

In the Heart of Syria's Darkness, a Democratic, Egalitarian and Feminist Society Emerges

Four million people, thousands of communes, a non-hierarchical social structure and a cooperative economy. Why is no one talking about Rojava?

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June. 9, 2019

Contents

Island prisoner	3
Millennia-old tradition	5
<i>How have the lives of women changed thanks to communal organization?</i>	7
<i>What about the relations between the Kurds and the Arabs?</i>	8
Social economy	8
<i>What kind of problems do you encounter?</i>	8
<i>Are there other difficulties, apart from mentality?</i>	9
<i>How many women have joined the cooperatives in Qamishli?</i>	9
<i>How are salaries organized in the cooperatives?</i>	9
Silence in the West	10
<i>You've studied a lot of anarchist movements. What's unique about Rojava?</i>	10
<i>Leaving aside the external challenges, what do you think are the major internal challenges facing Rojava?</i>	10

The most amazing thing about Rojava is that hardly anyone knows it exists. We hear plenty about Syria – the battlefields and chemical attacks, the brutality of ISIS and barbarity of the Assad regime. But very little has been written about the fact that in northeastern Syria an anarchist-feminist autonomous region has arisen that is the antithesis to everything around it. Well, maybe that shouldn't come as a surprise. In a world sinking ever deeper into consumer culture, careerist individualism and financial plutocracy, who can believe in the idea of a non-hierarchical society? A coherent autonomy without a centralized government? A cooperative economy? True gender equality? Yet this is precisely the vision that the people of Rojava – known officially as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – are realizing in practice, in an appallingly hostile environment, surrounded by enemies bent on their destruction.

Against all odds, Rojava, which declared its autonomy in 2014, continues to exist – encompassing four million people, seven regions, hundreds of neighborhoods and thousands of communes. Several principles underlie Rojava's democracy. To begin with, it is decentralized and lacks any hierarchy, a democracy in which communities preserve their sovereignty and manage their lives by themselves. Second, it's an egalitarian democracy, which does not prefer one ethnicity or religion over others, and where women play an equal and essential role. And third, it's a democracy based on a fair, ecological and sustainable economy, which does not sabotage the environment and aims to meet the needs of the common people, not aggrandize the powerful. In short, the inhabitants of Rojava are trying to create a political entity that is the opposite of the capitalist nation-state. They are out to forge true democracy, a society in which the people is sovereign.

"We are all children of the village," says Zelal Ceger, co-chairwoman of Tev-Dem, the Movement for a Democratic Society in Rojava, which initially created the organizational structure of the autonomous entity, from the level of the commune up to the regional one.

"Our system is not like that in Europe," she notes in a recent interview arranged under the auspices of the Rojava Information Center, which works with foreign media and academics. "For example, go to our villages and look. If a house gets damaged, the whole village fixes that house together. The natural society was created in Mesopotamia, and even now we still have some of that with us, it's our basis. As such, our people are ready to create a communal life. But in the last 2,000 years of life under the state system, the state wanted to remove the communal life and ruin it for the people, and wanted society to disperse. After the [democratic and feminist] revolution started, we're coming together once again to build up that life."

Island prisoner

Rojava (meaning "west" in Kurdish – the region is actually located in western Kurdistan) constitutes a new solution to an old problem: the oppression of peoples. Like the Jews, the Kurdish people suffered for many long years at the hands of hostile rulers and regimes. Unlike the Jewish people, the Kurds have always lived, since antiquity, in a single, contiguous geographical area: the vast, mountainous region called Kurdistan. Despite that fact and their large numbers, however, a series of Great Power agreements after World War I split the Kurds into minority groups in four different countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. As a result, their sense of common identity was lost and the Kurds were persecuted and attacked by four different oppressive regimes. Numbering some 35 million in the region, the Kurds have long held the dubious title of the largest nation in the world without a state.

The collapse of Iraq, and afterward Syria, created a propitious moment to realize Kurdish sovereignty and create a state. In Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government assumed control over some of the northern provinces, and has been steadily breaking away from the federal government. Even though, compared to their neighbors, women are treated better in Iraqi Kurdistan, it has the same political structure as other centralist nation-states. Its almost-exclusive reliance on local petroleum resources effectively made it another paternalistic, Middle Eastern oil-producing state. Revenues are divided among the rulers and their cronies, and because most of the material goods and investment capital come from Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan has become, in effect, Ankara's colony. The alliance between the two has been particularly vexatious.

