

“Turkey, Europe and the Kurds after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan”, in: Martin van Bruinessen, *Kurdish ethnonationalism versus nation-building states* (Istanbul: The ISIS Press, 2000).

Turkey, Europe and the Kurds after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan¹

The capture of a 'baby-killer'

Handcuffed and blindfolded, waking up from what looked like a drug-induced sleep, Abdullah Öcalan told the masked Turkish security men in the little plane that was taking him from Kenya to Turkey that he really loved the Turkish people, that he was willing to co-operate and that he could be very useful to them. The video images of this humiliating scene, hurriedly and very visibly edited so that doubts remained about the context of Öcalan's words, were shown again and again in news programs of the major television stations all over the world. The images created an upsurge of nationalistic fervour in Turkey and caused outrage among Kurds of all political affiliations, including Öcalan's fiercest opponents. These images — of which more were to follow — had the obvious intention of destroying Öcalan's charisma by showing him as a broken and weak man, ready to betray his cause. In an obvious effort to counteract any pity or sympathy that Öcalan's plight might provoke, the Turkish media invariably referred to him as 'baby-killer' and 'terrorist chief' in each news item that mentioned him.

One of the effects of this propaganda offensive was that the Kurds closed ranks; almost every Kurd felt personally humiliated and to some extent identified with the plight of Öcalan. Even supporters of Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which was at war with Öcalan's PKK, spoke of a black day for all Kurds. They might have applauded if Öcalan had been put on trial somewhere in Europe or had been forced into retirement in some far-away country. When he was captured and surrendered to Turkey, however, they perceived that this was the result of an anti-Kurdish conspiracy involving the USA, Israel and, at least indirectly, western Europe.

The Kurdish response to Öcalan's capture showed clearly to what extent the Kurdish national movement has become a transnational phenomenon. Within hours after the news of Öcalan's arrest had broken, groups of radical PKK activists occupied Greek diplomatic missions all over Europe. The occupiers soon received moral support from hundreds, then thousands of other Kurds gathering in front of the embassies and consulates. In some cities, apparently unorganized Kurdish demonstrators went on rampage, throwing stones at Turkish clubs and shops and generally causing considerable damage to property. Publicly announced demonstrations later the same week were more tightly controlled by the organizers and passed without serious incidents, although the demonstrators' rage and their anger with Europe were palpable. Large demonstrations not only took place in western Europe and Russia, but also in the large Kurdish cities of Iraq and Iran. The

¹ This is a revised and updated version of an article that was first published in German as "Die Türkei, Europa und die Kurden nach der Festnahme von Abdullah Öcalan", in the Summer 1999 issue of *INAMO, Informationsprojekt Naher und Mittlerer Osten*, Nummer 18, pp. 9-15.

Turkish consulate in Urmia (Iran) was under siege for days, and so many people turned out in the streets of Sulaymaniya and Arbil that Kurdish observers wryly commented that by being captured by Turkey Öcalan had become more of a national symbol to the Iraqi Kurds than their own leaders. In Turkey itself, there were protest actions in the Kurdish provinces as well as in the districts of Istanbul with a dense Kurdish population.

Öcalan's detention in the heavily guarded prison island of Imrali in the Sea of Marmara, in mid-February 1999 ended an Odyssey that had begun five months earlier when he was forced to leave Syria, the country that had long been the PKK's major foreign sponsor. After a brief covert stay in Russia — allegedly as the guest of nationalist and communist politicians and to the great dismay of the government when his presence was discovered — he turned up in Italy. His two-month stay there had a high profile, caused a serious diplomatic row between Turkey and Italy, and resulted in unprecedented press coverage of Turkey's Kurdish question, much of it sympathetic to the Kurds. Öcalan himself was too hot a potato for Europe to handle, however; none of the relevant European countries was willing to either offer him asylum or put him on trial.

