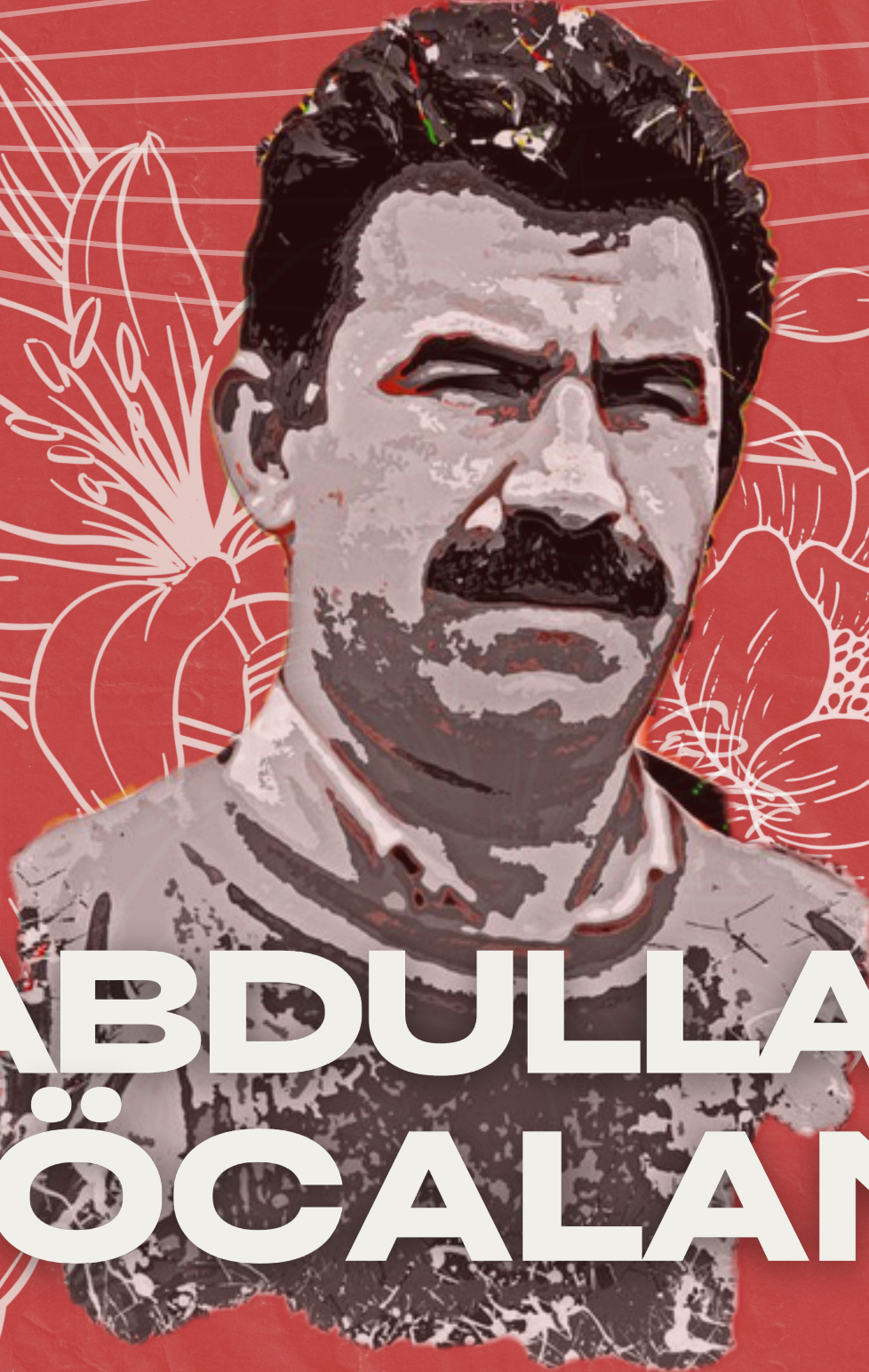


# ON MY PRISON LIFE ON İMRALI ISLAND



# ABDULLAH ÖCALAN



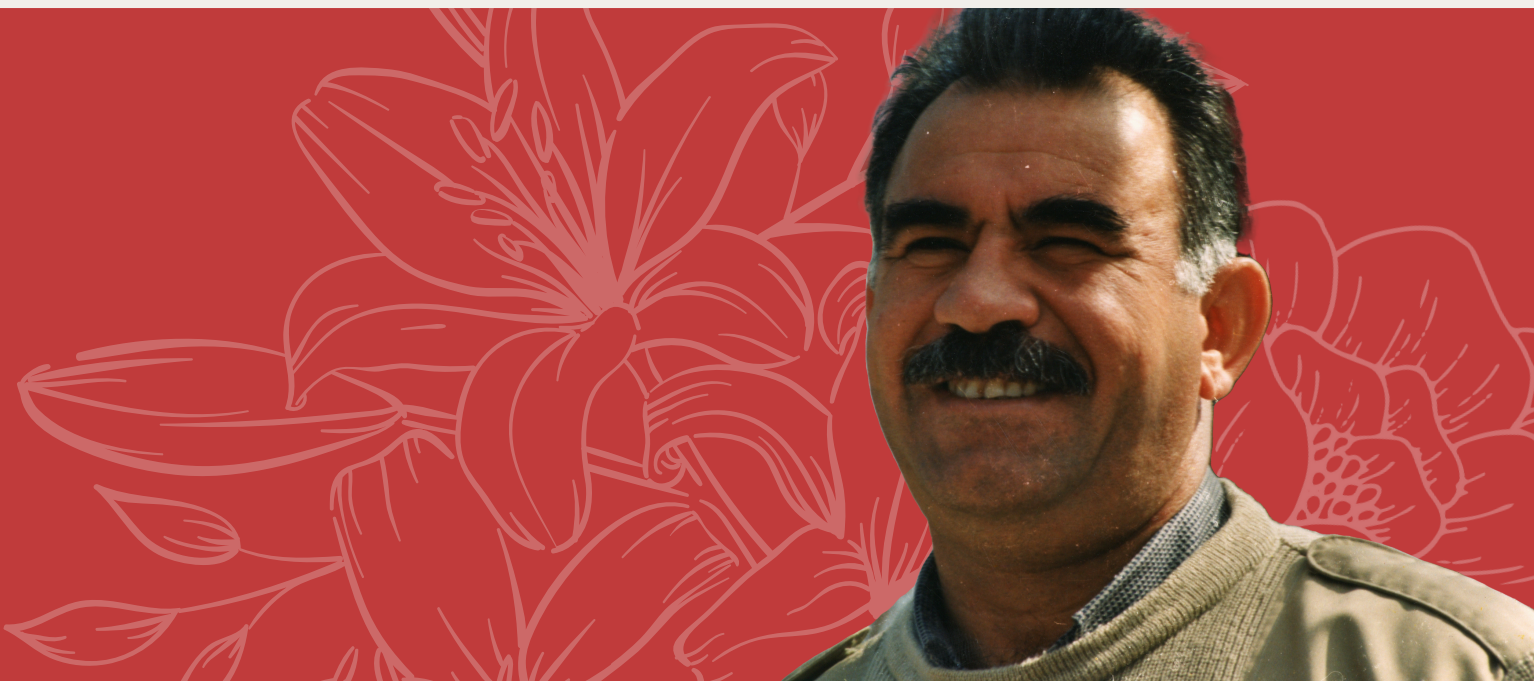


# On my prison life on İmralı Island

Abdullah Öcalan

In a letter to the European Court of Human Rights\*, Abdullah Öcalan outlines the conditions of his solitary confinement on İmralı Island, where he has been held since 1999. He describes the severe isolation, limited communication, and psychological challenges he faces, shedding light on his experiences & methods of resistance during over two decades of imprisonment.

\*The letter was first published in English language by Medya News:  
<https://medyanews.net/the-single-comprehensive-address-of-an-isolated-political-prisoner-to-the-outside-world-ocalans-letter-to-echr>





In all my talks and defence statements to date, I have avoided speaking of my personal life. Barring general talk of health issues and relations with the prison administration, I have not spoken of how I have resisted the isolation that the system designed, specially for me and solely for me, nor how I endure being alone. I imagine the life practices that I have developed against this absolute solitude and inactivity will be what attracts most curiosity. When I was still a young boy, an elder in our village regarded for his wisdom observed my behaviour and activities and said something to me that I still remember vividly: “Lo li cihê xwe rûne, ma di te da cîwa heye?”, which translated means, “sit still, have you mercury in your veins?” I was as energetic as mercury is fluid. The gods of the ancient myths could probably never have thought of a worse punishment for me than tying me to the rocks of İmralı.





