

## **The Position of the US House of Representatives on the Kurdish Issue In Turkey 1993-2000**

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### **Summary:**

The interest of the members of the US House of Representatives, through their files and the minutes of their sessions, in the focus of their country's relations with Turkey on the issue of human rights and democracy. As well as that, the annual reports of the US State Department have recorded widespread and increasing violations regarding the issue of dealing with Kurdish citizens in Turkey, and how American lawmakers have become more aware of and interest in these issues in their country's foreign policies.

The effects of the Kurdish issue in Turkey on the position of Congress appeared through the nature of US-Turkish relations, and directly from the US financial aid granted to Turkey, as well as the US arms deals with Turkey, their quality and quantity.

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### **Introduction:**

The Kurdish issue in Turkey is receiving great international attention, and this concern has entered the corridors of The position of the US House of Representatives as part of the nature of Turkish-American relations, and its implications and direct effects on the nature of those relations.

The paper titled "**The position of the US House of Representatives on the**

**Kurdish issue in Turkey 1993-2000"** examines the nature of the practices and opinions of some members of the US Congress regarding the Kurdish issue in Turkey during the term of President Bill Clinton. As there were different activities, movements and positions of some members of the US Congress as a result of the policy of successive Turkish governments on the issue of democracy and human rights in the majority-Kurdish areas of Turkey, and how these members tried to demand the US government to pressure the Turkish authorities to reduce these arbitrary policies.

### **The problematic of the study:**

The study tries to address the nature of the Turkish government's actions towards their Kurdish citizens, and the echo of those measures within the corridors of the US Congress, and how the American representatives presented their views and positions on this thorny issue that the Turks have always tried to consider as an internal matter, rejecting all foreign interference .

### **Study hypothesis:**

If it is considered that the Kurdish issue in Turkey is an issue that affects human rights and democracy, and that it is the product of long decades, then the methods that the Turkish government tried to deal with this issue must be discussed, and does it rise to the familiar Western democratic approach? And how did the policy of Turkish governments have a reaction from the Kurdish movements within the natural borders of the Turkish Republic? What are the most prominent effects of that issue on Turkey's foreign relations, especially with the United States of America? .

### **The first topic: The impact of the Kurdish issue on Turkish-American relations**

The Turkish daily Al-Akhbar newspaper wrote in its issue dated August 4, 1994 that a growing trend has emerged within the US Congress working to cut financial aid to Turkey unless it works to improve the human rights situation within its territory)<sup>1</sup>.

The first effects of US congressional pressure on US-Turkish relations were clearly reflected in the annual US military aid to Turkey. This aid decreased from (500) million dollars gradually in 1991, until it finally ended in the year 1998)<sup>2</sup>. In fiscal year 1995, the administration of US President Bill Clinton (1993-2000) proposed allocating \$ 405 million as a military grant to Turkey, but Congress reduced the amount to 364.5 million dollars)<sup>3</sup>. After the State Department finished preparing the special report on the use of US weapons in the war in the southeast and human rights violations and submitting it to Congress in June 1995, Congress cut again 10% of the aforementioned amount to 328.05 million dollars . In fiscal year 1996, the US administration had proposed

an amount of 450 million dollars as a military grant to Turkey, but Congress reduced the amount to 321 million dollars<sup>4</sup>(.

US military loans and grants to Turkey have also witnessed a sharp decline since 1996. Congress reduced annual military grants to dollars 175 million, and economic aid loans to 22 million dollars for the year 1997<sup>5</sup>(. Because of the increasing criticism and pressure from Congress and its restrictions on the American administration, Turkey did not receive funds in 1998, neither as part of the annual military grant programs nor from economic loan programs, and it was decided to grant it an amount of 1.5 million dollars only to finance foreign military programs and training programs, most of which focused on publishing A culture of human rights among the Turkish forces<sup>6</sup>(.

The file of US arms sales to Turkey did not remain untouched by problems during this period, as US arms sales to Turkey during the period (1994-1997) witnessed a significant decline<sup>7</sup>(. The echoes of the criticisms of US administration officials in the year 1994, which were accompanied by reliable and international press reports about Turkey's extensive use of American weapons in combating Kurdish movements and campaigns to evacuate villages in the southeast of the country, echoed in the US Congress, which asked the State Department to prepare a report on Turkey's use of weapons. America Against Civilians<sup>8</sup>(. It was considered at that time the most embarrassing and important statement of the US government<sup>9</sup>(. The result of the report that the State Department carried out in cooperation with the Ministry of Defense on June 1, 1995, was that Congress resorted to imposing restrictions on US arms sales to Turkey and linked that important file to an **"improvement in human rights record"** in it, as well as a reduction in US military grants to Turkey. Although that report stressed in more than one paragraph the importance of Turkey and its previous positions towards the United States of America<sup>10</sup>(.

