this, 'Instead of a nationalist and statist Kurdistan project which has been perceived as a second Israel in the region by Turks, Arabs and Persians' (Öcalan 2003: 97), Öcalan believed that his project of a democratic Kurdistan could be positively received. With the Congress of November 2003, Kongra-Gel, the People's Congress of Kurdistan, was formed. However, this step did not prove strong enough to hold back the winds blowing from Iraqi Kurdistan, which continued to present itself as a model for other parts of Kurdistan, and the PKK ranks during and after the foundation congress of Kongra-Gel were seriously affected. The Kurdish movement thus faced one of the most serious splits in its history. A group of PKK cadres under the leadership of two members of the Presidential Council and a number of long-time militants (among them the former representative for Europe) established a new political party, which they named Partiya Welatparez Demokratik (PWD; the Patriotic Democratic Party). However, while size, group composition and the political atmosphere were advantageous for this initiative of creating a new party, the PWD turned out to be not much more than a website (Özcan 2007).

Notwithstanding the failure of the PWD, the turmoil that was created within the PKK and amongst its supporters continued to influence the movement. During the period from November 2003 to 2005, an estimated total of almost 1500 militants left the organization, to settle in northern Iraq and Europe and discontinue political activities. In this period, Öcalan and the PKK mainly dealt with getting the

movement in order. For that purpose, congresses were held in quick succession. Only four months after the founding congress, Kongra-Gel held an extraordinary congress in order to solve the problem of the split. Öcalan tried to deepen his project of democratic Kurdistan(s) by proposing the concept of democratic confederalism.

At the same time, during the upheavals of 2004, Öcalan called for the formation of a 'Preparatory Rebuilding Committee', concerned with the re-founding of the PKK as a distinct party (PKK 2005). This 'new' PKK was not designated as a pioneer party in the old mold of classical Leninist terminology, but as an ideological and philosophical power grouping, mainly concerned with membership. Or rather, Öcalan wanted to re-establish the PKK as a force of assurance because of the turmoil that had shaken the members and movement. Political and military activities were left to the control of the KKK/KCK, in coordination with other military and political organizations such as the HPG, HRK and political parties in each part of Kurdistan.

The reconstruction congress was held from 28 March to 4 April 2005, as the ninth PKK congress.[18] The re-founded PKK party structure now consists of a Party Leadership[19] (*Parti Önderliği*), a Congress (*Kongre*), two Co-Presidents (*Eş Bakanlar*), a Party Council (*Parti Meclisi*), an Executive Committee (*Yurutme Kurulu*), a Disciplinary Board (*Disiplin Kurulu*), and Committees (*Kurullar*). The Congress is the party's main decision-making institution. It has the right to determine and change the party programme and the party statute. It chooses the Co-Presidents, the Party Council and the Disciplinary Board. The Congress also has the authority to evaluate the practices and activities of the Co-Presidents and Party Council, but no reference is made to the authority of the Congress to evaluate the practices and activities of the Party Leadership, which is therefore beyond control of the party institutions. The Congress assembles at least once every two years, with a minimum participation of two-thirds of the delegates. Between two congresses, the highest authority of the party is the Leadership together with the two Co-Presidents and the Party Council. Of the two Co-Presidents, one is male and the other female. They are chosen by the congress with a two-thirds majority. Should two rounds of voting fail to yield a two-thirds majority, a third round follows in which a simple majority is enough. The Executive Committee and the Party Council are chaired by Co-Presidents, who are also responsible for the functioning of these institutions.

In the past, Arteşe Rizgarîya Gelê Kürdistan (ARGK; the Peoples' Liberation Army of Kurdistan) and popular front organization Eniya Rizgariya Netewa Kurdistan (ERNK; the National Liberation Front of Kurdistan), functioned as the executive bodies of the PKK. As mentioned above, the successors to the ARGK and ERNK, were, respectively, Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG (the People's Defence Forces) – with HRK in Iranian Kurdistan and YJA-STAR the main female guerilla force – and Yekîtiya Demokratîk a Gelê Kurdistan (YDK; the People's Democratic Union in Kurdistan). Mainly active among the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, the YDK was disbanded and replaced by the Koordinasyona Civata Demokratik a Kurdistan (the Coordination of Democratic Communities in Kurdistan).[20] In Turkey, and in the different parts of Kurdistan political activities are currently run by various organizations, all oriented towards the realization of the PKKs political project.