Still, I have now spent twelve years in solitary<sup>1</sup> confinement on this island. İmralı is notorious as an island where high-level state officials were put to serve sentences throughout history. The climate is both extremely humid and also harsh. It causes the body's constitution to deteriorate physically. Add to this isolation in a closed room, and the debilitating effect on the constitution is amplified still more. Also, I was placed on this island as I was starting to age. I was detained under supervision of the Special Forces Command for a long time. I think it is about two years since the Ministry of Justice took over my supervision. I had no means of communicating with the outside world other than one book, one newspaper, and one magazine at a time, and a radio that only tuned to one station.

My whole universe of communication consisted of half-hour visits from my brother every few months, and my weekly visits from the lawyers, though these were frequently curtailed due to "adverse weather conditions". Naturally I don't minimise these factors in my communication, but they were not enough to keep me on my feet. My mind and my will were to ensure I remained on my feet and did not deteriorate.

I had already isolated myself and prepared myself for solitude while I was still outside. I practised experiments in making the relations of family, close relatives and even close friends and comrades, all of which constitute a significant dependency, abstract.

1. 24 years at the the time of this brochure being published



Relationships with women were also significant, and were among those I made abstract. I was the exact opposite of [the much-persecuted revolutionary poet] Nazım Hikmet. I had sworn off having children. When I was still in high school I got top marks from my literature teacher for an essay entitled, “To me you are a child that will never be born”. I think I wanted to deal with childhood lives that pass in hardship. In any case, these experiences are not enough to explain my resilience in İmralı.

I must not move on without mentioning this: The conspiracy against me during the İmralı process was one that left no shred of hope behind. The protracted process and psychological warfare relating to the death sentence had the same aim. In the first days, even I could not fathom how I might be able to endure. I could not imagine how I would be able to get through even one year like this, let alone several. I had this thought which filled me with regret: “How can you hold thousands of people in a tiny room?”

**Truly, as the Kurdish National Leadership, I had made myself into – or I was made into – the very synthesis of millions. This was also the people’s perception of the situation. If it is impossible for most people to tolerate separation from their families or children with no hope of being reunited, how then would I endure such a separation from the will of millions united to the death, never to achieve a reunion?**



Letters from the people were not given to me, even those of just a few lines. To date I have not received any letters apart from a few exceptions from comrades in the dungeons, which are subjected to stringent censure and heavily redacted, and none at all from outside. Nor have I been able to send any letters.

All this may help with the understanding of the conditions of the isolation to some degree. But there were certain aspects unique to my position. I am in the position of being one who has led the emergence of many principles relating to the Kurds. All this output was stopped halfway, dependent on a life of freedom. I had led our people to emerge in all social fields, but I was unable to leave them in trusted hands or safe conditions.



Think of a lover: He has made the first move for his love, but just as their hands were about to meet, they were left in suspense. Such were my leaps for freedom out of social fields, similarly left in suspense. I had virtually dissolved myself into the realms of social freedom. I left very little behind to call 'me'. The process of imprisonment, in the societal sense, had started at just such a moment. External conditions, the state, the administration, and the prison itself could have been fit for kings, and it still would not explain how it could be possible to endure the isolation created for me. The basic factors should not be sought in the conditions or the approach of the state.

**The determining factor was that I had persuaded myself of the conditions of isolation. What grand reasons I would need to be able to endure isolation, and to prove that a great life could be displayed even under isolation!**

Thinking on this basis, I should first mention two conceptual developments. The first was on the societal status of Kurds. For me to desire a free life, the society I was connected to itself would need to be free. Or more accurately, individual liberation could not happen without society. In the sociological sense, the freedom of the individual correlated in full to the level of freedom for the society. Applying this hypothesis to the Kurdish people, it was my perception that the life of the Kurds was no different from a pitch-black dungeon with no walls around it. I am not presenting this perception as a literary device. This is the absolute truth of the reality experienced.



Secondly, in order to fully understand this concept there is a need for adherence to an ethical principle. One must make oneself fully cognisant of the fact that it is possible to live life in absolute dependence on a community. One of the most important beliefs modernity has engendered is the persuasion of the individual that she or he can survive without dependence on community. This persuasion is a false narrative.