Like Israel, Rojava, too, was an idea that evolved into a reality. It even has a visionary whose writings were the underpinnings of its creation: Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). When it was founded, in 1978, the PKK was a Marxist-Leninist movement whose aim was to establish a socialist state for the Kurdish people in eastern Turkey, which is northern Kurdistan. Turkey, for its part, tried to deny the existence of a Kurdish people and toughened restrictions on their language and culture. Even before a military coup in Turkey in 1980, the PKK felt that the situation was becoming more dangerous and violent. In 1979, Ocalan and other party leaders moved to Syria and dug in there. Ocalan lived in Syria for almost 20 years and became a revered figure among the Kurds, known fondly as "Apo" (uncle).

Already then, Ocalan grasped the importance of women in fomenting a true democratic revolution. Women played an active role in the PKK from the outset and became increasingly involved in organizational matters and in combat roles. The PKK's first women's organization was formed in 1986, and seven years later, Ocalan set up an all-female military unit. In his other activities, too, such as in military training and study camps of the PKK, Zelal Ceger relates, Ocalan introduced new norms to promote women's involvement, including in everyday affairs. He asked men to cook and not to expect their wives to do it, so that the women could devote their time to studies. Increasing numbers of female activists joined, the women's organizations grew stronger, and the seeds of the process were planted that would culminate in the socially egalitarian practices of Rojava.

While the PKK commanders waged the struggle from Syria, many of its activists returned to Turkey, resulting in a blood-drenched conflict between the party and the Turkish army between 1984 and 1993. About 40,000 people died, with both sides accused of deliberately targeting civilians. In February 1999, in an operation involving Turkish intelligence and the CIA (some in the PKK also accused the Mossad of involvement) – Ocalan was seized in the Greek embassy in Kenya and extradited to Turkey. A show trial was held in which Ocalan was charged with treason and sentenced to death. Fortunately for him, Turkey's attempt to enter the European Union – which had abolished the death penalty – led to the commutation of his sentence to life imprisonment.

For a decade, between 1999 and 2009, Ocalan was the only inmate in the prison on Imrali Island, in the Sea of Marmara, where he remains incarcerated today. In his small cell, guarded by 1,000 warders, he began to delve into Sumerian mythology and the origins of Neolithic cultures, as well as the history of the first city-states. He was influenced by a number of thinkers, among them Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, Maria Mies and Michel Foucault.

The theorist who influenced Ocalan most profoundly was Murray Bookchin, a Jewish-American writer and anarchist who formulated the theory of social ecology. Drawing on the connection between the environmental crisis and capitalist society, Bookchin argued that the enslavement and destruction of nature is the continuation of the enslavement of other human

beings. To avert calamity, he observed, the structure of society needs to be rethought; a shift is needed from a rapacious capitalist society to an ecological social structure that maintains a balance between its parts. Consequently, Bookchin proposed a confederative-municipal entity by means of which communities could organize their lives independently.

Ocalan eventually forsook the nation-state concept, which he'd actually begun to turn away from even before his arrest. Instead, he proposed democratic confederalism, a fusion of Bookchin's social ecology and emergent Kurdish feminism, a system of decentralized social organization that would avert creation of a centralized government like that of Syria, which oppresses its people, and allow individuals and communities to wield true influence over their environment and activities, and most important, would ensure that women would play a vital and equal role at all levels of organization and decision-making.

Ocalan's ideology began to spread. When the protests of the Arab Spring reached Syria, in 2011, and Assad's forces started to withdraw from western Kurdistan, the Kurds used the opportunity to establish autonomy, based on a well thought-out political program that they previously devised.

Zelal Ceger met Ocalan in 1993, in Syria. She had grown up with his ideology, but when she finally got to meet him, her knees shook, she relates. But Ocalan turned out to be a warm, friendly person, she says – very far from the dictatorial image sometimes associated with leaders of popular liberation movements. “When I was with Ocalan,” she relates, “I felt simultaneously like a child and an adult. He was like a brother to us.”

She goes on to explain that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) “could not organize the people on its own. We wanted to create an umbrella organization, a council, which could lead all of society. Therefore, we created the Movement for a Democratic Society, or Tev-Dem. Through Tev-Dem we could reach all the peoples: Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Circassians and everyone who lived in Rojava. We took everyone into account.”