Ideological transformation

Initially, in its 1978 manifesto, the PKK had called for a destruction of all forms of colonialism and the construction of a united Kurdistan. At the same time, revolutionary forces in Turkey were to be united, since the two peoples were considered to be united in their struggle for liberation.[21] In this, the PKK's ideological formation of that time was not much different from other national liberation movements of the period. During the course of the party's existence, however, Abdullah Öcalan tried to develop an original understanding of socialism. Since his capture especially, he has elaborated further a distinctive understanding of socialism and revolution, breaking away from conventional communist doctrine imported from Russia and China. This has gone hand in hand with the organizational transition of the PKK, from a classical national liberation movement based on Marxist-Leninist principles to a *sui generis* organization, embodied in the figure of a 'Divine King' (the supreme leader), Abdullah Öcalan.

After 2000, the PKK's ideological framework was established through the defence texts, written by Öcalan and submitted to the different courts in which he had his cases. The defences can be grouped into two: those submitted to the Turkish courts, and those submitted to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg, France, and to a court in Athens (in a case concerning his expulsion from Greece). The defences have been published in Kurdish and Turkish as well as other languages. The first group consists mainly of two defence texts, the main text, submitted to the court in Imrali and an annex, submitted to the Court of Appeals in Ankara in 1999 and to a local court in Urfa in 2001. These first texts were published under the names of 'Declaration on the Solution of the Kurdish Question', and 'Urfa: The Symbol of history, divinity and wretched[ness] in the basin of the Tigris-Euphrates'. The second group of defence texts, submitted to the ECHR in 2001, to an Athenian court in 2003 and to the Grand Chamber of the ECHR in 2004, consisted of two books which together comprised three volumes. The first book (of two volumes) was published as *From Sumerian Clerical State towards People's Republic I-II* (2001), while the second book (and third volume) was published as *The Defence of Free Man* (2003) – known in PKK circles as the Athens Defence – and *Defending a People* (2004).[22]

As we have seen, these defence texts were published and accepted in the PKK congresses as the official party line. The first texts, submitted for the case in Imralı and then the Court of Appeal, were the most shocking, since Öcalan did not take the assumed defence position expected by the party militants and the Kurdish population. On the contrary, he rejected claims for an independent state, proposing instead a new, 'truly' democratic Turkish republic, and a project of democratic confederalism, approaches confirmed later: 'In my defence, I did not revert to either a classical Kurdish nationalist line or a leftist interpretation of a similar tendency. Developments went beyond both tendencies' (Öcalan 1999: 10).[23]

The first texts did not engage with theoretical or ideological considerations; they were mainly based on the historical background of Turkish-Kurdish conflict in the twentieth century, in which Öcalan stated that he had struggled in favour of a democratic republic, and thus not against the Republic. Öcalan argued that Mustafa Kemal had also intended to establish a democratic republic, but was confined by external forces. As a matter of fact, among Öcalan's defences, this first one can in the main be considered as a genuine defence in the usual sense of the term, although he stated that he is not concerned with a legalistic defence (ibid.).

In his second group of defence texts, submitted to the ECHR, Öcalan deepened his theoretical considerations. The first of the three volumes dealt mainly with a historical analysis of civilization, starting in the Middle East, and focusing upon the Sumerians as 'the earliest state-based' society. Although Öcalan elaborated in later parts of the book on other societies and periods, his main concern was to present the state as the 'Original Sin' of humanity. This was surprising as he was and remains one of the foremost political leaders of a society which has been widely depicted as 'the largest people in the world not to have their own state'. Initially it created a kind of alienation among Kurdish circles (a *Verfremdungseffekt*, in the Brechtian sense). However, Öcalan continued to elaborate on his critique of the state, including the socialist experiments, arguing that liberation cannot be achieved by means of state-building, but rather by the deepening of democracy. Like the first defence text, this one also was accepted as the new manifesto for the movement, named the Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization during the eighth congress of PKK in 2002 (Serxwebun 2002).