Actually there is no such life, but the acceptance of a manufactured virtual reality is imposed. Any deprivation of this principle expresses a dissolution of ethics. Here, truth and ethics are intertwined. Liberal individualism is only possible via the dissolution of an ethical society, and the severing of its ties from the perception of truth. That it is posed as the dominant lifestyle of our era does not prove that it is right. The same goes for the capitalist system of which liberal individualism is the voice. I have reached this conclusion as a result of my focus on the Kurd as a phenomenon, and the Kurdish issue. There is a duality in my life that needs to be well understood. This is the escape from, and the return to, Kurdishness. Cultural genocide has ensured that the conditions for escape are ready at all times, under any circumstances.

This escape is always encouraged. The moral principle comes into play just at this point. How right or good is it to flee one's own society for the sake of the salvation of the individual?

I made it to my final year at university, which meant my individual salvation was guaranteed at the time. The beginning of my return to Kurdishness, or at least my sharpened focus on it just at this point, was an expression of a return to moral principle. In the socialist sense, this community did not have to be Kurdish, it could have been some other community. But you would still need to connect with a societal phenomenon one way or another in order to be able to be a moral individual. It was becoming clear to me that I could not be an immoral individual. I am using the concept of morality here in the meaning of ethics, in the sense of ethical theory. I do not speak of a morality that is primitive, for instance one that dictates lifelong loyalty to any given family or similar group, because a connection to the Kurds as a phenomenon and their problematic condition was only possible through morals as ethics.

The absolute slave status of the Kurd – which remains true to this day – definitively prevented me from the dream, “a free life is possible”. I became convinced that: “I have no world where I can live freely.” I have been able to thoroughly compare an internal prison with an external one here. I have come to realise that captivity in the external prison is the more dangerous for the individual. It is a great delusion for a Kurdish individual to live in the belief that she or he is free outside. A life dominated by delusion and lies is one that has suffered treason and loss.



The conclusion I draw from this is that a life on the outside is only possible under one condition: that one spends every minute of the day fighting for the existence and freedom of the Kurds, and the Turkish workers under the conditions of capitalism. Life for a Kurd with morals and dignity is only possible by becoming a round-the-clock fighter for freedom and existence.

Judging my life on the outside on this principle, I accept that I have lived an ethical life. It is in the nature of warfare that the response to that is death or imprisonment. A life without war is a life of massive fraudulence and indignity, and as such, enduring death or prison is in the the nature of the action. It would go against the very purpose of my life to be unable to endure prison conditions. Just as no form of the fight for existence and freedom is avoidable. This is also true for prison, because it too is a requirement of the fight for a free life.



When it comes to Kurds, and assuming one is a socialist and not under orders from capitalism, liberalism or a warped religious fanaticism, there is nothing to live for and no world to live in other than a fight for a moral and ethical life. Looking at the lives of friends in prison in the light of this concept, I saw that they had serious misconceptions. Either they convinced themselves or they were convinced that a life could be lived in freedom outside. A sociological analysis would show that the role of prisons is to create a false yearning for freedom in the individual. Under the conditions of modernity prisons are very carefully built for this purpose. When people get out of prison, one option is that they accept a life of lies and deceit, in which case any expectation from them of revolutionary action or a moral and dignified life is in vain, an empty hope, or alternatively they will be able to conduct their struggle with better success thanks to the maturity that comes with the prison experience.

Prisons are not just for rehabilitation, they are also spaces where people learn how to effectively fulfil moral and voluntary duties to society. The same is true for freedom fighters who take to the mountains. Being a freedom guerrilla means fulfilling one's moral and political duties to the community at the utmost level, and taking on that consciousness and ethical duty. It means doing whatever is necessary for liberation in relation to self-defence. Becoming a freedom guerrilla is not a way to build personal influence or power.



That would not be the fight for freedom, but the fight for power. For those kinds of people, taking to the mountains (or leaving them) has no moral or societal value. They turn easily to betrayal when they do not find what they are looking for. These people cannot fulfil their duties to the community in any area.

What I mean by all this is this: All places have the same characteristics for those whose social existence is in a state of absolute enslavement and those who have experienced dissolution. Meaningless distinctions such as ‘inside is bad, outside is good’, or ‘armed is bad, unarmed is good,’ will not change the fundamental effort and goal of the fight for existence and freedom.