By August 2011, half the Kurds in Rojava were already organized in community councils. In that same month, 300 delegates from all parts of the region founded the People's Council of West Kurdistan, which in turn elected the Tev-Dem; the latter's members established and helped implement a bottom-up model of governance and autonomous administrative bodies. In January 2014, Rojava's de facto constitution was signed, declaring its commitment to freedom for all peoples, regardless of ethnicity or religion, and to gender equality, and setting forth the principles of decentralized democracy.

Millennia-old tradition

How can millions of people manage their lives autonomously? That is precisely the challenge of democratic confederalism, as practiced in Rojava. Their system of social organization continues to evolve, but its fundamental principles remain constant.

The basic unit of political organization in Rojava is the commune. Each commune consists of a few dozen families, and its members run their lives by themselves. They meet regularly to discuss the important issues and initiatives, and choose committees to advance them. They also elect two chairpersons, a man and a woman. The coordinating board, headed by those chairpersons, sends representatives to the next level of organization: the locality. It consists of a number of communes, and here too committees are founded to organize tasks, coordinate between the

communes and elect the representatives to the next level – the district. Above that level are the canton (in a few cases), the region, the General Council for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, with 70 members, and the Syrian Democratic Council, the chief legislative authority in Rojava.

There are as many as nine different committees at the different levels, each devoted to a specific subject. For example, there are reconciliation committees, comprising five women and five men, which arbitrate a variety of disputes. Only about a third of the cases brought before these bodies at the first level are referred to the next one, to regional courts; the others are resolved at the communal level. In any event, every committee regardless of its mandate must have at least 40 percent female membership, and be headed by both a woman and a man.

Women also take part in Rojava's military and police forces: There are both coed and all-female units. The goal is to ensure that women do not remain outside the centers of decision-making in the security realm – and elsewhere. “Without equality of the sexes, any call for freedom and equality is pointless and illusory,” Ocalan wrote in a 2010 manifesto.

Rojava's entire political system is constructed in a way that grants people the true power to decide how they wish to run their lives and about their environment. After all, who knows better about what a particular neighborhood needs than the people who actually live there? For example, at a meeting held in April in a commune of 25 families near the city of Derik, in the northern part of Rojava, residents met to decide what to do with an area of about 30 dunams (7.5 acres) surrounding their village. They agreed to devote most of it to growing crops cooperatively, and a smaller section to a community center. While in the past people needed approval from various government agencies just to plant a tree, restrictions on building have now been lifted: Rojava is replete with construction sites. The ultimate goal is to avert the disintegration of the communally based society, as has occurred in the industrialized West.

According to Mohammed Said, co-chairman of the PYD party in a locale in Jazira, one of Rojava's largest regions, the sort of social structure being introduced today is based on a tradition going back thousands of years.

“Fifty years ago, I remember, I was living in a village of five or six families,” Said recalled in an interview. “In the summer, if we needed to build a house, we didn't pay others to do it. We formed a group and we built it. If a house burned, everyone got together and contributed until that house was okay again. If someone fell ill, everyone would help. The communal system we want to build up is exactly that.”

Khalid Ibrahim, a member of a reconciliation committee in Derik, describes the workings of the judicial system in Rojava. “In this committee there are nine members. Of these, two are elected members of the General Council in Derik and seven are elected directly by the reconciliation committees of the localities. An election is held every two years, and the next election is scheduled to take place in another seven months.” However, he notes, that may not be possible, “because it's not clear if the political situation in northeast Syria will be stabilized” by that time – a reference to the activities of the Turkish armed forces that have occupied a neighboring district.

“Generally, when a conflict occurs, it's solved at the commune level,” Ibrahim says. “If not, the [reconciliation] committee members write a report and send the case to the next level, the locality. If the conflict is not solved there, the committee writes a report and sends the case onward. If the conflict is still not resolved, it is referred to the justice institutions that operate at the provincial, regional and federation levels, to carry out a deeper investigation.”

Trained jurists are found only in Rojava's official judicial bodies, but the members of the reconciliation panels are ordinary people whom the community trusts to listen to all sides and to resolve conflicts fairly.