After the Turkish Islamic Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan came to power in Turkey (1996-1997), it gave the US Congress ample room to work on enacting laws that are unfavorable to Turkey, on top of which are those that restrict arms exports to Turkey. This has provided the appropriate ground for the powerful Greek and Armenian lobbies in Washington to work to pass legislation hostile to Turkish interests under the pretext of Turkey's poor human rights record. In 1996, American lawmakers stopped the sale of ten attack helicopters (Super Cobra) to Turkey, despite the approval of the US Defense Department<sup>11</sup>(, The US Congress justified this by saying that these helicopters were used **"to transport Turkish forces to remote areas where human rights violations against civilians have been committed"** , based on Amnesty

International's reports<sup>12</sup>. In the same year, Senator Powell Squadron stopped the sale of three naval frigates to Turkey for more than two years<sup>13</sup>, despite the fact that they had already been paid for. In November 1996, Turkey, angry, canceled the aforementioned purchase of the ten helicopters, totaling 150 million dollars, after Congress had delayed them for more than a year under the pretext of using them in southeast Turkey against the Kurds<sup>14</sup>. A Turkish official commented, angrily, on his country's decision, saying: **“Turkey has canceled the purchase because it cannot allow its military requirements to be hostage to the hostile lobbies”**<sup>15</sup>. The Turkish government referred the deal to (Franco German Eurocopter)<sup>16</sup>. Whatever the case, since 1996 the restrictions of the US Congress on the transfer of US weapons to Turkey have become a reality, and its restrictions were described as (the arms blockade on Turkey)<sup>17</sup>.

Pressures by the arms companies, which submitted a request in March 1997 to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to lift restrictions on arms deals to Turkey, did not deter Congress from moving forward in restricting the transfer of advanced weapons and military systems to Turkey<sup>18</sup>. The US administration has tried to solve the problems and complications that Congress puts in the face of arms transfer to Turkey by emphasizing the importance of Turkey as a strategic ally of the United States of America, and by encouraging the Turks to undertake human rights reforms and taking pledges from Turkish leaders and officials. In February 1997, General Cevik Bir visited Washington to discuss Turkish-American military cooperation, and asked for more American support for Turkish military operations in northern Iraq. Although the aforementioned general was considered enthusiastic for relations with the United States of America, he threatened that: **“He will make a costly issue. F16 training is a problem if America does not show further cooperation”**<sup>19</sup>.

The position of the US House of Representatives did not pay any attention to the criticisms and threats of Turkish politicians and military alike, and American lawmakers did not discourage the administration's attempts in Washington, especially the Ministry of Defense, to dilute and reduce the results of the State Department's annual reports on human rights practices in Turkey. Therefore, the Foreign Relations Committee in Congress again requested from The Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared a report similar to the June 1995 report, which was completed in early July 1997, when Congress received it<sup>20</sup>. The outcome of the efforts of Congress for the year 1997 and the pressures of international bodies and organizations active in the field of human rights was the pledge of Turkish Prime Minister Masoud Yilmaz during his visit to Washington in December 1997 to respect the commitments he made to the US administration, which were centered around  
respecting human rights and finding

peaceful alternatives to the Kurdish issue. Under pressure from Congress, the Clinton administration pledged to stop the sale of attack helicopters to Turkey, which is estimated at 3.5 billion dollars, unless Turkey complies with the previously mentioned Yilmaz pledges. This was followed by the warning that the US State Department took an unprecedented decision when it imposed on Turkey not to use American-made soldiers' transport vehicles in eleven Kurdish provinces, where Turkish security forces and police committed serious human rights violations<sup>21(</sup>.

Some members of Congress strongly disagreed with the administration's policy of handing over American weapons to Turkey. Cynthia McKinney, a member of Congress from Georgia, said that respecting human rights and democratic standards should be binding when selling arms or offering US grants to countries like Turkey **"if they want [the Turks] to become our allies and take over our weapons"** .**"The least we can do is suggest to them that they not use arms against their people"**, said McKinney<sup>22(</sup>.