**Since human life is only meaningful when lived freely, wherever a life without freedom is lived that place is a dark dungeon.**

The second concept is the development of a perception of reality in connection to the first. The only remedy to ensure the strength to endure in the dungeon is to develop a perception of reality. The strong experience of the perception of reality relating to life in general is the attainment of the greatest delight in life, or indeed, the meaning of life. If people understand well what they are living for, they can live anywhere with no problem. Life loses its meaning if it is spent in a constant state of erroneousness and lies, paving the way for the degeneration of life itself.

Dissatisfaction, discomfort, quarrels, profanity... These are natural outcomes of a degenerate life. Human life is an absolute miracle, for those who have an advanced perception of reality. Life is a source of excitement and enthusiasm, it holds the secret meaning of the universe. As one discovers this secret, even in a dungeon, enduring life does not pose a problem.

**If the dungeon is for the sake of freedom, what will grow there is one's perception of reality. Life that grows in this way can transform the harshest pain into happiness.**

For me, İmralı Prison has become a veritable battleground for reality, with regard to understanding the phenomenon of the Kurds and the Kurdish issue, as well as constructing possibilities for a solution. Outside, discourse and action have more validity. Inside, meaning reigns supreme. Outside, it would have been very difficult for me to develop the ideas relating to the political philosophy that I have expressed in a more extensive and concrete manner in this defence.

Even grasping the concept of politics itself requires great effort, it requires a strong perception of reality. It is possible to say that my coming to terms with the depth of myself as a positivist dogmatic is strongly connected to my being in isolation.



I have come to comprehend better under isolation conditions that there are varying conceptualisations of modernity and a diverse range of nation-building models, and that societal structures are man-made and fictional, as well as flexible by nature.

Overcoming the nation-state was important for me. This concept had been a Marxist-Leninist- Stalinist principle for me for a long time, it was in the nature of a dogma that should never be altered. When I focused on societal nature, civilisation and modernity, I grasped that this principle could have nothing to do with socialism, and that it was merely a remnant of class civilisation and maximal societal search for power, legitimised by capitalism. As a result, I had no hesitation in rejecting it. If there was to be a truly scientific socialism as claimed, those who would need to change were the masters of real socialism, i.e., people like Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Castro themselves. It had been a great mistake for them to embrace a capitalist concept, and it did great harm to the cause of socialism.

As I understood better that capitalist liberalism had an extremely strong ideological hegemony, I started to better analyse modernity. I saw that a democratic modernity is not only possible, but also more real, more contemporary, and more livable than capitalist modernity. Since real socialism never got past the notion of nation-states, taking it as a fundamental truth for modernity, we never thought another kind of nationalism, for instance a democratic nationalism, could exist. A nation could not exist without a state!

If Kurds were a nation, they would have to have a state! But as I came, by focusing on social phenomena, to the understanding that the nation itself was the most disconnected of realities in recent centuries, that it had been shaped under the strong influence of capitalism, and that the nation-state model was an iron cage for societies, I realised that freedom and communality were more valuable concepts. Realising that fighting for the sake of nation-states was in fact fighting for capitalism, my political philosophy was greatly transformed. A fight for narrow nationalism and classism (both would take one to the same place in essence) was not going to result in anything but a fortification of capitalism. I realised that in a sense, I was a victim of capitalist modernity. As I came to see that social sciences imposed by modernity were not truly sciences but contemporary mythologies, my consciousness of history and society grew deeper. My comprehension of the truth experienced a revolution. As I tore apart capitalist dogma, I began to get to know society and history with more enjoyment, understanding more of the truth. During this time, the name I called myself was the 'Truth Hunter'.



In Turkish there is a saying, “Run, hare, run! Catch, hound, catch!”, which capitalist modernity imposes on the Kurds. I turned the meaning on its head, transforming it into “hunt capitalist modernity”. When the perception of reality develops as a whole, it secures supremacy of meaning that cannot be compared to anything prior, no matter what field we look at, be that social, or even the physical or biological. Under prison conditions I could have as many daily truth revolutions as I wanted. It goes without saying that nothing else could provide the strength for endurance as much as this does.