Ibrahim offers a case history concerning a debt: "Mahmood used to sell yogurt from his village to Ahmed. But Ahmed hadn't paid him for six months. Finally, Mahmood brought the case to his commune's reconciliation committee. A committee member listened to both sides, understanding both the reasons why the shop owner didn't pay and the economic needs of Mahmood's family. She facilitated an agreement between the two. They agreed to reduce the debt, and agreed that Mahmood's family would have the right to acquire other goods from the shop freely to satisfy its needs. They both signed a contract. With time, the relationship between Mahmood's family and Ahmed became close again."

Jihad Omer, co-chairman of the PR office of the Syrian Democratic Council, Rojava's main legislative body, used to serve on a reconciliation committee in the Afrin district, north of Aleppo, where he helped resolve a long-running conflict. "About 35 years before," he relates, "some killings took place between two families from two different villages. Each one killed some members of the other's family. Since then, the two families have not spoken a word to each other and they could not go to the other's village.

"Our committee of conciliation consisted of old men and old women who have people's respect. We spoke to the elders of each family, again and again. We got five members from each family to sit together and share all their sorrows. We explained to them that we need to live as a society with love. We told them that they are all living on the same land, they are from the same people, so why should they let their old quarrels keep going? After a month and a half of meetings, we got the two families to sit together and eat together. And this was a big victory."

There has been a dramatic improvement in the lives of Rojava's women thanks to its feminist ideology and social structure, says Khawla Diad, a PYD co-chairwoman in a town called Til Temir. An Arab woman, she was initially suspicious of the revolutionary movement that gave rise to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, she told the Rojava Information Center. "At first we thought it was a nationalist revolution for the Kurds, not a revolution for peoples' brotherhood and democracy. But Apo's [Ocalan's] ideology was far-reaching. Slowly we saw that this ideology was not only for Kurds, but also for Arabs and Assyrians, and especially for women."

Describing the changes in the lives of women in Syria and in her own life, Diad becomes emotional: "Before the revolution women had no life, especially Arab women. They had no opinions, no work, no freedom. Arab women were only supposed to give birth, raise children and tend to home duties, and that's it. Women were nothing, they were slaves. Step by step, things changed. Kurdish women became an example for all women."

How have the lives of women changed thanks to communal organization?

Diad: "In many ways. For example, underage marriage. A girl of only 14 would be given to a man to be married. But not any more. Another thing is a second marriage. A man could take four women for himself. But not anymore. Now only one woman. Before, if I had brothers ... within our house I didn't have the right to anything in my family – not property or money or land. But now, women have the right to all those things."

What about the relations between the Kurds and the Arabs?

“The Syrian state tried to divide the Kurds and the Arabs. We do not accept this conflict. This land is for all of us, not just for Arabs or for Kurds. We organized ourselves according to the philosophy of Ocalan and said we do not want a nationalist state, we don’t want Syria to be divided. We are one people together, we are brothers.”

Diad is determined to continue working to promote revolutionary changes in the lives of women: “Before the revolution I was a person with no will, without any opinion, without existence,” she says. “Today I am free, but other women are still enslaved. This philosophy has not reached them all. It’s my role to bring it to them.”

Social economy

Another vision harbored by the new democracy of Rojava involves a social economy – based not on communism but rather communalism. The goal is simple: to serve the citizens and not the owners of capital. The basis for achieving this is the creation of cooperatives guided by the universal values set forth by a Belgium-based NGO called International Cooperative Alliance: mutual help, mutual responsibility, democracy, equality, fairness and solidarity. There are hundreds of economic cooperatives in Rojava, on local and all other levels, whose establishment has been encouraged by the autonomous administration and by Kongra Star, a local confederation of woman’s organizations. The cooperatives are in essence joining a global movement toward sustainable alternative economies.

The Cooperative Contract of Rojava, issued in August 2016, describes the principles and limitations devolving on the cooperatives. These include: one vote for each member; consultation with the relevant autonomous administration and consideration for the community in which the cooperative is formed; a ban on monopolization, speculation and exploitation; active participation of women; and no more than one person per family serving on the management board, which is elected annually by the General Assembly. Membership in a cooperative involves the purchase of shares, with the standing rate being 20,000 Syrian liras (about \$40) per share.

Women’s cooperative business ventures account for about 3 percent of the Jazira district’s economy. For Arin Sterk and Baran Bawer, members of an economy committee in the city of Qamishli (called Qamishlo by the Kurds), on the border with Turkey, the importance of the cooperatives lies in their battles against monopolies.