The PKK, and the Kurds in general, held Europe responsible for Öcalan's ultimate capture in Kenya and surrender to Turkey. Their anger with Europe was a reflection of the high expectations that had been raised by Öcalan's arrival in Europe only a few months earlier. Öcalan had lived in Syria for almost two decades, and his movement had become very dependent on the Asad regime. Whatever the reasons for his departure from Syria, it appeared to strengthen the hand of those Kurds who believed that the Kurdish question in Turkey could only be solved if Europe became more actively involved.

Syria and the PKK

Many Kurds thought that Öcalan's departure from Syria, even though it was not entirely voluntary, was a good thing. Few had any illusions as to the reasons why Syria supported the PKK. Besides being a trump card in Syria's ongoing conflicts with Turkey over the province of Hatay (formerly known to Europe as Alexandrette) and over control of Euphrates water, the PKK helped Hafiz Asad's regime to keep Syria's own Kurds quiet and to project its influence into northern Iraq. Kurds constitute between 8 and 10 percent of Syria's population, and by successfully mobilising many of them in support of its own struggle, the PKK kept them from expressing their (very justified) grudges against the regime.² Significant numbers of Syrian Kurds allegedly became PKK guerrilla fighters, taking part in action inside Turkish Kurdistan. The PKK has been accused of acting inside Syria as an extension of the Syrian intelligence services, cracking down on Kurdish political dissidents. In Iraqi Kurdistan too, some of the PKK's actions — e.g. its attack on the KDP in 1995 — appeared to reflect Syrian interests as much as its own.³

² On Syria's treatment of its Kurds (many of whom are not even recognised as citizens), see: David McDowall, *The Kurds of Syria* (London: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 1998).

³ See: Michiel Leezenberg, "Irakish-Kurdistan seit dem zweiten Golfkrieg", in: Carsten Borck et al. (ed.), *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1997), 45-78, at 72-4.

Syria had an interest in supporting the PKK to the extent that the latter was actually fighting the Turkish state; it had little reason to persuade the PKK to reach a peaceful settlement with Turkey. If the PKK wished, as it had been saying since 1993, to make a transition from armed resistance to political negotiations, its dependence on Syria probably represented a serious hindrance. Some Kurds perceived yet another danger. In the 1970s, the Iraqi Kurdish movement of Mulla Mustafa Barzani had become so dependent on Iran (and, indirectly, on the USA) that the entire movement collapsed within weeks after the shah had reached a favourable agreement with Saddam Hussein and cut off his support.

The military weakening of the PKK may have been one reason why Syria lost its enthusiasm for the party, increasing international (especially American) pressure and the Turkish threat of armed intervention was another. Syria wished to be removed from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism, which the US made great efforts to isolate politically and economically. It had always denied harbouring Öcalan and the PKK, but when a high-powered Turkish delegation visited Damascus in 1992 it went further and signed a protocol naming the PKK an 'outlawed organization' and pledging co-operation against terrorism.⁴ The major PKK training camp in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa valley in eastern Lebanon was dismantled (but smaller camps remained in operation). Syria appears to have ordered Öcalan to keep a low profile and decrease the visibility of his organisation, and it is probably from that time on that it has regularly pressured him to find a permanent residence in another country. According to sources close to the PKK, American pressure on Syria to give up its support for the PKK kept increasing over the past years, and the PKK was told it had long overstayed its welcome. Weapon rattling by Turkey and the threat of a military invasion into Syria, in October 1998, provided the final push.

Turkey's other neighbours and the PKK

The PKK was not exclusively dependent on Syria but had successfully diversified its foreign sponsors. It has had camps in northern Iraq as well as in northwestern Iran since the early 1980s. In the 1990s it significantly stepped up its presence there, moving more people from Syria and Lebanon to guerrilla camps in the zones controlled by Mas'ud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as well as across the Iranian border. Turkey has carried out numerous raids and a number of major invasions (with tens of thousands of troops and heavy material) into northern Iraq but never succeeded in destroying the PKK's presence there.⁵

⁴ The delegation was led by Interior Minister Ismet Sezgin, accompanied by General Esref Bitlis, who as the head of the gendarmerie co-ordinated the military operations against the PKK. The visit was backed up with the threat of Turkish air operations against the Bekaa valley. See: Ismet G. Imset, *The PKK, a report on separatist violence in Turkey* (Ankara: Turkish Daily News publications, 1992), pp. 175-9.