The strengthening of the comprehension of truth also had an effect on developing practical solutions. The Turkish state mentality is always credited with being sacred and unique. The concept of governance brings to mind the concept of the state. This mentality finds its roots in the Sumerians, and it has been passed down through generations in both the Arab and Farsi cultures, having merged with the divine.

The phenomenon of power holds a strong position at the root of the concept of monotheism. Turks, as elites formed among the powers-that-be, developed maybe the fourth or fifth versions of this concept. Without knowing its roots or etymology, they were influenced by its outcomes. In the Seljuk and Ottoman practices, it became enwrapped in a completely dark meaning – or more accurately, meaninglessness. It became such that sometimes dozens of siblings or relatives were executed in the pursuit of power.



With the coming of the republic, this understanding donned another disguise – or rather, the national sovereignty and nation-state developed in Europe were applied directly to the ruling power with no adaptations. This made the Turkish nation-state into a still more dangerous Leviathan. Whoever interfered with it was executed. The nation-state was the most sacred of all sacred things. This was particularly true for the bureaucrat class. The problem of power and state became the most complicated social issue in its history. I focused mostly on the concepts of power and the state in İmralı.

As I came to understand what kind of a role these concepts played in relations between Turks and Kurds, I felt the strong urge to turn towards more concrete, practical solutions. I also felt the need to trace the thousand year development of power and state arrangements regarding Turkish-Kurdish relations back to the Hittites. And as I better understood the tight geopolitical and geostrategic relations between the cultures of power and state in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and applied this to Turkish-Kurdish relations, I could easily see that drawing distinctions between the state and power was not an intelligent method. I did not embrace the concepts of power and the state, as they were concepts developed against the concept of democracy. The more I saw that abandoning all governance to power and state forces was a great loss for society, the better I understood the importance of democracy.

Realizing that the anarchistic denial of power and the state led to serious insolubility issues in practice, I became aware that denial of the sharing of power and the state was incompatible with historical fact, even though this was not a method of solution I preferred. A democratic government was our primary preference, but I understood better the significance of the concepts of power and the state in partnership as I grasped that denial of the unified cultures of power and the state through history and the failure to comprehend the aspects of them that were right to share in terms of society, could not lead to healthy, practical solutions.

There were intense relations and attempts as frequently converging models were tried in the policies and strategies of power and the state in Anatolia and Mesopotamia throughout history. Similar models were also preferred in all critical periods of Turkish-Kurdish relations. This model was attempted most recently during the national war of liberation. I went over these matters extensively in my defence. As well as presenting it in the form of a theoretical model, there was immense value in transforming it into a practical project for a solution not only to Turkish-Kurdish relations, but also to other crises in the Middle East that were similarly at an impasse. In particular, the project involved elements that were both compatible with historical facts and closest to everybody's ideals for a practical solution against the positivist dogmatism imposed by capitalist modernity.

It was important that I focused on the concepts of democratic modernity, the Democratic Nation and Democratic Autonomy in relation to power and the state, in the light of historical developments.

Another historical reality was that central government was the exception, while local governments were the rule. As I comprehended better the connection between capitalism and the presentation of the centralised nation-state as the one and absolute model today and its inner workings became more understandable to me, the importance of local solutions for democracy became clearer.

I arrived at similar conclusions for the relation between violence and power. It was obvious that it could not be our preference to become a power and a nation through violence. Except in cases with a requirement of obligatory self-defence, the attainment of social advantage through violence also had nothing to do with socialism. Other than self-defence, violence of any nature could only be valid for monopolies of power and exploitation. Conceptual development in this direction placed great importance on approaching the issue of peace in a more principled and meaningful manner. I had thus achieved a significant conceptual and theoretical accumulation that would void the 'separatist' and 'terrorist' labels placed by the state and power elites, that put pressure on the Kurds and indeed all sections of society under oppression and exploitation.



Our dialogues with the state authorities on the basis of this conceptual and theoretical accumulation were more fruitful and ensured creativity for practical solutions. As can be seen in various sections of my defence, it was possible to develop theoretical and practical solutions with the contribution of developments in the perception of reality and societal freedom in numerous similar areas.

Other than physical causes paving the way for health problems, there is nothing unbearable for me about my life in İmralı. My morale, consciousness and willpower have not declined, on the contrary, they are more refined than before, nurtured with aesthetics, and enriched by way of beautiful development. As I gradually develop explanations of societal truths by way of science, philosophy and aesthetics, possibilities for a more correct, better and more beautiful life also increase. I would rather stay in my cell alone until my last breath than live with people led astray, away from the path of truth, by capitalist modernity.

