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# PRISONER SUPPORT AND ANARCHIST ORGANIZATION IN TURKEY

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# Prisoner support and anarchist organization in Turkey

by Richard

*The Gezi Uprising of 2013, the war in Kurdistan in 2015, the war in Syria and the coup attempt of 2016 are used by the Turkish State to violently target those who are (allegedly) critical towards the regime. Five days after the coup attempt in 2016, the Turkish State declared a state of emergency<sup>1</sup> which has been rigorously used to repress critical voices and consolidate power of Erdogan and his AKP party. Leftist, revolutionaries, journalists, various ethnicities, academics, civil servants, teachers, politicians and members of other religious groups (Gülenist) among others have been killed, detained, imprisoned or lost their jobs. Between July 2016 and 4 March 2019, 85,998 people have been arrested, 150,348 have been dismissed from their jobs, 6,021 academics lost their jobs, 189 media outlets have been shut down, 319 journalists have been arrested ([www.turkeypurge.com](http://www.turkeypurge.com)).*

*In March 2019, I talked with H., a member of Devrimci Anarşist Faaliyet (DAF: Revolutionary Anarchist Action) about anarchism in Turkey, organizing under a state of emergency and the prison system and prisoner support in Turkey. We had a long and detailed conversation, which was still too short to fully discuss the political situation in Turkey. This article contains some excerpts of our conversation where we added several clarifying sentences. It must be noted, that this article offers an insight into the situation in Turkey which is not a fully elaborated and detailed account of what is happening here.*

## **To start, can you maybe say something about yourself and the organization you are working with?**

I am H. and I am a member of DAF, Revolutionary Anarchist Action. DAF has been acting since 2009 and aims to socialize anarchism in Turkey. We socialize anarchism through self-organized collectives such as café 26A, Meydan newspaper, PATIKA ecological collective, anarchist women's organization, anarchist youth movement and anarchist high school organization. Within various struggles we talk about anarchism and act as anarchist to show and socialize anarchist ideas in Turkey.

As you mentioned, since the coup trials of 2016 much has changed. But when we talk about the state of emergency and the coup trials, we prefer to talk about the state of emergency which was declared in Kurdistan in 2015. We experienced the conditions of the state of emergency before the State imposed the general the general state of emergency in 2016. When we talk about the domestic politics of Turkey, for example the state of emergency, we also need to talk about the foreign politics of the Turkish state. For the last 8-years the Turkish state has used foreign strategies for domestic politics and the Turkish state prefers domestic strategies for foreign politics. There is no difference between domestic politics and foreign politics.

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## Can you maybe say something more about the distinction between foreign and domestic politics and how these two political strategies relate to the state of emergency

When I talk about the foreign politics, I talk about the Syrian war and the strategies towards the Rojava Revolution. We talk about the Middle East, where the actors are not only Assad, Kurdish movement, ISIS, but also the US, Russia and big energy companies. When we talk about war, it means a lot for the economy and politics.

What I mean that there is no difference between domestic politics and foreign politics, which States use war for political strategies inside their territory.

For example, in Turkey, the war in Kurdistan raised nationalist ideas and increased conservatism in Turkey which enabled the State to increase repression on revolutionaries. Kurdish and Alevi people and other ethnicities are more

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repressed and affected by the war politics of the State. In 2015, especially, after the Rojava revolution, the Turkish State changed their strategy in Kurdistan. The Turkish State started their war politics and declared the state of emergency in every village from city to city and waged a war in Kurdistan. The main aim of the state of emergency is to control the cities, detaining revolutionaries and even kill them. During these times, the Turkish State committed many atrocities and killed many people. They destroyed many houses and used chemical weapons. For example, I remember a woman, she was pregnant and she was killed by a sniper in Mardin. The State was mobilising fascist and there were nationalist protests in cities. Although a broad and complex topic, the last years there is a rise of a new kind of nationalism where Islamic values become more important and are mixed with conservatism and an Ottoman identity.

We describe this period of politics as terror-crazy to show the relation between States and so-called terrorist organization. Terror-crazy describes the acts of terrorist organizations and acts of States and they are related. States change their character from liberal democrats to more authoritarian state. Various terms are used to describe this period, such as post democracy, electoral autocracy, in fact, there is a reality that a new kind of state is appearing. Before state of emergency in Kurdistan, the Turkish state used, terrorist gangs as ISIS to bomb a big meeting of HDP (Peoples Democratic Party) in Diyarbakir and a meeting in Ankara against economic crisis. We lost two anarchist comrades in the ISIS bombing.