“Our economy should serve the needs of all the people and not just profit a few people,” Sterk says. “We are not against free trade, but we need to prevent the formation of monopolies. A simple example is seeds. Rojava is an agricultural land, so we need to ensure that the seeds are in the hands of the people, and prevent any monopoly over them.”

What kind of problems do you encounter?

Sterk: “Capitalist mentality is strong inside our society. There is a mentality of ‘I pay you and you work for me,’ but we are fighting against this attitude. You find this kind of mentality on both sides: in the cooperatives, but also among responsible people in the economy committees. We need to understand that economics is connected to our mind-set. As such, the first step toward developing the economy must be to change women’s mentality. The effects of hundreds of years

of oppression through the patriarchal system, and the influence of the Syrian regime, as well as the impact of religion, are still strong. Women are still sometimes looked upon badly if they leave the house alone for work, because there should be a man at her side. So women's economic problems are bound to this mentality."

Bawer: "On the other hand, we also need to change the dominant, male mentality, the capitalist attitude that looks on everything solely as a means to profit. We cannot allow women to become independent by putting themselves in a position of being exploited by men. It's not about integrating women into a capitalist system – it's about building a new economic system."

Sterk: "We go to houses and talk to the men. We ask them, 'Why don't you let your wife go to work?' We tell the men that women have the right to earn money, too, and help the family's financial situation. When we gather six or seven women, we ask them: 'What kind of work do you want to do? Which type of cooperative could you work in?' As an economy committee, we can also give women financial support to start a cooperative. This is how we can motivate women to liberate themselves."

Are there other difficulties, apart from mentality?

Bawer: "There is a need to professionalize the women, to supply the needed skills. For example with regard to milk production, we had cases where the know-how was poor."

How many women have joined the cooperatives in Qamishli?

Bawer: "About 4,500 women are members of cooperatives. Most of these cooperatives are occupied with agriculture, but there are also restaurants, bakeries, patisseries, chicken farms, textile industries and some that manage electrical generators for the neighborhoods."

How are salaries organized in the cooperatives?

Sterk: "In cooperatives that sell products, such as shops, they divide the sales profits among themselves equally. In agriculture, each woman decides how much land to work and for how many hours. She receives a proportional part of the produce and sells it independently."

The vision behind the creation of Rojava is astonishingly progressive – but there's a gap between it and reality. Many activists relate that they are having difficulty getting enough people involved in administrative roles in their locales: Most of them, especially women, are simply not used to the type of democratic activism required of them. And young people appear not to be very impressed by the new democratic system.

"The young people in our society are not joining the communal life," says Zelal Ceger, from Tev-Dem. "They see it as a prison. They are under the influence of capitalism; they don't accept the new system. They say they want freedom, they want to live in their way. But really, it's the commune that gives you freedom. You can solve all your problems through the communes. Some of this hasn't been understood yet, and thus we have certain difficulties."

That analysis is largely confirmed in a brief correspondence with a young computer programmer from Qamishli, who asked not to be identified by name.

"The system is not really functioning," he maintains. "The culture here is very communal, so people get along with their neighbors socially, but politically this is not an effective way to manage a society." Nevertheless, he believes in the potential of the democratic revolution

underway in Rojava, which he believes is still in its incipient stages: “Whether they are efficient or not, we have to remember that the social structures are not yet fully formed. People can and should influence them. That is the challenge and the potential of Rojava. Rojava is not an empty page on which someone can create a new society out of nothing. It is a reality that is rooted in history, and in order to develop it we need to recognize its complexity and depth.”

Silence in the West

One might think the emergence of a progressive political entity like Rojava would be welcomed by the enlightened West, which might even invest resources to ensure its development and survival. But it’s just the opposite. The West’s response ranges from relative indifference, as seen in limited media coverage and half-hearted, self-interested military support – to tacit hostility, because NATO supports Rojava’s largest and most dangerous enemy: the Turkish army. Thus, as President Donald Trump withdraws American forces from Syria and Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdogan assails Rojava with force of arms, there’s a genuine danger that the most democratic autonomy regime in the Middle East will become no more than a historical curiosity, gradually assuming the aura of a legend.