McKinney led throughout the year 1997 efforts in the US Congress to issue a draft (the Code of Conduct), to restrict the conclusion and financing of US arms deals to Turkey, but this met with the opposition of the US administration, and did not obtain the necessary votes in the Senate, which preserved it in the Conference Committee and thus did not see the light<sup>23(</sup>. But McKinney returned and submitted the bill again in September 1998, as it had the support of 80 members, but it was not approved due to the postponement of the session before the vote<sup>24(</sup>, to avoid embarrassing the American administration in front of the Turks. The compromise that won the approval of a majority of members of Congress was to take less comprehensive and assertive action, an amendment introduced by Senator Patrick Leahy, a Democratic senator from Vermont. The measure was an amendment to the Act on US Military Assistance to Foreign Security Units<sup>25(</sup>. According to the aforementioned amendment, it was prohibited to supply military equipment to foreign security forces that violate human rights, and this also includes funding for military training programs, even if it is proven that one member of those units committed human rights violations<sup>26(</sup>. The aforementioned amendment became the main obstacle to terminating the sale of armored personnel carriers to Turkey in 1999, and despite the pressures of the American administration that issued its export license<sup>27(</sup>, the aforementioned amendment prevented the United States of America from using loan guarantees necessary to complete the deal, those guarantees that were described It is often a **'deal breaker'**<sup>28(</sup>.

## **The second topic: The position of the US House of Representatives on the Kurdish issue in Turkey**

The US House of Representatives played an important role towards the Kurdish question in Turkey, through its support for a peaceful political solution to this issue. As Congress worked in more than one place to compel Turkey to end its misconduct with its Kurdish citizens and to consider their demands according to human rights considerations and democratic standards. The congress's hosting of Kurdish personalities and their invitation to Congress was of exceptional importance and a direct impact on congressmen's understanding and perception of the essence and size of the Kurdish question in Turkey. The Congress has invited Leyla Zana and Ahmed Türk, two representatives in the Turkish Parliament for the People's Action Party, to testify before the Helsinki Committee in the US Congress. On May 17, 1993 the two testified in the form of a statement to members of Congress. It began with an account of the conditions of the Kurds in Turkey after an introduction to their ancient history in the region. Then they were deprived of their rights in Turkey and subjected to the policy of assimilation into Turkish nationalism, and they talked about military rule in southeastern Turkey, and the village guards system. The two representatives also touched on the policy of systematic destruction of Kurdish villages and cities pursued by the Turkish government in the Kurdish regions under the pretext of fighting the PKK. The discussion also included eight proposals to achieve peace and establish brotherly relations between the Kurds and the Turks, the most prominent of which was the necessity of recognizing the Kurdish identity and granting the Kurds all cultural rights. Granting Kurdish political parties full legal and constitutional legitimacy, and disarming and dissolving village guards formations<sup>29</sup>.

US House of Representatives member John Porter (Illinois State Representative) and his wife Catherine, on all occasions they attend, face Turkey's policy towards the Kurds. As head of a party committee in the US Congress on human rights, John Porter played an effective role in reducing the volume of military aid that Turkey receives from the United States of America<sup>30</sup>.

A group of US congressmen also received Rams Kartal and George Ario, as representatives of the Kurdish parliament in exile, and close to the PKK. On October 6, 1995, these members sent a letter to US President Bill Clinton, beginning with an introduction on the Kurdish issue, and they mentioned in the letter that two Kurdish parliamentarians had presented to Congress aspects of the bad situation of the Kurds in Turkey, and that Mr. Kartal, who was a former deputy In the Turkish parliament for Van, in October 1991, he was forced to go into exile because he was accused by the Turkish government of treason and lifted

his immunity, because he demanded a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. As for the other deputy Ario, who is an Assyrian from Turkish Kurdistan, he was also forced to immigrate to Turkey because he called on the Turkish authorities to stop the policy of zero tolerance for the religious and cultural data of Assyrians in Turkey. One part of the letter states that the two **"represent leaders of two groups and are now part of the Kurdish parliament in the newly formed exile"**. The letter called for Bill Clinton to recognize that Kurdish parliament, because it is **"an elected body representing about a million Kurds living in exile in Europe"** and because it is **"a body that seeks to resolve the conflict with the Turks by peaceful means"** and **"if dialogue is encouraged between the representatives of this parliament in exile and the government"**. Turkey on the part of the United States government, and with the support of the international community, it is likely that this will lead to the achievement of peace in the region. **"The letter concluded with the signatories' request of President Bill Clinton to respond to their call and stated that they "appreciate the response regarding his intentions to work with the Kurdish Parliament in exile to advance the cause of peace in Turkey..."**<sup>31</sup>.

In February 1996, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the US Congress Christopher Smith and Senator Steny Hoyer sent a letter to the President of the European Cooperation Council, Francois Ryan, to "open an office for relations and cooperation in northern Kurdistan," and they also called for work to find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey, And sending a delegation of European parliamentarians to Turkey in order to closely examine the situation of the Kurds<sup>32</sup>.