One question in the minds of our people connected to my life in İmralı relates to where and how I would live if I got out of prison. I am not one prone to illusions. It should be well-known that my lifestyle is that known as revolutionary realism. Such questions are better answered by looking not at my life after a possible release but at my whole life story from childhood onwards.

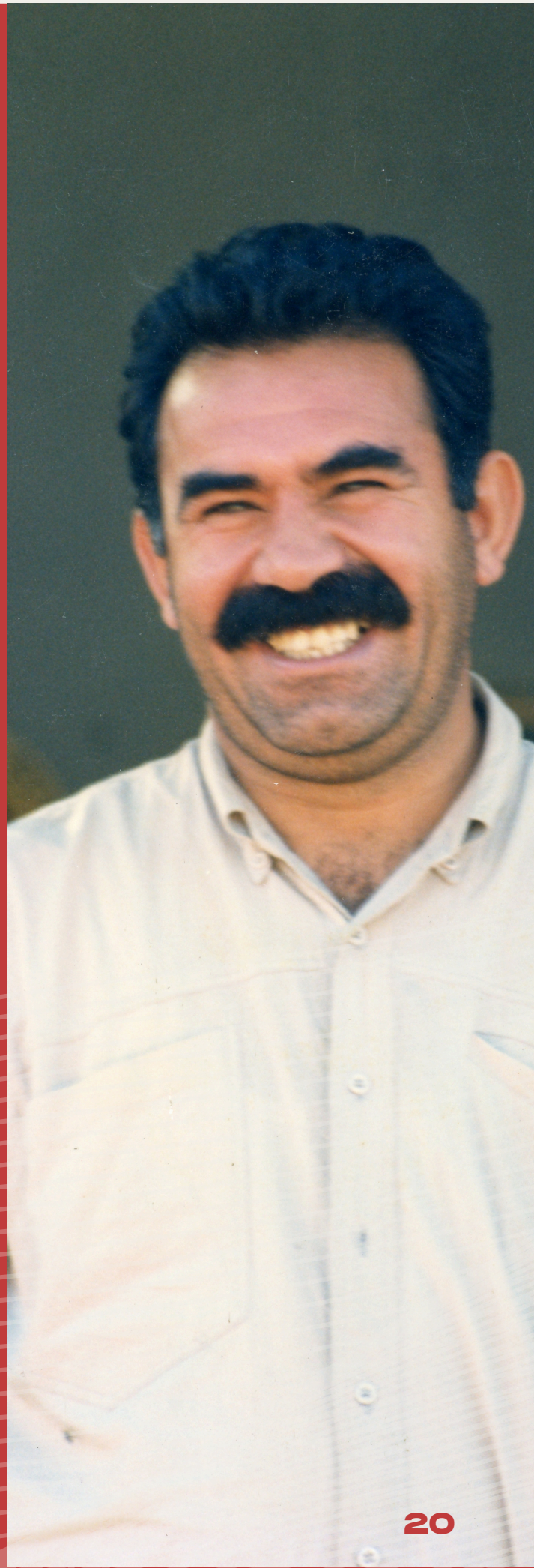
My first ‘rebellions’, against family authority when I was below the age of 10, carry important clues in this matter. I was a lone rebel even back then. I tried to express my objections to the rural and urban communities in places in my defence. Anyone who is interested can find the necessary questions and answers together there. In short, for me, life is possible only if it is lived freely. I have tried to explain what a free life means as the foundation of my most recent five- volume defence.



**A life that is not ethical, just and political is a life that from the point of view of communality should not be lived.**

Through the monopolies of ideological oppression and exploitation they cause, civilisation in general and capitalist modernity in particular render it possible to live and ensure acceptance of living the wrong kind of life, riddled with all types of slavery, demagoguery and individualism, and full of many lies. This is how developments identified as societal problems emerge. Whether we call them socialist, pro-freedom, democratic or communist, all those who believe themselves to be revolutionaries must object to and oppose civilisations based on oppression and exploitation by elite class, the city and power, and the dominant lifestyles of modern times. Otherwise, a just, free, democratic and communal lifestyle cannot become reality, and thus cannot be lived – any life thus lived would be full of lies, deceit, wrongdoing and ugliness. This is called a wrongful lifestyle with no proper basis.