⁵ The first raid was carried out as early as 1983, in the framework of an agreement with Iraq allowing the armed forces of both countries to cross up to 30 kilometres into the other in hot pursuit of guerrilla fighters. Iraq later abrogated this agreement. Since the creation of a safe haven under international protection in northern Iraq, Turkey has established a military intelligence network there and carried out a number of major military operations, most recently in October 1998 (as a part of the threat against Syria), in February 1999 (immediately after Öcalan's arrest), and again in September 1999.

The PKK had gained a measure of popularity among Iraqi Kurds as well, and this kept growing because the Iraqi Kurdish parties gradually alienated much of the civilian population by their bickering, which developed into an open war in 1994.

Turkey's support for American efforts to make peace between the feuding Iraqi Kurdish parties has been conditional upon the latter's preventing PKK activities in the region. In 1995 the PKK declared war on Barzani's KDP, and it has since then intermittently been fighting them, thereby losing much of the goodwill it had gained earlier among the Iraqi Kurds. Presently the largest PKK camps are allegedly in the district of Makhmur, a part of Iraqi Kurdistan south of the 36th parallel that is not controlled by KDP or PUK but by the central government. In spite of combined efforts of the KDP and the Turkish army, a number of smaller camps in very mountainous terrain close to the Turkish and Iranian borders are still operational, however.

In other neighbour countries — Iran, Armenia, Russia, Greece and (southern) Cyprus — the PKK is supported by powerful interest groups though not at the government level. Iran is perhaps the most complicated case, because of the existence of rival authority structures within the state itself. On the one hand, the Iranian government has repeatedly exchanged captured PKK activists for members of Iranian opposition groups arrested in Turkey; on the other it is hardly a secret that the PKK organisation has contacts at high levels (allegedly with the Revolutionary Guards) and has in the past received significant military assistance. In Armenia, there is a natural sympathy with the Kurdish struggle against the Turkish state. The government has an interest in accommodation with Turkey, but important opposition groups appear to lend the PKK concrete support. In Russia as well as Greece, it is powerful nationalist groups with army and intelligence links that supported the PKK in various ways and that have in the past months seriously embarrassed their governments by enabling Öcalan to enter these countries clandestinely.

Between guerrilla war and diplomacy

Öcalan's arrival in Italy was welcomed by many Kurds, both within and outside the PKK. The general perception was that, in spite of Turkey's furious reaction, Öcalan's residing in western Europe would in the long run bring a negotiated settlement nearer. (For those in favour of a peaceful settlement, Italy was certainly a more promising residence for Öcalan than any of Turkey's hostile neighbours.) The balance of forces between the 'military' and the 'political' tendencies in the PKK leadership was likely to be swung in favour of the latter. Being in Europe, the PKK leadership would have to give up the claim of being the sole representative of the Kurdish people, accept other spokespersons for the Kurds and perhaps even become more pluralistic itself. Leaders of rival Kurdish movements, such as Kemal Burkay of the Socialist Party of Kurdistan, publicly welcomed Öcalan and urged the Italian government to grant him asylum.⁶ Kurdish personalities of a wide range of

⁶ Burkay's PSK is, after the PKK, the best organised Kurdish party in Europe. It organised the first Kurdish workers' association, KOMKAR, which still has a very large and loyal membership. The PSK rejects armed struggle and was long the severest Kurdish critic of the PKK. Burkay wrote in the early eighties a lengthy critique of the PKK's ideology of violence, which he denounced as terrorism (Kemal Burkay, *Devrimcilik mi terörizm mi? PKK üzerine* (Özgürlük Yayinlari, 1983). In 1993 he reconciled himself with Öcalan when the latter announced the PKK's first unilateral cease-fire and even joined Öcalan's

political persuasions — including opponents of the PKK — accepted Öcalan's invitation to come and see him in Rome for discussions on possible future strategies. Öcalan and his collaborators announced plans for convening a Kurdish national congress at which all parties and organisations were to be represented. Apart from the Iraqi KDP, almost all Kurdish parties signalled their interest in such a conference.