In the second volume of his ECHR defence texts, Öcalan dealt intensively with Kurdish society, history and specifically the role of the PKK. He places Kurdish society into the history of civilization, as representing of a kind of natural society or community versus state-societies, which he attributes to a long standing and a deep Neolithic culture among the Kurdish tribes. For him, class (state) societies and modernization have, therefore, caused destruction for the Kurds, and the PKK is considered the locus of the last resistance to this pernicious process. Within this framework, Öcalan tried to show the limits of the PKK and its deadlock, trapped in the ideological-political constraints of the Cold War, which was continuing to condition the PKK, even a decade after its conclusion. Through this work, he aimed to evaluate the history of the PKK, addressing past mistakes.

In his later defence texts, submitted to an Athens court and the ECHR Grand Chamber, Öcalan transformed his theoretical considerations into a conception of radical democracy. This idea of radical democracy – radical in the sense that it tries to develop the concept of democracy beyond nation and state – is developed in two projects: one for the democratic republic and one for democratic confederalism. The concept of the democratic republic comprehends a reform of the Republic of Turkey. It aims at the disassociation of democracy from nationalism. Originally, in the eighteenth century, democracy was formulated in terms of citizen's rights and a rule of everyone by everyone. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, modernity lost its content of radical democracy and acquired a cultural meaning, referring to a unique people (Jongerden 2007: 7–8). A vein in

modern thought emerged, holding that cultural homogeneity is a requirement of the modern state, an inescapable imperative that manifests and erupts in the form of nationalism (Gellner 1983: 39). This 'national' condition of modernity is exclusive and intolerant, dictating that people who do not have the 'right' cultural characteristics choose between assimilation (genuine or superficial) and migration, while the options of the state range from assimilation to eviction and ethnic cleansing, or genocide (Gellner 1997: 240).[24] In Turkey, Kemalism became formulated as a project of modernization in cultural terms, resulting in harsh assimilation politics towards the Kurds. With his proposal for a democratic republic, Öcalan tries to return to an understanding of democracy in terms of citizens' rights.

Öcalan's radical democracy of the later defence texts is further developed in the concept of democratic confederalism. The idea of democratic confederalism is defined as a model for 'democratic self-government' (Öcalan 2008: 32). 'This project', Öcalan argues, 'builds on the self-government of local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. The citizens themselves are agents of this kind of self-government, not state-based authorities.' Since he proposes to build these self-governing bodies throughout Kurdistan (and wherever there are Kurds living), democratic confederalism is to be considered the main mechanism for the unification of Kurdistan and Kurds. The Kurdish liberation movement, Öcalan argues, should work for the establishment of such a system for self-organization. Thus was the KCK established, as just such an organizational system. In the end the project of democratic confederalism is interlinked with the project for a democratic republic – and ultimately, moreover, Öcalan argues that a free Kurdistan is only conceivable in a democratic Middle East (ibid.: 34–5; see also note 15).

Transformation of the political-military struggle

After Öcalan's capture, the main concern was the future of the PKK: would the party survive? Accordingly, the PKK took a defensive position. For the movement, the period between Öcalan's trial in 1999 and the reorganization of the party in 2003, was a period of retreat and consolidation. The PKK levelled down its demands, ceased military activities, withdrew the majority of its guerilla forces from Turkey into Northern Iraq and consequently gave an impression of introversion. The political activities of the PKK were confined to Öcalan's case, the sentencing in particular.

Öcalan was convicted at a State Security Court in Ankara for the crimes of treason and separatism and condemned to death in June 1999. Shortly afterwards, in July, the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning the sentence and calling into question the validity of the judicial process (e.g. there was a military judge presiding).[25] Meanwhile, Turkey's application for candidate membership of the EU was in its latter stages of completion. Clearly, the Öcalan case was a delicate issue. Finally, with the legal process completed after the Supreme Court of the Appeal Chamber had upheld the lower court rulings (in November), the government acceded, to an ECHR request for a stay of execution until it had ruled on the case (in January 2000) (Gunter 2008: 85).[26]

In August, 2002 the death penalty was abolished in Turkey. During the same period, Turkey gained acceptance as a candidate member to the EU, and made further reforms within the framework of EU accession process, including limited permission for Kurdish-language broadcasting. The PKK tried to claim credit for these developments. Turkish officials, on the other hand, considered the PKK defeated and dissolving. Not unpredictably, the partial success of the Demokratik Halk Partisi (DEHAP; the Democratic People's Party,) in the November 2002 election – when it won 6.2 per cent of the popular vote, thereby failing to reach the 10 per cent threshold but managing to become the leading party in the Kurdish region – did not change the attitude of the Turkish officials to Öcalan's case, the PKK or the Kurdish problem in general. The PKK leader was in jail for life and the movement he had led essentially broken. The overall approach of the Turkish state to the threat posed by the revolutionary party was vindicated in the prospect of victory – implied if not proclaimed – and a slight relaxing of control from Ankara was possible.

