

Solidarity with War Resistance in Turkey

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Introduction

I myself am involved in supporting the Turkish war resisters movement since about 1995. This presentation is based on my own experience and discussions I had in the last 10 years with Turkish activists. It is therefore very subjective, and all views expressed are mine, and not the ones of the Turkish war resisters.

The Turkish war resisters movement – a brief history

The Turkish movement – if we can call it a movement¹ – of war resisters or conscientious objectors goes back to 1990, with the second public declaration of conscientious objection, which was linked to a small campaign against conscription², and led to the prosecution of the first conscientious objectors based on Article 155, “alienating the people from the military”.

A first association to promote conscientious objection – the *Savaş Karşıtları Derneği* (War Resisters Association – SKD) – was founded in Izmir at the end of 1992, which can be seen as a first attempt to give some organisational base to the network of individuals. This was soon followed by a public declaration of six conscientious objectors in Izmir.

A major event – still important for the Turkish movement today – was the *International Conscientious Objectors' Meeting (ICOM)*, which took place in Ören in Turkey from 10-17 July 1993. This meeting was so important because it connected the Turkish groups with the international CO movement, and – even more than 10 years later – serves as a point of reference and inspiration³.

With even very limited organisational efforts came state repression: On 8 November 1993 the still young Izmir SKD is disbanded by the governor of Izmir, and members of the association are charged with Art 155. Istanbul SKD, which had been founded in autumn 1993, is disbanded again after a press conference on 17 May 1994, which led to the arrest of Turkish COs and 3 German members of a delegation. But in the early stages of the movement no-one was actually charged or arrested because of their conscientious objection – the authorities preferred other charges – such as Art 155 – to intimidate the movement.

The events in Istanbul from 17 May 1994 set the stage for the next development. One of the Turkish activists on trial for the press conference was *Osman Murat Ülke*⁴

1 Often we associate movements with mass mobilisation – clearly something the Turkish movement of war resisters did not achieve. However, each mass movement goes back to small groups making an issue known, which later might need to mass mobilisation. In this sense, the Turkish war resisters movement is a potential “movement in the making”.

2 Although the first public declaration of conscientious objection occurred in 1989, it did not have much impact. The second public declaration, made by Vedat Zencir, who later became an important activist within the Izmir War Resisters Association, received media coverage and brought the issue to the attention of the public (Patchwork 1998).

3 One of the recent proposals from Turkey to re-energise the movement was to again organise an ICOM meeting. However, history does not repeat itself that easily, and the meeting of 1993 took place in a special context. The context in 2006 is very different.

4 The case is documented in WRI 2005

(Ossi). Although he was finally acquitted of charges based on Art 155 on 29 August 1995, the court gave order to transfer him to the recruitment office, where he was given an order to present himself at his military unit within 3 days. Instead of doing so he burned his call-up papers in a press conference in Izmir on 1 September 1995, and publicly declared his conscientious objection⁵. This led to his arrest one year later, on 7 October 1996, and a series of trials based on “disobeying orders” - his conscientious objection. He is sentenced to prison repeatedly, released, sent back to his unit, arrested, sentenced, etc... He is finally released on 9 March 1999, but officially required to report to his unit, and lives a semi-legal life ever since.

The time of Ossi's imprisonment was a time of wide international support by the network of War Resisters' International, but also by other organisations, especially Amnesty International. But it also stretched the capacities of the activists within Turkey, who had to provide support to Ossi, and organise a national and international campaign. They requested (and then had to host) international delegations to trials; they needed funding for lawyers and their visits to the prison and the trials, and so on. While in the beginning Ossi's arrest and imprisonment energised the movement within Turkey, and solidarity committees sprang up in several cities, this was short lived, and after some month all work had to be done by the old core of activists – a pattern that was repeated 10 years later after the arrest of Mehmet Tarhan.

After the release of *Osman Murat Ülke*, the movement went through a quiet phase. The activists of the group in Izmir – working informally, after their second association had also been banned following Ossi's arrest – were exhausted, and also shifted their focus to other issues, especially nonviolence training⁶. Ossi himself decided that he did not want to risk arrest, and kept a low profile, which meant that the movement had lost its public face. Grassroots activities on conscientious objection and antimilitarism were mainly initiated by the *Istanbul Antimilitarist Initiative* (IAMI), a more loosely organised group. While there were a number of publicly declared conscientious objectors, neither the COs, nor the Turkish authorities seem to have been keen on a confrontation – no CO was arrested for a while⁷.

