

Cold War against the Kurdish Freedom Movement – a weekly news review

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Sarah Glynn

Everyone, it seems, is lining up against the Kurdish freedom movement – or, rather, every government. Most people in most parts of the world receive no information at all about the movement unless they go out and look for it. Yet this international attempt to extinguish the Kurdish struggle matters for every one of us, and is a vital part of the battle over the future of our planet.

The Kurds have recognised the universal significance of the attacks they are facing in their description of the region's battles as a third world war. And, just

as the Second World War emerged out of the First, so this war is a continuation of what has gone before, and particularly of the US-led battle against communism. The cold war did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It continues to extinguish every emerging attempt to replace capitalism and liberal democracy with a more socialist alternative, or even to moderate it through reforms. For cold warriors, almost anything is deemed preferable to conceding power to the left. They have supported right-wing coups, established networks of extra-governmental paramilitaries, and fuelled the growth of militant Islamic forces.

While this may seem to be contradicted by the US alliance with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in North and East Syria, it rather illuminates how this alliance is fundamentally tactical. The US also made a military alliance with the Soviet Union when that was seen to be expedient – and turned its back on it as soon as it had served its purpose. Although they have found the SDF to be vital military allies in the fight against ISIS, the US has not promoted their international recognition nor given them reason to look forward to a secure future. There is no ‘no-fly zone’ here, like the one that enabled the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to gain and protect its autonomy in 1991.

Cold-war politics has been going on for so long that it has become easy not to notice it; but we need to see it if we are to understand what is happening and to oppose these latest attacks against a better future. This week’s article looks at the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where the contrast between the international courting of the conservative, feudal Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the international outlawing of the progressive, leftist PKK is especially telling.

The US-led world order is not anti-Kurd and nor is it pro-Kurd. It regards the KRG as a strategically important friend, but classifies the PKK as the ideological enemy. The US have had no problem in acceding to Turkey’s request to list the PKK as a terrorist organisation, and have been consistently supportive of Turkey’s attacks on the organisation, whether within the Turkish border or in Iraq. The PKK is also outlawed by the European Union and the UK.

Meanwhile, the US and its European allies like to work with governments such as the KRG that won't upset the international order and that provide a welcoming environment for international oil companies. For the states that took part in the 2003 war against Iraq, it has also been important to present the KRG as a narrative of success, as Kamal Chomani has pointed out in a long analytical interview for BreakThrough News.

This week it was the turn of the European Union's High Representative, Josep Borrell, to visit Hewlêr (Erbil), where, following his meeting with KRI President, Nechirvan Barzani, he expressed the EU's solidarity and support for the region, stating that 'The European Union is and will be still more a friend and a partner.' Like Macron the week before, he praised the contribution of the KRG to the fight against ISIS. Similar acknowledgement is never given to the contribution of the PKK.

Borrell referred to a 'fruitful exchange on human rights', but the KRG's record on rights and freedoms has gone from bad to worse. Politicised trials have been recorded by Human Rights Watch and Christian Peacemaker Teams, and would be the subject of constant reprimand if propagated by a government to which the US and Europe were hostile. Just the day before Borrell's meeting with the president, four human rights activists who were arrested over a year ago announced that they are going on a death fast to protest against mistreatment (including being prevented from meeting with their families) and to demand a fair trial.

While the KRI is held up by western governments as an example of success, the people who live there have been murdered and imprisoned for going onto the streets to protest at their government's endemic corruption and mismanagement. The Barzani family's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Talabani family's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have maintained an unbroken dominance over business and media, as well as government, and the all-pervasive corruption has long been well understood by the US. A confidential cable from the US Consulate in Kirkurk from 2006, published by Wikileaks, describes a mafia system where 'The economies and governments of the Kurdish north are tightly wrapped in the tentacles of the KDP and PUK.'

The cable comments, 'Most Kurds believe corruption permeates every level of the parties... Most believe the two parties see the ubiquitous political controls they put on public life as necessary to protect their respective sources of illicit funds. Thus, common wisdom in Kurdistan [i.e. the KRI] links corruption and the democracy deficit.'

This has not stopped the US and its allies from working closely with the KRG and giving it material and practical support. On Wednesday, the peshmerga received over 150 US military vehicles as just the most recent shipment of military aid; and on Thursday, the US Consul in Erbil announced that the US was giving \$250 million to finance a gas plant, noting that 'The United States is committed to supporting Economic Development and Growth in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.'

