Former int'l PKK fighters emphasise organisation's influence on activism worldwide: Part 2

Two former PKK fighters share their unique perspectives on the movement, shaped by their experiences in the mountains of Kurdistan. As the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) marks another year since its founding on 27 November 1978, the movement remains at the forefront of one of the most complex and enduring struggles for self-determination, women's liberation and grassroots democracy.

Over the decades, the PKK has evolved from a primarily Kurdish nationalist organisation into a movement that has embraced broader ecological and feminist ideals, particularly under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan. Despite its controversial designation as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and other states, the PKK has profoundly influenced regional dynamics and inspired a generation of activists worldwide.

To mark this milestone, Medya News presents exclusive interviews with two former international PKK fighters. Both individuals share their unique perspectives on the movement,

shaped by their experiences in the mountains of Kurdistan during critical phases of the struggle. From reflections on the PKK's resilience after German reunification to accounts of the organisation's efforts to liberate women, these interviews offer a rare and nuanced insight into the PKK's history and transformative ideology.

As we delve into their stories, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, sacrifices and aspirations that define the Kurdish freedom movement. Through these testimonies, we aim to shed light on the PKK's enduring significance – not only for the Kurdish people, but for global struggles against oppression and inequality.

The first interview, with Anja Flach, is available here.

The second interview, with Wolfgang Struwe, is available in full below:

Medya News: You were one of the first international fighters to join the PKK after the fall of the Berlin Wall. What motivated you to do this? What happened that led you to go there?

Wolfgang Struwe: There was a solidarity movement for various organisations, whether it was Nicaragua, Palestine, or South Africa. However, the PKK was always vilified.

That naturally piqued my interest—what lies behind this vilification? I sought contact with Kurdish people. From there arose the desire not just to understand the Kurdish movement in Germany but also to see what it was like on the ground. And so, in 1993, I was able to go to the mountains.

On one hand, as you've just described, but on the other hand, I also think of the decisive message of the PKK. You sought contact, met people—what was ultimately the determining factor for you after those encounters?

At the time, I was involved in the anti-imperialist movement.

As we all know, after the reunification of Germany, most movements worldwide declined or were dismantled—except for the PKK. The PKK learned from real socialism, relying, as they said themselves, on their own strength. They continued the struggle and became one of the harshest critics of the real socialist systems. For me, this was a ray of hope—to explore why the PKK managed to grow stronger while all other movements faltered.

Behind this—why the PKK kept growing stronger while others declined—there must be value. What was it?

In my view, the reason why the PKK grew stronger and continues to do so lies in their genuine connection with their people. They analyse the population, their needs, the global situation, and draw conclusions from these.

What I find fascinating, and what led to the downfall of many movements—especially in Germany—is that while they could analyse problems, they lacked solutions. The PKK, however, is a party of solutions. It emerges stronger even from the most challenging situations, finding real solutions to problems.

Another aspect lies in the fact that, unlike in real socialist states, the PKK promoted women's struggle—not as a secondary contradiction but as one of the main pillars of the liberation

movement.

Could you briefly tell us a bit about yourself? When were you on the ground, and what were you doing there?

I was invited to the mountains in early 1993. Initially, I was in the south during the first PKK ceasefire, known as Nefros.

At first, I was in the south, in Selle, and from there I moved to the north. Most of my time was spent in Besta, in the entire Besta region. Occasionally, I was elsewhere—in Abitische, Bab, or Gaza, or Gaba—but the majority of the time, I stayed in Besta.

This isn't part of my prepared questions, but I'd really like to know—it's something I find particularly interesting. You mentioned that there was a ceasefire during your time there.

Yes. For me, it was a significant step for the PKK to say: we cannot solve the Kurdish question militarily; we need negotiations and dialogue. But as we know, this ceasefire lasted only briefly and was ended harshly by the Turkish state and regime. In Besta, we saw that there were no villages, no people—no civilians left.

I passed through burned-out, destroyed villages. That alone explains much of what was happening at that time. However, I'd also like to know how the commanders and leadership responded to the ceasefire.