This 'All Quiet on the Kurdish Front' atmosphere changed with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iraqi Kurdistan gained an unprecedented opportunity for recognition as an autonomous self-ruling territory, and turned out to be a new centre of attraction for many Kurds. The PKK found itself caught in the crossfire: at the same time as dealing with the major effects of the extensive restructuring process, it faced a transformed and mostly disadvantageous regional and international environment. Öcalan understood that the transformation of the PKK into KADEK in 2002 fell short of what was required to properly confront this new reality, and tried to develop a new project in his defence in Athens. The People's Congress of Kurdistan was the outcome of this attempt. It aimed to present a pan-Kurdish alternative, realized from below, contrary to the US-led state-building from above that was taking place in Iraqi Kurdistan. Öcalan also proposed a more active political struggle in this defence text, including campaigns for education in the mother tongue (i.e. Kurdish).

However, this new attempt underestimated the influence on the PKK ranks of the changes in the region, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan, for the party was confronted with one of the most serious organizational crisis in its history. In this sense, the movement suffered a kind of limbo between 2004 and 2005, struggling to come to terms with the internal and external developments. There was deadlock, an impasse created by the difficulties in forward movement in a period of uncertainty. At the same time, in the local elections of 2004, the pro-Kurdish party DEHAP lost votes in comparison to 1999. Some of the Kurdish cities were taken by the Islamic ruling party, the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP; the Justice and Development Party), which swept to power in a wave of national populism. Organizational steps were taken in order to overcome the crisis, including the re-foundation of the PKK as the main mechanism to hold the militants together and the establishment of a new pro-Kurdish party, the Demokratik Toplum Partisi (DTP; the Democratic Society Party). Meanwhile, the unilateral ceasefire which had been in force since 1999 August came to an end, in June, 2004. The military wing, the HPG, announced its decision to apply a more active military line. Although the PKK emphasized that this was not a declaration of war but a matter of self-defence, since 2004 the clashes between Kurdish guerillas and Turkish armed forces continued to increasing, reaching a peak in 2007 and 2008.[27]

During this period, in political terms the PKK concentrated on civil campaigns, such as the right of Kurdish language education and a campaign for Öcalan in which more than three million Kurds in Turkey signed up to a petition stating that they 'recognize Öcalan as their political representative'. The civil activities, openly demonstrating a Kurdish identity claim and mostly in accordance with the politics of the PKK at the time, predominated the political agenda of PKK followers in Turkey. With the election of a group of 21 DTP deputies in the national election of July 2007, Kurdish politics became included as more integral to Turkey's political agenda. The DTP started to voice more openly its political project, the 'Project for Democratic Autonomy', very much in accordance with Öcalan's concept of democratic confederalism.

Turkey, on the other hand, the government, its diplomats and the army, focused on improving the relationship with the US. The relationship between Ankara and Washington had been damaged by the invasion of Iraq, and Turkey hoped to find more support in its fight against the PKK.[28] After a meeting between the Turkish prime minister and the US president in November 2007, the US opened Northern Iraqi air space to Turkish military aircraft and started to share intelligence. This resulted in increasing air raids on the guerilla bases in northern Iraq. In February 2008 Turkey made a cross-border incursion into northern Iraq. Contrary to Turkish expectations, however, this did not yield successful results and the armed forces were withdrawn within a week. The PKK and its supporters considered this a victory of the resistance of its guerilla forces. Equally, further (currently ongoing) air raids have not thus far managed to eradicate the PKK armed forces.