Rivalry between the KDP and PUK is so intense that in the 1990s it led to four years of bitter civil war. When the KDP seemed to be losing, Masoud Barzani called on the help of Saddam Hussein, whose troops had killed up to 180,000 Kurds in the Anfal genocide just eight years before. Today the KDP is the dominant force in the Region and has formed increasingly close ties with another existential enemy of the Kurds, Turkey. The KDP have long collaborated with Turkey's attacks on their ideological and political rivals in the PKK – even during the 1990s, at the height of the assassinations, disappearances and village clearances carried out by the Turkish state against the Kurds in Turkey. As long ago as 1997, the KDP agreed to a permanent Turkish military presence in Iraqi Kurdistan, and they have developed increasingly close economic ties with Turkey, especially through deals for developing and exporting the region's oil and gas. These have increased the wealth of the ruling elites and given the region leverage in its relationship with the federal government in Bagdad, with whom they have a long running dispute over oil revenue; but it has delivered control over the KRI to Turkey. Turkey has the power to cut off the KRI's main source of revenue, as they made clear in 2017 after the KRG held a referendum on independence. Then, President Erdoğan warned the Kurds against any attempt to use the overwhelming positive vote to attempt to make independence a reality, claiming "It will be over when we close the oil taps, all [their] revenues will

vanish, and they will not be able to find food when our trucks stop going to northern Iraq.”

For the US and other western countries, the KRG’s close ties with their NATO ally, Turkey, opposition to the PKK, and welcome for international oil business, perfectly align with their interests and cement their partnerships.

Iraq’s troubled and corrupt federal government is also keen to consolidate support from this powerful international consensus. As we saw last week, they have clearly stated their backing for Turkey’s military interventions in the region – although they also have to be careful not to anger powerful Iranian-linked groups which are vying with Turkey for regional dominance. In mid-August, Yazidi representatives were assassinated by a Turkish airstrike on their way to meet the Iraqi Prime Minister. The Iraqi government’s failure to comment has given rise to suggestions of complicity in the attack, which targeted a leading proponent of democratic autonomy and the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan.

Turkey claims that its military actions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – and also in Şengal (Sinjar) and Maxmur – are simply aimed at eliminating the PKK. It is clear from the nature and scale of the operations, from comparisons with the Turkish occupation in Syria, and from Erdoğan’s own expansionist statements, that Turkey intends much more than this and that they want to build a strong permanent military occupation; but for the western powers, watching through a cold-war lens, this is not important. Whether the region is dominated by NATO ally Turkey, or officially controlled by the US-friendly KRG does not matter, so long as the possibility of an anti-establishment left alternative, represented by the PKK, is removed.

For many Kurds, the self-serving actions of the KDP leaders are seen as a betrayal. The PKK claim that they are not only defending their own bases in the northern Iraqi mountains, they are also protecting Kurdistan itself from being taken over and occupied by a hostile anti-Kurdish force. But, instead of keeping out the invaders, the KDP is helping them attack the PKK. There has been widespread opposition to the idea of a KDP-PKK conflict, not only from PKK supporters but also from others who don’t want to see another intra-

Kurdish war or who recognise that all Kurds will be the losers; however, the KDP, backed by America and friends, doesn't want to listen.

This week, the Kurdistan Democratic Communities Union (KCK) – the umbrella group that includes the PKK – stated that the KDP have moved beyond encircling and isolating the PKK on behalf of Turkey and have directly attacked the guerrillas themselves. Seven guerillas have recently been killed by the KDP, and a further three disappeared after an earlier KDP ambush. In calling on all Kurds to take a stand against the KDP's support for Turkey, the KCK state that the PKK has 'so far done its utmost to avoid the fighting provoked by the KDP' but that the KDP has used this as an opportunity to attack. They point out that the KDP's actions constitute more than immediate military help. They also help to give Turkey legitimacy in the field of international diplomacy.

The cold war imperative ensures that chemical attacks against the PKK are persistently ignored by international authorities. There is no 'red line' when those under attack are deemed to be the wrong side of a much more fundamental 'red' line. This week the PKK released a video of gas billowing out of one of their tunnels in an area where they have counted some hundred chemical attacks by Turkey; and The Morning Star reported on a suspected chemical attack on a Duhok village last Saturday, where three people required medical treatment after a bombardment by Turkish jets that released 'a white chemical gas'.

The isolation of the Kurdish revolutionaries is made more complete by the antagonism of the Iranian government, which, while hardly sympathetic to the western world view, shares America's opposition to anything remotely socialist, and Turkey's opposition to any growth of Kurdish autonomy. On Monday, a commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps warned of imminent 'decisive and crushing' attacks on the armed opposition groups who have set up bases in the KRI, and early Thursday morning Iranian drones hit a Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran base in Bradost. The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the Iranian group that follows Öcalan's philosophy, is also in Iran's sights.

While I have concentrated here on the situation in Iraq, the same cold war perspective explains international responses to events in Turkey and in Syria – or often the lack of responses. Turkey is a strategically important NATO ally, so, even as its government tramples over rights and freedoms, opposition groups struggle to get an international hearing. When that opposition comes from the political left and shares an ideology with the PKK, then support is limited to other left groups.

In North and East Syria, the US tries to negotiate a greater role for groups that are close to the Barzanis' KDP and who oppose the region's radical democratic structures. They exploit the desire for peace and Kurdish unity to try and dilute the social system that has made the Rojava revolution an inspiration to people everywhere.

The Kurdish freedom movement is under attack because it is recognised as a threat to the capitalist world order. It challenges the system that is destroying our planet, and it offers a path towards an alternative. While it attracts the ire of governments who defend the status quo, it has to be welcomed and supported by those who look for a better future. The cold war has frozen out hope for much too long.