As individuals, they carried hope, even though they knew it wouldn't last long and would soon end. Of course, declaring the ceasefire was a strategic or tactical move. But we must acknowledge that on one side stood Öcalan, who demonstrated a willingness for dialogue.

I think there was hope to lead the struggle diplomatically, through dialogue. Yet on the ground—among the fighters and commanders—no one really believed that the Turkish state would extend a hand for peace.

Do you draw the conclusion that the Turkish state has always acted, or often acts, politically manipulatively?

Yes, the regime constantly seeks opportunities to strengthen itself. The annihilation of the PKK remains its highest priority—then and now. Back then, it was said the PKK would be destroyed within a week, and they still say that today. But this regime… I think it will take global change to truly resolve the Kurdish question.

Above all, the solution must come through the parliament. Real negotiations with concrete consequences must take place. From 2000 to 2015, we saw such negotiations, leading to a period of détente in Kurdistan, particularly North Kurdistan.

I believe this period gave the people hope, real hope. They thought, "We're on the path to peace." However, as we know, the talks abruptly ended, sparking a devastating urban war. Many towns in North Kurdistan were razed to the ground. This shows the intent of the Turkish regime, but not only the Turkish regime—NATO states are also involved, driving this agenda.

One second—just a quick question that struck me. Have you personally met Öcalan?

Yes, I had the chance to meet Abdullah Öcalan, albeit briefly.

How was it?

Warm, very warm. I was in an apartment in Damascus, a party residence. Suddenly, everything became busy—people cleaning, organising—but no one told me what was happening. Then Öcalan entered the room. We greeted each other warmly and had a relatively short conversation. Later, I went to the academy near Damascus.

Can you recall what you discussed during your brief conversation?

Yes, such moments are hard to forget. I was utterly unprepared and quite taken aback by his warmth and friendliness, which were immediate. His openness was remarkable—something I witnessed throughout my time with the PKK. Nothing was hidden from me, and Öcalan himself was very candid. He even pointed out that too few people had joined the movement at that time.

At that time, it was very different from Rojava today, where people from all over the world have joined. Back then, in the 1990s, there were very few of us. He immediately began asking me questions—how things were, how I assessed the struggle in the mountains, and what suggestions I had to make the fight more effective. This shows how problem-solving was always a priority.

Öcalan didn't know I was there. He had come to conduct a diplomatic meeting with an Austrian politician. He quickly withdrew after their meeting began, but unexpectedly called me in. He told the Austrian politician, "Here's a chance to speak with someone from Europe who has experienced the war firsthand." That was significant for me—it showed trust in people and comrades.

How would you assess the struggle in the mountains, both then and now, if you can recall?

When I first arrived in Besta, the ceasefire had just ended. It had lasted only until May, and the war resumed immediately.

It was a turbulent time, under Tansu Çiller's government. Many recall that era as one where over 4,000 villages were destroyed, and countless people were displaced. The struggle reflected these harsh realities. I essentially stumbled into war, unprepared and unequipped. Many comrades would say, "War is beautiful, war is beautiful." Initially, I didn't understand this—war isn't beautiful to me. But over time, I interpreted it as a reference to the camaraderie, the mutual support that developed under such dire circumstances, and the ability to continue the struggle under extreme hardship.

The conditions were truly harsh. Sometimes, we'd hear in the news that "80 guerrillas were killed," yet we were alive. It showed us the extent of psychological warfare. Even with 10,000 soldiers deployed to infiltrate the region, they couldn't dislodge the guerrillas. The PKK always found ways to defend its areas and adapt.

For me, as a European, it was especially challenging. I had to learn everything anew. For instance, walking in darkness. In Germany, it's never completely dark, but in Kurdistan, you must walk under a bright moonlight—where soldiers might see you—or in pitch darkness,

where you can’t see anything yourself. I had to learn to move like a child, to navigate without sight.

And with little food. Food was always scarce. It was either red lentils or… red lentils. Finding noodles was a major event. Since there were no civilians in the area, our supplies were extremely limited. By late summer, when we could reach villages to harvest grapes or store food for winter, it was special.