“I think that part of the reason [why people don’t talk more about Rojava] is that we no longer believe revolutionary utopian movements are possible,” American anthropologist David Graeber, who has been writing about Rojava since his first visit there in 2014, tells Haaretz in a recent interview. “We’ve become so cynical that a lot of people just don’t believe it. You get a lot of people on the left whose politics are: ‘Whatever the Americans do, we’re against it.’ I call it the loser left – they basically don’t even imagine that they could win. And, frankly, a lot of liberals, in my experience, really don’t like the idea of [direct] democracy; they might not admit it, but they’re inherently suspicious of ordinary people’s ability to govern themselves.”

You’ve studied a lot of anarchist movements. What’s unique about Rojava?

Graeber: “Since [1930s] Spain, there’s been no place where so many people were able to create institutions outside of a state framework for so long. It’s important to point out just how historically unprecedented some of the things that are happening [in Rojava] are. In Afrin, for example, I think two-thirds of all political positions are held by women. And that might be the only society in human history of which this can be said.”

Leaving aside the external challenges, what do you think are the major internal challenges facing Rojava?

“Well, other than not getting killed... I think that if the revolution endures, the biggest problem will be the tension between the bottom-up structures and the top-down structures. They basically have the equivalent of a dual power system, but it’s a dual power system where they themselves created both sides, which might be historically unprecedented. So you have the self-government system that has a parliament, ministers, and you have to have that to deal with foreigners, otherwise they won’t take you seriously. For example, there’s an airport in Qamishli, it’s the only area that’s still under Syrian government control. Why do they do that? Because if you’re not a

government, where are you going to fly? To fly anywhere, you need to have aviation agreements, you need to have security agreements.

“In a way, their isolation has been really helpful, because it made it possible to keep this centralized structure largely toothless. But once they start engaging with external structures, people with technocratic knowledge are going to have an advantage. They’re going to take these [top-down] institutions – with the best intentions – and strengthen them, and that’s going to create a threat to the bottom-up [decentralized] structures.”

Rojava has indeed only begun to address the challenges of a modern society and economy. The power grid within its territory supplies electricity only in the morning and the evening; the rest of the time the localities rely on generators. Despite its aspirations to ecological sustainability, the Rojava General Council is compelled to rely mainly on oil resources. Not only that, but in the absence of a budget to underwrite modern drilling and refining facilities, it is unable to produce sufficient quantities of fuel for trade, and resorts to inefficient, environmentally harmful refining techniques. Indeed, because Rojava is besieged on all sides, current trade possibilities are more or less confined to Assad’s Syria. Taxation policy is also still in its infancy, with most regions levying only import and export taxes and taxes on business that are not cooperatives, though income tax is collected in the Jazira district.

The economy in Rojava, as said, remains largely agrarian, and the fact that the majority of available resources (about 70 percent) go toward self-defense hinders economic and infrastructure development. A relatively new challenge is the tens of thousands of ISIS fighters who surrendered to the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. The al-Hawl camp in Rojava, for example, currently holds about 73,000 prisoners in an area of four square kilometers. Most of them are former fighters, but about 10,000 are their relatives, mostly women and children. The camps are a ticking bomb, in both humanitarian and ideological terms, and they are depleting Rojava’s coffers at an unprecedented rate.

In the meantime, Ocalan continues to be a prisoner on Imrali Island, despite his repeated calls for peace over the past two decades and his assertion that he does not want an independent Kurdish state in eastern Turkey – only a confederated autonomy as in Rojava. In November 2018, Leyla Güven, a member of the Turkish parliament from the People’s Democratic Party, launched a hunger strike to demand an end to Ocalan’s solitary confinement and permission for him to meet regularly with his family, as well as with his lawyers; he had not met with the latter for some seven years, at that point. Thousands of Kurds worldwide subsequently joined Güven.

On May 2, after 176 days of striking and the submission of more than 800 petitions to the Turkish government, Ocalan was finally allowed to meet briefly with his lawyers. In a statement made through their auspices, he asked the hunger strikers not to put their health at risk and called once again for reconciliation. “There is an urgent need for a method of democratic negotiations, away from all kinds of polarization and culture of conflict in the solution of problems. We can solve the problems in Turkey, and even in the region – first and foremost the war – with soft power; that is with intelligence, political and cultural power instead of tools of physical violence,” the statement said.

On May 26, following another plea to the strikers from Ocalan, the hunger strike ended.

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Retrieved on 6th May 2021 from www.haaretz.com

The interviews in this article were conducted with the assistance of the Rojava Information Center.

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