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States use terror, either directly or indirectly. Why did France declare the state of emergency? Because attacks of ISIS or other radical Islamist groups. What we need to see is that states use these attacks to sharpen their politics inside and outside their territories. States change their character from liberal democrats to more authoritarian state. This shows that the state of emergency, as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben illustrates, is not exclusively Turkish or French, it is a big weapon for state. States can declare state of emergency whenever they want. For us, as anarchists, this is a good point to underline. The state of emergency shows the limits of liberal states.



**You were talking about state emergency before the coup attempt in 2016, five days after the coup, the state declared a general state of emergency. Can you tell something about this difference? What were your experiences?**

State of emergency in Bakurê Kurdistan was sharper because they killed more people. During these times, there was also more resistance against the Turkish state by for example self-defence unites. The Turkish state won this battle in Kurdistan and they became more self-confident to act as the boss. Practically this means that it is easier for them to declare and manage a general state of emergency. In 2016, after the coup attempt, the Turkish state declared the general state of emergency. The general state of emergency was declared after the war in Kurdistan.

In Turkey, there are many debates if this coup was really coup, or a scenery to consolidate political power more. Far away from these debates, there is a clear reality, that the Turkish state used this coup for their benefits. It has been three years since the state declared the state of emergency, and although, officially, the state of

emergency has ended, yet, the repression continues. For the last 3 years the state did not allow any kind of opposition any kind of economic or social strategy. During the state of emergency in 2018, the government replaced its parliamentary system with a system that consolidate virtually all political power in a presidency. Through this change, the president has more power than the parliament, which means, that Erdogan got all the power. For now, with the upcoming elections in March 2019, this means that they are talking about the opposition as terrorists. I am not only talking about the social opposition, but I am talking about parliamentary opposition, which the AKP frames as the terrorist. This kind of speech frames the opposition as terrorist, which legitimizes acts against parliamentarians. For example, it is easy to put them in jail or it is easier to fire them from parliament etc.

**You mentioned in the beginning that DAF aims to socialize anarchism. Can you tell something about socializing anarchism during the state of emergency? And what does the state of emergency practically mean for the social opposition and for anarchist organizations?**

During the state of emergency, the state banned any kind of protest, including distributing newspaper and leaflets. As a social opposition, we force this limitation. We are publishing Meydan Newspaper printing 2500 editions, which we distribute in 16 cities in Turkey, three Kurdish cities and we also distribute the newspaper in the streets. We are also sharing Meydan Newspaper through the internet. The important thing for us is to reach people who are repressed by economic power, social power or political power and to be in touch with them. The newspaper is a great medium to get in touch with people. In Meydan newspaper we published about massacres and state committed atrocities in Mardin and Nuysabin I mentioned before. And because we wrote about these violent events, we were punished. The state closed the newspaper for six months because they claimed that we were making terrorist propaganda. Some of our writers, editors and distributors got punished and were sentenced to jail. Eventually, we managed to run the newspaper again, however, we are still trouble with the newspaper because the state claims that we are making terrorist propaganda.

To go back to your question, before the state of emergency it was harder for the state to put people into custody who distribute leaflets or newspaper. It is easier now. During state of emergency they created several new laws that makes it easier to arrest and even kill people. There is a law in Turkey that forbids to make

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people feel bad about the state and the government. These kind of laws and forms of repression, does not allow us to distribute the newspaper in bookshops or for two year the newspaper was not allowed in prison. For example, three comrades have taken into custody because they were distributing the newspaper. Two of them, got punishment for resisting the police. Another law that came into force is that when the police feel themselves in danger, they can kill. They are allowed to kill. People have been murdered, while not doing anything. They were killed only because they stand in front of the police. When the police feel that they are in danger; they kill. And there is no punishment when the police kill people. There are many cases like this, only a few of these killings got attention in the mainstream media.

After the State banned any kind of protest, they hold the streets. It is not easy to make protest. It is not easy to do anything. The mainstrategy of the state is this: they prevent people to come together.