Items like onions and potatoes were critical, particularly for the injured. Medical supplies were scarce—unlike today—so good nutrition was vital for recovery. Most of the best food went to the wounded.

What impressed me greatly was the solidarity with the injured. I spent a lot of time in so-called hospitals. It was hard—amputations were common—but unlike in Germany, you were never alone. People stayed together, supported each other. Here, you go to a hospital alone; there, everyone held each other through the pain.

In Germany, the PKK is banned as a terrorist organisation. As a German, what’s your perspective on this ban?

The ban reveals Germany’s stance in this conflict. It shows that Germany isn’t willing to end the war there.

On one hand, there’s the ban. On the other, we’ve seen German tanks in Şırnak in 1992 during Nefros, or Leopards rolling into Afrin. Even I witnessed weapons from the former East German Army—everything from Kalashnikovs to tanks to uniforms—being used by the Turkish military. These weapons ended up with village guards and the military. Paramilitaries were equipped with these, as well as armoured vehicles, prompting a brief ban on arms exports.

But now, we’re seeing the PKK ban mark 31 years. This month, it’s been 31 years since the ban. And yet, just the other day, four Kurdish activists were arrested under anti-terror laws.

In Hamburg, two cases resulted in long prison sentences—not for committing any crime but to send a message to Kurds: you can do anything, but you cannot organise as the PKK. The PKK is the only movement leading the freedom struggle in Kurdistan.

The last question: What would you say overall about the Kurdish question, which seems to ebb and flow over time? The leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, has officially invited Abdullah Öcalan to Parliament to give a speech—not directly about peace, but to address Parliament. The mere fact that Öcalan has been invited is a significant step. At the same time, however, we see the appointment of state trustees in place of elected officials. How do you view this situation, and what do you think will happen? What, in your opinion, is the solution?

On one hand, they say Öcalan should come to Parliament; on the other hand, he remains isolated.

Not just isolated—this is a form of torture, isolation torture. Although the death penalty was abolished under European pressure, they essentially said, “We kill him every day.” This daily killing is carried out by depriving him of all communication.

We saw that through strong resistance, this isolation could momentarily be broken. After the brief conversation he was able to have with his nephew, or a representative, Öcalan stated that the isolation persists.

This shows how little belief there is that the problem will be resolved soon. I believe much of this is tactical—they claim to want a resolution but focus instead on the PKK. On one hand, they talk about solutions like Öcalan addressing Parliament; on the other, the expectation is that he should declare the dissolution of the PKK.

This mirrors past events. Öcalan has repeatedly stated, even after his arrest, that he could resolve the conflict within a week if given the opportunity. However, he is not allowed to do so. It's a constant game of carrot and stick. Resolving the Kurdish question often seems like a ploy by NATO. The PKK is used to placate Turkey on one hand while keeping it weak on the other. Currently, Turkey's position within NATO has weakened, partly due to Erdoğan's repeated attempts to cooperate with Russia and the BRICS countries and his criticisms of NATO. Furthermore, his stance on the Palestine conflict, openly supporting Palestine and groups like Hamas, has drawn ire in Europe.

In Turkey, we see a lot of political manoeuvring but no concrete steps. The only tangible progress can come through strengthening the Kurdish movement—not only within Kurdistan but globally. The Kurdish movement is strong because it is everywhere.

This makes it different from other movements that concentrate their strength domestically. Of course, the Kurdish movement is rooted in its homeland, but the Kurdish population is widespread.

Whenever something happens, such as events on 25 November—the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women—actions are organised across Europe and worldwide. I think the solution lies in breaking isolation, as seen with Rojava. This is a key issue.

Regionally, I observe that the movement often works independently but does not align itself with other initiatives or build alliances. More internationalist and democratic coalitions should be formed. I believe the diaspora plays a crucial role in promoting democracy and peace, not only in Kurdistan but worldwide.

This is the strongest peace movement. It is a challenging task for the movement, but it is one they must undertake alongside those involved in it. We stand on the brink of a major war. A potential solution could involve the PKK playing a key role. The PKK is the solution.