

International Initiative Analysis 3

Isolation limits dialogue



International Initiative
“Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan—Peace in Kurdistan”

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About us

On the 15th February 1999 the president of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Ocalan, was handed over to the Republic of Turkey following a clandestine operation backed by an alliance of secret services directed by their corresponding governments.

Disgusted by this outrageous violation of international law several intellectuals and representatives of civil organisations launched an initiative for the release of Abdullah Ocalan. With the opening of a central coordination office in March 1999 the "International Initiative Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan – Peace in Kurdistan" started its work.

The International Initiative regards itself as a multi-national peace initiative working for a peaceful and democratic solution of the Kurdish question with Kurds and Turks peacefully living together.

Even after his imprisonment Abdullah Ocalan is still regarded as the undisputed leader by a majority of the Kurdish people. Hence it seems reasonable to assume that the solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey will be closely linked to his fate in the future. Many Kurds see him as a safeguard for peace and democratisation. Therefore the Ocalan case needs a feasible perspective for a solution. The International Initiative is committed to play its part by intense lobbying and public relations work. Regular publishing and a balanced policy towards the public are a central part of its work.

About this document

With our series "International Initiative Analysis" we provide insight into topics regarding the Kurdish issue, human rights developments in Turkey and the Middle East and the situation of Abdullah Ocalan.

First Signatories of the International Initiative

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Introduction

During the last few months, significant developments have occurred in Turkey. For the first time in the decades-old conflict the Turkish state has broken a major taboo and publicly stated that there are talks with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, Abdullah Ocalan. His prison situation, however, has improved only very slightly and still violates several human rights standards.

In this analysis we want to provide some background information on the “dialogue process”, the ongoing human rights violations and possible developments towards a political solution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Ocalan's prison regime: from total isolation to small-group isolation

At the end of 2009 Ocalan was moved into a newly built high security prison. Five other prisoners have been transferred to the island as well. Subsequently, Council of Europe's anti-torture watchdog CPT has visited Imrali Island for the fifth time and published a report about the visit on 9 July 2010¹. Noting some improvements, CPT emphasizes:

“However, these new arrangements could only be described as a very modest step in the right direction.”²

The changes in the prison situation on Imrali Island that occurred at the end of 2009 basically meant a shift from total isolation³ to small-group isolation. Effectively there are now five other prisoners who are being subjected to worse conditions than they were before. However, when the conditions of Ocalan and the five other inmates are compared the ongoing discrimination of Ocalan can clearly be seen⁴. Imrali island maintains its position as having the lowest standards amongst all the prisons in Turkey.

Besides serious criticism on the healthcare system, CPT especially criticizes Ocalan still being denied some basic rights that every other prisoner in Turkey enjoys. Most of them are linked to communication like the denial of access to a television, the denial of any phone calls and the ban on letters. In its 2010 report CPT emphasizes the necessity of correcting this and in an unusual step even asks for monthly reports from the Turkish authorities.

¹<http://www.cpt.coe.int/documents/tur/2010-20-inf-eng.pdf>

²ibid.

³Ocalan has been the sole inmate of Imrali Island Prison for almost eleven years.

⁴ibid.

No visit: delegation of members of PACE

In late September 2010 a delegation of three members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) applied for a visit to Imrali Island⁵. The Turkish minister of Justice denied a visit with the interesting reason that this would set a precedent for all the other politicians and journalist who already want to meet Mr Ocalan. This highlights the already high demand for talks with Ocalan as well as the unwillingness of the government to lift his isolation.

From dialogue to negotiations - facts on the dialogue

On the other hand, all involved parties –the Turkish government, the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan– recently confirmed that there is an ongoing dialogue between Ocalan and high-ranking representatives of the state on Imrali Island. While some media organs try to blur what is actually going on, here are some facts about the dialogue:

- Ocalan and high ranking government officials have been meeting several times and for several days in a row
- The officials are not only speaking on behalf of the political party in government but on behalf of the state authorities
- The dialogue is not yet seen as qualified negotiations
- The talks have been severely endangered by the bomb attack on Kurdish pro-PKK villagers, killing 10 and widely believed to be carried out by state forces.

However the next step has to be qualified negotiations over a number of issues for a lasting solution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

Cornerstone for a solution: improving communication

For Ocalan to continue to play a positive role it is crucial that his means of communicating with the people, politicians and his own organisation are improved. That after some progress in an upcoming peace process he will convince the PKK to take further and irreversible steps like laying down their weapons under an international surveillance is only thinkable if he is granted the means to communicate with them.

While it may not be immediately possible that Ocalan is set free, many things can be done to improve his situation including his means of communication. The logical next step would be to include him into some “house arrest” setting with the possibility to receive other visitors beside his siblings and his lawyers.

⁵The delegation consisted of LYDIE ERR, Luxembourg, ALBRECHT KONEČNÝ, Austria, and JOHN AUSTIN, UK, all from the Socialist group (SOC).

Conclusion

The positive dialogue between Abdullah Ocalan and the state authorities should not be endangered by provocations but continued and extended to the level of qualified negotiations. Ocalan should be given the possibility to effectively continue to play his positive role in the public debates on a lasting peaceful political solution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. For this his overall conditions including his means of communication have to be improved.

European institutions like the EU and the Council of Europe have not adopted a positive policy on the issue until now. Unfortunately we have not seen any serious initiatives for a peaceful political solution. While this is very regrettable, Europe has still the chance to at least support the ongoing process and insist on the compliance with human rights standards.

Demands

- A new building does not change the fact that Imrali prison is an isolation prison. Imrali prison, the “European Guantánamo” has to be closed down. Abdullah Ocalan’s isolation and the discrimination against him must be ended.
- The “dialogue” should be extended and a real peace process should be started immediately.
- The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) should send an official delegation to observe the situation on Imrali Island and effectively demonstrate support for a solution through political dialogue.



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