The great efforts I have made throughout my life in the rejection of this lifestyle, that was an issue or that I have made an issue, is well understood. Where it is not understood, neither my character nor myself as the Leadership, can be comprehended. Those who wish to join my character or myself as the Leadership and benefit from them without comprehending them could suffer great disillusionment. Displaying correct comprehension and participation is not an individual but a societal matter.







Another popular question is on my way of living with women. I have written on how to live together with women from place to place in all the volumes. Living with women is particularly significant under conditions of modernity. This is not a matter to be resolved by asking for, seeking out and deceiving girls, whether in brothels or in private homes, or living together them with or without children.

To resolve this issue that occupies pride of place in the heart and mind of societal issues, the approach must be scientific, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic. In the era in which we live, under capitalist modernity conditions, an equal, free life together with women is a life that requires great responsibility and a strong approach based on science, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. Without knowing the status imposed on women throughout the history of civilisation and in the modern era, without an ethical and aesthetic approach, attempts at any kind of life together will result in wrongdoing, immorality and ugliness.

To avoid wasting life, it is imperative to prioritize the realization of the right, moral and aesthetic forms of life together with women.

**Analyzing the character of women, over which all types of enslavement have been tried and imposed, and making women comrades and life-partners in the cause for freedom and equality are fundamental conditions for becoming right, moral and beautiful men as well.**

The reasons why I value this type of lifestyle and consider it to be a matter of principle will be better understood if the words in my defence are read correctly. A lifestyle based on the primitive sexist 'domination' over women (as a form of relationship where even biological sexuality is degenerated), imposed by the power-centric ethics of civilisation of modernity, creates great immorality and ugliness. If in time my great war against this and its outcomes are correctly understood, life will be lived with better morals and beauty together with women. Every man and woman who takes a share of the responsibility for this, and in particular for women to be empowered and liberated and achieve equality in all areas of social life, must develop and organise scientific, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic approaches and practices constantly, and encourage revitalisation of the mindset and institutions of the democratic nation.



Whether inside or outside prison, in a mother's womb or in any moment in time and space, only communally can human life be lived freely, equally (with diversity) and democratically. Any lifestyle outside of this is deviant, and thus unhealthy. This deviance is fought with various societal narratives and actions including revolution, to bring it back to the right way and make it healthy. To this end, a mindset and will that are ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and scientific are formed.





So, wherever and whenever I may be when a possibility of release arises, it is only natural that I will be in constant struggle to the end with whatever discourse and style of action is necessary, for the communality I strive to be part of, for Kurds who suffer the most tragic reality of this, for their attainment of the democratic nationhood that is their path to a solution and emancipation, for the Union of Democratic Nations that is the path to a solution and emancipation for all peoples of the Middle East starting with their neighbours, and for the Union of Democratic Nations that is the path to a solution and emancipation for all peoples of the world of which they are a part.

I will march on with my character of truth, that I have won in great measure through the ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and scientific force rendered necessary by this, I will win life, and I will share it with everyone.

21 December 2010

Abdullah Öcalan

Convict in solitary confinement at İmralı F-Type Prison

To the Presidency  
European Court of Human Rights,  
Strasbourg/France

# About Abdullah Öcalan:

Abdullah Öcalan, known as "Rêber Apo", is a revolutionary thinker, Kurdish leader, and the ideological source of the Kurdish freedom movement. Born in 1948 in a small village in Urfa, Öcalan witnessed firsthand the oppression and poverty inflicted upon the Kurdish people by the Turkish state. This experience ignited in him a deep search for justice, equality, and the freedom of oppressed peoples everywhere. In 1978, he co-founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a movement initially seeking Kurdish independence, but which has since evolved into a broader struggle for democratic confederalism — a radical model of grassroots democracy, women's freedom, and an ecological life.

Kidnapped in 1999 through an international conspiracy orchestrated by global powers, Öcalan has been imprisoned on the island of Imrali ever since. Yet, from his solitary confinement, he has continued to inspire a revolutionary transformation, not only within Kurdistan but also across the Middle East and beyond. His writings, challenge hierarchical and patriarchal structures, calling for a society built on principles of communal life, direct democracy, and coexistence.

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**I will win life, and I will share it with everyone.**