Meanwhile, the AKP focused its attention on the Kurdish areas in which the DTP had control of many municipalities. AKP policies consisted of economic development initiatives as well as some cultural reform, such as the launch of a new 24-hour Kurdish language television station under the state-run broadcasting agency (TRT), in January 2009. In south-eastern Turkey, the next election campaign (conducted nationwide for the municipalities) turned into a political contest between the AKP and DTP, which in the end gained the upper hand. The DTP won the local elections of March 2009 and nearly doubling the number of municipalities under its control – to almost 100 Kurdish cities and towns, including Diyarbakır and seven other important cities. It has been argued that, the DTP should be taken as interlocutor, and 'with its incontestable success in the southeast at least should be accepted as the main player in the region' (Birand 2009; Ergin 2009). Some newspaper columnists even considered the PKK and Öcalan as among the actors in a possible dialogue, suggestions rarely read in mainstream Turkish press (Ozkök 2009; Akinan 2009). Thus, it would appear that the PKK not only reinvented itself, but also returned to the forefront of politics in Turkey.

Conclusion: continuity through breaks?

The PKK has shown a strong ability to transform and return after its virtual defeat. Here, we have discussed organizational, ideological and political-military features

of this remarkable return. Rephrasing Öcalan, we may say that by moving out off Ankara, a party was created, by moving to the Middle East, an army was created, and with Öcalan's 'return' to Turkey, a strong civil society movement was created. The implications of this return are important. In asymmetrical warfare – between a guerilla and a regular army – state forces have to defeat the enemy in order be politically successful, but for a guerilla it is sufficient not to be defeated. 'The guerilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win' (Henry Kissinger, cited in Mack 1975: 184).

It is clear that the 2000s have been the most critical period yet for the PKK. It has experienced this critical experience in different phases, which can roughly be divided into three stages: a) shock and retreat (1999), b) impasse and reconstruction (2000–2004) and c) return to the stage (2005–today). Kurdish and leftist criticisms of Öcalan's new policies and the PKK during this period have ranged from accusations of surrender to the Turkish state, even with allegations of being in the service of the Turkish General Staff, to charges of a complete break with the movement's past and its aims, with the conclusion that they are saying farewell to the dream of an independent united state.

What we have attempted to do here has been to trace the changes concerning the lines of organizational, ideological and political-military struggle. Organizationally the PKK has grown into a complex system of parties and institutions, as opposed to the Leninist style of pioneering party directly over ruling all activities that it had been previously. Although there have been considerable changes in the organizational structure, the devoted militant body as a group of 'professional full-time revolutionaries' continues to occupy the central role. The change in the organizational level towards a more complex organizational structure – or, towards a multiplicity of interacting institutions – is a reflection of evolving praxis.

A primary objective of the PKK has been the realization of an independent Kurdistan, but the road to realizing independence has been transformed from one of state-building to one of society-building. At the time of its establishment, the PKK aimed at the establishment of a united socialist state of Kurdistan, a so-called 'People's Republic'. Today it aims at the construction of a Kurdistan Democratic Society, the project of democratic confederalism. This does not mean the abandonment of the ideal for a united Kurdistan, but rather that this ideal is aimed at in a different way. The ultimate aim of independence is no longer embodied in the realization of a classical state, but in the establishment and development of self-government (calling into mind the current council-communism). Instead of a classical state-building process, that is, from above, establishing the overarching structures of governance, a process of constructing Kurdistan from below is being attempted,that is, a genuinely democratic confederalism.

Critics have argued that Öcalan renounced the establishment of an independent state after his capture. This argument is incorrect in two respects. First, the PKK had already hinted of a compromise with Turkey as far back as 1993, *de facto* dropping its demand for the establishment of a separate state. At the time, Öcalan let it be known that his understanding of independence was different from

mainstream thought, although, however, without specifying his understanding at the time (see Jongerden and Akkaya). Secondly, with his new specification of independence, Öcalan does not now simply reconsider the idea of an independent state of Kurdistan (as something to be maintained or forgone), but re-envisions it. Öcalan's critique of the (classical) concept of the nation-state brings him to a fresh conceptualization of politics. He considers the nation-state as outdated, and instead pleas for a system named democratic confederalism as an alternative to the state.

The political-military struggle, meanwhile, shifted more and more in the direction of a political struggle in which the DTP, with its grassroots organization and elected representatives (nationally and locally), has started to take the lead. Especially after the elections of 2007 and 2009, a more powerful Kurdish public sphere emerged. A prominent Turkish columnist wrote: 'After the painful period which Turkey experienced in the last quarter of the twentieth century, a separate state could not be established on its soil, but a separate political geography has been formed in its Southeast.' (Bila 2004: 10, authors' translation).

