

‘America is back’ – but what does that mean for the Kurds? – a weekly news review

[12:14 pm 12/06/2021](#)



Sarah Glynn

‘America is back’, and with US President Biden about to have his first meeting with Turkish President Erdoğan on Monday, it seems a good time to remember what America’s self-appointed role as leader and defender of the free world really means, especially if you are a Kurd.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the big threat to the US vision of the world is no longer communism – though they continue to try and extinguish any resurgence of left politics. China and Russia do not offer an alternative ideology, but they compete with US hegemonic power, and the freedom the US defends was always the freedom for American capitalism to do business. That remains the driving force behind their foreign policy. Even as Biden talks about reclaiming the USA's 'moral authority', he assures his American audience that the path he is setting out is in America's own self-interest.

Biden may sincerely believe, along with a great many Americans, that US foreign policy is guided by a defence of democracy and human rights, but decisions on when to implement that defence are highly pragmatic and depend on US interests, or rather the interests of US capitalism. The main difference under the Trump presidency was a blurring of the interests of US capitalism as a whole with the interests of one particular rather erratic capitalist, Trump himself. Now America is back to business as usual.

Despite references to freedom and democracy, the US has not held back from interfering in the politics of other countries, both overtly and covertly. In 1948, an Office of Special Projects was set up within the CIA 'to plan and conduct covert operations'. After the Second World War, the US gave aid to Turkey in line with the Truman Doctrine of providing assistance to anti-communist regimes, and began military cooperation. The US gave Turkey military aid and advice. Turkey hosted a large US military presence, and US army engineers began construction of what would later be known as Incirlik Air Base and would serve as an important node for US air defence. In 1952 Turkey joined NATO.

In the cold war years, NATO, the CIA, and other state intelligence services trained secret units of fighters in many different western countries who would be ready to resist in case of an invasion from the Warsaw Pact. These morphed into a shadowy network of parallel secret states ready to infiltrate and disrupt all communist or even leftist activity. They are generally referred to by the name of the Italian version, Operation Gladio.

Turkey's geographical position makes it an important NATO ally with whom the US wants to keep on good terms, and America has shared the determination of the various Turkish governments to prevent the growth of the Turkish left. In Turkey, the Gladio organisations are known as Counter-Guerrilla, and the US was directly and indirectly involved in training personnel and providing both financial and practical help in setting the operations up. Counter-Guerilla organisations have worked closely with ultra-right groups and have been involved in much of the political violence that has beset Turkey, including massacres, false flag operations and political coups.

From the 1980s, the main target of these US-backed undercover groups and their far-right friends was the Kurds. The Counter-Guerillas even had a special unit that carried out attacks on civilians in order to blame them on the PKK.

One of the people trained by the US and involved in these organisations from the start was Alparslan Türkeş, who had been imprisoned for fascist and racist activities in 1945. Türkeş played a leading role in the 1960 coup, founded and lead the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and founded the Grey Wolves, who are responsible for widespread fascist violence and the deaths of hundreds of leftists, Kurds and other minorities.

The Kurds were also under attack from Turkey's official security forces, armed with US weapons. Turkey responded to PKK resistance with collective punishment, forcefully evacuating and destroying thousands of Kurdish villages, carrying out extrajudicial killings, and displacing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and land. The worst atrocities took place during the first term of Bill Clinton's presidency. An article from 1999 observed, 'Since 1980, the United States has sold or given Turkey \$15 billion worth of weapons.' And noted that the US government 'acknowledged that American arms had been used by the Turkish government in domestic military operations "during which human rights abuses have occurred."'

In 1999, the CIA masterminded the abduction of PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and handed him over to the Turkish State, where he initially faced a death sentence. Öcalan provides the key to a fair and peaceful settlement for the

Kurds in Turkey. His imprisonment was a massive blow to the hopes of Kurds everywhere, and also to the prospects of a more democratic Turkey where minorities are not forced to suppress their own culture; but it was facilitated by a US president – Bill Clinton – who promoted ‘multiracial democracy’.

The video confessions of Mafia Boss, Sedat Peker, are currently ensuring that everyone in Turkey is aware of the deep and tangled connections between Turkish politicians and state security organisations and organised crime. Much less is said about the role of the CIA in this mix – but they are still very active in the region. Notably, the CIA worked with the Turkish secret service to implement a widely criticised billion-dollar programme to train and equip Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime.

At the same time as the US-supported Turkish government was using collective punishment to put down the resistance of the oppressed Kurdish population, the US was actively supporting the Kurds in Iraq in their resistance to state oppression. The Kurdish leaders in Iraq did not share the PKK’s leftist ideology, and US support for Kurdish resistance served as a proxy war against Saddam Hussein. Since the Kurdish leaders and the US were both highly instrumental in their alliances, the situation shifted according to the interests of the different parties. During the Iran-Iraq war, US antagonism towards Iran made President Reagan ignore Saddam’s genocide of the Kurds in the chemical attack on Halabja and the wider Anfal campaign. But when, after the defeat of Saddam in the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraqi government tried to clamp down on the Kurdish uprising, the United Nations imposed a no-fly zone, and the autonomous Kurdish authority was born. In the mid-nineties, competition between the two main Kurdish parties developed into civil war. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by the Talabani family, received support from Iran, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by the Barzanis, called in Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi army; but the US was able to negotiate an agreement between the two parties, and later work with them both against Saddam. The Kurdistan Regional Government has proved very welcoming to US business. Despite endemic corruption and violent clampdowns on freedom of speech, the KRG and its peshmerga forces still receive large amounts of aid and practical support from the US and from European countries.

