



Conference Sovereignty or Nationalism?
Free State Rijeka Association and the Coppieters Foundation
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The political concept of Democratic Confederalism

Dear attendees, my name is Orhan Kiliç and for many years, I am a member of the Board of Directors for the Kurdish Institute Brussels. Over the recent years, the KIB has developed a vision regarding concepts such as sovereignty and nationalism. It is this vision that I would like to share with all of you today.

The Kurdish Institute is a recognized movement that strives for human and peoples' rights in the Middle East, Eurasia and the Caucasus. The institute stands up for the rights of Kurds, and for other peoples and ethnic minorities in these regions.

As you probably know, with approximately more than 45 million, the Kurds are by far the largest population without an own state. Kurds are spread over large parts of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran and a smaller part of northern Syria and Armenia. Most of these countries can hardly be labelled as democratic. On the contrary, in many cases they have become very autocratic regimes.

The Kurds' demand and pursuit for independence is centuries old. With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, and particularly with the encouragement of the United States, Kurdish nationalists looked to the eventual establishment of a Kurdistan state. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920 by representatives of the Allies and of the Ottoman sultan, provided a small glimmer of hope that a Kurdistan state would finally become a reality.

Due to the military revival of Turkey under Kemal Atatürk, this treaty was never ratified. It was replaced in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne. That was exactly 100 years ago. The outcome of the Treaty of Lausanne was disastrous for Kurds and all other minority groups. The state borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran were definitively established and 'suddenly' many of the ethnic peoples and minorities in that region no longer existed. Since then, a policy of repression, oppression, discrimination and assimilation towards Kurdish nationalist feelings has been pursued in all of these states.

The reason for this historical introduction is to outline the complexity that the Kurds face in their quest for independence, self-government or more autonomy.

To make it clear, Kurdish nationalism is a nationalist political movement which asserts that Kurds are a nation and espouses the creation of an independent Kurdistan from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Early Kurdish nationalism had its roots in the Ottoman Empire, within which Kurds were a significant ethnic group. With the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, its Kurdish-majority territories were divided between the newly formed states of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, making Kurds a significant ethnic minority in each state. Kurdish nationalist movements have long been suppressed by Turkey and the states of Iraq, Iran and Syria. Obviously all of these states fear a potential independent Kurdistan.



As the years pass, most of the Kurds have become aware that an independent Kurdistan remains a distant utopian idea. They began to consider other forms of self-government and/or self-determination. Amongst other, a form of 'sovereignty' could be a conceptual solution, because it concerns respect for each other's borders and the right to exercise authority within the borders of a national state, the right to self-determination.

From the Turkish prison where he has been locked up in isolation for more than 24 years, the former leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Öcalan, theorized and presented the concept of 'Democratic Confederalism' as a political solution to Kurdish national aspirations and the Kurdish yearning for sovereignty.

Öcalan became disillusioned with the nation-state model. He reformulated the political objectives of the Kurdish liberation movement, abandoning the old statist and centralizing socialist project for a radical and renewed proposal. This proposal no longer aims at building an independent state, but at establishing an autonomous, democratic and decentralized entity based on the ideas of Democratic Confederalism.

Democratic Confederalism, also known as Kurdish communalism, is a political concept about a system of democratic self-organization with the features of a confederation based on the principles of autonomy, direct democracy, political ecology, feminism, multi-ethnic, self-defence, self-governance and elements of a cooperative economy.

It is a model of libertarian socialism and participatory democracy built on the self-government of local communities and the organization of open councils, town councils, local parliaments, and larger congresses, where ALL citizens are the agents of self-government, allowing individuals and communities to exercise a real influence over their common environment and activities.

Democratic Confederalism has feminism as one of its central pillars. Öcalan advocates a new vision of society in order to dismantle the institutional and psychological relations of power currently established in capitalist societies and to ensure that women have a vital and equal role to that of men at all levels of organization and decision-making.

Other key principles of Democratic Confederalism are environmentalism, multiculturalism (religious, political, ethnic and cultural), individual freedoms (such as those of expression, choice and information), self-defense, and a sharing economy where control of economic resources does not belong to the state, but to society.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was established during the first years of the Syrian civil war and is completely based on the concept of Democratic Confederalism. The AANES unites Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Arameans, Yezidis, Turkmen, and Armenians.

When looking at the society model of the AANES, it becomes clear that Democratic Confederalism offers a solution for other fundamental problems in countries in the region deeply rooted in class society, and as a path to freedom and democratization for people around the world.