

Scottish Parliamentary Cross Party Group on Kurdistan

Minutes of AGM held at the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday 7 November 2018

Chaired by: Ross Greer, MSP and Ruth Maguire, MSP.

	Agenda Item	
1.	Welcome, attendance and apologies	Ross and Ruth introduced themselves and welcomed everyone to the meeting. A sederunt was circulated but will not be shared. 23 people were in attendance, including the co-chairs. Apologies were received from John Finnie MSP, Stephen Smellie, Roza Salih, Murat Gullen and Goran Abdullah.
2.	Membership	Ross gave a brief explanation of the membership of the group. MSPs on the group were Ross, Ruth, Bob Doris, Pauline McNeill and John Finnie. Former members Ash Denham and Claire Haughey could no longer participate in the group since being promoted to Ministers. Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan support and members attend. Ross reiterated that individuals or organisations with an interest in Kurdistan can attend meetings and that all in the community were welcome.
3.	Approval of minutes	The minutes of the previous AGM held on 24 October 2017 were circulated and approved as an accurate record of the meeting. There were no matters arising.
4.	Election of Office Bearers	It was proposed and agreed that secretarial support would continue to be provided by Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan and Stephen Smellie was re-elected to the role of Secretary. Ross Greer MSP and Ruth Maguire MSP were unanimously re-elected as Co-Convenors of the group.
5.	Update from Co-convenors	Ross reported that although it had sometimes been challenging to establish the group and hold regular meetings, there had been lots of other activity taking place in the Parliament. He circulated copies of recent motions that had been lodged by himself and Ruth and described debates that they had been involved in. Ruth has participated in debate and events for the international day of the imprisoned writer when she has highlighted Zehra Dogan's unjust imprisonment and that of other Kurdish journalists that Turkey has jailed.
6.	Presentation by Sarah Glynn	Sarah gave a presentation on Rojava, Northern Syria and the progress of the Rojava revolution. She had been invited to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria by the Kongreya Star (a confederation of women's groups in Syria) and visited for a week in May. Sarah illustrated her talk with pictures of the places and people she had visited. She described how the Kurdish saying "resistance is life" referred not only to the daily fight for survival, but also resistance to the forces trying to crush the Kurdish way of life, their autonomy and culture. Every Kurdish family has lost relatives in the war. (Sarah noted that Victoria Bridges, the aunt of Anna Campbell, was a member of the delegation.) Sarah described the grass-roots democracy she witnessed and the bottom-up people's justice system. There are 65 communes in Kobane and 40,000 inhabitants. Co-ops have been established and these help to give women financial independence. Reconstructing war damaged buildings is a major part of the economy. Sarah said it was exciting to see women playing a full and equal part in society and she now realises that not all revolutionaries are young people in army fatigues – sometimes they are middle-aged women in floral dresses helping to create a new society. She described the situation in Shahba where 130,000 refugees have increased the population 5-fold and suffer harsh living conditions. The area was already war ravaged and has limited electricity, polluted water and no proper sewage system. Sarah met a family from Afrin and relatives of families trapped in Afrin, where Turkey is replacing Kurds with Jihadi gangs. It is tragic that the system of self-determined democracy and equality most firmly established in Afrin was destroyed by Turkey. Sarah also visited Manbij, a very mixed area that's adopting an autonomous system that is the opposite of what is now happening in Afrin. Different ethnic groups in Manbij are getting involved, with women door knocking to reach other women and being inspired by Kurdish female empowerment. Sarah also noted the constant border tension and said that although everyone talks about Trump's Mexican wall, there seems to be no awareness about the hundreds of miles of walls already built along the border separating Turkey and Syria. Sarah concluded by saying how aware she is of her responsibility to tell everyone what's happening in Syria and to try to focus the media's attention by writing articles and letters. She also recounted visiting the site for the Scottish school in Kobane and meeting the children who will benefit (featured in short films on the SSK website). There was a short question and answer session after Sarah's talk when education, health and the role of trade unions and SSK in raising awareness were discussed as well as some of the work done in the