Activities increased from 2000 on, with new energy and new public declarations of conscientious objection, mainly organised by IAMI in Istanbul. From 2004 on, initiated by IAMI, the groups in Turkey organise a “*Militourism Festival*” on or around 15 May, which in some way serves as a focus of activities for conscientious objection. *Militourism Festivals* took place in Istanbul in 2004, Izmir in 2005, and Ankara in 2006.

5 See for example: Osman Murat Ulke burns his call-up papers. In *Peace News* No 2395, October 1996, <http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2395/pn239508.htm>

6 In April 1996, a first nonviolent action training is held in Foca, near Izmir. This leads to increased interest in nonviolent training, and some of the participants from Izmir go on to become nonviolence trainers, and build a core group of trainers within Turkey. The training is documented in *Probleme des Friedens* 3/1997. A Turkish version published by Izmir SKD, is confiscated by the Turkish authorities.

7 The brief arrests of COs Halil Savda in 2004 (see <http://www.wri-irg.org/news/2005/turkey05-en.htm#Heading14>) and Mehmet Bal in 2002 (see <http://www.wri-irg.org/news/2005/turkey05-en.htm#Heading16>) did not re-energise the movement. Both COs represented difficult cases, and were unable to provide identification for the CO movement.

Only the arrest of Mehmet Tarhan on 8 April 2005, and his subsequent trials led to a new wave of activism, and international solidarity. Again, groups such as the network of War Resisters' International and Amnesty International issued alerts, and raised public awareness abroad. Within Turkey, new activists joined solidarity committees for Mehmet Tarhan, that sprung up in several cities. The fact that Mehmet Tarhan is gay also broadened the audience, and led to LGBT groups joining solidarity actions for Mehmet Tarhan⁸. On 9 March 2006, Mehmet Tarhan has been released from prison, and now is in a situation similar to Osman Murat Ülke – being ordered to report to his unit, and therefore living a semi-legal life (PN 2006). His release followed two important legal victories: On 24 January 2006, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg finally ruled in favour of *Osman Murat Ülke*, and in March, a second judgement of the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of members of the Izmir Savas Karsitlari Dernegi.

International support for the Turkish war resisters movement

International support was crucial for the Turkish war resisters movement, but at times not easy. In addition, the political focus of the groups providing support might have been different from the focus of the groups in Turkey, a situation that from time to time led to tensions.

Besides Amnesty International, which did not provide direct support to Turkish CO groups, but campaigned for the release of conscientious objectors when they were imprisoned – especially in the cases of Osman Murat Ülke and Mehmet Tarhan – international support was mainly provided by the following groups:

- War Resisters' International (London office)
- Connection e.V., Germany, and DFG-VK Hessen (focus on conscientious objection).
- DFG-VK Nordrhein-Westfalen (focus on nonviolence training)
- Stop de Oorlog in Turkiye, Netherlands (focus on conscientious objection)
- MOC and Objecion Fiscal in Spain (focus on conscientious objection)
- Bewegungsstiftung, Germany (support to Ferda Ülker as nonviolence trainer)

International support fell mainly into the following categories:

- **Emergency campaigning, including delegations and speaking tours**

International campaigning for Turkish war resisters was often linked to state repression: Trials based on charges of violation of Art 155 in the early stages, including sending of international delegations to these trials. These delegations mainly served two purposes: as a signal to the Turkish authorities and public that there is international support to the Turkish war resisters, and to generate public awareness “back home”.

A similar role played speaking tours of Turkish activists abroad. In 1995, a speaking tour of Osman Murat Ülke through several European countries

⁸ Sadly, Mehmet Tarhan being gay was one of the main reasons for Amnesty International to get involved. A shift in focus at Amnesty International in recent years means that conscientious objection is not considered an important issue any more, and Mehmet Tarhan being gay allowed AI staff to get involved on a larger scale than if it would just have been for “conscientious objection”. The success of LGBT groups in lobbying AI came at a cost to conscientious objectors.