It was not exactly as a successful guerrilla leader seeking to shed his terrorist image that Öcalan came to Europe, however, although this was what a significant number of his followers wanted him to do. Turkey's changed counter-insurgency techniques — which under prime minister Çiller and chief of staff Dogan Güres included the evacuation and destruction of thousands of villages and the use of death squads targeting Kurdish community leaders, lawyers and politicians⁷ — had deprived the PKK guerrilla fighters of most of their civilian support. Whereas in the early 1990s the PKK was, through local committees, virtually in control of such towns as Nusaybin, Cizre and Şırnak, entire wards of Diyarbakir and other large cities, as well as large rural districts, it had by 1995 lost much of its civilian infrastructure and was reduced to a purely military organisation. The physical removal of the village population on which the guerrilla had depended enabled the army to deliver the PKK serious blows. Since 1995 its military presence inside Turkey has been significantly weakened (although there are still armed PKK units permanently present deep inside the country, and the PKK even extended the range of its operations to the Black Sea provinces).

Öcalan's calls for a peaceful settlement were not simply a consequence of the PKK's military defeat, as the Turkish authorities claimed. He had from the early 1990s on, when his movement was at its strongest, made efforts to transform the guerrilla struggle into a primarily political one. He renounced the PKK's earlier pan-Kurdish ambitions and showed himself very eager for negotiations with the Turkish authorities. (He had in fact made the first step in that direction with a charm offensive towards the Turkish public in 1988, in an interview with the large daily *Milliyet*.⁸) In March 1993 Öcalan announced a unilateral cease-fire (a gesture he was to repeat in 1995 and 1998), inviting the government to respond with some form of concession to Kurdish cultural demands and indicating his willingness to let others represent the Kurds in possible talks. Through journalists close to President Özal and Prime Minister Demirel, the first indirect contacts

press conference, but the relations never became cordial.

⁷ *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and western Bingöl, September-November 1994* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederland-Koerdistan, 1995); Martin van Bruinessen, "Turkey's death squads", *Middle East Report* #199 (Spring 1996), 20-23. Many aspects of the 'dirty war' against the Kurds are documented in an official report presented in early 1998 to then Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz, which is also available in German translation: *Bandenrepublik Türkei? Der Susurlukbericht des Ministerialinspektors Kutlu Savas* (Bonn: Internationaler Verein für Menschenrechte der Kurden, 1999).

⁸ The interview, by leading journalist Mehmet Ali Birand, produced a shock in Turkey by showing Öcalan as a man who had in fact much in common with the average Turkish citizens, who had nothing against the Turkish people and who thought of himself as a sort of Atatürk for the Kurds. Birand later published an extended version of this and a later interview together as a book, *Apo ve PKK* (Istanbul: Milliyet, 1992).

had already taken place the previous year. Öcalan knew that Özal was determined to solve the Kurdish question, though on his own terms, and expected him to take significant initiatives. When Özal died of a heart attack in April 1993, the PKK cried foul, convinced that the 'war party' (presumably the same people who in the following years carried through the 'dirty war') had murdered the president.⁹

The PKK also threw its full weight behind the HEP, Turkey's first legal pro-Kurdish party, when this was established in 1990, although it represented a much broader political spectrum than the PKK alone. It is true that the PKK made great efforts to bring the HEP, and later its successors DEP and HADEP, under its control, but these legal parties have always been more than just fronts for the PKK.¹⁰ When in 1994 the government made moves to have the immunity of the parliamentary delegates of this party lifted, those delegates who had drawn closest to the PKK sought asylum in Europe; their colleagues were taken from parliament to prison. The former group, together with other party officers, spearheaded the establishment in 1995 of the Kurdish Parliament in Exile, a formation that was to function both as a would-be government in exile and as a diplomatic representation that established and maintained contact with numerous parliamentarians in Europe.