The US House of Representatives also expressed its understanding of the Kurdish issue with the approval of the House of Representatives on a draft resolution on January 25, 1996, which was read by New Jersey State Representative Smith on his behalf and on behalf of Representative Hoyer, during the second session of the 104th session of Congress, and after the decision was approved by the House of Representatives, it was referred to the Foreign Relations Committee. In Congress<sup>33</sup>. The decision began with a presentation of the great tragedies and human losses resulting from the conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurdish fighters since the start of the war that has continued since 1984 in southeast Turkey, and the resulting large human losses, the displacement of 3 million civilians and the destruction of nearly 700 Kurdish villages. The decision referred to Turkish laws that restrict and criminalize freedom of expression and to imprison journalists, academics or human rights activists. The decision also touched upon the expulsion of Kurdish representatives from parliament and their exile due to their political views, and the denial of Kurdish citizens of their basic

rights such as the right to learn in the mother tongue and the freedom to participate in political life and publish in the Kurdish language. The decision also included alerting and reminding Turkey that it is a member of NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and a strategic partner of the United States of America, which has signed human rights charters and conventions issued by the United Nations, the 1948 Geneva Convention on Human Rights and Helsinki legislation, and that the long-term strategic interests of the United States of America They are at risk because of the ongoing conflict in Turkey, and that military operations are not a solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey. Rather, sitting at the dialogue table is what leads to peace, stability and democracy<sup>34</sup>.

It is worth noting that the resolution called on the US government to implement a number of recommendations, in the form of seven points. The first spoke about a request from the Turkish government to release all political prisoners and lift restrictions on freedom of expression. The resolution also calls on the PKK supporters to cease fire and to declare its acceptance of a democratic solution within the territorial integrity of Turkey. The Turkish government was also asked to declare a ceasefire<sup>35</sup>. As for the most prominent points included in the recommendations of Congress, the sixth point, which focused on granting the Kurds their full cultural, political and social rights<sup>36</sup>. The decision concluded by calling for a solution to the financial crisis in southeast Turkey. And to commit President Bill Clinton to providing technical assistance to implement the preceding paragraphs and points<sup>37</sup>.

Also on March 25, 1996, some representatives in the US Congress addressed a letter to President Bill Clinton asking him to pay attention to the issue of the ceasefire launched by the Kurdistan Workers Party on December 15, 1995. January 1996, I said: We can and must be the best peacemakers in the world. We are writing to you asking for help to bring ... peace to the Kurds who are struggling against harsh persecution in southeastern Turkey. The letter also touched on the role of Turkey's use of US weapons in exacerbating the disaster, and they wrote calling on the US administration to stop supplying Turkey with weapons as long as it continues to abuse the Kurds<sup>38</sup>.

On October 9, 1998, a member of the US House of Representatives, Bob Fellner, addressed his colleagues in Congress, saying, "**I stand today to express my support for the unilateral ceasefire announced by Abdullah Ocalan ... from September 1 until further notice**". And that this is an important opportunity for those who embrace peace and defend human rights, describing the situation of the Kurds in Turkey as a "**historical tragedy**". He also referred to the role of the Americans as the superpower that adopts the issue of establishing peace in the world<sup>39</sup>, as was done in the Israeli-



Palestinian agreements. And they must do something no less than that for the Kurds in Turkey<sup>40</sup>.

Bob Fellner also indicated in his speech that those who imprison the representatives of the people in the Turkish Parliament because of their testimony before one of the committees of this Congress should not receive our support. That leaders like Abdullah Ocalan, despite his violent past, but he promises to implement peace and harmony between the Kurds and their neighbors<sup>41</sup>.

These moves by some members of the US Congress aroused the ire of many Turkish politicians, and the reactions of some members of the US Congress regarding the imprisonment of Laila Zana and her comrades after they were stripped of their parliamentary immunity further complicate matters. As nearly fifty members of the US Congress sent a letter to Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Geller in October 1994, expressing deep concern about the trial of Kurdish representatives, questioning the message about Turkey's credibility and its commitments to human rights and the principles of democracy<sup>42</sup>.

New Jersey Congressman Frank Ballon indicated in a speech to the US House of Representatives on May 1, 1997, which he started with the phrase "**Free Laila Zana**". His colleagues to help in the release of Laila Zana after reviewing part of her life and the reasons for her arrest<sup>43</sup>.