The places of DAF, 26a Collective, 26a workshop and we have another café European side and another café (Istanbul), offers space for people to come together. During the state of emergency, we started a workshop space to make people come together and talk and discuss about politics. Preventing people of coming together is not just happening in Turkey, according to us, it part of the world-wide politics of the state.

***"During state of emergency they created several new laws that makes it easier to arrest and even kill people."***

Another important thing that is close to terror-cracy, and is important for anarchist organization in Turkey, is the economic crisis. For the last 3 years, there has been an economic crisis in Turkey. Last summer, it became obvious that there is economic crisis in Turkey. We started 26a collective in 2009, and it functions as a collective economy to solve our economic problems. Because, for our needs we have to work. It is not one individual, but everyone has to work. We came together and talked about this for more than one year. We talked how to solve this problem. We talked



about the needs of a human being and to talk about collectivizing the solutions for the economic problems of capitalism. We decided to organize a collective café, to use our time to work in this café. We prefer to work in collective than working in another place. The café it is not only an economic effort, the café is a gathering place where we use the space for presentation and different experience sharing events. The first years it was hard to run the place, it was hard to pay the rents and the bills. However, we believed that the project is important and we decided to run this café and we were working other jobs to pay the rent and other bills.

In the first years of the cafe, the café was everything; our house, 15 anarchists came together to run the café, as an economical project. In 2019, we have three cafés, which we run collectively, there is no boss and we do not work with any kind of wage system. There is collective budget, so the individuals in the collective, satisfy their needs and give according their abilities. There is no one, or there is no group of people who pays the wages, but the people get according to their needs according to the collective budget. The first years it was difficult to satisfy our needs. This is the reality. Now, if we compare, it is easier to satisfy some of our needs. There are now 50 people in the collective. Three families with their children are inside this economic gathering.

This economic model, can be the solution for the people. So, it is also socializing this economic model. There were many things we did wrong, yet, there where are also many things we did good. We learned from our failures. In times of economic crisis times, we aim to collectivize the solutions of capitalist problems.



**One of the strategies of the state to silence critical voices and ban any form of social opposition is putting people in prison. Since the coup attempt of 2016, more than 86000 people have been incarcerated. You also mentioned that you have some comrades in prison, can you say something about the prison system in Turkey? Your comrades who are detained? How people can support them?**

We have one comrade who calls himself revolutionary anarchist, another comrade who calls themselves anarchist, and another friend is a transwomen prisoner. The first comrade is Umut Fırat, he is in jail for 25 years, and is a political prisoner from the Kurdish freedom movement. For 15 years he calls himself anarchist and for the last 5 years he calls himself a revolutionary anarchist and he writes for Meydan Newspaper.

In Turkey, the prison system differentiated between political prisoners and other prisoners. Political prisoners are held in different prisons. In Turkey, there are E and F type prison cells. F type prison cell is for one person in one little room, while E type prison cell is for three people. Before the E and F type prison system political prisoners were held together with large numbers. This was useful for political prisoners. There is political motivation for people to come inside. And it is easy to react to the state inside the prison. The government changed the system in the first years of 2000 and they had a big operation to organize this. Political prisoners resisted this change<sup>2</sup>. The state made big operation to crackdown the protest where they killed many political prisoners. After this operation, the government changed the prison system slowly, day by day they changed the prison into the F and E type prison system.

One of our comrades is in an E-Type prison, the other is in an F type prison. At the moment, the state is building so-called prison cities. It is not like a city, but I am talking about a big region, with 20 buildings out of the city. Umut Fırat is in a prison similar like this. The government tries to put political prisoners in there. Moving political prisoners out of the city is another strategy of the state to deal with political prisoners.

Since, the state of emergency and the high numbers of prisoners resulted in many problems. The cells for 3 individuals, became a cell for 15 individuals. The state frames the coup as being organized by a religious community (Fethullah Gülen) that has been cooperating with the government before. During state of emergency, the Turkish government names people who are allegedly connected to the Gülen movement as FETO (Fetohullah Terrorist Organization). The state created a new terrorist organization in (FETO) and members or the people they think they are members they put them in jail. The numbers of political prisoners increased.