The PKK's most significant diplomatic contacts so far have been with the German Federal Republic, ironically one of the states that have banned the PKK following a series of violent actions against (mostly Turkish) targets in Germany. It had soon become clear that the ban did affect the legal activities of pro-PKK groups but had no effect on the PKK's clandestine activities, and that support for the PKK among the Kurds living in Germany kept growing. From 1996 on, a series of highly placed Germans — the head of the internal security service, politicians close to Chancellor Kohl, various government advisors — visited Öcalan in Lebanon or Damascus. They apparently received pledges that the PKK would henceforth refrain from violence on German soil. Germany never lifted the ban in exchange, but it silently allowed PKK activities and the authorities adopted a less hostile attitude towards the PKK. Germany won altogether more in these diplomatic exchanges (and clearly had no desire to jeopardise these gains by requesting Öcalan's extradition when Italy arrested him on the grounds of an old German warrant), but for the PKK they represented its first successes in this field. The PKK may have seen them as a model for future contacts with Turkey.¹¹

⁹ Two months earlier, the gendarmerie commander Esref Bitlis, who was known to be opposed to the use of right-wing paramilitary groups in the fight against the PKK, had died in a suspect aeroplane accident widely believed to have been due to sabotage by the same faction in the armed forces. For a review of the evidence in this case, see: Adnan Akfirat, *Esref Bitlis suikasti - belgelerle* (Istanbul: Kaynak, 1997). Doubts about the circumstances surrounding Özal's death have also repeatedly been voiced in Turkey's mainstream press, and Özal's closest relatives have responded evasively to questions on the subject (one of them answering "You'd better investigate the death of General Bitlis first").

¹⁰ The best, non-partisan, history of these legal pro-Kurdish parties is A. Osman Ölmez, *Türkiye siyasetinde DEP depremi* ('The DEP earthquake in Turkey's politics', Ankara: Doruk, 1995). One of the best accounts in English is: Henri J. Barkey, "The People's Democracy Party (HADEP): the travails of a legal Kurdish party in Turkey", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18 no 1 (1998), 129-138.

¹¹ Some form of diplomatic contact has in fact been established between the PKK and at least a liberal

'Military' and 'civilian' in the PKK

The group that was to become the PKK first emerged among university students in Ankara in the mid-1970s but then recruited new members with preference among the rural lower classes of Kurdistan. It adopted an anti-intellectual attitude and discouraged formal education, considering schools to be part of the Turkish colonial system. Once the PKK had begun its guerrilla war against the Turkish state, it recruited many young village boys, for whom life with guerrilla units in the mountains was the only form of education they ever received and who grew into a hard core of tough mountain fighters.¹² The PKK's fighters have different social backgrounds, but most of them are of unsophisticated village origins and have low formal education. Guerrilla war is the only work they know well.

An entirely different group of PKK supporters, whom I shall call the 'civilian PKK', consists of those with secondary or higher education, who joined the PKK after it had booked its first military successes. Many of them were previously active in other Kurdish or Turkish left political movements. The PKK came to depend very much on such people for its cultural and diplomatic activities: publishing newspapers and journals in many languages, in Turkey as well as abroad; running the information and solidarity committees in Europe; organising legal associations and parties, the Kurdish Parliament in Exile, satellite television and websites on the Internet.

Behind both groups, and less visible to the outside observer, is the party organisation proper (with parallel structures for the guerrilla army, ARGK, and the political organisation, ERNK).¹³ This organisation, most members of which have been in the PKK since the 1970s, is highly centralised and only answerable to the central committee — meaning in practice Öcalan, the one person who directly controlled all command structures (and who could maintain his position by balancing the various parallel structures against each other). For most purposes, both the guerrilla units and the 'political'

faction of the Turkish military. A small group of respected Kurdish personalities has been meeting with Öcalan and other PKK leaders on the one hand and some of the more liberal generals on the other. Since the replacement of the relatively liberal Karadayi as chief of the general staff by the more severe Kivrikoglu, the impact of these talks on the military's policies is not likely to be great.