Congressman Bob Fellner announced in a speech at a gathering organized by the American Kurdish Information Network, the Kurdish Cultural Center, and the Kurdish National Conference on August 23, 1997 in San Diego, California, that, together with 118 of his fellow congressmen, they had sent a signed letter to President Bill Clinton To work for the immediate and unconditional release of Laila Zana. In part of his speech, he declared: "**The inspiring work of Laila Zana and thousands of others will one day put an end to Turkish oppression**", and that more congressmen are standing with Laila Zana and the Kurdish people more than ever. There is no doubt that the US Congress is becoming more aware and more sympathetic to the dilemma of the Kurdish people<sup>44</sup>. Then Congressman Frank Ballon referred to Leyla Zana that she is "**one of the victims of Turkish cruelty and irrational anti-Kurdish policy**", and declared that the majority of the members of the US House of Representatives will join the European Parliament in defending that courageous woman, who is also a parliamentarian and elected, and whose goals are recognition of identity Kurdish and the freedom to speak and write in the Kurdish language, and the Kurds were granted cultural and constitutional rights for all Kurdish political parties<sup>45</sup>.

In an indication of the increasing interest of the US Congress in general in the case of Leyla Zana, on October 3, 1997, 153

members of the US Congress sent a letter to President Bill Clinton, in which they talked about the tragic case of Leyla Zana and her arrest by the Turkish government on March 2, 1994 and a prison sentence. A period of 15 years for exercising her right to freedom of speech in defense of the rights of the Kurdish people, and for one of the other charges related to her coming to Washington and her appearance before the Helsinki Committee in the US Congress. The letter asked the US President to exercise maximum pressure on the Turkish authorities for the immediate and unconditional release of Zana<sup>46</sup>. Congresswoman Elizabeth Voyres, one of the signatories to the aforementioned letter, likened the case of Laila Zana and her companions to that of Nelson Mandela, when she spoke before the House of Representatives on November 13, 1997, saying: **“I heard people saying that these are terrorists, and I remember when Nelson Mandela described him as ( A terrorist). A terrorist is also a freedom fighter, that these people are looking for freedom for their people ”**<sup>47</sup> ( . The same member came on October 9, 1998 to remind the Clinton administration once again of Laila Zana’s situation and considered that Laila Zana, who is already serving a 15-year prison sentence, was sentenced by a Turkish court to: **“It constitutes a flagrant violation of freedom of expression and an insult to her supporters around the world”** . And that **“the Turkish government is afraid of Leyla Zana, and it believes that it can imprison her forever. That is the story of those who imprisoned Nelson Mandela. That long nights merry to a radiant dawn”**<sup>48</sup> ( .

US Congressman John Edward Porter saw granting Laila Zana the Nobel Peace Prize a measure in support of dialogue and peace, and came in the letter he addressed to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee on January 23, 1998, in which Laila Zana was nominated for her award. 1997 will be an act that establishes the start of a dialogue that could lead to peace. **“Such an award will be a symbol of hope and peace in the region ... that such a courageous act by the committee will work to light a candle in a part as long as it remains dark in the world. I hope that you agree that such Light is necessary to end the misery of the long Kurds”**<sup>49</sup> ( .

It is worth noting that the US Congress intervened when the US Supreme Court decided not to expel the Kurdish activist, Kani Ghulam, head of the office of the Kurdistan Workers 'Party (PKK) from Washington, as Turkey had hoped, and instead imposed four hundred hours of suspended imprisonment on him for possession of a false passport<sup>50</sup> ( . The result of the court disappointed Turkey<sup>51</sup> ( . Behind that lighter ruling was a letter signed by 20 members of the US Congress addressed to the head of the Los Angeles Department of Immigration, Richard Rogers, asking him to stop procedures that may lead to his deportation to Turkey, and they indicated the cases of murder,

kidnapping and torture widespread in Turkey, and they expressed their support for Ghulam's request to grant him. Political asylum, because they saw his return to Turkey as a grave danger<sup>52</sup>.

### **Discussions:**

It comes to mind that the multiple and limited positions of members of the US Congress regarding the Kurdish issue in Turkey were not at the level of ambition, as the US government did not seek to deteriorate its strategic relations with the Turks regarding some internal policies towards the Kurds that the Turks have always sought to improve and amend, and this is observed in the American role. By helping the Turks, the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, was arrested in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 1999.

### **Conclusion:**

By studying the content of the research, it becomes clear to us that the special attitudes of some US House of Representatives on human rights issues represented in Turkish dealing with the Kurds, were not identical with the procedures of the American administration, which has always sought to develop the nature of relations between the two countries.

The Turks are strategic allies of the Americans, as the internal issues in Turkey are dealt with by the US administration in accordance with the policy of softness, and do not exceed the demands and calls for their solution, and this is noted from the dialogues and speeches that were launched by the legislative authority in the United States of America. And how the Kurdish issue remained suspended without a radical solution to this day.

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