(Spain, France, Netherlands, Germany, Austria) laid the groundwork for the later solidarity campaigns. Shorter speaking tours, especially to Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain, took place later, especially with activists from the Izmir SKD.

- **Movement building support within Turkey**

This is a broad category, and includes financial assistance to Turkish groups, as well as cooperation in organising seminars or events, mainly or partly serving the Turkish movement. This includes several trainings (nonviolence training⁹, Movement Action Plan training¹⁰), seminars (the WRI seminar and Council meeting took place in Turkey in September 2001¹¹), and also long-term stays of foreign activists in Turkey, to work for and with the Turkish groups¹². Several problems can be associated with this kind of support:

- The decision to support one group and not another one can create tensions among Turkish groups. The criteria who receives support might depend more on the agenda of the foreign supporter, than on the Turkish situation. Support can also more easily be given to more formally organised groups than to more loosely organised initiatives. Thus, the Izmir SKD was and is main recipient of foreign financial support, and as a result is much better connected internationally.
- External support – financially or sending of personnel – can create an artificial structure, which is not really sustained by support from within the country. The presence of foreign personnel in Izmir probably kept Izmir SKD alive longer than it would have without this presence, although the foreign presence also facilitated a process of shifting the focus of the Izmir activists consciously more into the direction of nonviolence training, after the release of Osman Murat Ülke.
- Seminars or trainings – even in co-organised with a Turkish partner – are often based on the agenda of the foreign partner. This is true for the ICOM in 1993, which was one meeting of an existing network, although it took place in Turkey. But it is also true of the training on Foca in 1995, or the WRI seminar in 2001, although in both cases a special effort was made to include the Turkish groups in the organising and shaping of the event, and to a large degree successful.

- **Building a link between groups in Turkey and the Turkish Diaspora abroad**

Especially Connection e.V. and SOT in the Netherlands also work with groups of the Turkish Diaspora abroad – in Germany and the Netherlands respectively. This is difficult and one of the sources of tensions and

9 Probleme des Friedens 1997

10 Patchwork 1998

11 See http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2445/ferda_ulker.html and http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2445/coskun_usterci.html

12 In 1998, a German-Turkish activists worked with Izmir SKD as part of a programme of the German Shalom Diakonot. In 2000-2001, two German activists organised their own stay in Izmir for 12 and 18 month, to work with the Izmir SKD.

disagreements between groups in Turkey and international supporters. One of the main activities abroad is to promote public declarations of conscientious objection by Turkish citizens abroad (in fact most of these are people of Kurdish origin at different stages of their asylum application). The problems arise because groups in Turkey have doubts about the CO declarations made abroad, within the framework of an asylum application. The person declaring himself as a conscientious objector hopes to increase his chances of being granted asylum through a CO declaration. However, groups in Turkey fear that these declarations won't stand in the case of the persons being deported back to Turkey after a failed asylum application, and in fact in a few cases people then performed their military service.

An additional problem is that only very few Turkish Diaspora activists keep working beyond their public declaration of CO.

- **Lobbying international institutions and legal support**

The lobbying of international institutions – especially the Council of Europe and the different institutions of the European Union – became more important recently, and increasingly following the arrest of Mehmet Tarhan, and the decisions of the European Union to formally open talks with Turkey about EU membership. It has been possible to build relationships with some members of the European parliament, who supported Mehmet Tarhan while he was in prison, and who raised the issue with the European Commission. Later this year, a hearing will take place in the European Parliament, organised by the European Parliament Peace Initiatives Intergroup, which is co-chaired by Tobias Pflüger (Germany) and Caroline Lucas (UK).

International support was also important in bringing the case of Osman Murat Ülke to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. While Turkish lawyers played an important role in preparing the case, it would have been much harder to bring it to the court without the cooperation of Kevin Boyle from the University of Essex. It is still not known who brought the same case to the attention of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention¹³.

Some questions for discussion

The organisers of this seminar gave me a few questions to look at. Well – I take one of those, and add one of my own.

Home/International balance.

Question: Turkish war resisters have put quite a lot of energy into international networking, and indeed after the Ossi campaign, the Izmir group said they didn't have the energy to support another war resister immediately. So has this using the energy internationally paid off? Have they had a good home/international balance?