¹² Interesting observations on the 'boy guerrillas', and on the attitude of the guerrilla fighters in general, are to be found in the notes of a journalist who was kidnapped by a guerrilla unit and lived with them for a month: Kadri Gürsel, *Dagdakiler* ('Those in the mountains', Istanbul: Metis, 1996), and in the notes of an Italian woman who herself joined a guerrilla unit: Carla Solina, *Der Weg in die Berge, eine Frau bei der kurdischen Befreiungsbewegung* (Hamburg: Nautilus, 1996).

¹³ The division of tasks between the party itself, the ERNK ('Front for the National Liberation of Kurdistan') and the ARGK ('Liberation Army of the People of Kurdistan') is not entirely clear. ERNK has in the past also carried out or supervised armed activities. It appears that ERNK is the only party structure active in Europe. There is an official PKK spokesman in Europe, and one or two members of the central committee have lived in Europe in recent years, but the degree of their authority over the European ERNK remains unclear.

or 'civilian' organisations and support groups had a large measure of autonomy, working only under very general instructions. But any decisions taken there could always be cancelled by a specific order from 'the leadership' (*önderlik*, the abstract appellation for Öcalan that had come to replace the more familiar 'Apo' in party parlance).

The 'military' and 'civilian' wings of the PKK obviously had different views of the benefits of negotiations and concessions. Öcalan's attempts of the past years to transform the nature of the PKK's struggle necessitated a balancing act in which he had to keep both sides satisfied. The frequent inconsistencies in his public statements, threats with violence and promises to give up the guerrilla struggle altogether, are at least in part a reflection of the need to keep these wings of the organisation in balance. Progress towards a political solution necessitated the active involvement of the 'civilians' but carried the risk of making the 'military' feel marginalised. It was the latter who presented the only serious potential threat to Öcalan's position and whom he had to find ways to keep in check. Not surprisingly, the 1990s saw a whole series of purges of the military organisation, and Öcalan made efforts to keep it divided by exploiting rivalries between his commanders.

It was significant that Öcalan, when he had to leave Syria, did not join his guerrilla army in Iraq but opted for western Europe, where the strongest 'civilian' structures of his party existed. Never having lived in other political environments than Turkey and Syria, he probably had serious misconceptions of what to expect in Europe, and he did not hide his disappointment with his European organisation for having insufficiently prepared his future position and role there. He did indicate his willingness to stand trial before an international court, which — seeing himself in the role of a Dimitrov accusing his Nazi prosecutors — he planned to use as a platform for his own indictments of Turkey's policies. His presence in Europe galvanised the Kurdish political community, which saw unprecedented opportunities for a new common strategy based on a European mediating role, as well as for more internal democracy in the Kurdish movement.

Öcalan's capture turned the tables within the PKK also. During the first months, the leading role appeared to have reverted to the military wing. The break-up of the PKK into a number of feuding military factions, which was predicted by Turkish counter-insurgency experts, did not occur. An extraordinary party congress held in Kurdistan did not name any successor but confirmed Öcalan as the immortal party leader. The party's European representatives were severely censured (and apparently punished) for not having prevented the chairman's capture. Publications directed at the rank and file of PKK supporters and sympathisers, attempting to capitalise on the charisma associated with the name of Öcalan, gave much coverage to Abdullah's brother Osman Öcalan, who had since 1990 been the leading party man in Iran. It was initially, however, Cemil Bayık, who had long been the chief military commander, who appeared to hold real authority. Bayık ordered a resumption of the guerrilla struggle almost directly after Öcalan's arrest. In spite of Öcalan's call upon his followers, made through his lawyers, to refrain from violence, Bayık ordered an intensification of the guerrilla struggle.