The preservation of Öcalan's leadership position and the relatively unity of the organization contributed to the return of the PKK to the political stage after a virtual defeat. More importantly, however, the PKK has managed to keep Kurdish identity demands in Turkey politically alive. This has been made possible mainly through the elaboration of new ideological and political approaches, which created opportunities for the PKK to enlarge its scope of interest and activities, thereby creating more space for a Kurdish public sphere. In aiming at the transformation of society in all aspects rather than the capture of state power through armed struggle, PKK efforts now allow for a broader field of operation. The capacity to struggle and the nigh miraculous return of the PKK is suggested in its motto, '*Berxwedane Jiyane*' ('Resistance is Living').

Appendix

PKK guerilla forces losses 2004–2008

Table 1: Country of origin versus year of decease

	Country of origin				
Year	*Turkey*	*Syria*	*Iran*	*Iraq*	*Total*
2004	79	16	11	4	110
2005	102	32	11	1	148
2006	104	27	5	3	139
2007	156	22	21	2	201
2008	114	18	19	5	156
Total	555	115	67	15	**754**

Table 2: Country of origin versus year of recruitment into the guerilla

	Country of origin				
Year of participation	*Turkey*	*Syria*	*Iran*	*Iraq*	*Total*
Before 1999	176	30	7	11	224
1999–2003	310	83	45	2	440
After 2004	59	1	15	2	77
Total	545	114	67	15	**741**

Table 3: Year of decease versus gender

	Gender	
Year	*Male*	*Female*
2004	103	7
2005	124	24
2006	128	11
2007	179	22
2008	132	24
Total	666	**88**

All tables based on information compiled from <http://www.hpg-online.com/ sehit/sehit_kunyeleri/index.html>, which also contains personal data about the guerillas who lost their lives.

Notes

1 Özcan for example concludes that the PKK gave up the struggle for an independent Kurdistan. Yet this critique is not new. PKK dissidents have argued the same long before Öcalan's capture in 1999 (Beşikçi 1992). Our argument is different. In this contribution, we will argue that one has to distinguish between the establishment of a state and independence.

2 The leader of the Shining Path, Abimael Guzmán, was arrested in 1992 by Peruvian state forces, after which the organization lost all forward momentum. It was thought that Turkey had achieved a similar success after capturing Abdullah Öcalan (Hoffman and Cragin 2002).

3 From which perspective, the analogy is less with the Shining Path than the IRA.

4 The Flying Dutchman, according to folklore, is a ghost ship that can never go home, doomed to sail the oceans forever.

5 The government in Greece was held responsible for the Öcalan's capture and abduction. The fact that Öcalan had resided in both Greece and the Greek Embassy in Kenya was seen as the apparent involvement of Greece in Öcalan's extradition to Turkey, causing considerable embarrassment for the Greek government and resulting in the immediate resignation of three senior cabinet ministers.

6 Nationalist fervour among Turks also hit a peak after Öcalan left Syria. For an analysis of nationalist campaigns on Turkish TV during the time of the capture, see Bilgiç (2008); for an account of the success of the main nationalist party in the period following, see Yavuz (2002).

7 In the nine years from 1999 to 2007, Öcalan met with his lawyers a total of 283 times (1999: 60; 2000: 37; 2001: 40; 2002: 35; 2003: 21; 2004: 25; 2005: 14; 2006: 22; 2007: 29): <http://www.firatnews.com/index.php?rupel=arsiv&anf=nuce&nuceID=38551>.

8 For a conceptual exposition of this initiative, see the prison notes. Available online at <http://www.gundem-online.com/haber.asp?id=35>.

9 Iraq: Partiya Çareseriya Demokratik a Kurdistan (PÇDK; the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party), formed in 2002; Syria: Partiya Yekitiya Demokratik (PYD; the Democratic Union Party) formed in 2004; Iran: Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan (PJAK; the Free Life Party of Kurdistan), established in April 2004.

10 Women's organizations in the PKK have a long history. The first Union of Women guerillas was formed in 1995, followed by the first women's party in 1999. The name of the women's party has changed several times – it currently operates under the name of Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistan (PAJK; the Party of Free Women in Kurdistan). The PAJK functions as the ideological centre for women's groups organized autonomously, with Koma Jinen Bilind (KJB; the Community of Assertive Women) as front organization and YJA-STAR (the Free Women Units) as the organization of women guerillas.