This question is very difficult to answer, especially for someone coming from abroad. And it's not always an easy choice to make. During the time of Ossi's imprisonment, energy went into both directions: the support to new solidarity committees, and creating international support. In addition, the direct support to Ossi in prison took a lot of energy, which stretched the capacities of the small group in Izmir (thus the remark that they would not be able to support another war resister immediately). However, during the time of Ossi's imprisonment, two other CO activists – Vedat Zencir and Erkan Çalpur – tried to provoke their own arrest, to increase the pressure, but the Turkish authorities too did not want a second CO in prison, due to the international awareness that Ossi's case had raised.

During a strategy session in Sigacik close to Izmir in April 1998, based on the model of the Movement Action Plan, the need to build more of a movement in Turkey was strongly felt¹⁴, but at the same time most participants felt that this was very difficult to achieve, especially since most solidarity committees which had been founded after Ossi's arrest had already ceased to exist.

In addition, the fact that a male resister was in prison and required support was one factor which brought the gender dynamics within the group out into the open after the release of Ossi, and lead to the founding of the *antimilitarist feminists* within ISKD. It was to a large degree the demand of the women activists within ISKD that lead to a shift of focus from conscientious objection to nonviolence training after the release of Ossi, as this served more their own needs and interests.

More recently, the group in Istanbul that was at the core of the support to Mehmet Tarhan never had the same international connections that the Izmir group had and has – partly due to language problems, but also for ideological reasons. It is maybe not surprising then that the Istanbul group established a new tradition of CO activism in Turkey with the invention of the *Militourism Festival*. The lack of international experience within the Istanbul group, however, made the organisation of international delegations to trials of Mehmet Tarhan much more difficult, and also less satisfying for those travelling from abroad to Turkey. Besides “being there”, the Istanbul group made little use of the presence of the delegation, i.e. organising press conferences or interviews with Turkish media.

While I agree that it would have been good to have a stronger Turkish base – back in 1996, but also now – this is not necessarily something that can be chosen. In the given situation, the international support was the only realistic option for the Turkish movement, and also helped their standing within the existing more traditional Turkish left.

Clarity of goals and differences international/national

With the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights the movement in Turkey enters a new phase. There is now pressure on Turkey to regulate the issue of conscientious objection, which is likely to follow the established legal European

14 The MAP defines as one of the tasks for a movement in stage II “*establish new grassroots groups and national networks*” - all participants saw the need to work on this.

model in one way or other – which means some restricted right to conscientious objection, which will bring the duty to perform a substitute service.

The existing groups in Turkey define themselves as total objectors, and are not in favour of a substitute service. At the same time, the existence of more than 50 declared objectors who potentially face arrest at any time leads to some desire to legalise their situation, even though they are opposed to substitute service. The Turkish groups themselves are presently not very clear what they want, and how they want to respond to the new situation.

This can potentially be dangerous, because international groups already start to act. The *European Bureau for Conscientious Objection* is lobbying European institutions – based on European standards, which favour a substitute service. A conference is being organised in Turkey, scheduled for December 2006 or January 2007, and co-organised by *Human Rights Watch* and *War Resisters' International*, in cooperation with Istanbul University.

It will be difficult for international supporters to accept guidance from the Turkish CO activists, when this guidance simply does not exist, due to a lack of clarity among Turkish CO activists. The new situation also means that new actors get involved, which might just follow a standard human rights approach – this might be established Turkish human rights groups, or also international human rights organisations. It is likely that groups – such as EBCO – with a different agenda will find partners in Turkey to pursue their agenda, especially in the absence of a clear CO voice from Turkey, which is relevant to the present situation.

Conclusions

The Turkish war resisters movement came a long way since 1990, although it did not (yet) achieve the recognition of the right to conscientious objection, which anyway was never their main objective (at least not in the way it is usually understood within a human rights framework). International support was often crucial for the movement, especially in cases of imprisonment of activists, but also beyond, in providing inspiration, moral, and practical support.

As a result of the combination of local, national, and international efforts, but also of the wider political developments (such as EU membership talks), Turkey is now at a crucial point regarding the right to CO, which leaves the movement unprepared. In this crucial situation, it is important that international supporters act with sensitivity to the needs and the state of discussion among Turkish groups, if the not always easy but in general positive co-operation is to continue in the future. This might be difficult, because there is some urgency to exploit the present “window of opportunity”, but it is crucial.

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