Under interrogation and in court, Öcalan behaved as the first video images after his capture had given reason to expect he would. He pleaded guilty to most of the charges, admitted that the movement he had led had committed numerous terrorist acts (for which

he held others responsible), and praised the Turkish state. Shrewdly he attempted to turn his trial into the beginning of a dialogue between the state and the Kurdish movement and told the court that no one but he himself could bring the guerrillas down from the mountains — in exchange for concessions. Though it must have been hard for PKK sympathisers, as it was for other Kurds, to see their leader acting so submissively and repudiating much of the movement for which thousands had given their lives, there were few open signs of disaffection. Once or twice, PKK spokesmen remarked that the words of a “prisoner of war” under duress cannot be taken at face value. Surprisingly, however, the PKK leadership not only attempted to give its own “spin” to Öcalan’s statements, interpreting them in the PKK media as the expression of a policy change that had been decided upon well before his arrest, but they actually kept obeying him. Whatever rivalries and disaffection there were among the party’s political and military leaders were kept in check within the “presidential council”, the collective decision-making body that carefully maintained a facade of unanimity. When Öcalan declared that he was ready to order the dissolution of the guerrilla forces (on condition that the government made some serious concession to the Kurds), the “presidential council” declared its agreement, without any dissenting voice from Bayık or other commanders. When Öcalan ordered the guerrilla units that were still inside Turkey to withdraw to northern Iraq they did so. In support of Öcalan’s offer to disband the guerrilla forces, a small group of high-ranking PKK personnel in fact crossed back into Turkey and in the presence of witnesses surrendered themselves to the authorities, challenging the government to end the armed Kurdish rebellion by proclaiming a wide-ranging amnesty.

The Kurds, Turkey and Europe

The 1999 elections brought Turkey's most nationalist parties to power. The participation of the fascist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in the government coalition makes serious concessions to Kurdish demands extremely unlikely in the near future. HADEP won the local elections in a number of cities in south-eastern Turkey but is not represented in parliament because it stayed far below the 10% threshold nationally. For this reason the Kurds in Europe are perhaps best placed to have a long-term impact on developments in Turkey, as they had during the 1990s.¹⁴

The recent events have, however, deeply shaken the Kurds' trust in Europe. NATO's war on Kosovo not only conveniently blotted out all news on developments in Turkey and Kurdistan but also drove home the message that the West applies double standards. Western Europe and the US acted as a virtual ally of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) but drove Öcalan into the hands of his Turkish captors. Turkey followed up the capture of Öcalan with a successful campaign to ban the Kurdish television station MED-TV from the satellite. Although Britain's Independent Television Commission, which controls access to the satellite, had serious formal grounds for its decision to deny MED-TV further access (in at least one program, a call for violent action was made), its decision

¹⁴ See Martin van Bruinessen, "Shifting national and ethnic identities: the Kurds in Turkey and the European diaspora", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18, no 1 (1998), 39-52.

was widely perceived to be due to heavy Turkish pressure.

The PKK organisation in Europe no doubt suffered a serious shock with Öcalan's arrest and found it difficult not to lose morale when Öcalan appeared so submissive. It recuperated rather quickly, however. A Kurdish National Congress, preparations for which had been going on for a long time, was convened briefly before Öcalan's trial was to begin, as if to show that the political struggle continued smoothly. The delegates to the Congress, whose name deliberately echoed those of the African National Congress and the Palestinian National Congress, represented a much broader regional and political spectrum than any previous Kurdish body. The election of Öcalan as the Congress' honorary president showed that the PKK was its strongest component, but many of its members were prominent Kurdish personalities who had no previous connections with the PKK. Morale was further boosted by the appearance of a new satellite television station to replace defunct MED-TV. Other Kurdish organisations in Europe also heightened their profile. Kurdish lobbying at European (and American) institutions is becoming increasingly professional and increasingly effective.

In Turkey itself and in neighbouring northern Iraq, the PKK has consistently stated its wish to lay down arms and negotiate a settlement. (By analogy with the Oslo process, this is now called the "Imrali process" in PKK circles, after the prison island of Imrali where Öcalan is being held.) It is hard to imagine, however, that the PKK guerrilla forces, which still number several thousand, seriously consider dissolving themselves without tangible gestures from the side of the Turkish government. Similarly, it is hard to see what the Turkish armed forces have to gain with a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict, that has provided them, after all, with the legitimisation of their high-handed intervention in politics and with a high budget for arms spending. It will be surprising indeed if low intensity conflict were not to continue, perhaps with a brief interruption for as long as Öcalan's fate remains undecided.