It would be difficult to argue that the US war with Iraq more generally has left the world a safer place. The chaos created gave room for the growth of ISIS, and also for the growth of groups supported by Iran. There is instability and uncertainty. Recent reports describe the emergence of tightly organised militant groups, loyal to Iran and targeting US bases. Turkey-trained militia operate in Kirkuk, and proudly make the grey wolf sign.

In Syria, after America's disastrous backing for an unlikely mix of rebel groups, and increasing fears of military aid ending up with the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, US intervention in support of the Kurdish YPG/YPJ fight against ISIS was widely welcomed. A few armchair revolutionaries denounced this tactical alliance with the US imperialists as a betrayal, but most people could see, like the Kurds themselves, that this was a case of survival. The US had found a reliable and sincere ally that enabled them to continue to fight against ISIS while risking the lives of only very few Americans. But they also found themselves supporting an administration in North and East Syria that defined itself in opposition to 'capitalist modernity', and they were working with groups that followed Öcalan's philosophy and that their Turkish allies refuse to distinguish from the PKK.

While the US military presence in Syria was, and remains, vital for the protection of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, it is there for US interests, and acts accordingly. For Trump, pleasing Erdoğan and Turkey was more important than loyalty to America's Kurdish allies. For Biden, a sense of morality and a more developed tactical understanding makes a similar abandonment unlikely, but that doesn't mean that the US will enable the Autonomous Administration to flourish. There are problems both in what the US doesn't do, and in what it does.

Despite repeatedly discovering too late that they have won the war but lost the peace, the US fails to learn. They have missed many opportunities to make the situation in North and East Syria more secure and stable – and not only through fear of offending Turkey. The Kurds and their neighbours have repeatedly called for a no-fly zone, as in Iraqi Kurdistan thirty years ago, for inclusion in UN-sponsored talks on the future of Syria, and for international help in trying ISIS fighters for war crimes and in rehabilitating ISIS families.

And they need international leverage to force Turkey to stop holding back their share of the Euphrates water. Without physical security and basic services such as water and electricity, even the best-run authority will struggle to maintain support and order.

Meanwhile, politically, the US has not abandoned its determination to nip alternative forms of social organisation in the bud. Rather than allow space for North and East Syria to develop their own form of radical democracy, their US allies hope to remake it in the familiar US image. Politicians in North and East Syria who share the outlook of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in neighbouring Iraq have refused to recognise the democratic structures established by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and relations between the two groups have been fraught. The US has tried to negotiate some form of 'unity'. Although 'unity' is supported by high-profile figures in the Administration, it is difficult to see what sort of arrangement could be imagined that didn't negotiate away fundamental principles. And a power sharing agreement hardly sounds very democratic. Recent developments in Iraq must make such an agreement less likely, while adding new fears for the Autonomous Administration.

Turkey has carried out attacks against the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan over many years, and now has a massive military presence in the region and at least 37 military bases. This has been facilitated by their close relations with the KDP, who dominate the Kurdistan Regional Government, and also by the United States, who have been fully supportive of all attacks on the PKK, as well as generally siding with Turkey and with the Kurdistan Regional Government. Biden made clear that he continued America's anti-PKK stance by renewing bounties of millions of dollars for information on the whereabouts of three leading PKK figures. Turkey's latest invasion into north Iraq began the day after Biden had spoken to Erdoğan to tell him he would be recognising the Armenian genocide. Did they also discuss the forthcoming attack?

Although Turkey portrays these attacks as only directed against the PKK, their ongoing manoeuvres are repeating the pattern of occupation and ethnic cleansing we have seen in Afrîn. Their scorched earth policy is emptying out the local villages and devastating the natural environment, with orchards and

forests reduced to firewood that is trucked off to Turkey. The invaders have brought in jihadi mercenaries, whose reputation for brutality is well known, and they have attacked the UN-recognised Makhmour refugee camp.

Meanwhile, the US-sponsored tensions in Şengal are still unresolved. Last October, America brokered an agreement between the Iraqi federal government and the KDP for them to jointly administer the region – but they never consulted the Yazidis who live there and who had established their own self-government.

For months, Kurds across the world have been warning of the danger that Turkish intervention will succeed in provoking an intra-Kurdish civil war, in which the KDP aids Turkey by attacking the PKK. Last week, an armoured vehicle from the KDP peshmerga was destroyed near a PKK area, with the loss of five soldiers. Experts say that it was hit from the air, and the PKK's Murat Karayılan has made it clear that they believe that it was hit by a Turkish drone with the intention of putting blame on the PKK and provoking conflict. The US – and also UK – consuls didn't wait for an explanation, but instantly blamed the PKK.

It doesn't have to be like this. If the US could see past its total aversion to the PKK, they could, instead, use their influence to push for a return to negotiations for a peaceful and dignified future for Kurds in Turkey and beyond. For a start, as a very basic measure of US sincerity over human rights, they could convert their condemnation of Turkey's attempts to shut down the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – which has been resubmitted to the Constitutional Court – into action that the Turkish government cannot ignore. Erdoğan is weaker than he has ever been. The ball is in Biden's court.