Agreement reached between Turkish government and Kurdish nationalist PKK

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Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed Kurdish nationalist leader, called for a ceasefire on March 21, the traditional Kurdish Newroz festival. Ocalan, who heads the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), called on his supporters to withdraw their armed forces inside the borders of Turkey and to silence their weapons. The governments of Turkey and the US welcomed the call, as did the European Union.

The circumstances and background of Ocalan's declaration were unusual. It was read out by leading members of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The BDP, which is close to the PKK, has several MPs in the Turkish parliament; many of the mayors in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of Turkey are from the BDP.

The declaration was preceded by months of negotiations between the Turkish secret service and Ocalan, who since 1999 has been serving a life sentence in solitary confinement on the prison island of Imrali.

Hundreds of thousands of supporters followed the words of the PKK leader. Many marched with banners, chanting slogans and carrying pictures of Ocalan to make clear their support for him and the PKK. Until last year, such demonstrations had been disbanded using brutal force by the Turkish police. This time, they were reported in a broadcast by Turkish state television.

In his letter, Ocalan wrote pathetically that a new era of democratic rights, freedom and equality was now dawning. The armed struggle was at an end.

He appealed openly to right-wing Turkish nationalism and the Islamic religion: "Dear people of Turkey, the Turkish people living in the Turkey of ancient Anatolia should know that almost a thousand years of [the Kurds] living together with the Turks under the flag of Islam are based on the law of brotherhood and solidarity.

"Turks and Kurds fell together at Çanakkale, they conducted the war of liberation together, in 1920 they opened the parliament together.

"The fact of our shared history suggests that we [should] build our common future together. The founding spirit of the National Assembly of Turkey also illuminates the new era that begins today."

It is true that in the Ottoman Empire, Turkish and Kurdish peasants and other nationalities suffered under feudal exploitation and oppression. The "banner of Islam", or more precisely pan-Islamism, was unfurled by the Ottoman Sultanate in its death throes as it was gripped by nationalist and democratic aspirations and social unrest. The victims were particularly the Christian Armenians, who fell victim to numerous pogroms.

In the 20th century, the Turkish nationalists, who were well aware of the social and national disunity in the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, used Sunni Islam not just against separatist tendencies but also against the growing influence of socialist ideas.

In 1920, Turkish officers fraternised with Kurdish dignitaries "under the banner of Islam"; the same year, the entire leadership of the young Turkish Communist Party was murdered. Neither the representatives of the Turkish nor of the Kurdish elite wanted or want unity from below, that is, the unity of the oppressed workers and poor peasants under the banner of socialism.

Representatives and supporters of the moderate Islamist, right-wing AKP [Justice and Development Party] government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan were appreciative of Ocalan's words.

Citing Selahattin Demirta?, chair of the BDP, who had visited Öcalan in prison, the online edition of the newspaper *Zaman*, which is close to the AKP government, commented, "Ocalan constantly refers to the Ottoman heritage during the early formative years of the republic, to the commonwealth of Ottoman cultures". In response to a question regarding what this heritage is, Demirta? explains, "You know, under the Ottoman Empire different nations, people with different religions

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were able to live in the same country."

It is not surprising that Ocalan made special reference to religion in his statement: "The truths in the message of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are alive today with new glad tidings. People try to regain what was lost". Every right-wing conservative, whether of Christian or Islamic persuasion, can easily sign up to that.

For a movement such as the PKK, which has long claimed to be socialist, albeit falsely, such pandering to right-wing politics and ideology is revealing.

The Turkish government welcomed Ocalan's call. Although Prime Minister Erdogan was critical that there had been "no Turkish flag" to see at the rallies; nevertheless, Ocalan's declaration was a "positive development", he said. If it were put into practice, the atmosphere in Turkey and the entire region would change.

Erdogan's top adviser Yalcin Akdogan was quoted by *Hurriyet Daily News* with the enthusiastic words, "First of all, there is the message that the era of armed struggle has come to an end and the struggle must continue through democratic means. I find this very important. Secondly, never before had such emphasis on unity and fraternity been made. [The PKK] disliked emphasis on a common history, a common civilization and a common religion. Ocalan has changed the paradigm today and broken with the rhetoric."

Almost simultaneously with Erdogan's statement, a spokeswoman for the US State Department welcomed Ocalan's declaration, which was not only supported by the BDP, but also explicitly by the PKK leadership in Kandil in northern Iraq.

It is not the first time that the PKK has ingratiated itself with the Turkish establishment. What is new is that Turkey now recognizes this and is negotiating directly or indirectly with the Kurdish nationalists.

This is for two reasons.

First, the Erdogan government is looking for new props to attack the working class in Turkey. It is said that Erdogan wants to introduce a presidential system in Turkey as part of a new constitution, and wants to become president himself. The BDP could help him, if the AKP in return makes concessions to the Kurds.

A presidential system would strengthen the state vis-à-vis parliament and lend it more authoritarian traits. This is particularly important given Erdogan has largely neutralised the Turkish army as an independent power factor and brought it to heel. Erdogan does not hesitate to impose his neo-liberal policies with authoritarian means. He will be able to count on the BDP and its "left" appendages.

Secondly, the situation is worsening in Turkey's neighbourhood. For some time, the Turkish government has been playing the role of US guard dog in relation to Syria. No other government is publicly so aggressive in arguing for "regime change" in Syria as is Erdogan's. The Syrian "rebels" operate from Turkish territory, and have a central base of operations in Syria's neighbour, Turkey.

While direct military aggression against Syria is fast approaching and is being prepared systematically, the Syrian Kurds pose a serious problem from Ankara's point of view. The "rebels", dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda-affiliated forces, have little influence in the Syrian Kurdish areas. The strongest force there is the PYD [Democratic Union Party], which is allied with the PKK and has long been supported by the Syrian regime.

Ocalan's flowery phrases must be understood in this context, when he calls on the Turkish and Kurdish people "to throw off the yoke of tyranny" under the flag of Islam. Turks and Kurds, as "the two basic strategic powers of the Middle East", are called upon to "build a democratic modernity."

"The Middle East and Central Asia are in search of a contemporary modern and democratic concept that corresponds to their own history", proclaimed Ocalan. It was "inevitable that Anatolia and Mesopotamia, the local culture and time, will be a pioneer in its construction again. It is as if we are experiencing an updated, more complicated and intense version of the Liberation War, which developed in recent history under the National Pact [1920] under the leadership of the Turks and Kurds."

Put less pompously, this means that Turkey should be the ruling power in the Middle East, and the PKK is ready to support this as its mercenary.

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