For example, around 2.5 year ago, Umut Firit was living in the toilet because he was detained with 15 other people in a small cell. His bed was in the toilet. It was a hard condition. It is not only UmuT Firit, he is just an example. Because we face state of emergency outside, but inside the prison there is also state of emergency. Because of this, around 2.5 year ago, Umut Firit started a hunger strike to protest against the conditions inside the prison. Umut protested against the state of emergency but also because he wanted to be recognized as a political prisoner. In Turkey, the prison cells are differentiated according to the political organization you are a member. If you are from communist organization, they put you in jail with communists. If you are from another socialist organization they put you in another cell. However, it is a common thing, but they do not recognize you as an anarchist.

The management and the state didn't except his demands. Then we started a media declaration and protest outside the prison. During state of emergency, we are one of the initiators of the solidarity initiative for political prisoners. This initiative is not an initiative from DAF, but it is a collaboration between different political revolutionary organizations. Within the initiative, various political groups, revolutionary people and revolutionary organization are involved. The management and the state initially did not agree with his demands. Therefore, Umut, changed his hunger strike to fast-to-death strike. The management had to except his demands, or he will die. We made international solidarity call, comrades Greece, Italy and Ireland, protested in front of Turkish embassies, while we were in front of the prison. After a while they agreed with his demands, and they put him in another cell, and other people in another cell. During state of emergency time it was a good protest, it was a good protest. However, if the State wouldn't except his demands, he probably would have died, or he would have serious health problems.



We are still in contact with Umut, he is also writer of MeyDan newspaper. However, especially since the state of emergency, it is hard for him to send articles to us. Umut writes about the problems he is facing inside the prison. Last summer, there was a court for Umut Firat. His case is complicated. He has been judged in the 1980 in a state security court. The head of the court was the military. So many of the revolutionary people have been judged in a military court. Many people judged in this court got life sentences. For Umut his case there is no evidence. People talked to the police without their lawyer and many people are convicted after torture. There is no evidence. The government has closed these state security courts five years ago because members of government have been judged. But many prisoners judged under these courts have been released from prison. Many people who have been released were political prisoners, but they were conservative or nationalist prisoners, few revolutionaries have been released. Umut's case is complicated, there is no evidence, and still he is in jail. And the sentence of the state security court is still running. And we even applied to the European rights consulate, and even they don't give the answer we want.

**You mentioned two other comrades, can you say something about them?**

Another comrade Şevket Aslan he was also in Izmir and they changed his location because he started hunger strike. They excepted demands and they put him in a cell with many people without recognizing his political identity. Again, he started hunger strike after a while he put in another jail. In another city, far away from his family and relatives.



Esra is a transwomen prisoner. She is not a political prisoner, but she has been in prisoner over 10 years. Because having LGBTBI+ identity, inside a men prison, she faced many forms of violence. Sexual violence by guards, management or other prisoners. So also with the help of the newspaper and other political prisoners we met with her. One of our lawyers, took the case and one of our comrades became her visitor. She wrote about her situation and the systematically torture inflicted by the management. First, through the Newspaper, we informed the people about her situation. Her demand was transition surgery and by the help of this surgery to move to a women prison. We wrote many things, we published many things and for 1.5 year we made a campaign for her. It is important we report about news with the newspaper for other revolutionary newspapers, other revolutionary organizations and LGBTBI+ media to show her situation. But also, to make the prison management feel that they are being observed. For her case, when the management saw the media, they got a call from higher up the management chain. They moved her to another prisoner, to another to another. In every prison, she faced the same problem. Eventually, we collected money for her surgery and this is something we achieved. A half a year ago she was transferred to a women prison. And she is in good health.

This is an important experience. It is important, because it shows the importance of organized action. These people who are inside prisons, not only political prisoners, face the violence of the state. They try to do something as individuals, yet, there is no exit for these individual efforts. We use the same strategy, inform the people, bring people into the media, make solidarity calls, and through a campaign we achieved something. But also, lawyers are important. In Esra's case, we didn't only help an individual, it is our responsibility to be in solidarity with any kind of indi-

vidual who faces such situations. It is related to anarchist ideas. Now Ezra tries to be in solidarity with individuals who are same situation. Through her we got more information about different prisons.

## **You mentioned the initiative of Prisoners Solidarity, can you say something about the work you do?**

The aim of the initiative is to inform the people what is happening inside the prison. During the state of emergency, they use sharpened the politics inside the prison. For example, if a political prisoner demands something they have to write something and give this to management. During state of emergency there are many cases they act they didn't get this paper. Before the state of emergency, the prisoner's lawyer could see their client whenever the lawyer goes to prison. Now they changed this. There is limitation and now prisoners can see their lawyers only, 2/3 times per month. They also changed the conditions for family and relative visits. Before it was two times open gathering, now it is once a month, and they make limitation of telephone calls.