11 Kongra-Gel is the people's front within the PKK complex (PKK 2005: 97), to some extent taking over the functions of the ERNK, which was abolished in 2000. It can be considered the legislative body, as can be understood from its name, which means People's Congress.

12 Koma Komalan Kurdistan (KKK; the Association of Associations in Kurdistan), later renamed Koma Civakên Kurdistan (KCK; the Association of Communities in Kurdistan), is both a concept embodying the idea of democratic Confederalism, as developed by Öcalan, and a societal organization presented as an alternative to the nation-state and which, Öcalan sees as a model for the resolution of the problems of the Middle East (for an extensive discussion, see PKK 2005: 175–243). In the PKK party complex, the KCK can be considered the executive body, with all parties and organizations coordinated through it.

13 Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan (KNK; the National Congress of Kurdistan) is a pan-Kurdistan umbrella organization comprising representatives from the Kurdish diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, North America, Australia and Asia as well as representatives of political parties from all parts of Kurdistan, religious and cultural institutions, independent political entities and intellectuals and non-Kurdish ethnic groups.

14 The guerilla forces are organized mainly into three bodies: the Hêzên Parastina Gel (HPG; the People's Defence Forces), which constitutes the military organization of the party-movement; the Hezi Rojhelati Kurdistan (HRK; the military force of Eastern Kurdistan), which is working parallel to the political goals of PJAK; and YJA-Star (the Free Women's Units), the organization of women guerillas.

15 See < http://www.kurdistan.org/Current-Updates/kadek.html>.

16 Ibid.

17 These eventually led to the idea – voiced by Peter Galbraith (2006) in the US especially and contrary to US (Bush) administration policy – that Iraq, never a 'natural' country, would inevitably and should, as a mattter of practical politics, be split into three self-determining regions (Kurdish, Suni and Shi'ite), i.e. that the Iraqi state of Iraq be effectively dismantled.

18 A tenth congress was held in August 2008, the last to date.

19 The Party Leadership (Parti Önderliği) is the party's main theoretical-ideological institution. It determines party philosophy, ethics, politics and strategy. The function is fulfilled by Abdullah Öcalan.

20 The KCDK allegedly falls under Kongra-Gel and coordinates, among others, the associations (Fed-Kom, Yek-Kom) and the various mass-organizations and branch

organizations in the party-complex, such as the youth organization Komelen Ciwan, the student organization YXK, the organization of lawyers and jurists YHK, the union of writers YNK, the organizations of religious groups (such as Yezidi, Alevi and Muslim), and the organization of employers Karsaz.

21 See also Chapter 10, this volume.

22 The first volume was also published in Turkish and in English by the Pluto Press as Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization (2007). For reviews of this book, see Michael Gunter, Middle East Policy 14/3 (200) and Stan Newens in The Spokesman Journal, 95 (2007).

23 The anti-Öcalan campaign among the various Kurdish circles starting from his first declarations about the Turkish state and call to his supporters for a refrain from violence peaked with his Imralı Defence. Accusations of 'selling out' and 'saving his own neck' among political circles were expressed in academic writings by such phrases as 'In his trial, the PKK leader Öcalan defended himself – if that is what he did – in Turkish, not Kurdish' (O'Leary, McGarry and Salih 2006: 12).

24 What has become known since the Bosnia conflict as 'ethnic cleansing' – including, but not limited to, 'mass expulsions of defenceless civilians from their homes' – is regarded by the UN as 'a form of genocide' (UN General Assembly RES/47/121, 1992, Preamble). Available online at <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/47/a47r121.htm>.

25 The EU resolution also noted, in its preamble, that Turkey had observed a *de facto* moratorium on capital punishment since 1984, and that a draft law abolishing capital punishment was currently in committee at the parliament in Ankara. See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>.

26 The legal process at the ECHR had been ongoing throughout 1999, with applications lodged immediately following Öcalan's capture and again after the initial sentencing. See <http://www.khrp.org/content/view/178/2/> and Trilsch and Rüth, 2006. For solitary confinement conditions of Öcalan, see <http://www.freedom-for-Öcalan.com/english/download/the-Öcalan-case.pdf>.

27 See the appendix to this chapter.

28 A ruling party rebellion of over 100 MPs had joined the opposition to prevent the government from allowing the US to use Turkey as a base for a northern offensive on Iraq.

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Part IV

Calling up

Agents of long