		Scottish Parliament to highlight the situation in Afrin and Kobane. Donating to Heyva Sor is a practical way to help.
7.	Discussion on Turkey and impact on the Kurdish Community	<p>Ross described the system of pairing between HDP and our MPs and MSPs after the Turkish elections in 2016. Ross had paired with Leyla Birlik, one of the first imprisoned, and who is now safe but exiled in Greece. (Ross had taken up her case.) He now proposes to restart the pairing in preparation for the local and Mayoral elections in Turkey next year and has discussed this with a member of the HDP and a member of the Kurdish National Congress. Ross noted that candidates are already being jailed and he agreed to write to Council leaders in Scotland on behalf of the CPG to invite Provosts and leaders to pair with equivalent Kurdish politicians at risk. Ross then invited discussion and contributions from the floor. Issues raised included the imprisonment of Demirtas, assimilation of the Kurds by Turkey and Kurds having no life in their own land. Forest fires and the destruction of nature and wildlife in Kurdish areas was discussed, with those trying to tackle the fires beaten and stopped from putting out the flames. This issue has potential to attract the FBU who are strong supporters of fire fighters in Palestine. Turkey's recent publicising of Khashoggi's murder while imprisoning Demirtas and jailing and murdering their own journalists was highlighted. The arrest and jailing of academics was raised and it was suggested that we should co-ordinate with the 17 universities in Scotland and use connections there to put pressure on Turkey through the ERASMUS scheme (an EU student exchange programme that includes Turkey). Turkey's role in NATO was mentioned and there was also a discussion about tourism and boycotts, but this is complex as the main holiday resorts are not supporters of Erdogan. The call must therefore come from the Kurds. Civic boycotts were discussed, with those towns, Councils and schools who have twinning arrangements with Turkish equivalents being encouraged to replace them with Kurdish equivalents, e.g. Diyarbakir. The final issue raised from the floor was that of the police raids that took place last year, which have resulted in Kurds living in Scotland being fearful of attending celebrations of Kurdish events. Ross and Ruth were concerned and heard also that items confiscated at the time, including phones, tablets and flags, had not yet been returned. Ross said that he is meeting with the new Justice Minister, Humza Yousaf, and will raise this as well as discussing rebuilding trust and confidence for the future. Ruth emphasized that it was important to have normal functions in the community and that should be addressed ahead of celebrations such as New Roz. Kurds in Scotland should be able to celebrate without fear of recriminations.</p> <p>Ross then summarised a list of agreed actions -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-establish the deputies to deputies campaign • Write to Councillors about local level pairing • Draft a motion regarding trials and ongoing imprisonment • Write to the Foreign Office about the imprisonment of Demirtas • Raise the forest burning and destruction of nature with environmental groups e.g. Greenpeace's "defend forests from fascists" campaign • Encourage breaking of links/twinning with Erdogan supporting areas and their replacement with Kurdish equivalents • Raise issue of Rojava and explore support in parliament for the school building project • Meet with Government Ministers to resolve police and justice issues • Explore potential of University and ERASMUS programme links to deter jailing and suppression of academics in Turkey • Contact Education Scotland to add Rojava to the Higher modern studies unit on Syria <p>In response to a query about Turkey's monitoring of UK Facebook posts criticising Erdogan, Ruth warned that posts are easily accessed by governments worldwide. A question about the strength of the Turkish Consulate's voice in parliament was addressed by both Ross and Ruth who reported that they refuse all event invitations from the consulate and that the MSPs who ran the Turkey group disbanded it on learning of Kurdish human rights abuses. The consulate now has very little access to the Parliament.</p>
8.	Any other business	Ruth announced a debate taking place in the Scottish Parliament on 15 th November with Scottish PEN – "the international day of the imprisoned writer" when Zehra Dogan's work will be read out by Scottish authors and the First Minister will be in attendance. Ruth asked everyone to encourage their MSPs to speak in the debate.
9.	Date of future meetings	Ross and Ruth will liaise to set future meeting dates and will advise the group.