As an organization, the prisoner solidarity initiative, also takes part in many protest to address the situation of political prisoners. Now the agenda is the hunger strike of Kurdish movement. It changes accordingly, from

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time to time. We focus on anarchist comrades, but also people like Ezra. We prefer to use newspaper because we have a legal identity as a publishing house. It is easier to organize, it is easier for the state to eliminate you when you have no legal identity. It is a publishing house. We use this, because, DAF is not a political party, it is not cooperative, it is hard to understand what is DAF for the state. As DAF we don't search for a legal identity. We use the publish house to organize campaigns and also collaborate with these initiatives. The newspaper is an important tool to be in contact with political prisoners. One of our writers, he is now in Jail and he is writing about the jail. He writes about the conditions of the prison. We also try to send the newspapers to comrades. It doesn't matter if they anarchist comrades or not. In every issue of the newspaper we have section for prisoners and the situation of the prison system.



## **Are people also forced to work in the prison?**

It changes from prison to prison. You can choose. It is better to work, it is a choice, but it is not a choice. I think, using prisoners as cheap labour didn't come to Turkey yet. But in few years, it will. It is hard to talk about companies, there are state owned companies that sell products in the market, the main thing they are forcing people to work in construction. Building a new prison or other buildings. It changes from region to region. Some produce office chairs, some produce cheese milk. It changes from region to region.

## **If people want to support political prisoners in Turkey, what can they do? Can they send them postcards, books or zines?**

About sending postcards to prisoners. It changes prison to prison. It changes time to time. It is up to the feeling of the prison management. Sometimes they allow the newspaper or books to arrive. Now they do not allow books for political prisoners. Last month we have sent Umut books, this month, he didn't receive them. Same with the newspaper. Sometimes a good wish, a revolutionary salute can be prevented by the management. It is psychological strategy to target political prisoners. On the other hand, during hunger strike of Umut Firat, there were many solidarity messages many letters, however, they didn't give these letters to him. However, sending prisoners mail is a thing to show that individuals are not alone and we know what happens inside.

## **Do you have some final words to our comrades?**

As experience with these comrades and friends and every day we learn the importance of being in solidarity. Especially internationally solidarity is a need for anarchist comrades. Unfortunately, we are not at the moment of social revolution like Spain or Ukraine, the good times of anarchism. Especially in these times it is important to be in solidarity in any means. If we can do anything for the comrades in prison in the Netherlands, or the comrades who try to struggle against the state, capitalism patriarchy or other structures of power, we can do anything to be in solidarity. For the last six years we have realized this; anarchist solidarity is important. It creates more options than we think.



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## More information

### Writing letters:

If you want to write a letter to our anarchist comrades, get in contact with Anarchist Black Cross Nijmegen. They will forward the letters. Post address: Tweede Walstraat 21, 6511 LN, Nijmegen. Email: [abcnijmegen@riseup.net](mailto:abcnijmegen@riseup.net) (PGP possible)

### Weblinks about anarchist prisoners in Turkey:

- <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/2017/01/18/turkey-revolutionary-anarchist-prisoner-umut-firat-is-not-alone/>
- <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/2018/02/10/turkey-anarchist-prisoner-sevket-aslan-on-hunger-strike-for-over-80-days/>
- <https://lgbtinewsturkey.com/2014/12/26/anarchist-meydan-newspapers-interview-with-trans-inmate-esra/>
- <http://souciant.com/2017/01/death-fasting-turkey/>
- <http://anarsistfaaliyet.org/>

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Giorgio Agamben is a political philosopher who in his book, *Homo Sacer* describes the state of emergency and sovereignty. According to Agamben, state of emergency is evident to the notion of sovereignty, and so, to modern nation states.

<sup>2</sup>In 2000, hundreds of prisoners detained in 41 different prisons started a hunger strike to protest against the upcoming change. After sometime, the hunger strike movement turned into a fast-to-death protest, which means that activists were literally starving themselves to death. On 19 December 2000, the government started a three-day security operation “Operation Return to Life” to break the protest. During this operation, at least 31 prisoners were burned to death or shot, while hundreds of prisoners were severely wounded.

